

James 3:1-18

Here we have a photo montage of various people. What connects them? They are all Christians so as you look at them you can say that well this is what a Christian looks like.

But they are all so very different and if we were to trace the story of their lives I wonder if we would be able to say this is what a Christian life looks like?

So what does a Christian life look like?

As we are looking on these Sunday mornings at the book of James we see James gives us some understanding of what a Christian life looks like? In this short book we see it is a life of faith which is tested in the fire of trials and shown to be real in practice be that in caring for the weak, treating people equally or many other things. What James has been saying in the first couple of chapters to these Christian spread across the world was that the true Christian life is one that is rooted in Jesus and shown in practical action even when life is tough. Is that how you see it? Do you recognise that following Jesus is more than Sunday morning and it is not just for the sunny days?

But what is the source the wellspring of this Christian life?

James has made that clear for his readers as well and it is the word of God. It is through the word, 1v18, that the Christian comes to faith, by which he or she grows in faith if they listen to it and put it into practice, 1:22, and it is this word again put into practice which gives the Christian wisdom. That ties in with what Jesus said doesn't it when he said, "everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matt 7:24). The well spring of the Christian life is the word of God heard and acted on and it is this word which gives wisdom and wisdom may be described as the ability to understand the will of God in any given situation and to help others understand God's will.

James has been writing to these Christians about how to live the Christian life and to do that they and we must rely on God's wisdom and work it out in godly lives.

So in 1:5-7 we see that wisdom brings Christian stability and leads to godly action and here in 3:13-18 the good, the God, life stems from wisdom which v17, is God given, which comes through the word of God and is practical, it results in fruit, a harvest of good things.

I think I have mentioned before we have a tree at the side of our house. I had no idea what it was I called it a trifid because the long tendrils seemed to reach out and get you and then after a few years I found kiwis on it. By the fruit we knew what it was.

In v17 we see the fruit of wisdom. Just look at the fruit of wisdom, which are the hallmarks of the Christian life.

a. pure – that is free from self interest and selfish ambition

b. peaceable - true wisdom brings people together. It helps to reconcile and unite.

- c. considerate – that is concerned for others and how they feel
- d. submissive – or perhaps open to reason ready to listen to others and to obey even as Jesus submitted to the will of the Father even to death.
- e. full of mercy – compassionate towards those who are in trouble
- f. full of good fruit – the fruit of the Spirit growing and evident
- g. impartial – treating everyone the same
- h. sincere – that is being genuine, no affectation.

This is what a Christian life looks like as it draws on the wellspring of God's word, which creates God's wisdom in the followers of Jesus.

Clearly in these verses James is saying that if we would live the life Christ wants us to then we need wisdom. It is this wisdom that leads the Christian to a godly life where faith is shown in action and that applies not just to doing but as we see in the rest of the chapter to speaking as well.

Wisdom helps the Christian to counter the danger of the tongue.

In 3:1 James gives a warning to the readers about wanting to be teachers. On the face of it it seems a bit odd. Why does he say this? Well he is speaking to Christians and about teaching within the Christian community not about whether you do a PGCE or whatever. People look to the teacher for wisdom and wisdom as we have been seeing equals godly living and yet the main tool of the teacher is so hard to control.

Teachers do have an influence over people we think of that from things like the Prime of Miss Jean Brodie or Dead Poets Society or perhaps just our own experience. I can certainly remember teachers who have had a big impact on me. Paul in 1 Cor 3 spoke of teacher's work being tested by fire.

Those of us who preach here in Christ Church regularly remind ourselves of the great privilege that is and also of the huge responsibility.

It is because of this that James gives this warning about teaching because, as he says in v2, we all get it wrong and if someone were able to be perfect in what they say then that person would be perfect and of course none of us is ever going to be perfect so we are not going to get our speech right and because of that it would be better not to be a teacher.

James makes the point even stronger by showing just how unruly the tongue is and how humans cannot perfectly control it – as if we need to be told!!

1. a power disproportionate to its size v3-5

The first thing James shows us about the tongue is that it has a power disproportionate to its size.

That is not uncommon as we see from vs 3-5. The bit is small but can be used to control a large horse. The rudder similarly is small but can direct a ship. A spark is small but in the right conditions

can set ablaze a whole forest. The tongue is small but like a spark of fire can cause devastation way beyond its size. We should not underestimate the power of the tongue.

We may consider the tongue just another small part of our body. No more offensive than say our nose. James tells us differently and I believe experience and often bitter experience tells us the same. The tongue is powerful.

