

Place: Lurgan Baptist 7:3:2004

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

Reading: James 3:1-12

19. THE TEACHER AND HIS TONGUE

On a windswept hill in an English country church yard there stands a drab grey slate tombstone. The quaint stone bears an epitaph not easily seen unless you stoop over and look closely. The faint etchings read:

*" Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
Lies Arabella Young, who on the twenty four of May: Began to hold her Tongue."*

The **Tongue** ! What study in contrasts ! Medically, they say its only a two or three inch slab of muscle, mucous, and membrane, and nerves that enable us to chew, taste and swallow. How *helpful* ! Its also the major organ of communication that enable us to articulate distinct sounds so that we can understand each other. *How essential* ! Without the tongue no mother could sing her baby to sleep at night. No ambassador could adequately represent his nation. No teacher could stretch the minds of his students. No pastor could comfort troubled souls. No officer could lead his fighting men in battle. Without the tongue our world would be reduced to unintelligible grunts and sounds. Seldom do we ever pause and realise juts how *Valuable* this strange muscle in our mouths really is ! But then the Tongue is as *Volatile* as it is *Vital*.. It was Washington Irving who said, " *A sharp tongue is the only edge tool that grows keener with constant use.*" But it was James who said, " *the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.*" (3:6) My the tongue has killed more friendships, ruined more reputations, wrecked more homes, split more churches, and driven more men out of the ministry and caused more division among brethren than other person I know. Concealed as a sniper, quick as a bullet, and deadly as a gun, is this three inch animal that lives in a pool of salvia behind an ivory cage of teeth.

Now you get the impression when you read James letter that the believers to whom he wrote were having serious problems with their tongues. Five times over in this short letter James brings this subject up. (1:19, 26, 2:12 4:11 5:12) My it seems evident that what Matthew Henry calls, " *the sins of the tongue,*" were rather prevalent among these believers. Would James find them less common if he were to visit this church today ? There are few sins that more frequently and glaringly blacken our faith than the " *sins of the tongue.*" Now in this opening verse James is dealing with the Teacher and his Tongue. Notice James begins by issuing:

(1) A REBUKE

Albeit a gentle one. Apparently everyone in the church wanted to teach and be a spiritual leader,

for James had to warn them. He says, “ *my brethren, be not many masters,*” (3:1) Or as the Amplified Bible puts it, “ *Not many of you should become teachers, self-constituted censors and reprovers of others.*” Now in the 16th century the word “ *masters,*” meant “ *school-master.*” The original word used here for “ *masters,*” comes from the verb “ *to teach.*” This particular word “ *masters,*” is used many times in the Bible. Do you recall what the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus ? “ *Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things.*” (Jn 3:10) When Joseph and Mary found the boy Jesus sitting in the Temple he was “ *in the midst of the doctors.*” (Lk 2:46) The word “ *doctors,*” and “ *masters,*” are the same word. So we can safely say that James is referring here to “ *teachers,*” or to what John Calvin called “ *reprovers of others.*” Now in the Early Church teachers were of tremendous importance. Do you recall in the church at Antioch they are ranked with the prophets who sent out Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey ?

(Acts 13:1) You see, while the apostles and prophets belonged to the *Foundational Ministry of the Church,* the evangelists and pastor/teachers belonged *to the Fundamental Ministry of the Church.* Now are there apostles and prophets today ? No ! Because the Word of God gives us all that we need, but there are still evangelists and pastors/teachers today ! Do you recall Paul words ? “ *And He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers.*” (Eph 4:11) Or if you like “ *And some pastor/teachers.*” (1 Cor 12:28) And their responsibility was to instruct and edify. Now when James says, “ *Let not many of you become teachers,*” is he condemning the teaching ministry ? No, actually, he is warning against clamouring for the position without carefully weighing the cost. You see, James is issuing a warning against:

(a) CARNAL AMBITION:

You see, the teacher in the Early Church inherited some of the exalted status of the Rabbi in the Jewish system.

A Rabbi was held in a very exalted position. His very name meant “ *My great one,*” and everywhere he went he was treated with great respect and he gloried in that respect which others showed him in public.

(Matt 23:5-7) Then what happened was this, the exalted status of the Rabbi began to filter into the Early Church, and with the status, the danger. People sought to be teachers because it put them above their fellow-men.

