

Not Many Teachers!

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- [0 : 00] Well, now, we are going to turn to our Bible reading for this morning, and Andy Gemmler is going to be leading us again for the last time in a little while in the letter of James. If you have one of our church Bibles, it's page 1012.
- If not, you'll find it after the long letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament and just before 1 Peter, which we've also been studying. And we're going to read this morning in James chapter 3 and this first section down to verse 12.
- James chapter 3 then, at verse 1. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.
- For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he's a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.
- If we put bits in the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also. Though they're so large and driven by strong winds, they're guided by a very small rudder, wherever the will of the pilot directs.
- [1 : 22] So also the tongue is a small member, and yet it boasts of great things. Our greater forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.
- And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.
- For every kind of beast and bird or reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue.
- It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.
- From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?
- [2 : 33] Can a fig tree, my brother, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Amen.
- And may God bless to us this is word. Well please sit and let's pray as we come to God's word.
- Heavenly Father, we re-echo those words we've just sung. That you would cleanse our sins and renew our souls. And make your word our guide to heaven.
- Hear us we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. James chapter 3, verse 1. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers.
- Well we're going to be looking at the first half of James chapter 3 this morning. And before we get to the detail, let me draw your attention straight away to two real surprises.
- [3 : 40] Here's the first. What a strange command verse 1 is. Don't you think that's unusual? Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers.

What a strange thing to find in the Bible. What a strange thing to find somebody who lectures at Cornhill speaking on this morning. Think for a moment who God is and what God has done.

The true God is a God who speaks. He speaks powerfully. His words are very powerful indeed. They bring things into being. They're that powerful.

And not only did God speak back at the beginning to start things off. He speaks still. Still. And he has spoken a life-giving word into this spiritually dead world.

A message about his son. About a great king and a great rule. A message of forgiveness for rebellious creatures. And far from keeping that message shut in behind locked doors so that none but a few eager spiritual pioneers can stumble upon it.

[4 : 49] God has sent that message out into the world. He's poured out his spirit into the lives of ordinary human beings. And all the time is pushing them out into this world to pass that message on.

And in plenty of places in the New Testament, the business of identifying and equipping and sending out teachers of God's word is positively encouraged.

And so 3.1 is hugely surprising that anybody who's read any of the Bible before. Given what God is doing in the world, you would expect any statement touching on numbers to say, Well, we want as many of those sorts of teachers as possible.

But this appears to say quite the opposite. Not many teachers, my brothers. That command needs some explaining, doesn't it? Well, here's surprise number two.

Surprise number two is that verse one is the only command in our passage today. We don't meet another command until verse 13.

[6 : 02] Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. That one's for next time. Verse one to 12 is a passage nearly everyone agrees about speech, about the use of the tongue.

And there's no doubting how important speech is. Words have enormous power. Power to build up and tear down. To help and encourage, to discourage and destroy.

The whole morale of a political party, of a nation, can be changed by just a few words. With words, the weakest armies have been roused to bravery in battle.

With words, the bravest can be rendered powerless. Words are very powerful things. We used to rule when the children were small that they used their words to do things, not just whine or scream.

On those occasions when something desirable comes into view, and it seems much easier for a small person just to go, The constant family command is use your words.

[7 : 13] And the truth is, of course, that nearly everything we do, especially in relation to other people, we do with our words. Of course, our hands are useful and our feet are useful for carrying us around and doing stuff.

But most of what we do in the world, we do by speaking. Words are very important. And this passage certainly speaks all about the great influence that your tongue can have for good or ill.

And at first sight, one might expect this passage to be saying, The tongue, it's a very important, powerful thing. So, work jolly hard to control it, won't you?

But that isn't what this passage says. Nowhere does this passage say, Your tongue is very important, get a grip of it. In a book full of commands, in a passage all about speaking, At no point is there any command to control your speech.

Now, isn't that a surprise? In fact, the only command in 1 to 12 is, Let's not have many teachers from you lot then. Well, this is a strange command and a strange passage, isn't it?

[8 : 28] Why is this such a strange command? And why are there no other commands here about the use of the tongue? Answer, I think, this is not a passage about the tongue.

It's a passage about the teacher. It starts with a command about not having many of them. And the whole thing flows on from that command.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers. For, you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For, you see how the logic moves on? Not many teachers.

And then we get the reasons why not many. And the rest of the chapter fits very much with that subject matter too. After the negative of verse 1, not many teachers, Verse 13, which we'll look at next time, is rather more inviting and positive.

Well, who is wise and understanding among you? What sort of teachers do you need then? And verse 18, the last verse, talks about those who sow in peace and raise a harvest of righteousness.

