

Wisdom and Speech
James 3:1-12
November 11

Ask yourself, “During this past month, if someone paid me \$10 for every kind word I spoke about other people, and also collected \$10 from me for every unkind word I spoke, would I be richer or poorer?”

James challenged Christians, and particularly teachers, to reflect Christ in speech and behavior. Christians can meet this challenge only by the means of godly wisdom imparted through the indwelling Spirit.

What lessons does James teach about godly wisdom and speech?

First, James highlighted the necessity of wisdom (3:1-4). Because of the Jewish heritage of the readers, the most prized position of Jewish Christians was the position of teacher. Earthly wisdom caused many church members to selfishly desire the prestige bestowed upon teachers. James cautioned would-be teachers that the great honor given to teachers means greater responsibility. Teachers are responsible for instructing others in wisdom. God will judge reckless statements, reliance solely upon rhetorical skills, misleading assertions, and lifestyles that do not undergird the teachings. Teachers need heavenly wisdom to responsibly fulfill their roles.

Our tongues reveal either the presence or lack of godly wisdom. Many people are more prone or apt to sin in the area of speech. A person able to control his/her tongue evidences discipline and spiritual maturity in other areas of life. Such control is possible only through wisdom imparted through the indwelling Spirit.

The tongue is a small body part, but it exercises great influence. James employed the illustration of a bit, a rudder, and a spark to emphasize the power of the tongue. Our speech can either be a positive influence or a negative influence.

Second, James contended that inconsistent speech demonstrated a lack of wisdom (3:5-12). Like a fire, the misuse of the tongue can cause great destruction. The tongue, of course, operates under the direction of the mind. Unwise thought processes could corrupt a person's entire life. Hell or Satan functions as the source of the destructive power of an inflammatory tongue. Pentecost, however, demonstrated that God can set a tongue on fire for positive results.

Humans tame animals, but without God's assistance an individual cannot tame the tongue. The tongue may contain deadly poison. Christians who would never consider serving a meal with poison often serve a meal with poisonous, vicious gossip.

William Norris expressed sage advice in a poem:

"If your lips you would keep from slips,
Five things observe with care:
To whom you speak; of whom you speak;
And how, and when, and where."

Unwise Christians praise God in worship and then angrily curse a brother or sister in Christ. Since God created people in His image, angry curses attack God in reality. Nature operates based on consistency; in nature like produces like. The inconsistency of praise/curse is contrary to nature. Inconsistent speech may reveal a person's true nature, that is, our family resemblance.