



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

I Wish He Hadn't Said That

James 3:1-4:12

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Introduction

1. As we go on in James, it's a good time to share a little of my preaching philosophy.
 - a. Topical studies have a place, but I believe that over the long haul, expository lesson series are a more fruitful approach.
 - 1) *Expository preaching* refers to the development of a particular passage, studying it in its context to discern what its author intended to say and then drawing appropriate applications from that study that reach across time and cultures.
 - 2) *Expository series* develop the thoughts of a longer series of texts, a major section of or even all of a Bible book, over a period of time.
 - b. Advantages of expository preaching include the following.
 - 1) The subjects selected for study are determined and guided by the text itself; that forces us (and me!) to be confronted by things we might not otherwise consider.
 - 2) The result is that a better balanced diet of Bible teaching ("the whole counsel of God" - Acts 20:27) is presented (especially as multiple books are studied over time).
2. To be an honest expositor means that one sometimes must study and preach about themes he might rather omit. That is one reason I bring this up at this point in our study of James.
 - a. It is beneficial, and in one sense, not especially difficult to talk about trials and temptations.
 - b. It is stimulating to study, compare and explain the texts on faith and works by Paul and James.
 - c. It is not particularly difficult to talk about how we treat others, even when the example has to do with rich and poor.
 - d. And who doesn't enjoy study of pure and undefiled religion as James defined it?
3. But, then we come to chapter 3.
 - a. "Not many ... should become teachers..." (3:1) – teaching is what I do!
 - b. "... if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man..." (3:2) – where does that leave me (us)?
 - c. "And the tongue is a fire, a world of righteousness ... staining the whole body, setting on fire the whole course of life, and set on fire by hell..." (3:6) – we try to deflect that idea to others, but we know better, don't we?

- d. "...no human being can tame the tongue.... a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8) – now he's really gone to meddling!
 - e. But he's just getting started, for "with it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God ... these things ought not to be so" (3:9-10) – but they are so, aren't they?
- 4. All things considered, I wish he hadn't said that. It would be easier, not to mention more comfortable, to talk about something else. But, it's in the word and if we're studying *James*, not our edited version of James, we have to confront it.
 - 5. Today, we will look at the big picture, noting how much James says about our speech and seeing how 3:1-12 sets the stage for seeing just how important this is.

Body

I. The Theme of Speech in James.

- A. Even the most cursory study will notice the connection between 3:1-2 and 1:19, 26.
- B. But, look closer at the writing, and you'll see that careless, negative speech is an ongoing concern.¹
 - 1. The person who blamed God for his temptation said as much (1:13).
 - 2. Speech was used to show favoritism for the rich over the poor (2:3-6), behavior that endorsed the rich's blasphemy against the honorable name of God (2:7).
 - 3. The faithlessness in failing to help the needy was shown by an idle word (2:16).
 - 4. The person who thought he could have faith without deeds gave away his view by what he said (2:18).
 - 5. Later, he will confront their judging and slandering of a brother (4:11-12).
 - 6. He will condemn the one who boasted about his plans without reference to God (4:13-17).
 - 7. He will tell his readers to "not grumble against one another" (5:9).
 - 8. He will tell them not to swear, to stick with "Yes" or "No" (5:12).
- C. What he addresses indirectly throughout, he elaborates in 3:1-4:12.
 - 1. 3:1-12 elaborates the seriousness of the problem.
 - 2. 3:13-18 treats the matter in terms of divine and demonic wisdom (note in v. 14 the references to boasting and being false to the truth coupled with the jealousy and selfish ambition that will be directly tied to speech in 4:1-6).
 - 3. 4:1-10 deals with worldly behavior as exhibited in quarrels and fights, asking for the wrong things, and being double-minded (4:8; see 1:8, but also 3:9-10).
 - 4. 4:11-12 closes [brackets] the section by returning to the matter of speech, specifically speaking evil against a brother and the law and presuming to judge.

II. A Snapshot of the Troublesome Tongue (3:1-12).

¹ See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, The Anchor Bible, 254-255.

- A. James goes to the heart of the problem in 3:1-12, declaring that “believers must control their speech because the tongue has an influence in life for good and bad that is all out of proportion to its size.”²
- B. Here is an overview of his thinking.
 - 1. Teachers, who depend so much on their tongues and have widespread influence, must especially keep in mind how powerful the tongue is (1-2a).
 - 2. Like other small things that exert significant control over much larger objects, the tongue has an influence that belies its relative size (2b-5a).
 - 3. That influence is often incredibly destructive (5b-8).
 - 4. The influence for both good and evil makes the tongue a unique participant in an inconsistent life that both blesses God and speaks evil of people (9-12).

III. No Little Matter: The Importance of Seeking Tongue Control.³

- A. It matters because of how it relates to the way God saves.
 - 1. James stresses that we are to be “doers of the word” (1:22); we need to be sure we focus on both ends of that phrase.
 - a) God’s word is what gives us new life (1:18).
 - b) It is what we are to receive for salvation and growth (1:21).
 - 2. At the heart of faith is how we treat others with respect to both actions and speech (2:12), i.e., how we let God’s word form our identity.
- B. Our speech shows much about whether or not we are submitting in faith.
 - 1. Are we “double-minded” (1:8; 4:8), claiming allegiance to God but betraying that claim by how we live? Being “double-tongued” (cf. 3:9-10) is an indicator.
 - 2. Our speech is at the heart of our choice between godly and demonic wisdom.
 - a) Speech that is governed by the dictates of hell (3:6) is evidence of a life that devalues others, displays jealousy and bitterness, and is unspiritual and demonic (3:14-16; 4:1-2, 11-12).
 - b) It shows the extent of our participation in and endorsement of “friendship with the world” instead of loyalty to God (4:4, 7-8).

Conclusion

- 1. Do we really need to talk about the tongue? James shows us that it is a subject we must not avoid, should not take lightly, and must not limit to a few “bigger” speech sins.
- 2. In fact, he says that “failure to control [our] speech [is] the very antithesis of authentic religion (1:26)” (Johnson, 264).

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² Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamel, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 148.

³ Adapted from Johnson, 264-265.