

Sunday July 9, 2023

Lesson 6: Directing Your Ship

Scripture: James 1:19-20, 26; 3:1-12

Context:

Today we continue our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this second lesson of our second unit, “Wisdom,” we continue looking at how wisdom plays a prominent role as a gift from God to humanity. Today we continue to look through the book of James in the New Testament as we started last week with the analogy of seeking wisdom to navigate in the tumultuous seas of life. In today’s lesson we will emphasize how self-control is a vital factor to the life of faith, and to learn ways to exercise self-control when it doesn’t come naturally to us.

The book of James as we discovered last week is full of admonitions for wisdom. Using analogies from everyday life, James seeks to give tools to the Christian community for them to understand how they are called to live together. Just as James used the tempestuous sea to entreat Christians to seek wisdom, the passage today has James using several allusions including bridled animals, ships, flames, water, and crops. These rich metaphors help the early Christians understand the power of self-control and its importance in the Christian faith.

For James, the first step to wisdom deals with a place most Christians might never consider. The practical place James asserts wisdom begins with is the attention to speech.¹ Tying back to language in the gospel of Matthew where Jesus moves from a legal prohibition against murder through anger to name calling.² James takes this admonition from Jesus head on to state how readers should be more ready to listen and slow to speak. Going on further in verse twenty-six, James asserts Christians cannot be true in their worship if they do not control what they say, they mislead themselves and their service to God. Christians must control their tongues as the first gift of wisdom.

For James, the modeling of this behavior should come from teachers according to the start of chapter three. According to sources of the time including Ralph Martin, conflict among persons who claimed authority to teach was causing difficulty in the churches.³ Thus, the Christian community needed teachers who were wise and who sought to honor their communities to lead them peacefully and with self-control.

Yet James in the second verse of chapter three makes clear of how all make mistakes, even teachers. However, the wise teachers learn to bridle their tongue and keep at bay connecting to the rest of their body. The next step James uses is the tongue which is like a rudder of a ship. James uses the images of the horse and the ship to suggest one can gain control of the whole by concentrating on the small thing responsible for giving them directions.⁴ James reflects on how the tongue can be like a flame starting a fire, and can also be used to praise God. It can be a

¹ Perkins, Pheme. “First and Second Peter, James, and Jude.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 103.

² *Ibid.*, See Matthew 5: 21-22 for reference.

³ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

dangerous or life-giving organ.

The final metaphor James uses is a spring. Christians must learn to control the tongue. Otherwise, there is no fruit and others cannot come to salvation. By focusing on the power the tongue has over human beings, James reminds readers any success they have in disciplining speech is also a gift from God.⁵ It is truly a gift when humans can see how the bridled tongue can lead to actual growth and transformation.

Application

If you spend any amount of time with small children, you will discover how the power of the tongue plays out. Connecting to little ears, the tongue can teach little children to praise or curse, to lift or throw down. And their tongue will repeat what you say even if said just once.

For those not around small children, there is no doubt though you have seen a place where the tongue can cause great damage. One word, one line of gossip to one person, and an entire place can be consumed in a blaze. And it all begins with the wagging of the tongue.

Tied to the wagging of the tongue is the discipline of self-control. We do not often put the two together and yet when you make the connection, it clicks. Self-control can be an extremely challenging discipline for some while for others it comes more naturally. Yet even those with the gift of self-control still must strive and ask the Lord for the cultivation of it as there are seasons and times when the tongue gets restless, ready to start a fire and watch what happens.

Just a few weeks ago I had a moment when there was a time where the release of the tongue was at stake. Someone was talking to me and innocently threw out a rumor, a piece of gossip which was nice and juicy, just waiting to be shared. Yet something within me clicked and I realized the conversation needed to stop, to move in a different direction. And thus, I kept my silence and moved the conversation forward to another topic.

I use the example not to highlight myself, but to highlight what God was doing in the moment and how other mentors have helped formed me. Rumors and gossip are some of the easiest ways the tongue can deceptively move in and make its mark. You've probably seen the thought process at work: It doesn't seem so bad and if I just share with this one person even if I don't know its true, it'll all be okay.

Thus, the "he said, she said, and then they said," gets started and before you know everyone is all upset with each other and there is broken connection in the body of Christ. God has convicted me of times I have participated in it and I have also seen it hurt me or others I love and care about. The tongue can indeed cause great good or bring great harm.

For some of us, the act of self-control might help if we practice what is called "the pause." An example would be if someone says something which makes us angry. Do we lash out with a defense? Or do we pause for just a second to pay attention to what is going on within us. Did the person's comment make us sad, upset, or hurt? Before we say anything back, it might be good to practice the pause, to collect our words and our thoughts before our tongue takes us in a direction we do not want to go.

I think if James were to be here today, I also think he might say the tongue isn't just about the words we audibly speak. The "tongue" can also extend to what we write in an e-mail, a Facebook post we share, a letter we write, or a text we send. Those are extensions of the tongue and like the metaphor James used, they can start a fire or they can be a spring of water for goodness.

⁵ Ibid., 120.

In recent years, we have unfortunately even seen how respectable teachers in the Christian tradition can fall victim to not bridling the tongue. I have concluded if you start a statement, “I don’t mean to offend anyone, BUT…” the odds are what you are about to say or write or send is meant to hurt someone and you should not say it. There is power in telling the truth. Yet there is no good power when your words will hurt people you love and Jesus’ name is used in any form to bring harm to others.

A good place to start with self-control beyond the pause includes the number one rule of John Wesley, “Do no harm.” If there is any question of what you might say or suggests harms someone, it is best to bridle the tongue and find another way to speak the truth in love. It is in self-control we truly learn about God’s wisdom and how it can lead us into deeper connection with our Lord and one another.

How do you cultivate self-control? When was a time you learned the tongue can do great harm? Or a time when the tongue did great good? Who are people who can hold you accountable in what you say or do to others? Why can a pause help you cultivate self-control?

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