

sermon of the month



Speak the truth in love – or shut up!

by Ray Straub

It's easy to talk about how people ought to behave, but it's hardly safe. Describing good conduct tends to incite judging. Since few people will be critical of themselves, they judge the one who has their attention, the speaker. While a speaker evaluates the deeds of others, listeners wonder what his life is like. That's fair.

This makes our series on the Book of James challenging. His messages get our attention because he focuses on daily attitudes and deeds. He seeks to bring the lustre of our religion down out of our halos into our minds, hearts, hands and feet.

Lofty ideas must be put into practice. Pure religion is serving God blamelessly and humans compassionately.

Today's message from the Book of James is a sensitive one. It is a probing light which shines into our innermost beings. It tells us what we don't particularly like to hear, but we know we must because it focuses on a vital issue. James talks about our talk.

Almost all of us have been hurt by offensive remarks. Some have been painful. James resorts to some tough talk about our tongues. He provides not only pointed words, but there is a somber mood in his writing that we

really need to feel.

To get us off on the wrong foot, I chose a poor title. When it came to mind a few days ago, I figured it might be clever and attention-getting. Perhaps I was half right. It may have your attention. I decided not to use it, but I was unable to discard it. It provides us with an object lesson.

As direct as he is, James would not use a title such as the one chosen. First of all, it is inconsistent. James was dedicated to being consistent.

The title has one phrase which is "spiritual" and one which is "carnal." The first one reflects a certain maturity in Christian dis-

cipline. The phrase is from the Bible, Ephesians 4:15. The latter part of the title is tasteless, uncouth! Such vulgarity comes from an undisciplined mouth.

A second reason James would not use my terrible title is because he wouldn't give such poor advice. He never advised anyone to keep from talking. Some of us may have gained the idea that silence is the best alternative to not knowing how to talk as we should, but James didn't give it to us. Silence is not an adequate alternative to damaging talk.

Advice to Teachers

James, chapter three, begins with some advice to teachers. The language of the King James Version shields its message. We read from it, "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation." A clearer rendition would say, "My brethren, not many should try to be teachers, because they will receive stricter judgment."

What would this verse have to do with those following which deal with undisciplined speech? That's difficult to answer. Teachers use speech a lot as they serve. Careless statements can turn away listeners and cause disinterest, if not rejection. James' words can be appropriately applied to teachers, but the message would hardly be restricted to them. What is written can be applied to all.

Regarding teachers, let's take another cautious glance at the faulty sermon title. We'll drop the words, "in love." What remains, "Teach the truth or shut up," may describe some of our teaching attitudes. Could it be that our attitudes or approaches may have suggested a demand that others must agree with us in order to enjoy their right to have and express opinions? Are our opinions the only convictions that should be heard?

During the time that James wrote this letter, there were problems relating to the number and quality of teachers. There was more zeal than ability in many in-

structors. It was troublesome. Jesus warned about those wanting to be called "Rabbi" in Matthew 23:8; James disclaimed unauthorized teachers who were causing disturbances (Acts 15:24); and Paul warned Timothy about wanderers who turned to meaningless talk (I Timothy 1:5-7). These problems are assuredly related to talk. They fit teachers along with the rest of us.

The Tongue

Having cautioned teachers, we proceed into James, chapter 3, to study James' description of the



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tongue. Is it needful for me to mention that reference to the tongue here is metaphorical? We understand that we are considering the use of language — the selection of words, the tone of voice in which they are delivered, facial expressions and other means of communication.

James insists that anyone with perfect control of the tongue is indeed perfect. Are we perfect? Am I? You know that I'm not because of this sermon title! Let those of us who must confess to a status which is less than perfect recognize that the message which follows is for us.

James offers three comparisons to the tongue. First of all, it is like a bit in a horse's mouth and second, like a ship's rudder. I know that a horse is a strong animal and is capable of helping and providing enjoyment. Many of you are

better acquainted with the animal than I am. Imagine the value of a horse which can never be tamed and directed. Likewise, what good is a massive ship placed on the high seas if it cannot be guided in any way, but must be subject to the movement of the currents? The simple message in these two comparisons is that a small cause can bring about big results.

This leads us to the third comparison to the tongue. It is like a fire. Each time we read or hear about a sizable, destructive fire, the same question ascends from the cinders. This happens time after time, almost without fail. The question is, "What started the fire?"