[9 : 40] And you can't help think of the sort of language that the Lord Jesus Christ uses in the parable of a sower, of a sower who sows seed and a great harvest is produced at the end.

We're in teaching territory here. This is a passage about the teacher, about not having many, verse 1, but, verse 13, having the right sort.

Well, next time we're going to look at the right sort, and that may be a little while. But for this morning, we're looking at the not having many. And we'll try and explore this passage for a moment. Why?

Why, when there's such a need in the world for gospel teachers, why not many? Well, it must be because of the situation that James is speaking into.

If you remember, if you've been with us at all over this series, this letter is an antidote to Christians behaving badly with one another. It's a letter full of bad behavior.

[10 : 43] Evidently, James knows something about some Christians somewhere. We don't know anything much about who they are, who are behaving in ways towards one another they ought not to. And one of the big features of their behavior towards one another is their speech towards one another.

Look, for example, at chapter 3, verse 9. Here's one of many examples in this letter. With our tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

Strong language. It must be because he knows people are doing that kind of thing. And we find this is a situation where people are very eager to speak and slow to listen.

Look back to chapter 1, verse 19. Know this, my beloved brothers. Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.

Why is he writing this? Well, because he knows that some of his hearers are not quick to hear and are very quick to speak and are very quick to anger.

[11 : 55] And that anger pops up all over this letter. And, says James, in a situation where people are like that, maybe not many of you should become teachers.

Chapter 3 has that quick-to-speak feel about it as well. Look at 3.5. The tongue is a small member but boasts of great things.

Or verse 14. He speaks of people who boast out of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition and so deny the truth. In a climate where words are being used in that kind of way, there are going to be people who just long to be teachers because they like to be in the public eye and they love the sound of their own voice and they don't want to listen to anyone else.

In a world where everyone feels a need to be heard, the position of teacher is likely to be sought by all the wrong sorts of people and for all the wrong sorts of reasons.

And that, I think, is what James is talking about here. And part of that remedy is to keep the wrong ones quiet before you encourage the right ones. The remedy, then, is not many teachers, guys.

[13 : 17] Not many. Now, next time we'll look at the what sort. But James says here, don't rush into being a teacher.

And his argument basically goes like this. If you have your head screwed on properly, you really don't want to rush into being a teacher because of what it's like.

And the whole of the rest of verses 1 to 12 is an explanation of why you wouldn't want to rush into being a teacher, would you? Well, let's follow that argument through and see where it leads us.

Why not many teachers? Verse 1. For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

You're a teacher? Well, you'll have to give account for your teaching, says James. Of course, the judgment here, the giving account here, is God's judgment.

[14 : 17] So often, of course, the teacher only has eyes for what human beings think of his or her teaching. But James wants them to raise their eyes to the judgment of God.

Stricter judgment goes with the territory of being a teacher. Of course, what you say doesn't matter much if nobody's listening. But if others are listening to you, then what you say matters enormously and will be judged more strictly.

And James doesn't just leave it there. Not only is there a stricter judgment issue, there's a stricter judgment, and we all stumble, don't we? Issue verse 2.

For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone doesn't stumble in what he says, he's a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. It's not just stricter judgment that's the issue.

It's strict judgment. And guys, we all stumble in many ways, don't we? Do we want that kind of judgment? If anyone's never at fault in what he says, he's a perfect man, able to control his whole body.

[15 : 26] Now, there's no doubt that James has controllable speech in view here. But the weight of this section is to make the point that we don't speak as we ought.

Do we? We all stumble in many ways, says James. How long do you need to listen to my everyday speech, especially the way I speak about other people, to know that I'm a sinful person?

How long do you think you need to listen to me before you know that I'm a sinful person? Well, not long. How long will I need to listen to you before I know the same? Not long. James says we all stumble in many ways, and if you want evidence of that, he says, look at your tongue.

Now, that I think is what he does in verses 3 following. Look at your tongue, says James. If you want to see that you all make many mistakes, take a look at the tongue.

It's a bit like going to the doctor. When I was a small boy, every time you went to the doctor, you were asked to put your tongue out because there was a vogue at that time for looking at your tongue. The thought was that it told you lots about what was going on inside, and actually they didn't do that anymore much because it doesn't tell you very much about what's going inside.

[16 : 45] It's rather changed, that habit. But what James is doing, he's doing the old-fashioned doctor thing. You want to see what's wrong with you? Look at your tongue. That'll teach you what's wrong with you.

And he goes to work on the tongue. Now, 3 to 12 is a little bit complicated, but it's all about how our tongues show us that we make many mistakes. Now, the first, where he starts is, he gives a couple of illustrations of things that are small that have big effects.

Two things. First, bits and horses. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

A horse is a big thing. You can make it do what you want with a very small thing in its mouth. A small controls the big. Second, ships. Look at the ships also, verse 4.

