

A Study in James

The Tests of a Living Faith

James 3:1–5a

February 13, 2013

Introduction

James has already given us four tests by which we may evaluate ourselves to see if we indeed have a living faith. You may recall that James assumes his readers were passing some tests, while others they were failing. This next test falls into the latter category. James accuses his readers of not exercising biblical wisdom.

Test #5: A Living Faith and Wisdom (3:1–18)

There are two areas in which James’s audience had failed to exercise wisdom: their speech and their conduct. James addresses both of these areas as wisdom issues. The bottom line is that a living faith should be evidencing biblical wisdom in both speech and conduct. The one who exercises wisdom in these areas will be giving evidence of genuine Christianity.

Wisdom and Speech (vv. 1–12)

In this section, James makes frequent reference to the tongue. As we explore the meaning of this passage, we need to have a firm definition in our minds of what James means by “tongue.” The term is not referring to a spoken language like English or Spanish. James is using “tongue” as a kind of figure of speech called a metonymy of association. This is where one thing (the tongue) is substituted for a closely related thing (speech). The tongue is the primary instrument of speech (Psalm 39:3).

Not Many Should Become Teachers (v. 1a)

There is a sense in which you might think that positions of teaching should be sought after in the body of Christ. This is partly true. Teaching carries with it a certain level of status and influence over the people being taught. And the author of Hebrews chides his readers by suggesting that many of them should have been mature enough to be teachers, but were still spiritual infants (Heb 5:12).

James, however, is approaching the issue from the opposite angle. There were many who were jockeying for teaching positions, when in fact some of them might not have been cut out for it. Teaching is not for everyone! There may be some situations, even today, where there are too many teachers (in the sense that they are not qualified or are teaching the wrong things). In this sense it would be better to have fewer churches with better teachers.

To whom does this apply? This is not only addressing pastors. Anyone who is engaged in teaching the word of God would fall into this category — pastors, Sunday School teachers, Bible Study leaders, children’s ministry teachers, etc. This goes for both men and women. Being a teacher should not be viewed as a status symbol, but rather as a position of service.

Stricter Judgment: A Warning for any Would-Be Teacher (vv. 1b–2)

James’s point in verse two is not to say that teachers *must* be perfect in all their ways. All people sin in their speech. Anyone who doesn’t sin with his speech would indeed be a perfect man. But honestly, who succeeds perfectly in that? No one! James’s point is that a teacher needs to be a mature believer who is sinning less and less with his speech. Just as the tongue represented the heart (Jas 1:26); so also here it represents the whole person. Those who can control their speech are demonstrating self-control. Self-control is not only a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23); it is also a requirement for teachers.

Verse one indicates that teachers will receive a stricter judgment than others. But why? Teachers, by the nature of their responsibility, must use speech to communicate with others. Since the teacher speaks more often and about important spiritual matters, he will have more to give account for on the day of judgment.

What does this mean for you? If you feel called to be a teacher, consider if you are meeting the qualifications and can accurately handle the word of God. Also remember that every word you utter will be called to account by the Lord (1 Cor 5:10).

What if you’re not gifted as a teacher? If you don’t think you fit the qualifications for a teacher, you can still strive for mature speech. There are many other positions of service within the body of Christ. Don’t buy into the unbiblical thinking that not being a teacher is somehow a lesser

status. Each member is a gift to the body of Christ, and is necessary for the church to function properly!

A Small Thing Can Have a Huge Influence (vv. 3–5a)

James offers us two illustrations to show that if you can control the tongue, you can control the whole body. This is not only incumbent upon teachers, but is vital for all believers who claim to have a living faith.

Illustration #1: A Bit and a Horse (v. 3)

Horses are large animals relative to the average sized creature. And yet a properly trained horse can be controlled by a tiny bit placed within its mouth. The point is that if you can control the bit in its mouth, you can control the whole horse.

Illustration #2: A Rudder and a Large Ship (v. 4)

The ship James has in mind here is not the small fishing boats the disciples used on the Sea of Galilee. He has in mind the larger ocean-going vessels like the one Paul sailed on in the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 27:37). These vessels could be as long as 300 feet, carry several hundred passengers, and thousands of tons of goods. The point is that if you can control the rudder of the ship, you can control the whole ship.

But notice that there is something else at work behind the scenes. The rudder controls the ship, but there is someone controlling the rudder. In the same way, a person's speech controls his body; but the heart controls the speech. And so you can see that the tongue is not the ultimate issue here. If we are going to exercise self-control of our whole person, we must first have a godly heart that is controlling our tongue.

Conclusion About the Tongue (v. 5a)

The things we say can have a far-reaching effect on others. In the context of teaching, the words of a godly teacher can turn others hearts toward walking in righteousness. At the same time, the words of a false teacher can lead a whole group of people into condemnation and destruction — whether it be a church, or even a whole community. As believers, we should be testing ourselves to see if our speech evidences godly wisdom. God can help us with this. Those who have a genuine living faith also have a redeemed heart that God can influence for His glory (Psalm 139:4; Prov 16:1).

~AWB