They were impressed with the authority and prestige of the office, and they forgot about the tremendous responsibility and accountability. Paul speaks to Timothy about those “ *desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.*” (1 Tim 1:7)

You see, in spite of their ignorance and spiritual immaturity they wanted to be teachers. Carnal Ambition ! Andrew McNabb says, “ *There seems to have been an eagerness on the part of many to speak in public, and a failure to recognise that the fundamental qualification is learning.*” Do we need to hear that ? You see, when you cease to be a learner you cease to have any usefulness as a teacher. What a word for today. For there are those who still aspire to be teachers, because of the external trappings of the office, because they love the limelight, because it puts them in a position of prominence, gives them an opportunity to impress others. There are

young men who think that the ministry is very romantic. My there is nothing glamorous or romantic about it, indeed many churches are in a shambles today, because of the shabby way they have treated their pastors. Now there are two things we must avoid in relation to all of this. The first is:

1. SLOTHFULNESS:

James does not say, “ *Be not any teachers.* ” (3:1) He is not saying that no man should give himself to the study of the Word and the communication of that Word to others. My there is a tremendous need in the church today for sound teachers of the Word of God. For those who will “ *give themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.* ” (Acts 6:4) My do you do that ? Do you meditate on this Book ? Are you exercised about bringing God’s Word at the Breaking of Bread ? Slothfulness is a sin and we have a duty always to be praying Paul’s prayer, “ *Lord what wilt Thou have me to do ?* ” (Acts 9:6) To obey Paul’s command, “ *Neglect not the gift that is in thee Stir up the gift which is in thee.* ” (1 Tim 4:14 2 Tim 1:6) My you have a gift (Eph 4:7) and you have a duty not to neglect it, but to stir it up. What are you doing with the gift that God has given you ? Are you neglecting it ? Are you using it for God’s glory and the blessing of others ? We must avoid slothfulness, and we must avoid:

2. BUMPTIOUSNESS:

Is there not a terrible amount of striving, wriggling, scheming and politics in the church today ? To be chairman of this, president of that, leader of the other.

My if there is one thing worse than social climbing in the world, it is ecclesiastical climbing in the church.

Are you guilty of it ? Are you like Diotrephes ? Do you

“ *love to have the pre-eminence ?* ” (3 John 9) Did you know that the shortest chapter in the book of Jeremiah is written to one man ? His name was Baruch and he seems to have been Jeremiah’s private secretary. At that time Jeremiah was commanded by God to prophecy some very hard things to his people, but Baruch was not happy with that. And the Lord sent a message exclusively to this man Baruch, a message that comes ringing down through the centuries, in one single, shattering sentence. “ *And seekest thou great things for thyself, seek them not.* ” (Jer 45:5) My do you seek great things ? Fine ! Seek them for the kingdom of God, seek them for the Lord Jesus, seek them for the sake of God’s people, seek them for the sake of the lost, seek them for the glory of Christ, but “ *seekest thou great things for thyself seek them not.* ” “ *Not many of you should become teachers,* ” it’s a warning against (a)

(b) A CRITICAL ATTITUDE:

For we can take the word “ *master,* ” here to mean

“ *reprover.* ” Here is a word to those who are in a position of leadership. I’ve discovered that sometimes those in leadership regard themselves as superior and become critical, arrogant and proud. Self-assumed authority soon leads to a critical attitude of others. Now there are two

Biblical antidotes to this sort of thing. The first is this:

1. Remember the MASTER:

You see, whatever your position in the Lord's work whether it is pastor/teacher, elder, deacon, leader in some department, always remember that there is only One who is the Lord of the Vineyard, and the Master of the harvest. Do you recall what the Saviour Himself said, "*the servant is not greater than his Lord.*" (Jn 15:20)

And what kind of attitude did Christ adopt ? Was He high-handed, arrogant, proud ? No ! Can you see Him as He takes a towel and washes the disciples feet ?

(Jn 13:14) My He came "*not to be ministered unto but to minister.*" (Mk 10:45) Can you afford to be proud and high-minded when you remember the Master.

2. Remember the MINISTRY:

For teaching, preaching, leading chairman of this and president of that, are ministries, and do you know what the root meaning of ministry is ? "*To serve.*" To be a servant of others and not the promoter of self. That's why Peter writes to the elders and says, "*Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint but willingly, not for filthy lucre but of a ready mind. Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock.*"

(1 Pet 5:2-3) Does this mean a sort of spineless approach to leadership ? Not at all. Paul says to Timothy,

"*Reprove, rebuke, exhort.*" (2 Tim 4:2) A leader appointed by the Lord should be a man with a note of authority about him. How sad and solemn when an elder in the fellowship wants peace at any price. Not spineless but not superior either, for Paul says "*Reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine.*" My are you a servant of others or a promoter of self ? How do you exercise your leadership ? Like Christ do you seek to minister rather than be ministered unto ? (1)

(2) A REASON

Look at (3:1) "*For you know that we teachers will be judged by a higher standard and with greater severity than other people.*" (A.N.T.) Now let me say again, James is not condemning the teaching ministry. But he is warning against clamouring for the position without carefully weighing the cost. You see, we who teach the Word of God will be judged more strictly than most. Why ? Because we are responsible for teaching truth, God's truth not our own opinions. Because what we say exerts influence over others. Because we who minister the Word are expected to model the truth that we teach. Now who wants to be a teacher now ? Do you see:

(a) THE PRINCIPLE THAT IS HERE:

It's a very simple one. Great privileges bring great responsibilities. What a privilege to minister the Word from the pulpit, in the Sunday School, among the youth, but those of us who do it will be judged with special strictness. Do you remember what Christ said, "*For unto whomsoever*

much is given, of him shall be much required.” (Lk 12:48) You see, we know there is a division between heaven and hell, between the saved and the lost, but do you realise that there are degrees of punishment in hell and degrees of reward in heaven.