Though they are so large and driven by strong winds, they're guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. Small rudder, big effect.

[17 : 55] Now, they knew that in the ancient world. We ought to know that even more in our world. The biggest ship, my Googling came up with, the biggest ship in our modern age is a ship called the Sea Wise Giant.

It weighs in at 657,019 tons. That's quite big, really, isn't it? And all you need to turn it is a little rudder. Well, actually, it's quite a big rudder, but for the size of the ship, it's a really small rudder.

You can turn hundreds of thousands of tons of metal with just a little bit that waggles in the water. The little thing controls the big thing.

That's the point. The little thing is very powerful. And, says James, in the same way, verse 5, the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

The tongue is very influential. It's a small part of the body, but it makes big boasts. And, straight away, we're into its negative features.

[19 : 00] Verse 5, second half. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. The image here is of burning destruction.

Like a little spark which sets a forest off, so the tongue is with words. All you need to destroy thousands of acres of forest is one spark in the right place.

Well, says James, the tongue has great power, not just for boasting, but for destruction. And, of course, that's true. It takes such a small remark to cause a massively destructive burn in people's relationships.

Don't you know that personally? Haven't you ever uttered the stupid or ill-considered remark? At the moment it left your lips, you know you ought to have done it.

Haven't you had weeks in life dominated by the fallout from words that took seconds to speak? Or that email that you dashed off in frustration, you typed it in a rage and you hit the send button because you were angry, and then it was done.

[20 : 13] We ought to have a license to be allowed to use words. James describes the tongue as a world of unrighteousness, verse 6, a fire, a world of unrighteousness set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

Now, what does he mean by all this? Well, I think he means this, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is like the enemy within, like a little outpost of enemy activity within our bodies.

Somebody has described it as being like an embassy on foreign soil, the embassy of the world in the body of a believer. The anti-God world has set up an outpost in your mouth and my mouth and everybody's mouth.

The tongue, says James, is kind of at the disposal of the anti-God world. And it has big effects, like a fire, like a rudder, like a bit.

And often those effects are driven by the concerns of the anti-God world. It corrupts, he says, it stains the whole body, sets on fire the entire course of life.

[21 : 36] I don't think James means here that the body itself is made wicked by the tongue. That's not the way it works. You couldn't go home and chop your tongue off and be rid of your sin problem.

No, it's more a matter of the style James uses to express himself. Often he looks at the outside for evidence of what's inside. And what I think he's saying here is that the attitudes and thoughts that are vocalized by the tongue are the things which corrupt the whole person.

The Lord Jesus says, similarly, but with more focus on the inward things, Mark chapter 7, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts and they corrupt a person.

Well, I think in James' words that would be more like out of the mouth of man come evil words and they corrupt a person. But it's the same idea. Everything about a person's self and life shares the corruption of the tongue.

At one level, we are what we speak. What we speak tells us what we're like inside. The overflow of the heart comes out of the mouth.

[22 : 53] The tongue is set among our members staining the whole body setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell. A striking image of that.

I think it implies not only the satanic influence that often exists in the realm of human speech. The devil is, after all, a liar and the father of lies.

He specializes in the manipulation of words. I think it also expresses the condemnation that belongs to us because of our speech.

Hell is, after all, not the place so much that Satan lives as the place of his destruction. corruption. The end destiny of evil is hell.

And again, here James is looking down the line, looking where things lead in the end. Not only do our tongues in the present express our corruption, the destructive influence of our words in the present age is a little foretaste of the destructiveness of hell in the end.

[24 : 04] And, says James, verse 7 to 8, we cannot control it. For every kind of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

Verse 7, beast and bird, reptile and sea creature. James is alluding back to Genesis chapter 1 when human beings created at the beginning have dominion over beasts and birds, reptiles and sea creatures.

And, says James, we're pretty good at conquering anything still, even with our sinfulness and fallenness, but there's one thing, one thing that we cannot control in the whole of the created order.

Our speech. Which means that the one thing we can't control in the created order is ourselves. I talked to a man a while ago now.

[25 : 29] We were talking about Christianity. He said, I'm a fairly decent person. I think what matters is that you don't do anyone any harm. Five minutes later in the same conversation, he was lamenting the fact that he'd said something to his mother which had caused a massive breakup between them.

And then she died suddenly and it was all left unresolved. He deeply regretted those words. Five minutes before he was saying, I've never hurt anyone.

I'm a fairly decent person. If we take a look at our tongues, we'll know that we're really corrupt. Our tongues reveal our hearts.

Verse 9. With our tongue we bless our Lord and Father, with our we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so, but of course they are.

