

James

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James 3:1-5b

Vs.1

- James shifts gears here, moving from the vital importance of matching deeds with our faith, to the equally vital responsibility of those who are teachers. The role of teachers in the early church was borrowed somewhat from the role of the rabbi in the Jewish synagogue. Like the rabbi, a teacher in the church was held in the highest honor, but such a position comes with great risks. Oftentimes we translate "rabbi" to mean "teacher", which makes sense because that is what they did. It would be like calling Steve Spurrier "coach". But the word "rabbi" literally means "my great one". So a teacher first has to avoid the pitfall of sinful self-importance. To the Jews, a person's duty to their rabbi exceeded their responsibility to their own parents, for it was seen to be better to honor the one who gives you eternal life than the one who gave you physical life. And while it is true that a rabbi was prevented from taking a salary or receiving payment, the community, especially the more prominent families, made sure that THEIR rabbi was well provided for. It is easy to see then how a Jewish rabbi might become exactly the kind of teacher Jesus despised: a spiritual tyrant, ostentatious, filled with pious arrogance, a lover high adoration, and the best seat at any function, "a person who gloried in the almost subservient respect showed to him in public" as William Barclay puts it. James' first concern here is that Christian teachers not fall into that trap, which of course we still see all too commonly still today.
- In the early church teachers were elevated to the same level as prophets (Acts 13:1), so falling into the sin of Pride was an ever-present risk. Every Christian leader in the New Testament had this concern. In Acts 15:24 there were teachers who believed themselves to be theologically superior and who tried to turn Christianity into another kind of Judaism and tried to introduce circumcision and the keeping of the law. In Paul's letters you see teachers in Romans 2:17-29 who believed they were above criticism and lived out nothing of the truth which they taught, whose lives were a contradiction of their instruction and did nothing but bring dishonor on the faith they represented. In 1 & 2 Timothy there were some who pridefully tried to teach before

they themselves knew anything and others who fashioned their teaching to meet the false desires of the crowd whose praise they coveted above all else.

- A Christian teacher or preacher must always seek to avoid at least two traps. First, given that there will always be either people who are young in age or young in their life with Christ, the teacher must ALWAYS teach The Way of Jesus Christ as given in the Scriptures and be careful not to allow his/her own opinion and prejudices taint the pure Truth of Christ's Way. Second, the teacher must ALWAYS take care to ensure that how they live matches the Truth they teach. "Do as I say and not as I do" is never going to meet the demands Christ has for those who teach His truth. Again, as Barclay puts it, "He must never get into the position where his scholars and students cannot hear what he says for listening to what he is."

Vss. 2-5b

- "For we all stumble...". The word here really means "to slip". The British navy's Admiral Fisher famously said that "Life is strewn with orange peels." Everyone slips. Everyone sins. "None is righteous, no not one," quotes Paul from Psalm 14:1-3. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:10; Romans 3:23). "If we say we have no sin," says John, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). "There is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins," said the preacher of Ecclesiastes 7:20. Jesus said in Matthew 12:36-37, "By your words you will be justified; and by your words you will be condemned". A slip of the tongue can be a devastating sin. This is why the teacher especially must be so very careful, but so should any who follow Christ.
- Yes, the tongue by itself is a small thing, but so too is a horse's bit and a ship's rudder. Though a horse is much larger than a person, if a person can control the bit in a horse's mouth, then that person can control the whole horse. A rudder, when compared to the whole of a ship, is indeed a very small thing, but whoever controls the ship's rudder controls the ship. It doesn't matter how many hands high the horse may be or how many tons the ship displaces, control those small parts and a single person can control the whole. The same is true of the tongue, James is saying. This is exactly the kind of thing Paul had in mind in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (read). James is not saying that we should not speak, only that our tongue, as with every other part of our body and every other aspect of our life, is to be made to come under the authority of Jesus Christ.