

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

RESPONSIBLE TEACHERS

James 3

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Responsible teachers.

Rather than a theological treatise, the book of James is primarily a pastoral letter. It is full of practical instructions and clearly not intended as a theological or philosophical in depth exploration. This is why many of the thoughts and instructions aren't developed in great detail and here and there a lot is left to the imagination. The first readers probably knew what the writer was referring to and it is clear the imagery used probably found its origin in ordinary, day to day language, some of which for us is no longer accessible.

With the third chapter a new series of thoughts starts. I believe it is a unity, even where it can be divided in two clear parts (1-13 and 13-18), with the second part functioning as a bridge to chapter four, and that's why we read the whole chapter, rather than only the first half as the lectionary suggested.

The first part of chapter three deals mostly with the responsibility of teachers for their teachings and the consequences of what they say for their environment. The second part deals mostly with the content of those teachings and the effect of their application.

Different levels of address.

By addressing his readers on different levels at once the writer plays a subtle game.

First of all his words are directed to the teachers and those with ambition to become teachers in the congregation. The position of teacher is an important one in the early Church, bringing high regard and status to those holding it. Anybody who thought themselves suited for the job and possessed the necessary rhetorical gifts could become a teacher, and it's easy to imagine, even without the warnings James gives at the beginning of chapter three, that there would have been a lot of dead wood amongst them. False teachers were a wide spread problem in the early Church and we encounter them everywhere in the New Testament as people who spread discord and lead people astray.

Beware, James says, don't enter into the position of teacher too easily, it doesn't only bring status and high regard, there is also a lot of responsibility that comes with it. That the consequences of this responsibility is not taken seriously is substantial, James illustrates with a couple of images: The image of the rudder changing the direction of a big ship and the image of the small spark causing a great and devastating fire.

The consequences of words, James says, are difficult to control. Before you know it you've said something that will have effects you'll rue. So: if you only half know what you're doing it is better to shut up completely! Wild animals are easier to tame than your tongue! Words can bring about good and cause harm, they can bless and curse, your words can be a source of life, but for the same token they can damage and bring destruction. So be careful!

His words aren't directed only at the teachers who have to be conscious of their responsibility and need to take care their words are sources of life and blessing. The text can also be read as an exhortation to the congregation as a whole: She needs to be aware that everything she says and does can have enormous consequences. Her words and actions can have devastating effects, just like a rudder causes a ship to change direction and a spark can start a huge fire.

The words and actions of the community of Christ are not without obligation or consequence, they can cause enormous shifts in how those around her perceive her and ultimately change the way the world takes in the gospel.

Last but not least the words of James are also applicable to every individual member of the congregation, the body of Christ. Even what the smallest part, the tongue, does, can have an enormous effect on the body as a whole and it is important that every part, even the smallest, applies itself to being a source of blessing and life rather than of curse and death.

Wisdom from above against wilfulness and ambition from below.

The body needs to be ruled by wisdom that ensures her words and actions are wholesome and life giving. What this looks like in practice is worked out in verses 13-18 where a list of the virtues that are the fruit of true wisdom are given. It is a list that emphasises unity and communality. True wisdom is averse to arrogance and self righteousness but produces peace and justice. True wisdom is not guided by ambition and pride but by a desire for goodness and blessing.

This applies to every individual teacher as well as to the whole of the Christian community, as well as to every individual member of the body of Christ. They are each individually and as a whole responsible for producing peace and justice, to the propagation of ideas that do not spread discord but promote community. Each individually and as a community they are responsible for wisdom from "above" taking shape in their life and not the wilfulness of those who are led by worldly ambition and only have their own gain at heart.

Anyone who has any experience with Church councils, congregations or individuals will know the exhortations of James are in no way superseded. Power struggles, wilfulness, arrogance and self-righteousness all too often wreak havoc with peace and justice both inside the congregation as well as doing damage to the world around it. All too often the tongue of a single individual can shift the feelings and perceptions of many others and set up members of the body of Christ against each other as well as repel those from the outside ready to join the congregation.

Even where teachers nowadays are put through a stringent regime of studies and training, there are still those who will abuse the trust and authority they are given to feed their own ambition. All too often words spoken in the name of the whole body of Christ, are not considered carefully enough, and are capable of causing deep and often irreparable hurt in the community.

Should we stop speaking altogether perhaps? I don't think that's an option for those who seriously want to follow in Jesus' footsteps. The only thing is to take responsibility and be accountable to each other and to Christ in every move that dangerous little member of us will make and make sure we don't send any sparks flying to light devastating fires where we can help it and certainly at no time let ambition, wilfulness, power and arrogance get the better of us.