

**Preaching Christ....
...by the power of the Holy Spirit
...and the authority of the Word of God**

Sermon

The Epistle of James

12 November 2023

James 3:1-4:10

5 How serious are you about God?

Three clear contrasts

1. **The tongue: cursing or praising?** 3:1-12
2. **Wisdom: from within or from above?** 3:13-18
3. **Friendship: with the world or with God?** 4:1-10

- AFL players, NRL, Rugby Union, Cricketers, Footballers.... If they misbehave off-field, they can be fired or fined for bringing their code into disrepute ... Drugs, drunkenness, brawling and the like is seen to bring shame on their game... and there's a penalty to pay
- Same for Olympians... if you misbehave while representing your country, you can be sent home...
- The question for such players is – do you take your role seriously... your privilege... your opportunity....??
- To play for your team or represent your country - to be a role model for others – especially young people... is a huge privilege which carries with it a weight of responsibility! //
- Now – we've been challenged since the start of our series from James, with the question of is our relationship with God making a difference in our lives....
- 1. In the midst of **trials** – do we see God at work for our **good**?
- 2. Do we put into **practice** what we read in God's **word**
- 3. Do we show **favouritism** to the rich who grace **our church**?
- 4. And **last** week – is there evidence that we have a real relationship with God – is that clearly evidenced in a changed life///
- It's been **searching** and **challenging**
- And today's question is no **different** – do we take God **seriously**...?
- That is – just as a sports person must take seriously their responsibility and their code of conduct...
- ...do we take **God seriously**?
- ...whether that be in the most **basic** of things such as what we **say**... /
- ...or from where we draw our **wisdom**... /
- ...or whether we are **flirting** with the **values** of the **world**...
- So that's where are heading today – looking at three clear **contrasts**:
 1. **The tongue: cursing or praising**
 2. **Wisdom: from within or from above**
 3. **Friendship: the world or with God?**
- Let's look firstly at:

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1. The tongue: cursing or praising? 3:1-12

- You know that old saying your mum taught you when the bullies at school gave you a hard time?
- “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me”
- It’s complete **nonsense** of **course**...
- What people **say** to you – **about** you – behind your **back** – can have an absolutely **devastating impact!**
- And the questions this passage asks includes – do you see the power your **tongue** has?
 - Do you see the potential for **evil**?
 - Do you see the potential for **good**? //
- The passage begins with a warning to teachers – such as me – or **you** if you preach or teach or take scripture in schools or lead a Bible study... *we who **teach** will be judged more strictly....* Hear the warning anyone here today - anyone who teaches God’s word!
- But I think the passage opens up more widely to challenge everyone about the power of the tongue...
- And I don’t have to come up with illustrations of this principle because James himself has supplied the illustrations...
- The tongue is small but very powerful.... Just as a **bit** in a horse’s **mouth** can control the whole **animal**.... Just as a huge **ship** is controlled by a small **rudder**.... Just as our **bush** can be set alight by a small spark from an electric **grinder** or lightning **strike**... three clear **illustrations**... of the power something really small has in influence and outcomes! /// - like the tongue.
- But he’s not done **yet**...
- Because he also points out that while many animals are tamed by humans.... – the elephant – the lion - It seems no one though can properly tame their tongue... Rather v8 *It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison!*
- Can you relate to that?
- Have you been hurt by someone’s tongue?
- What about **your** tongue?
- Does it get you into **trouble**?
- Do you have it **tamed**? //
- Who among us hasn’t said things we **regret**?
- ...things of which we’re now **ashamed** – or **embarrassed!**
- Things which have been **devastating** to those we’ve been speaking... or speaking about....
- Caused **hurt** and **harm** and broken **relationships**... //
- I’ve said stuff I’ve **instantly** regretted and wanted to immediately **take back**...
- How **staggering** that in the words of v9 - *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.* ¹⁰ *Out of the same mouth come **praise AND cursing.***
- I can praise God Sunday morning; and then say something cruel or damaging or untrue by the time I get home...