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt? No. Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives or a grapevine produce figs? No. Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water?

[26 : 37] Can it, he says. But our speech shows a division that you can't find anywhere else in nature. Apple trees don't produce pears, but real believers can produce ungodly speech.

It shouldn't be, but it is. Here is another example of how James looks at our behavior and sees inside to a divided loyalty towards God.

On the one hand we bless our God and Father, on the other we curse those made in his image. It just doesn't go together, says James, but that's the way it is. Now, before we draw some conclusions, let's say, let me just point out two things that James is not saying here.

He is not saying, your tongue is important, get a grip of it. That would be to repeat what he's already said back in chapter one.

No, here his point is rather different. He's saying, your tongue is very important and you cannot get a grip of it, can you? No one can control it. A restless evil full of deadly poison.

[27 : 53] Second thing he's not saying, he's not saying, if you want to be a teacher, change your speech. Of course, there does need to be self-control in that area.

But what he is saying, look, this is the way it is with the tongue. You don't really want to be a teacher, do you? Do you? If you really want to rush into being a teacher, you've got to ask yourself whether you've understood how things are in your speech and in your heart.

Here's the big point then. Not many teachers, because stricter judgment comes with the territory and we stumble in many ways and if you want evidence of that, well, all you have to do is listen to your words.

Well, now, let's draw some conclusions from this. It's a strong passage, isn't it? Let's draw some conclusions. There is something more positive to come. verse 13 is more positive.

Don't lose heart. There are good things to be said about teachers here, but you'll have to wait till the next series for that one. In the meantime, three things, three things to take note of.

[29 : 15] First, we need to be wise. this is a letter full of horrid behavior. And in chapter three, having got under the skin of the horrid behavior in chapter two, James focuses in on the teacher.

And the reality is that so often when church life gets bad and behavior between Christians becomes disgraceful, somewhere in there will be a voice that has forgotten the words of James 3 verses 1 and 2, that words are going to be judged and that one ought not to rush in to being a teacher.

If you want to see the root of the problem, says James, we'll look at the teaching. And of course, that's the case. The teaching in a church drives the life of the church in all sorts of ways.

positively and here negatively. You don't want to rush into being a teacher, says James, do you? You've already got plenty of that sort of teacher.

Be wise. Second, be careful. Here's one for us. We're part of a culture that loves a snappy speaker. From Prime Minister's questions through the spectrum to stand-up comedy, we love someone who's clever with words.

[30 : 45] We attach enormous value to the person who speaks impressively. We give enormous sums of money to the person who speaks impressively. We also belong to an insecure culture, desperate for approval and affirmation.

affirmation. And it's not a surprise to find then that in such circumstances, self-promotion by words is so much part of what we do culturally.

We tweet, we blog, we text, we email, we love getting our words out there. We troll, we love knocking down the words of others. And so it's not wholly positive that in our Christian subculture we prize cleverness with words.

Words are very powerful and God is very concerned for the passing on of them, truthfully. But our uber-valuation of speech and the speaker may not all be good.

because in such a culture as ours it is more than likely that people will want to be teachers for all the wrong sorts of reasons.

[32 : 03] And it's very likely that those who ought to be teachers aren't really all that keen. So be careful. Be careful who you encourage towards teaching roles.

Be careful what you long for if you long to be a teacher. So often the reason we do want to be teachers is that we like to be listened to. We like to have people hear what we have to say.

You really want that says James? Think again. For we all have many sins as is demonstrated by our tongues. So don't rush into being a teacher because that brings with it stricter judgment.

be wise. Often the teacher is at the heart of relational dysfunction. Be careful. Be careful what you long for and who you encourage.

And third, be humble. Our speech reminds us, doesn't it, of our need for grace. You don't have to be much of a teacher.

[33 : 13] You don't have to utter many words to be convicted of your need for God's mercy and kindness. Our speech reveals what we like. Our speech to and about others tells us what we think of God.

And so the right thing to do at the end of a passage like this is to turn again to God for mercy and for grace to help in time of need. Let's pray together.

Just a few moments to respond in the quiet to what we've heard. James says for every kind of beast and bird, reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. James says later on, but God's grace is bigger.

He opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. humble yourselves therefore before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

[35 : 18] Gracious heavenly father, in a world that longs for self-promotion and affirmation, we confess to you that so often we use our speech for those things, to promote ourselves, to knock others down, so that we can feel big.

We pray that you would have mercy on us. We recognize that this is not what our mouths were made for. We ask that you would help us to humble ourselves before you.

We thank you that your grace is bigger than our dividedness and our sinfulness. We pray that we would long for our words to be used for the things that you've designed us for.

not only praising our God and Father, but also building up and encouraging and loving those who are made in his image.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.