

Perhaps what we like most about this letter of James is that it is practical.

Basically, it is all about doing- if we wanted we could do what James says without even really thinking at all. Chapter 1 gives us a solid, useful definition of our faith: taking care of widows and orphans and keeping ourselves unstained from the world. Chapter 2, which we examined last week, tells us that we must not play favorites. And here in chapter 3, we are instructed to mind our tongues. Here is this little 6 or 8 square inch piece of flesh, and we have no control over it. We humans have figured out how to guide a ship, how to tame animals, how to ride and direct the movements of a horse- but we can't put a bit in our own mouths, so we cannot control our tongues. It is a fire, James says. An appropriate metaphor for us because fire is big in the news right now. The firefighters in California have discovered that at least some of the fires they are battling were set by humans- intentional or accidental, they don't yet know. Not that it matters, still hundreds of thousands of acres have been burned up, countless animals have died, millions of dollars spent, two human lives lost. Well, sometimes our words are the spiritual equivalent to the human actions that start these conflagrations. Our words may smolder; they may consume and destroy; they can kill. Our speech can divide us,

can hurt others, and can put us in dangerous situations. “Even a fish wouldn’t get in trouble if it kept its mouth shut,” the saying goes; and its cousin, this adage, “’Tis better to be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

Now some who read this letter without thinking may infer that James is writing about swearing (1), especially when he writes, “how can the same mouth speak blessings and curses?” It makes me think about the Dairy Queen I entered once and where was posted on the wall, the “Rules of the House.” And as I waited to be helped, I began to read them: Rule 1- “no bad language is permitted in this establishment.” And I got no further than that, because, right then, from the prep area in the back, came a string of expletives- fairly mild ones I’ll admit, but the timing of them was absolutely perfect. Just then a high-school age girl came out to take my order, as nice as she could be, smiling, and oblivious to the supreme irony of the moment. But the teaching of James about the tongue is more than crude speech. It could be gossip (2), such an evil act that in other places in the New Testament it is equated with idolatry and murder. The purpose of gossip, of course, is to build up oneself by tearing down someone else- it is a fire that burns both gossipers and the victims of gossip. Speaking from ignorance (3) seems to be another form of destructive speech. Ignorance isn’t bliss, it isn’t helpful, but

rather prolongs or deepens the hurt and fear that separate us. Life would be so much easier and kinder if we realized- if all of us realized- no matter how educated and culturally attuned we may be, or not, that we don't have all the answers.

Perhaps we should be like this man, who was able to make provision for his lack of knowledge. This is supposedly a real 911 call; I have heard the tape of it. I'll just read the transcript.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"Yeah, my wife was hurt real bad by a wild boar; can you get an ambulance up here real quick!"

"All right sir, what is the address?"

"It's 1-8-2-5 Eucalyptus."

"Can you spell that please?"

"You know, I'm just gonna drag her over to Oak St., and you can pick her up there."

Maybe James' warning to us means this: don't try to say more than you know; don't speak if it is beyond your understanding, just go as far as you know, go on over to Oak St. and sit quietly until help comes. Understand that it's ok to ask questions. Maybe you've heard someone say, "I have a stupid question." And the correct answer is, "There are no stupid questions. Stupid is thinking you have

figured out the answers all by yourself, or trying to move forward without the knowledge you need.”

There are things we may say that can never be taken back (4). Marriage counselors advise couples to speak carefully when they argue, what is sometimes called “fair fighting.” Don’t attack what cannot be changed, that is, do not fight using the mistakes or failures or painful episodes from the partner’s past. If you have lived with someone for any length of time, you know the key phrases and the inflammatory words that can beget a passionate response. Don’t speak to take advantage, or to come out on top. Just say “yes” or “no” James writes in chapter 5, paraphrasing Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. “Yes” or “no” may also mean don’t try to explain (5), for in the explanation you may say the wrong things and make the situation worse, and what was a simple disagreement could become an inferno of anger and blame.

And I think that is where verse 1 comes in; why James begins this passage which warns about the tongue with an injunction that “not many should become teachers,” that “teachers will be judged with greater strictness.” It is the responsibility of teachers to speak the truth, and not to lie (6), not even to exaggerate; to be able to explain the meanings of scripture, and to develop within

the church an atmosphere of friendship and caring and unity, and to defeat party spirit or division; to be able to teach or to lead with humility and not with demagoguery. “The tongue is full of deadly poison,” James tells us, and we need teachers who can speak the words that point to life. We can turn on the news at any moment, and hear leaders who want to tear down and divide; we could hear the self-righteous right now, those evangelists or pundits who proclaim some people to be better than others, who preach hatred for those who do not agree with them. And our nation and our religion are dying from the poison of their speech.

Here is the goal. (Displaying a picture on the monitor of two California wildfire survivors- a bobcat kitten and a week-old fawn snuggling together for comfort.) To bring together; to heal. To recognize that we have been saved from death, and that even natural enemies can become friends and take comfort from one another. This seems to be the meaning of the church- where the vegetarian has found a safe home alongside the carnivore. There will come a time when these two wild animals will be bigger, and may forget they once needed and loved each other, and one of them may try to avoid the other out of fear; or the other may try actually to devour the first. It is like that with us. We will not agree about everything, but we must realize that we need one another. Christ calls us to love

and care for each other and we must not speak words that tear down, that diminish and alienate. Let us rejoice together that we have been delivered from destruction and the fires of hell; we must be careful not to create divisions between people by hateful and prideful speech. Let the church be the place where rich and poor, and liberal and conservative, and black and brown and white exist together for the good of one another, and for the hope of the world; where God's love for all creation is professed and the good news of Christ's message is lived out; where the wolf and the lamb, and the lion and the deer, lie down in peace together, at rest in the loving rule of the Lord who calls us to be his.

Let us make the church a place that teaches the rest of society what makes for selfless speech and humble living. Where the harsh realities of the world are acknowledged, and where difficult words of discipline and learning may be spoken, but spoken always with love for the other person, always looking to encourage and build up; let us join together with the hopeful mindset that we are not opponents- one church against another, or one viewpoint trying to overpower another- but let us meet merely as humble servants of God trying to express our gratitude to the Lord who loves us.

All this about teachers being judged and watching our rogue tongues, made me sort of scared; I halfway toyed with the idea of preaching only about two minutes this morning, just to avoid the responsibility. But I knew you wouldn't put up with that! Besides I can't avoid it; nor can any of us. Mark Twain wrote about the "lie of keeping silence," and you've heard that saying, "all that evil needs to win is for good people to remain silent." And so, we must confront what the world is, and what we are, with the courage to speak. We will want to speak the truth against the lies of the world, but the only way we can do that is to *approach the truth with personal humility*- otherwise our speech can be at best only partial truth. Here is what James says about that in the verses immediately following our passage:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. This wisdom comes from above, is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Let what we say and how we live be the seeds of this just and holy peace.