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- v10: – *My brothers and sisters, this should not be*
- and here's the thing in James' final set of illustrations... *Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?*¹² *My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*
- Do you see what he's **saying**?
- Our tongue reveals our **heart**... I say this to my great **shame**!
- What is coming out of my **mouth**, shows what's in my **heart**!
- Reminds you doesn't of words from James' brother? – Luke 6:45 *A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the **mouth speaks** what the **heart is full of**.*
- For the mouth speaks, what the heart is full of!
- So it turns out that the way to tame the **tongue**... the **only** way – must be to change the **heart**!
- As we'll see in a few minutes... as we draw near to God so he will draw near to us... and we cannot help but be changed... //
- Let's leave this section by recalling God's word in Ephesians 4:29: *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*
- Saying only what is helpful for building others up!
- Have you ever heard of this little saying... Before you speak: **THINK**: T= Is it true, H= is it helpful, I= is it inspiring, N= is it necessary, K= is it kind?
- Now – that doesn't address the **heart** issue... but it may **help**.... As we **pause** before opening our **mouths**... //
- Which will it be – our tongue used for **cursing** or **praising**? //
- O Lord – please change our **hearts**... flooding them with your love – your patience – your kindness – your compassion!... so that when we speak... your radical **heart surgery** may be **seen**. //
- Well let's look secondly at **wisdom**... and contrast here is:

2. Wisdom: from within or from above? 3:13-18

- James again goes to the issue of what is going on in our **hearts**.
- You see – how do you know someone is wise?
- We generally think about **wisdom** in terms of someone coming out with **wise sayings**, or great **insight** into **situations**...
- But no James says – if you are wise and understanding, v13, - have a look – *let them show it by their **good life**, by **deeds done in the humility** that comes from **wisdom**.*
- You will recall what we've seen about wisdom this year.
- The **fear** of the **Lord** – **that's** where wisdom begins.
- So **accordingly** – if you have that appropriate **fear** of – **reverent awe** of - God – that will be seen by your **humility** which results in **good deeds**...
- Reminded of my chancellor Adrian... whose wife Cath was our children's minister in Roseville... Adrian – top lawyer in town... making very serious decisions all week.... But so wise was he – so humble – that

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every Saturday afternoon he was up at the church shall with Cath, setting up the little tables and chairs for Sunday school the next morning and cutting things up for craft! Deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom! //

- V14 – bitter envy and selfish ambition are the opposite.... v15 – such ‘wisdom’ is earthly, unspiritual and demonic!
- The contrast could not be more clear – v17 – *but the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*
- The question is – do you take God **seriously**? /
- If you **fear** God – if you hold him in **reverent awe** – if you take him **seriously** – remembering his **might** and **majesty** and **power** – as well as his **love** and **mercy** and **compassion** – if you **humble yourself** before him... realising he is the **Creator** and you the **creature**.... The result of that over **time**... will be seen in your good life – in deeds by the humility that comes from wisdom... you’ll see it in your **purity**... your **peace-loving**, your **consideration of others**, your **submissiveness** to God... your **mercy**... your **good fruit**... your **impartiality**... your **sincerity**.... // - that’s where we’ll see it...
- Brothers and sisters... **fear the Lord**... shun **evil**... and **wisdom** from **above** will become abundantly **evident** in your **lives** – from the **inside // out!** ////
- So, the final contrast is:

3. Friendship: the world or God? 4:1-10

- Now – despite the new chapter and the headings in our Bibles at this point – he’s not changed **subjects**.... There’s a clear **continuity** with the subject of **wisdom** he’s put before us....
- Remember – he said that **wisdom** resulted in **purity**...and **peace loving** and **humility**...? and being **considerate** and full of **mercy**... etc....?
- And now in **Ch 4** – he’s basically saying – I don’t **see** that in **YOU!**
- There’s **quarrels and fights** because you seriously **LACK** these qualities.... You **kill** (probably a rhetorical device here) and **covet** what is **others**... you **want** what **they have**... and if you ask **God** for what they have – it’s all out of **wrong** motives... it’s all about **you** and your **pleasures**.
- This is not **wisdom** from **above**...! /
- In fact it is about **friendship** with the **world**... loving the **ways**, the **values**, the **priorities**, the **pleasures** of the world....
- And here’s the thing.... Just as James’ brother said you cannot serve two **masters** – **God** and **money** – so **here** – **James** says – **friendship** with the **world** is **enmity** against **God**...
- You cannot have it both **ways!**
- You can’t claim to be a **friend** of **God** and at the same time, keep **flirting** with the **ways** of the **world**...
- That is not taking God **seriously!** //
- Meanwhile – v5 – God is **jealous** for your undivided **attention** – jealous for our **exclusive love** – *he jealously longs for the spirit he caused to dwell in us.*
- Have you ever felt that someone you love, is not loving you exclusively?
 - Perhaps tragically in a marriage, where one spouse begins to love someone else... totally **wrong** of course... and you’re left **jealous**... **jealous** for their exclusive **love** as they promised in their wedding **vows**....