2. a power for evil v6

But secondly it is a power for evil. James spends time warning about the tongue because it is seen as evil. v6 would bear much consideration if we had the time but two points to note from it. First that James sees the tongue as "set on fire by hell". This is not to say that the tongue is somehow in touch with evil in a way that the rest of the body is not, but that the evil that is in a person does come out and so often the tongue finds itself more a servant of the devil than of Christ. Then, secondly, James describes it as a world of wrong occupying its place in our bodies. In other words the tongue has a multitude of ways in which it can bring out the evil that is in us. We gossip and back bite. We sit safe in our cars and hurl abuse at other drivers, and we spread rumours. Is this not so? Do we not see ourselves in that kind of list?

The tongue has disproportionate power and a potential for evil.

3. impossible to control v7-8

Thirdly it is also impossible to control, v 7&8. The point is made that while we can tame all the animals the tongue is like a wild half tamed animal in a cage which in the words of J.B.Phillips is "always liable to break out". We know from experience that given the circumstances the tongue is always liable to break out and say something which will cause pain and hurt and which later on we will regret. No human being can tame the tongue. James presents it as being like some venomous jack-in-a-box always ready to pop up and pour poison into someone's ear.

4. reveals our inconsistency v9-12.

Fourthly the tongue reveals our inconsistency v9-12. A stream can't produce both fresh and salt water. A fig tree doesn't produce olives and yet we use the same tongue to praise God and curse other people. No wonder in v10 James says "this should not be" or perhaps this is not right.

However it is this thought which links us through to v13 and to what we were thinking about earlier in terms of wisdom.

Back in 1:5 James had called on his readers to ask God for wisdom so they would not be double – minded and unstable. Here in v9-11 we get just that, those who are double minded who speak now words that edify and now words that destroy.

Here is the tongue. It has a power disproportionate to its size, it is a power for evil, it is impossible to control, and it reveals our inconsistency.

But why – why is the tongue such a problem? Jesus knew exactly what the problem was in Matt 12:34 he said, “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” and later in 15:18 Jesus said, “the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'.”

If we are to live godly lives with regard to the tongue we need a change in our hearts or wisdom. Yes we can do practical things and people talk about setting a guard over our lips but here James is talking about wisdom as the root of godly living and with regards the tongue we must rely on God’s wisdom to change our hearts so that what comes out is pure because what is within is pure – simples!

As James says in 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God”.

We need to ask God for wisdom that our hearts may be changed and so the source material for what we say is purified and then our speech will be pure. We will no longer be double-minded out of the heart will flow only good things through our speech and through our actions.

So what then might we do?

In my late teens early 20’s I used to spend holidays down in Devon with some friends there. I always came back speaking a lot like them. Just being with them affected my speech. I think the first thing practically we might do is **spend more time with God** through his word that we grow to think and speak like God. Some years back I preached on the passage that Margaret Locke-Wheaton will preach on in a couple of weeks from James 4:13-17 and was especially struck by v15, “you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will” and since when people have said “will you be there on Sunday” have mostly said “yes God willing”. Being with God and his word gives us wisdom and shapes the way we speak. I know it is something we say often but if we spend time with God through his word he will give us his wisdom and that will affect our heart and so our tongue.

Then secondly, because James says here in v13 that wisdom is shown in what we do, if we think our tongues should be used better let’s do it. Let’s make use of every opportunity to use our tongue to **speak of God and for God**.

I may have said it before but I remember when I was working at a church in London one day walking down Great Portland Street and these two young men stopped me. Their hair was brightly coloured their clothes had zips and holes. They came up to me and spoke to me and after a very few minutes one of them said, “so Ian what can we pray for you?” These guys were lay workers at our Clubhouse and strong Christian guys but I tell the story because they spoke of God. So many questions they could have asked or things that they could have said but from their hearts came godly words.

So for us we need to actually do it to speak to or for God.

As you go about your daily business sing a hymn or song and give praise to God. Speak to somebody about God to whom you’ve never spoken about God before. Say a prayer when you wouldn’t

normally perhaps before you get the kids out of bed or pick them up at school or as you sit down at your desk in the morning. Say grace before your meal. Speak to your Christian friend about something to do with your faith rather than about the weather. It should not be that we use our tongues to praise and curse so let's focus on the praise and let's not forget that we need that change of heart if this is to be something other than a cosmetic change.

"Who is wise among you " James asks, well probably none of us but God will give us wisdom if we ask so that we can live the godly life he desires for us and that godly life is worked out in what we do and what we say. If our words are to reflect God then our hearts need changing and our lips need practice.