

9. Learning to Bridle Our Tongue – Part 1

In our last topic, we were given illustrations of two people who showed their faith by their works. Abraham showed the faith he had already had in the Lord for more than fifty years when He placed his son, Isaac, on the altar. Rahab showed the faith she already had in the Lord when she placed a bright red cord in the window. Many people saw that cord before God preserved her and her entire family. Throughout the rest of the book of James, we are going to see various ways God gives us to show our faith, after we have placed our faith in Christ. In this topic, and the next, we will see that one of the ways we show our faith is by the way we speak to others.

James 3:1-2 says, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he *is* a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.” The word that is translated here as “teachers” is used fifty-eight times in the New Testament and is translated either “master” or “teacher”. Forty times, it is used to refer to Christ, and the other eighteen times it is used to refer to various people. In Ephesians 4:11, we see that the word is used to speak of one of the equipping gifts Christ has given to some to equip others for ministry. In Hebrews 5:12, we read, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” In these verses, we see that some people had been Christians long enough that they should have been teachers of others. However, they had failed to mature and now needed to be retaught the basics of Christianity.

We see that James reminds us that those who become teachers will receive a stricter judgment. It is important to help our physical and spiritual children realize that we receive both a privilege and a responsibility when we are given the opportunity to teach the Word of God. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” Here, we see that when we are teachers, we will give an account to the Lord for those we have taught. If we have not been faithful in our teaching, we will give an account with grief. In contrast, if we have been faithful in our teaching, we will be filled with joy as we give an account to the Lord.

As Christians, James reminds us that we stumble in many things. If we are teachers, we need to realize that when we stumble, we may cause those who are following us to stumble also, because they are following our example. We see that not stumbling is evidence that we have become mature in our spiritual lives. In Ephesians 4:12-13, we see that our responsibility is to help other Christians grow to maturity. Those verses tell us that God gives spiritual leaders, “For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Here, we see that if we are a spiritual leader, our goal should be to help each person we lead grow to spiritual maturity. We also see that a mature Christian is one who has learned to exercise self-control in all areas of his or her life.

Since teachers use examples and words as the two primary ways to influence those they lead, we

are given two illustrations of the way we should exercise self-control if we want to be effective leaders for the Lord. James 3:3 says, “Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.” The bit that a person places in the mouth of a horse is only a few inches in length. However, one is able to use that small bit to cause the horse to obey. In fact, with a bit in the mouth of a horse, one can control the entire body of a horse weighing several hundred pounds. In the same way, we see that the words that come out of our mouths, as teachers, have a great influence on the lives of others.

The second illustration is given in James 3:4. That verse says, “Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.” Here, we see a second example of the way our words have a very great impact. In the day James wrote, ships were powered by large sails. Today, ships can be many hundreds of feet long and may have large motors. Regardless of the size of the ship, or how it is powered, it was and is still turned by a very small rudder. The person who determines what direction that ship is going is the pilot. Our words can have the same impact. Most people seldom realize the impact their words have on the lives of others.

The word that is translated “pilot” means *to lead or guide in a straight path*. This word is used two times in the New Testament. The other place the word is used is in John 1:23, where we read, “He said: ‘I am “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Make straight the way of the LORD,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.’” As a result, when we are teaching the Word of God, we want to teach the Word of God accurately so that we will lead others in a straight path. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” Some people only work well when their employer is watching. If we are teaching the Word of God, we see that we do not want to be like a worker who is ashamed when he is caught unprepared. Instead, we want to prepare to teach a passage thoroughly so that we can explain the Word of God accurately to others and lead others in a straight path.

If we have prepared to teach the Word of God, we will be able to work with the Holy Spirit in our teaching. We do this as we explain the Word of God with the Word of God. 1 Corinthians 2:13 says, “These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” Learning to explain the Word of God with the Word of God will change and transform our teaching. Matthew 7:28-29 says, “And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” The scribes quoted other scribes when they taught. In contrast, Christ explained the Word of God with the Word of God.

We are also given a warning about the danger of failing to control our tongue. James 3:5-6 says, “Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.” We saw that a horse is controlled with a bridle that is only a few inches long. A huge ship is controlled by a very small steering wheel and rudder. In the same way, our tongue is a very small part of our body. However, a tongue can be very destructive when we do not yield our lives to the

Lord and let the Holy Spirit guide us as we speak.

Here, we see that the tongue is a very small part of the body, but it boasts great things. The phrase that is translated “boasts great things” comes from two Greek words. One word means *to boast* and the other word means *great or great things*. Here, we see that when people are controlled by pride, instead of the love of Christ, they will begin to boast about themselves instead of giving glory to the Lord. Christ compared the prayers of two men, in Luke 18:10-13, where we read, “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” Here, we see that all the Pharisee did was talk about himself and what he had done. Christ said, in the next verse, that every person who exalts himself will be humbled.

James compared boasting to a wildfire. A wildfire can start from just a spark or a tiny fire. However, if that fire gets out of control and becomes a wildfire, it can destroy thousands of acres. As a result, James says that a tongue is a fire that produces a world of iniquity. The word that is translated “iniquity” speaks of unrighteousness in heart and life. Here, we see that the tongue shows what is in the heart of a person.

Proverbs 15:28 contrasts the heart and words of the just and the wicked. That verse says, “The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil.” Here, we see that a person who is right with the Lord will think how to give a wise answer before he speaks. In contrast, the heart that is wicked causes the evil person to pour out evil words. As a result, we see that in order to control the tongue, we must allow the Lord to control our hearts. If we do not let the Lord control our hearts, we see that a wicked heart will fill the whole life of a person with evil, including the words that the person speaks.

We see that an evil heart that speaks evil words will set the course of nature on fire. This means that the words of a person with an evil heart will influence many others to do evil. We want to show our children, by our example, how to have a heart that is right with the Lord so that the words we speak will bring honor to the Lord and give our children an example to follow. May the Lord richly bless you as you speak words that will give your physical and spiritual children an example to follow.