

DAY eleven
James 3:1-2

We all stumble in many ways.

ALL.

STUMBLE.

MANY.

Your parents, spouse, friends, boss, teacher, elected officials...pastors....

that's the "all".

Their lies to and about you. They're unfair evaluation, gossip and opinion of you. Their inconsideration, theft, abuse, injustice...and b-rate sermons...

that's the "stumble".

Their continuing to "not get it", their unreasonable defense of their position. Their compounded lies and foolishness. Their refusal to make up, own up or straighten up. For years even...

that's the "many".

We all stumble in many ways.

Both reader and writer enjoy no exception.

So why are we so shocked when it happens to us? It makes sense that "nobody's perfect" and "everybody makes mistakes". But, somehow, when WE are the object of the stumbling subject- when that imperfection is aimed at me, we can be outraged.

Could it be that we each believe that we're somehow entitled to better treatment than we're getting. Could it be that we're so inundated with news of people hurting people that we've learned to not feel for others very deeply- and so we are not prepared for how to handle the reality of sin happening directly to us? Could it be that we don't think of ourselves as part of a broken world, but at the center of a world that's about our self, where breaks happen around us, but not to us?

Whatever the reason or combination of them...you may find that there is a strange sense of peace that comes from simply accepting that "all" means "all". The reason your parents shorted you however they did is that they're classified as "all". The reason you or a loved one lost the job, gained the wrong one, or can't find the right one may very well have to do with "all". The reason you were cheated, hurt, stolen from, ruined or otherwise victimized is because of "all". And the reason someone else has a grievance against you that you may or may not be able to defend is, again...."all".

Forgiveness, grace, mercy. These are words we don't take lightly in the Kingdom of God. Perhaps, today, understanding "all", "stumble" and "many" will help give them weight, while also bringing some healing to a potentially exaggerated sense of personal, unfair, targeted attacks that you have carried because you didn't appreciate how in-this-together we all are. You haven't been singled out, for you fall under "all", and need to give and receive grace as all the rest. May you appreciate and live in grace today.

from Jim

DAY twelve

James 3:3-8

It's likely that either one of your biggest regrets, or biggest hurts, have to do with words. Want to read some nonsense that we all learned as kids?

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me”.

There aren't many people that would choose “I don't love you anymore” or “you'll never amount to anything” “you good for nothing” or “why can't you be more like _____” or “you just aren't management material” over a brief pelting with yard waste. Words cut, kill, ruin far more than anything that can be done with hands. They are at the center of most of our brokenness and pain and guilt that we each carry. So why does our tongue, or our mouth, have so much power? Jesus spoke to this:

“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” Matthew 12:34 (Matthew 15:11, 15:17-18, Luke 6:45 as well).

If we focus on editing only what comes out, then we'll be people who have a church-building vocabulary, a Friday night vocabulary, an argument vocabulary, a talking to grandma vocabulary, a family sense of humor, an email sense of humor, etc... We will have the ability to filter our words to sound more holy, while the heart, inside, remains unchanged. We speak the things lodged inside of us. Opinions, views and ideas that may be either beautiful or ugly. Good or bad, it's not the mouth's fault when words are said. The mouth is simply spilling what the heart is full of.

The mouth, not the eyes, are truly the windows of the soul.

Rather than trying to merely filter your words so as to give the impression that there is nothing dark or misaligned within the heart- let's deal honestly with the heart. Ask tough questions through examination. Observe yourself throughout the day and ask in a given moment:

Why do I have the impulse to speak?

Why does it feel like if I don't say _____ then i will have missed out on something critically important?

Why the impulse to say something negative, offensive, defensive, humiliating, inflammatory, vengeful, vulgar, etc?

Does what I am preparing to say fan the flames of hell, or douse them?

Does my body language communicate ugliness, anger or disgust even though my words might not?

Pause, ask and listen before speaking. Rather than taking James' rhetoric and metaphor too far and resorting to blame it all on an “uncontrollable tongue”, ask God what needs dealt with in the heart. Transformation there is how transformation of the mouth occurs.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Psalms 139:23-24 (ESV)

“Talking comes by nature, silence by wisdom.” -Yiddish Proverb

“Speak only when what you're going to say is more beautiful than silence” –Sufi Proverb

from Jim

DAY thirteen

James 3:9-12

"This should not be."

In other words, James is saying "something needs to be done in this area". Apparently, this has been true for a long time. Our mouths have been getting us in trouble from the beginning. For the second day in a row, let's deal with our speech. Consider these proverbs from the Book of Proverbs, and perhaps write a few that jump out at you in prominent places for further meditation throughout your day. Resist the urge to skim and say "I got it" and walk away before you give these bits of wisdom a chance to replace other stuff that might be wedged in your heart!

10:8 If you have good sense, you will listen and obey; if all you do is talk, you will destroy yourself.

10:11 The words of good people are a source of life, but evil hides behind the words of the wicked.

10:13 If you have good sense, it will show when you speak.

10:14 If you have good sense, you will learn all you can, but foolish talk will soon destroy you.

10:19 You will say the wrong thing if you talk too much-- so be sensible and watch what you say.

10:20 The words of a good person are like pure silver, but the thoughts of an evil person are almost worthless.