(Matt 11:20 1 Cor 3:12) And these degrees depend on the light we have received, the opportunities we have had, the circumstances in which we have lived, the privileges we have been given and the service we have rendered. Now all of those things are going to be weighed in the mind of perfect Judge. But one thing is sure, that while all Christians will stand at the Judgement Bema Seat to have their service reviewed, those who have taken the position of ministering will be judged by a more severe standard for special privileges bring special responsibilities. Do you recall what God said to Ezekiel the prophet ? “ *Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel, therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from Me. When I say unto the wicked, thou shalt surely die and thou gavest him not warning His blood will I require at thine hand.*” (Ezek 3:17-18) The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that pastors/elders are to be obeyed.

Why ? “ *For they watch for your souls as they that must give an account.*” (Heb 13:17)

Sometimes people say to me, “ *Why do you say certain things against certain groups ? I want to warn you about them.*” Pastor-teachers, teach, lead, warn, rule shepherd. My I’ll do whatever I can to try and keep the flock in tow. That’s the role of the shepherd and elders. It may not always please you, but there’s a day of accountability coming ! Are you ministering in the light of the Judgement Seat ? Do you realise that unfaithfulness to God and His Word, will result in great loss then ? (a)

(b) THE PERILS THAT ARE HERE:

For when you venture into the work of teaching the Word you’re entering into an area where temptations are many and sins are easy. Did you ever go through the N.T. and look at teachers who failed in their responsibility and task ? There were teachers who tried to add a damnable plus to the Gospel and thus pervert it.

(Acts 15:24) There were teachers who taught others but who failed to live out the truth themselves. (Rom 2:17)

There were teachers who tried to teach before they themselves knew anything. (1 Tim 1:6-7) Then there were false teachers who would pander to the desires of the crowd. (2 Tim 4:3) My do you recognise that the dangers for the teacher of the Word of God are many ? That’s why I desperately need your prayers.

There’s the danger of vanity, of self-conceit, of intellectual and spiritual pride, there’s the great danger of compromising the doctrines of the faith ! No wonder James says, “ *Not many of should become teachers.*”

Listen, because a man has got a college training, a ready tongue, a big Bible, a family name, that does not make him a teacher of the Word of God ! So there is a (1) (2)

(3) A REALITY

“ *For in many things we offend all,*” (3:2) or “ *For we all often stumble and fall and offend in*

many things.” Now James is not only thinking of teachers here but of all believers. You see, we all stumble in many ways. This is a reason why:

(a) *The Teacher should be marked by HUMILITY:*

You see, there is no room for pride in anyone who ministers the Word, for not one of us have avoided the slips of the tongue. The tongue is the tool of the teacher but so the tongue slips its leash even in the pulpit. Moses was one of God’s great servants but he missed a trip to the Holy Land because he spake “*unadvisedly with his lips.*” (Ps 106:33) Isaiah got a glimpse of the Holiness of God and he cried, “*Woe is me because I am a man of unclean lips.*” (Is 6:5) Someone has said that Christian workers limit their usefulness more by sins of speech than in any other way. Indeed do we not all stand condemned in this respect ? Is it not so easy to traffic in unfelt truth and offer formal, mechanical prayers ? Is it not so easy even in the very act of teaching to be guilty of the “*sins of the tongue ?*” (a) and:

(b) *The Believer should be Marked by CHARITY:*

For teachers are not the only ones who are tempted and sin, for every Christian must admit that “*we all often stumble and fall and offend in many things.*” And do you know what seems to head the list ? The sins of the tongue. The word that James here means “*to slip up.*” Supposing you slip up once a day there is one thing, one moment, one word, one attitude each day in your life that grieves the Spirit of God. In a week that means 7, in a year 364, in 10 years 3640. My lets be honest, its more than once a day. Lets suppose its once an hour.

In a day 24, in a week 168, in a year 8736, in 10 years

87,360. But is that the end ? No ! For the Bible says that we are continually falling short of God’s glory and “*it is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning, great is Thy faithfulness.*” (Lam 3:22-23)

Oh, the wonder that God’s mercies overwhelm our sins every day. My in the light of that truth how should we assume any responsibility in the church, as a Sunday School teacher, a youth leader, an office-bearer ? How should we exercise that office ? What should be our attitude toward fellow-believers in the fellowship ? I think we know the answer. May the Lord help us to live it out!