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Active Faith

Studies in the Letter of James by Peter J Blackburn

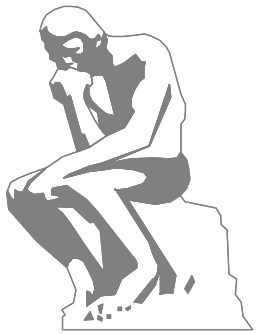
3. Mind your Tongue!

Favouritism and **inactive (or dead) faith** are seen in many aspects of our lives, but they certainly become evident in what we **say**.

We are inclined to place not much importance on what is said. Perhaps because the written word is now so readily available, the spoken word is no longer regarded as the "real thing". You've got to have things "in writing" these days – the hopeful car salesman rings, "But you haven't signed anything yet, have you?"

We only have to go back to the story of how Jacob tricked his blind father into giving him the blessing planned for the favourite son, Esau (see Genesis 27, especially v.33) to realise how earlier generations regarded the **spoken word** as binding. Today people say things they would never put in writing!

Chapter 3



[1]Don't all become teachers, my brothers – we face greater scrutiny! [2]We all stumble in many ways. But the truly perfect person doesn't stumble in speech – he is able to hold his whole body in check! [3]We put bits in the mouths of horses so that they will obey us – so that we can control their whole body. [4]Ships too – they are so large and the winds that drive them so powerful! – yet they are steered by a comparatively small rudder under the will of the skipper. [5]The tongue is like that – small, but able to produce great effects.

Think of how little a fire can set a whole forest ablaze! [6]The tongue can be like that little fire, containing a whole world of all that's wrong! Then it shows itself within our body as the part that pollutes the rest of the body – igniting the whole of our existence with a fire that comes from hell itself! [7]People have tamed all kinds of beasts, birds, reptiles and marine creatures – [8]but not the human tongue! It always seems restless to do evil and full of deadly poison! [9]We use the same tongue to bless the Lord and Father – and to curse the people made in his likeness! [10]Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth – and that, my brothers, should never be! [11]No fountain gushes both sweet and

bitter water, does it? [12]And a fig tree doesn't produce olives, my brothers. A vine doesn't produce figs either, does it? Nor can salty water produce sweet!

[13]So you have among you someone wise and experienced? That needs to become active out of his excellent conduct in the gentleness of his wisdom. [14]But if in your heart you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, don't do it! You are over-riding the truth and lying against it! [15]That kind of wisdom hasn't come from above – it is earthly, natural, demonic! [16]Where you have jealousy and selfish ambition, you also have chaos – and every evil act! [17]The wisdom from above is different from that – it is firstly pure, then peace-loving, gentle, considerate, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unambiguous and without hypocrisy! [16]As a result such a person is seen to be right with God as his peacemaking sows peace in others.

What we say

What we say is the major theme of this chapter. Verses 1-12 focus on the tongue in general. But notice the concern about teachers and true wisdom – introduced in v.1 and followed through in vv.13-18. The theme of the tongue is introduced in 1.26 – *If anyone thinks he is religious but doesn't restrain his tongue, he is deceiving himself – his religion is worthless!* It is not just that words are not being matched with action, as in 2.16 – *"Go in peace. Be warmed and fed"*. We might describe that as the evil of being **all talk** – the words themselves may be good, correct and appropriate, if part of a commitment that is followed through into action. But words can be bad, inappropriate and representing a great evil in themselves, as in what is said to the poor man in 2.3 – *"You can stand back there – or sit on the floor!"*. Here the words are improper, debasing and actively evil – no doubt supported by wrong attitudes and actions.

In other words, the problem is not just the relationship between the tongue and action, but between the tongue and faith. This is highlighted in vv.9-10 – *We use the same tongue to bless the Lord and Father – and to curse the people made in his likeness! Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth – and that, my brothers, should never be!* The tongue that blesses God must not be used to curse others.

Our faith in God revolutionises all our attitudes and actions – and the first "port of call" is the tongue. The evil use of the tongue is a contradiction of faith in God – it is described in v.6 as igniting the whole of our existence with a fire that comes from hell itself! In v.15 "wise speech" from the evil tongue is described as earthly, natural, demonic! Those are rather heavy words – they place strong emphasis on what we say as an indicator of the reality of our professed faith.

- Is James a bit tough on the tongue or "spot on"? Why do you think so?

True Wisdom

True wisdom is the opposite of foolish or evil speech. Its origins are not from *bitter jealousy or selfish ambition*, but from faith. Its qualities are different – *it is firstly pure, then peace-loving, gentle, considerate, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unambiguous and without hypocrisy!* Its results are different, not *chaos and every evil act*, but *sowing peace in others*. Such speech flows out from and so demonstrates that the person is *right with God*.

Thinking back to v.1 – perhaps a lot of people thought it would be just great to be a teacher, but, James points out, the teacher, along with everyone else, faces this battle with the tongue – only more so, for the teacher stands under the greater scrutiny of God.