



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

I Wish He Hadn't Said That

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Without discounting the value of topical studies or the need to occasionally step away from a series to address a timely concern, I prefer expository sermons on specific texts. Sermons of this type develop the ideas of a passage, studying it in its context to discern what its author intended to say and then drawing appropriate applications that reach across time and cultures. When developing lesson series, I prefer sequential expository studies that, over time, develop the thoughts of a longer block of text, whether a major section (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5–7; Jesus's farewell discourse, John 13–17) or an entire Bible book (e.g., James).

Advantages of expository preaching include the fact that, if correctly studied and applied, the subject matter for a sermon or series is guided more by the text than by the preacher or a perceived congregational issue. Pursuing a sequential series of expository studies can require the church (not to mention the preacher!) to think about subjects that might not otherwise be addressed. In addition, as expository studies of textual sections and/or books are presented from week-to-week, over time a more complete and balanced diet of Bible teaching—a practice suggested by Paul's phrase, “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20.27)—can be offered.

Of course, there are also challenges, not least of which is the fact that a commitment to be an honest expositor of an extended section of text will mean that one must study and preach about

themes that, for various reasons, the church (or preacher) might find uncomfortable. That is why I bring up the matter at this point in our study of James.

Think about the subjects James addresses in chapters 1–2. We appreciate the benefit and learn lessons for coping from his teaching about trials and temptations. Our thinking and understanding of the faith are stimulated by digging into and explaining the discussions of faith and works in the writings of James and Paul. We find it amenable with what we know about the teaching of Christ and our desire to implement it to talk about how we should treat others, even when the example has to do with the treatment of the rich and poor. And who among us does not find helpful a review of the nature of pure and undefiled religion?

But then, just as we are growing stronger and finding at least a measure of comfort in our study—James never lets us be completely comfortable—we come to James 3.

“Not many of you should become teachers,” James begins (v. 1). But teaching is what I do!

“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man,” he continues (v. 2). Where does that leave us (me)?

“And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness ... staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell,” he declares (v. 6). Though we would like to deflect the teaching of those words toward others, we know better, don't we?

“No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison,” James adds (v. 8). Okay, now he's just meddling.

But in truth, he's just getting started for with the tongue “we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so” (vv. 9–10). But we know that too often they are so, don't we?

To be honest, I can find myself wishing James hadn't said those things. It would be easier, not to mention more comfortable, to talk about something else—any number of things, in fact. But there it is, right in the middle of James's letter. If we're to honestly study James, not to mention teach the letter of James and not some edited version of it, we have to take his words as they are and allow them to challenge our speech practices.

The Speech Theme in James

James 3.1–12 is not the first time we encounter the subject of speech in James. Even the most cursory of studies will see the relationship of 3.1–12 to 1.19, 26: “Know this, my beloved

brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ... If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." A closer look at the writing reveals that the matter of careless, negative speech is an ongoing concern (cf. Johnson 1995, 254–255). The person who blamed God for his temptation had vocalized the charge (1.13). Speech was the means of discrimination by the rich against the poor, behavior that endorsed the rich's blasphemy against God's honorable name (2.3–7). The faithlessness exhibited in failing to help the needy was demonstrated by an idle word (2.16). The person who thought he could have faith without deeds revealed his view by what he said (2.18).

After chapter 3, James confronts the community's practice of judging and slandering their brothers (4.11–12) and condemns the one who boasts about his plans without deference to God's will (4.13–17). He tells his readers to "not grumble against one another" (5.9). And echoing the teaching of Jesus, he warns them against swearing instead of letting their "yes" be yes and their "no" be no (5.12).

The basis for these admonitions is presented in his direct teaching in 3.1–4.12. He identifies the seriousness of the problem in 3.1–12. He casts it in terms of a contrast between divine and demonic wisdom in 3.13–18, referring to the specific matters of boasting and falsehood that he then ties to jealousy and selfish ambition in 4.1–6. In 4.1–10, he confronts worldly behavior as demonstrated in quarrels and fights, asking for the wrong things, and being double-minded (4.8; cf. 1.8; 3.9–10). He closes the section in 4.11–12 by challenging the practice of speaking against a brother and the law while presuming to assume the Lord's place as lawgiver and judge.

The Importance of Tongue-Control

James shows that seeking to control our tongues is not just one of the several moral practices that result from our commitment to serve God. It relates to the way God saves and is integral to being "doers of the word" (1.22). Note the place of speech in that emphasis: God's *word* is what gives new life (1.18) and what we are to receive for salvation and growth (1.21). It is also at the heart of genuine faith since treating others with respect involves both our deeds and our speech (2.12).

Accordingly, our efforts to control our tongues reveal much about whether we are submitting to God in faith. Our speech will expose us if we are "double-minded" (1.8; 4.8), claiming allegiance to God on the one hand but betraying that claim on the other (3.9–10). Our words will give us away if we are pursuing demonic wisdom, as evidenced in devaluing others, displays of jealousy and bitterness, or pursuit of unspiritual values more friendly with the world than with God (3.6, 14–16; 4.1–4, 7–8, 11–12).

We are wise, therefore, to subject ourselves to the potential discomfort that comes from the study of James's teaching about speech.

Works Cited

Luke Timothy Johnson. 1995. *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible. vol. 37A. New York, NY: Doubleday.

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