Acres of forest and valuable grassland are destroyed by fires which lustily consume homes and food of man and beast. These catastrophes had small beginnings, many unnoticed, such as dropped cigarettes, lighted matches or campfires left smoldering. What an awesome blaze can come from a tiny spark! The tongue starts fires that rage into uncontrollable infernos.

Verse 6 of chapter 3 contains James' most pointed remarks about the destructive capabilities of the tongue. In order to take advantage of more current language and to make use of a version which appears to reflect the message of the original language more forcefully, I turn to the New English Bible. We'll consider this verse in sections.

"And the tongue is in effect a fire. It represents among our members the world with all its wickedness." This is a "heavy" accusation to lay on the tongue. As we contemplate this description, I sense a wariness about this ominous, threatening member which resides in my mouth. Among all the parts of my body, this resident, so close to my brain and so active, represents a world of its own, full of wickedness. We may need this apprehensive feeling. It may not be too good for us to feel relaxed about our tongue's ability to cause trouble.

When he uses the word,

"world," James refers to the world as it has become, a sinful society which repeatedly demonstrates its rebellion against and enmity toward God.

The apostle Paul says that we are the temple of God, collectively and individually. We were bought. The price was the death of His dear Son as payment for our sins. Now we are His.

We want that. It warms me to think that God thought enough of us to pay the high price needed to buy us. I want to be His, as do all of us.

But, according to James, inside this redeemed body lies a member which insists on belonging to the world of sin. Among this possession of God's which tries to please Him is an agent of the enemy. This foe tries to influence the entire body. It pollutes and stains. It defiles and destroys.

I understand that the muscles controlling the jaws are the strongest in our body, which seems reasonable judging by our ability to bite hard. The tongue lies horizontally surrounded by powerful jaws. It sounds like a good arrangement to assure adequate control. Does it? Apparently not. It seems that the shroud occupant persuades the strong jaws to cooperate.

Not only are other members of the body wrongly influenced, but the tongue keeps the "wheel of our existence red hot . . ." (NEB). Dr. Phillips, in his paraphrase, says the tongue "makes the whole of life a blazing hell." Its unrelenting, troublemaking capacity rules through all of life, no matter what the age or location. Where life rolls on, the tongue is present, threatening, infecting and inflaming with ongoing destruction.

It is fed from Gehenna hell. The tradition of the Jews suggested that this garbage dump (Gehenna) outside Jerusalem was headquarters for Satan and his demons, and James says Gehenna is the source of the tongue's inspiration. It seems incredible that James would suggest to me that my tongue has connections with hell, but that's the way his letter reads!

Man has had excellent success in his efforts to subdue animals, but a one-word report about his efforts in tongue-taming is "failure."

I hope I do some justice to James' regard of the tongue. There is danger of being too gracious and kind! This can be a problem because it may allow us to forget what danger lurks when the tongue moves.

James is not alone in his severe attitude toward careless talk. In describing the inherent sinfulness of man, Paul says that the throat is an open grave, tongues are used



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for deceit and treachery, the poison of snakes is on lips, and mouths are full of bitter curses (Romans 3:13, 14). That's no compliment!

Mouths attempt to bless God and curse men. They advise that we "speak truth in love or shut up." The undisciplined tongue would attempt such, a quick, unprovoked, turnabout-from-worship attack.

Alternatives to Bad Talk

Earlier I stated that James would not have advised silence as the alternative to bad talk. Let's give that some attention.

The good alternative to caustic conversation is to think and say what is good and helpful. More than learning to keep silent, the Christian must learn what to say, and how and when to say it.

A foundation to this letter of James insists that Christianity is a "people" religion. God is served when humans are loved. He becomes known as members of the God Family reflect their Father's virtues.

This cannot be accomplished through silence. Yes, at times silence communicates effectively, but such instances are rare. Compassionate, loving, caring, active children of God communicate. In this world of sinfulness, visiting meaningfully is becoming a lost art.

H. Norman Wright has written a series of studies on family communications. We've been studying these in our elective Sabbath school class. A lesson of this study asks, "Are you an emotional or factual communicator?" It offers five levels of communication, a formula which had been developed by John Powell in his book, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* (Argus, 1969).