11:12 It's stupid to say bad things about your neighbors. If you are sensible, you will keep quiet.

11:13 A gossip tells everything, but a true friend will keep a secret.

12:18 Sharp words cut like a sword, but words of wisdom heal.

12:23 Be sensible and don't tell everything you know-- only fools spread foolishness everywhere.

12:25 Worry is a heavy burden, but a kind word always brings cheer.

13:2 You will be well rewarded for saying something kind, but all some people think about is how to be cruel and mean.

12:3 Keep what you know to yourself, and you will be safe; talk too much, and you are done for.

13:17 Whoever delivers your message can make things better or worse for you.

14:3 Proud fools are punished for their stupid talk, but sensible talk can save your life.

14:15 Don't be stupid and believe all you hear; be smart and know where you are headed.

15:1 A kind answer soothes angry feelings, but harsh words stir them up.

15:2 Words of wisdom come from the wise, but fools speak foolishness.

15:4 Kind words are good medicine, but deceitful words can really hurt.

15:23 Giving the right answer at the right time makes everyone happy.

15:28 Good people think before they answer, but the wicked speak evil without ever thinking.

16:23 You can persuade others if you are wise and speak sensibly.

16:28 Gossip is no good! It causes hard feelings and comes between friends.

17:9 You will keep your friends if you forgive them, but you will lose your friends if you keep talking about what they did wrong.

17:27 It makes a lot of sense to be a person of few words and to stay calm.

17:28 Even fools seem smart when they are quiet.

18:7 Saying foolish things is like setting a trap to destroy yourself.

18:8 There's nothing so delicious as the taste of gossip! It melts in your mouth.

18:13 It's stupid and embarrassing to give an answer before you listen.

18:19 Making up with a friend you have offended is harder than breaking through a city wall.

18:20 Make your words good-- you will be glad you did.

20:19 Stay away from gossips-- they tell everything.

from Jim

DAY fourteen

James 3:13

Once again, our brother is not impressed with what we know, or say we know, when compared to those that show their wisdom and experience with their life.

Who do you look to for growth in the faith? Who is it that draws you into maturation? Who challenges you, encourages you and reminds you of what's true in moments and circumstances that make you most likely to forget? If that person isn't someone you would describe with words like "wisdom", "experience" and "lives the kind of life I want", it might be time to get behind someone else. To the extent that we are taking our faith seriously, we must also take seriously the call to do life with others seeking the Kingdom, and to live in humble respect of those further down the path than ourselves. This is not to say that we ditch everyone whose faith seems to be less than our own. It's simply to say what we would say of any discipline. Wanna get healthy? Eat primarily with and like people who are healthy, not unhealthy. Wanna get "buff". Hang out and exercise primarily with weight trainers, not heavy nappers. It's common sense really.

Gravity always pulls down, so attach yourself to that which is defying gravity, rather than to that which is succumbing to it. Unfortunately, when it comes to the deeper, inner world of the soul, some of us assume osmosis will do. Just go to the same place once or twice a week and important stuff will just stick. Right?

Whether you meet with others for lunch to challenge or encourage each other in the faith, or meet with others weekly in a LifeGroup, or sit with one person of faith that has what you want, it's up to you. But James insists that this faith is to be lived out, more than only studied or even agreed with. So, it makes sense that you won't grow much if you don't have a chance to live it. And you won't learn to live it without having other people live it out with you. Perhaps you'll want to contact the church office and simply express a desire to hook up with some others on the journey. Perhaps you can put your antennae up and be watching for a person or people to join in a way that works with both your schedule and your very real desire to have the kind of humble wisdom and understanding James is talking about. Maybe God has already put the person/people around you that you need but you haven't noticed because you are evaluating them on some other criteria.

What one step can you take today in order to align yourself with someone who has wisdom, or wants it as much as you? What's another step you can take tomorrow?

Wisdom says that you would not just identify the step, but that you would take it.

"Above all and before all, do this: Get Wisdom!

Write this at the top of your list: Get Understanding!"

Proverbs 4:7, The Message

from Jim

DAY fifiteen
James 3:14-18

Compare what James says here with what Paul had said earlier to the Galatians in chapter 5 of his letter to them:

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Galatians 5:13-21 (NIV)

This theme is prevalent in the scriptures. Though people may be able to make a case for their self-preferring, fearful divisiveness, this so-called wisdom doesn't come from God. It may be a well thought out argument that seems to justify revenge, shunning, gossip, betrayal, and the settling for base behaviors that reinforce that we're all nothing more than our desires. But, it's not the Truth.

Paul continues,

“...But the fruit [evidence of the presence] of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” Galatians 5:22-26 (NIV)

Though often harder and less popular to live out, it's the kind of life we can point to and confidently call beautiful. A life of heaven, even.

Acknowledge what it is that stands opposed to this kind of life for you today. Do the work of seeing in your mind's eye what it is in your life today that makes living the way of the Spirit difficult, and what it would take to give God's Spirit reign over it. The information you have read today may not seem new, but the way God wants it to specifically unfold in your life may be.

Do the work of letting the simple beauty of Christ's powerfully loving Spirit override the default settings of the wisdom of this world.

We, your brothers and sisters, can't wait to hear the story!

from Jim