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- That is how **God** feels when we pursue **friendship** with the **world**...!
- But the **staggering** news here is – v6 – *But he gives **more grace**...*
- ...he shows **favour** to the **humble**
- So the answer today if we feel **convicted** by this is not to beat ourselves up...
 - We may feel convicted.... That may be appropriate... but that's the not the **end** of our story with **God**!
- hear this **gracious invitation** in v7 – *submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.*
- Put God back in **charge** – in place of **you**, in place of the **evil one**.
- That's a massive promise there isn't it....? *Resist the devil and he will flee from you.* Do you realise you have that much power?
- **Resist** him... and he will **flee**!! //
 - **Try** that next time you're **tempted** to **sin**.
 - **Stand up** to him.
 - Don't easily cave in to the **temptation**.
 - Put up a **fight**. Tell him to get lost.
 - **Resist** the **devil** and he will **flee** from you!!
- But there's more beautiful, life-changing **news** here in ch 4 – have a look with me at v8 – it's the flip side of the promise about the devil – *come **near** to **God** and he **will come near** to **you**.*
- That's a wonderful **promise** too isn't it?
- Old bumper sticker in the 80s – “If God seems far away, guess who moved”... it is more than a bumper sticker – it reflects reality...
- ...but **change** that... draw **near**... he will **draw** near to **you**...
- How do you draw near you may ask?
 - Just simply talk to him – “God - you seem so far away....” That's a good place to start – and go on from there.
 - Or start with the **Lord's prayer**... there have been times in my life when that was the only prayer I could pray – and it usually helped connect me powerfully to God...!
- The passage finishes with a call to mourn our sin.... Look with me from half way through v8 - *Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*
- When was the last time you stopped to decisively **purify** your heart?
 - And to **mourn** your **sin**?
 - Often in the confession time in church, it's something we just rush over... say be wrote... finish...
- You see when Jesus says in the beatitudes ‘blessed are those who mourn’, he's not talking about the funeral you just went to.... He's talking about mourning **sin**! And the **promise**? You shall be comforted... because there's **forgiveness** and **grace** and **mercy** in the **cross** of the **Lord Jesus Christ**! //

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- This is not saying Christians are meant to be **gloomy** all the time – though many seem to be – he’s saying that when you realise you’ve been **flirting** with the **world** – when you see that you’ve been **double minded** – stop your **worldly laughter** and your **joy** in **worldly things...** and return completely to **God!**
- V10 – *humble yourselves before the Lord* – and the promise – *he will lift you up!*
- I was sharing about this with some of our clergy the other day and Sally Phelps from Forbes, appropriately reminded us of the beautiful Anglican prayer which opens our communion service...
- **“Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit... so that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name!”**
- I’m sure it’s inspired by James chapter 4 here!
- -----
- Well - three challenging and searching contrasts...
- Our **tongue** – will we use it to praise God or curse others?
 - Lord – go to work on our **hearts...** for out of the overflow of the heart, does the mouth speak
- **Wisdom** – will our wisdom be from above or from within?
 - Lord – go to work on our **hearts** – that we may have that appropriate reverent awe of you... that shows itself in humility and good deeds – in lives changed!
- And then – will we be friends of **God** or friends with the **world**?
 - Oh Lord – go to work on our hearts – that we may **resist** the devil and see him **flee** – **and draw near to you and feel you draw near to us... and so – know wonderful – beautiful change – from the inside – out!**
- How **serious** are you about your relationship with **God**?