Note these five levels of communication, giving special attention to the levels which are the most worthwhile. We begin with level 5 and move upward.

The fifth level is a conversation which consists of cliches. This kind of talk is characterized by its safety — its lack of any kind of commitment. It uses phrases like, "How are you?", "How are things going?", "Have you been busy?", "How is your new dog?", etc. Oft-repeated, general answers are given. No one shares, and nothing is learned about another person.

Level four is the reporting of facts. People are quoted. The speaker is like a newscaster, reporting what happened and what was said without any personal reaction to the facts given. One hears a narration. While this kind of conversation is more interesting, it says nothing about the speaker.

Level three provides personal ideas and judgments. At this level the speaker steps out of his confinement and begins to reveal a little of himself. He risks telling of his own ideas and decisions. However, he remains cautious,

fearing criticism and rejection.

Level two gets into the expression of feelings and emotions. Here a person tells how he feels about facts, ideas and decisions. At this level one person is sharing himself with another, allowing his inner self to be heard and evaluated.

Level one provides complete emotional and personal communication. There is a basic honesty and openness at this level. People express how they feel about people, including the person spoken to. Love and aims are described.

It is on this first level that one is the most vulnerable to rejection and hurt, but it also is here that meaningful relationships grow. It is here that lives intermingle and people become a part of each other.

Time does not allow an examination of this worthy analysis about our style of communication, but enough is shown to indicate that in order for us to be helpful to others, to be brothers and sisters in God's Family, we must communicate. Everyone participates at some levels suggested, but many will not risk the higher levels easily.

The first "I love you" mentioned between people involves risk. Acceptance of the strong sentiment voiced in this expression can be exhilarating, but rejection can be painful. People who love and care, say it, and show it.

Who would travel for hundreds of miles to see loved ones, determined not to say anything lest it be offensive and cause pain? We meet with others to communicate and relate. That will involve talk. The alternative to destructive talk is conversing with words that support and build up.

What to Do About the Tongue

What can be done to control the blaze that the tongue is always threatening to start? This is difficult to answer. Let's consider some suggestions together, to which you may add. James gives us much help as we look at the latter part of the chapter.

1. Let's strive to be consistent. Talk, like the kind making up the title to today's message, should be abandoned. We'll resist having our uplifting talk weakened by thoughts that are caustic, hurtful and degrading. Being consistent takes a lot of patience and practice, but we'll improve as we struggle to watch our words carefully. James noted that a well should not even attempt to produce both sweet and bitter water. Do we want to see people hurt or helped? The choice is ours.

2. Second, let's recognize that we judge ourselves different from how we judge others. We judge others for what they are, but we judge ourselves for what we would like to be. It pays to remember that others are the same. They too prefer to be judged for what they would like to be. We forgive ourselves easily because we know that our thoughts and intentions were wholesome. Understanding these simple traits will point out an important truth. It is better to accept people than to judge them. We hardly ever do both.

3. James suggests that the wisdom from above is peaceable, gentle, easily approached, merciful, fair and genuine (3:17). We hurt others when we are too image conscious, wondering constantly how others see us. Such concern causes more harm than good, because we become self-centered and boring. We help when we love others and seek what is best for them.

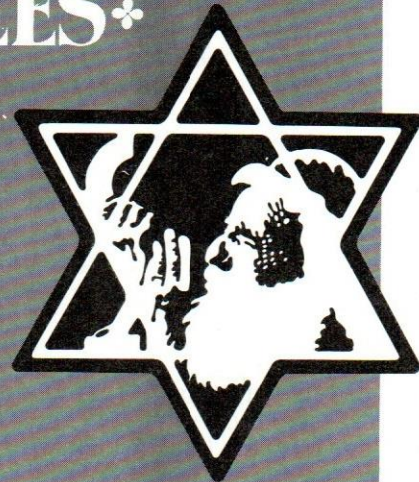
4. Let's come to grips with the fact that we can't fight the world, the devil and hell on our own. We need to invite the triumphant resources of God into our lives. If we have not received Jesus as Saviour, it's imperative to do so because we need His Presence and Power. He can change our hearts, our lives, our attitudes and our speeches. We cannot subdue our tongues, but Jesus can.

Our success is guaranteed if we follow the correct formula:

Ye are of God, little children and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world (1 John 4:4).



