

Prayer

Rescue us, O Lord, from the frustrations and upsets of life that beset us from time to time. Save us from being controlled by them, and turn our eyes away from them towards You. Create in us a desire to worship You through everything we do and say, and thereby live a life which is victorious over all fear and distress. Thank You, Lord God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Find time in the course of your day to spend fifteen minutes in prayer, listening to God

On-going prayers

- **Pray this week** about agriculture and food. The Bible suggests we give thanks and bless our food before eating. Try doing this.
- Give thanks for the fellowship of your church and all it means to you
- Pray about your country's future after the financial crisis

Meditation

When You look into our eyes, O Lord, what do you see?

Loving compassion and concern for others?

Or suppressed emotions because of past troubles?

A deep desire to do what is right without exception?

Or only the will to do what it suits us to do, and little else?

Genuine interest in all the other people we meet?

Or a harmful desire to impose ourselves on others?

A heart for what is right, just and true, without compromise?

Or an inner urge to twist all to our own advantage?

The will, drive and purpose of one who lives for You?

Or only the singular intent to pursue self interest?

Challenge us and cleanse us according to Your will, O Lord.

Bible Study - James 3:1-5

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, dear friends, for you know that those of us who teach will be judged more strictly; ² for we all make many mistakes, and if someone were to make no mistakes in what they said, they would be a mature person, able to keep themselves bridled.

³ Now think of the way we put bits into horses mouths to make them obey us, and we therefore control their whole bodies, ⁴ Or take the example of ships, for although they are so large it takes strong winds to drive them, but they are guided wherever the pilot directs by a very small rudder. ⁵ This is like the tongue which is a small part of the body, but it makes great claims! Consider how a small spark can set a whole forest ablaze!

Review

In yesterday's passage, we read about James' teaching on faith. Today, the subject changes to that of the responsibility of a teacher and it continues with comments about control and the use of the tongue. James was an apostle and the brother of Jesus; he could remember living and working together with Him and by comparison, he could see the limitations of human leadership! However, it seems that as James continued to write, he may have been aware of the controversy generated by his frank teaching about faith and works, and in this passage, he reflects on the onerous role of teaching and the importance of conveying the truth about the precious Gospel of salvation.

Teaching was an accepted and important calling within the life of the early church (Rom 12:7, Eph 4:11), a role centred on preparing candidates for baptism and ensuring that the Faith was passed on. For this reason, the task of teaching was to be 'judged more strictly' (5:1). There was no room for people to teach what was incorrect about the Gospel, or about who Jesus was, or about faith and the Kingdom of God. In the early days it is probable that those who taught had to be approved by the apostles themselves, but this could not last longer than their lifetimes, and as time went by, the church wrote down 'confessions', or 'creeds' designed to contain the true teaching of the apostles. To this day, it is important that teachers maintain the heritage of the classical Christian truths as handed down to us, and James' warning is an important caution to all who teach the Faith.

However, James appears to have been concerned about the maturity required for this important role when he stumbled into the next big theme of his letter. In talking about self control, he used a word that was natural for his day when talking about control; the word 'bridled' (3:2); he then took this word and developed his train of thought. The bridle is a small piece of iron placed in a horse's mouth, and attached to reins, it enables a rider to manage his riding by controlling the horse (3:3); James used this example together with that of the control of a large ship by a rudder (3:4).

James' point is obvious; something small controls the act of teaching, and that small thing is the tongue (3:5), and when we spot this, we realise that this is why James spoke as he did about the tongue. Perhaps James had seen the effect teachers who did not have as much control of their tongue and created confusion by confusing the truth about Jesus; there is evidence of church groups of the first and second century AD developing strange heretical teaching far removed from the teaching of the apostles. It is also possible that James saw people speaking loosely about their faith when in public, and decided this was as dangerous as bad teaching; and it may also be that James still had in mind the ungracious comments of the rich (2:1-4), and the disturbing way in which this created inequality in the church. His point, however, is clear. A great responsibility lies upon a teacher because small things said can have dramatic consequences; a spark can light a forest fire! (3:5)

In whatever way James' mind was turned towards the use of the tongue, he now made the point that the uncontrolled use of the tongue could be devastating for individuals and the church. To this day, many people read James' words and feel convicted because of what they feel about their own speech. Whether or not they are teachers, they ask quite rightly about how to deal with the issue raised; how may the tongue be controlled? James does not answer this question immediately because there are other things he wants to say in his letter. However, he does provide an answer later on in his letter when he gives some of the only specific teaching in the Bible about healing ministry, including dealing with sin (5:13f.). James always assumed that his readers were committed to Jesus according to the teaching of the early Church, and his general answer to this question would have been that people should find their answers in Jesus. When he eventually gives advice, this is the gist of it; it seems simple advice, but it should not be ignored.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What place do 'teachers' (of the faith) have within the church today? How can we improve 'teaching' within our churches?
2. What kind of abilities are required for a 'teacher' within the church? Draw up a 'job specification'.
3. Is the tongue the only part of us that needs to be 'bridled'? Think about other parts of our bodies which can create difficulties for the witness of the church.

Discipleship

Discipleship issue in this text

- *The responsibility of teachers and teaching*
- *Maturity and the use of the tongue*
- *Controlling one's passion in the Lord*

Personal comment:

James' teaching about the tongue is a reminder to every teacher to 'watch their words'. Even as I write these studies, I am aware that I stand in judgement for what I write, and I pray every day that what is published will be true to God's truth and His purposes for what I do. But each of us have the task of passing on the Gospel, and should hear this word accordingly.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you are worried about things you say which are not very worthy, ask someone to pray with you about this.*
- *Who has taught you most about the Christian faith? Make sure you honour God the Holy Spirit above the person who taught you!*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, bring us joy we pray. Lead our hearts to sing to You, to be free, to laugh and cry out loud and be unashamed of our emotions. Then, when we are at liberty in Your presence, speak to us, we pray, through the joy of Your presence. Thank You for this privilege Lord Jesus: AMEN