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BACK TO BASICS

by Richard Straub

Christianity is founded on some very basic teachings. It rests primarily on the simple message of salvation, which is easily comprehensible by all. The early church was founded upon that message, and there is no other foundation but that message. This morning I'd like for us to talk about the basic teachings of Christianity. Sometimes we're so busy talking about other Bible subjects that we fail to emphasize the very basics of our faith.

Turn with me to Acts chapter 2. We're going to be looking at a few key verses in this chapter — verses which contain the essential

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elements upon which the early church was established.

Hear These Words

The first passage is Acts 2:22-24:

Ye men of Israel, HEAR THESE WORDS; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it (emphasis supplied).

A key phrase in this passage is "hear these words." The words spoken are the words of the apos-

tle Peter on the Day of Pentecost. And the words which Peter wanted the people to hear were the words about Jesus Christ.

What about Jesus of Nazareth, the one who worked miracles, wonders and signs among the Jews? The point Peter stresses is that this same Jesus was crucified — He was slain. But Peter goes on to say that the Jesus who was crucified could not be held by the grave. He arose again. He lives!

These two tenets, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, were at the heart of the message taught by the early church. When Peter said to "hear these words," he meant not only to listen to these words, but to believe these words, to have faith in these words. Of all messages, this is the most basic message. Belief in the crucified and resurrected Christ is the very center of our Christian faith.

Through the crucifixion of Christ we learn that He is our Saviour, that He died to save us from our sins. And through the resurrection of Christ we learn that He is not only our Saviour, but that He lives as our exalted Lord and High Priest at the right hand of God.

However, there are many people today who claim Christianity, but they claim a very weak form. It's a "Christianity" that sees Christ solely as a good man. Those who hold this view recognize the excellent moral and ethical teachings of Jesus. But when it comes to His crucifixion and resurrection, they say, "Well, that's a little more than we can handle. We can't quite accept all of that." And so some who claim Christianity

fall short of believing in the very fundamental tenets of Christianity.

Repent and be Baptized

After Peter's sermon on the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, we encounter the second essential element upon which the early church was established. This second element is found in Acts 2:36-38:

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, REPENT, AND BE BAPTIZED everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost (emphasis supplied).

After hearing the words of Peter about the crucified and resurrected Christ, the people responded with a question, "What shall we do?" Peter's answer lists two more basic elements of Christianity — repentance and baptism.

When we think of repentance, we often think of being sorry and remorseful for things we've done. But the concept of repentance is larger than that. It also includes a willingness to change. Repentance means nothing without a willingness to change. It's not enough to just say, "Oh, I feel really bad about that sin," and then go on to do it again. That's not enough. Repentance calls for a total change in lifestyle.

Baptism is a symbol of that change. It represents a cleansing

from those things that made us so dirty — those sinful things which caused us to be separated from God. Baptism symbolizes that cleansing.

It also symbolizes the burial of our old sinful natures and the raising up or resurrection of our new natures in Christ. We become new creations, no longer looking to sin but to Jesus Christ and His salvation. We also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit which empowers us to live godly lives, something which we could not do before on our own.

Repentance and baptism are acts of commitment. Some people say, "Well, I feel sorry for what I've done, and I want to change, but I don't know if I want to be baptized. I don't know if I want to make a public commitment in front of other people. They'll be able to see if I do right or if I do wrong from now on." But that's just what Christianity calls for. It's stepping up and committing ourselves to Jesus Christ.

Others may say, "I'm willing to make a commitment. But is the act of baptism really necessary for salvation? Can't I be saved without being dunked under the water?" True enough, our salvation rests solely in our acceptance of Jesus Christ. But because of our acceptance of Christ, we should seek to follow His example and instructions. Baptism is not only instructed by the Lord, but it is something that is *desired* by the Christian.

Christianity calls for commitment. We can't ride the fence. We can't sit on the side, showing an outward form of Christianity while in reality living a life apart from God. After hearing about Jesus, we must repent of our sins and then demonstrate our repentance through baptism.

Continue Steadfastly

The third essential element on which the early church was established is found in Acts 2:41-47. Notice as we read that the third element follows the hearing and accepting of the word about

Jesus and the responding to that word through repentance and baptism.

Then they that gladly received his word [first element] were baptized [second element]: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they CONTINUED STEADFASTLY in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (emphasis supplied).

The key phrase in this passage is "they continued steadfastly." After hearing about Jesus and after demonstrating their faith in Him through repentance and baptism, the people in the early church continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine by following those things that God instructed. And in following those things, they didn't stay where they were, but they grew. They grew in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. They grew in their commitment to the Lord.

They also continued steadfastly in their fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers with one another. They tried to strengthen one another as well as they could. When people had problems, they no doubt suffered with them. When they had concerns, they shared their concerns. When they had physical needs, they shared by giving.

They also sold their possessions and goods. They had all things in

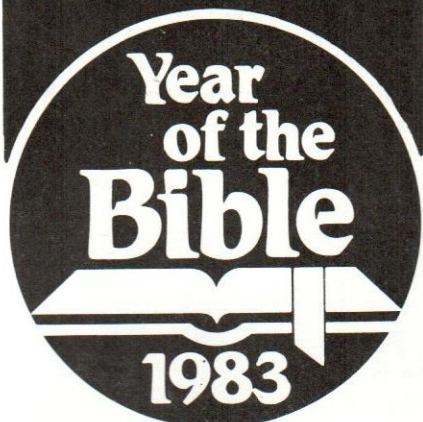


On February 3rd, President Reagan Proclaimed 1983 as The Year of the Bible

In his proclamation message the President encouraged "all citizens . . . to reexamine and rediscover its priceless and timeless message."

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common. This shows that they devalued material things. They put no value on earthly wealth. They realized that their wealth would get them nowhere. The only use wealth had was in sharing it with others. The true wealth was the salvation that they had through Jesus.

I think it's interesting that verse 46 says they "continued daily." Their Christianity was not something that occurred weekly, monthly or yearly. It was something that was lived day in and day out.

The same should be true for us today. We should not exhibit our Christianity just on Sabbath when we come to church or when we go to Bible Study, or when we're around other people of the congregation. Rather our commitment to Christ must live in us at all times. We must steadfastly continue in it daily.

And we cannot continue steadfastly without sinking our roots deeper and deeper into Christ. The more steadfast we become, the deeper our roots go, and the deeper our roots the more we grow and the more fruit we produce. No newly converted Christian who stays at that same stage can be pleasing to God, because God expects that Christian to grow! God does not say, "Well, as long as you believe and have faith, you can just sit and take it easy." Rather He says, "There's a job for you to do now. Get busy. Devote yourself to doctrine, to fellowship, to prayer and to serving others."

Conclusion

Christianity is simple and easy to understand. It requires faith, repentance and baptism, and then continuing steadfastly as God's Spirit leads and guides into greater truth, into greater fellowship and into greater service for Him. A Christianity which is built on this basic foundation is a Christianity which is strong. A Christianity which does not have these elements as its very foundation is a Christianity which is weak and terminal. As we said at the beginning, we often become so wrapped

up in discussing other Bible subjects that we fail to address the basic questions of our faith. This morning I don't want to fail to ask those questions, and I don't want you to fail to seek the answers. They're questions of utmost importance for our lives. Our very salvation depends on the answers we give to these questions.

First question — the most basic of all: Have you accepted Jesus Christ? Have you accepted the message that He is your Saviour, that He in truth was crucified and resurrected so that you might have eternal life? Have you accepted that fact?

Second question: If you do believe what is said about Jesus is true, then have you repented of those things that separate you from Him? Have you repented and been baptized? It's not enough simply to have grown up in the church. It's not enough to be associated with the church and to join in all the activities. It's not enough to attend church services once a week. If you haven't repented and been baptized, if you haven't made that personal commitment, then you're missing one of the fundamental elements of what being a Christian is all about.

If you have answered "yes" to those questions, then there's one more basic question to consider. Namely, have you continued steadfastly in service to God? Has your Christian experience been one of growth? Do you have a deeper understanding of Christian doctrine now than when you first began? Have you grown closer in fellowship and communion with your fellow Christians? Have you shared your faith about Jesus Christ? Have you learned how to tell others about Jesus and to bring them into the fellowship?

If you don't have the answers to these basic questions, then pray to discover the answers for your own life. We all need to get back to the basics in our Christian experiences. The basics of Christianity deserve our undying commitment. They are commitments we each need to make. **BA**