

February 25th, 2008
“Profitable Speech”

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James 3:1-4

1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

2 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.

3 Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.

4 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.

Thank you very much for coming to hear the message for today. Before we begin our next lesson, let us reiterate our reason for attending Church.

We attend Church to obtain the mind of Christ, meaning, to have the Bible illuminated in our minds so that we can clearly understand the principles that Jesus taught and base our daily personal decisions on those principles.

We come to Church because we want to be obedient to the Bible, which is the doctrine of Jesus Christ, in an informed, insightful and intelligent manner.

Last week, I recounted my personal intellectual journey to the understanding that divorce was outside of the will of God. One of the salient points that I tried to make had to do with my personal sinfulness in the matter. I have tried to stress throughout this series in the book of James that we ought not have pride in our supposition that we are good Christians, but we should recognize that we are actually sinners, and that our eternal security is not based upon our good works, but the fact that God has given us the grace gift of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Let me reiterate the declaration of the universal sinfulness of man and our opportunity for salvation through the gracious saving gift of God found in **Romans 3:10, 23, and 6:23** which says:

**10 As it is written: “There is none righteous, no, not one;
23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**
but although

23 the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our acknowledgement of our personal shortcomings is foundational to our acceptance of the grace gift of God.

We need to avoid the tendency that Christians have to get the “big head”, meaning an inflated ego, and to look down on others that are still living life in the way that we formerly lived before we came to a saving knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ.

It is interesting that the lifestyle of the average unsaved person is not necessarily any worse than that of the average Christian. I cite the fact that the percentage of divorced people identifying themselves as Christians was only once percentage point less than that of divorced people not identifying themselves as Christians. Unsaved people do a large percentage of the sin

that is done in the world, but not necessarily a larger percentage than Christians. If you think that I am wrong, just spend some time looking into the history of scandals and in the Church and into sin and cruelty done in the name of the Christianity, and you will find that neither joining the Christian band nor accepting the call to the ministry makes a person immune to sin.

James begins this third chapter of his epistle with a warning. **James 3:1-2a** tells us:

1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

2 For we all stumble in many things.

Jesus gives the background for this verse in His teaching, in **Matthew 23:1-12**:

1 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples,

2 saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.

3 Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

4 For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

5 But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.

6 They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues,

7 greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’

8 But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.

9 Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.

10 And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.

11 But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.

12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

The best that any person in the role of a Bible teacher can do is to give accurate instruction in that which the Bible says, endeavor to live a good Christian life as an example to others, and then always be ready to acknowledge his personal shortcomings and to repent of them, doing his best to keep himself off of the pedestal. Let me be the first to acknowledge that today, the real teacher here is Jesus Christ, and I am just trying to emulate His example by quoting the relevant portion of that which Jesus said and interpreting His Word as He would were He here.

We do the unsaved and those that are less experienced in Christ than we in our sphere of influence a disservice when we present ourselves as better than they rather than presenting ourselves as sinners saved by grace. Even if you have recently been successful in living a less sinful life than the person whom you are trying to persuade to come to or live for Christ, you should always remember the parabolic illustration that Jesus gives us about being humble, in **Luke 18:9-14**, which says:

9 Also He [Jesus] spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 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.

12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’

13 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!’

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

For an example of someone humbling Himself, consider the Lord Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, having all power in Heaven and Earth in His hand. Jesus humbled Himself to be born into the human family in the normal way that people are born. The Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, came to earth as a human child, taking on the obligation to be subject to human parents.

Luke chapter **2** tells us that when Jesus was twelve years old, He traveled to the Passover Feast in Jerusalem with His parents and His other human relatives. Once there, Jesus left the group and went to the Temple for a discussion with those who were in charge. Jesus did not return home with His parents, but remained in the Temple, questioning and teaching the most learned in Israel. **Luke 2:46-47** records:

46 Now so it was that after three days they found Him [Jesus] in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions.

47 And all who heard Him [Jesus] were astonished at His understanding and answers.

The Boy Jesus, teaching in the Temple, was a singularly impressive individual. His parents, however, came to retrieve Him from this extraordinary intellectual exhibition in the temple to return Him to life as a boy in Galilee. What was the reaction of the one who was fully God, with all power in His hand and all wisdom upon His lips to this denigration of His power and intellect, as He was asked to return to the role of a child? **Luke 2:51-52** records:

51 Then He [Jesus] went down with them [His parents] and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart.

52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Jesus humbled Himself, not just to obey God, but also to obey His earthly mother and father, two simple country people that could not hold a candle to His mental and spiritual ability. Of course, all pre-teen and teenage children think that they are smarter and more knowledgeable than their parents, but unlike most adolescents, Jesus Christ actually was smarter and more knowledgeable than His parents. That fact notwithstanding, the Bible teaches us that Jesus humbled Himself.

If the Lord Jesus Christ, the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace could submit to His two flawed, human, sinful parents, how can we, hell-bound sinners saved from our fate only by the grace of God, exalt ourselves over anyone? It is an interesting question about which to think, isn't it? Remember it the next time you find yourself tempted to get on your high horse, because, as our text tells us in **James 3:1-2a**:

1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

2 For we all stumble in many things.

The Scripture teaches we should be careful about our propensity to manifest our sinful nature in our speech, in **James 3:2b-4**:

2 If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

3 Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.

4 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.

Our speech is our presentation to the outside world. The content of our conversation is that that distinguishes us from those that do not know the Lord.

It was a great blessing to watch the victory celebration on Super Bowl Sunday this year. As the game came down to the last few minutes and it became clear that Indianapolis was going to win, Tony Dungy prepared himself to accept his first Super Bowl trophy as a coach. On the podium, the owner of the Indianapolis Colts spoke before Tony, and said that he hired Tony as soon as he could after Tony's dismissal from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers because of Tony's reputation of being a successful coach with a great deal of class. As Tony spoke on the podium after the owner, he credited all that he had done to his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. I don't think that I have ever watched a championship speech, not even in a church league, in which the Lord was given more glory and honor for the victory and for the demeanor of this year's champions of the NFL. Tony acknowledged that which the press wanted to dwell on, that being that he was the first African-American coach to win the Super Bowl, but he deflected that conversation as quickly as he gracefully could, and returned to the subject of the relationships of the team management, the coaching staff and the players on the team, giving credit for his leadership to the Lord Jesus Christ.

There were also said some interesting things about Tony's personal demeanor. Someone related the fact that, in the first team meeting, he talked to the team in a normal tone of voice, telling the players, "Get used to listening to me talk like this, because this is as loudly as you will ever hear me speak." Several of the players interviewed acknowledged that Tony never raised his voice at them, but coached by speaking to them as one civilized adult would talk to another, in a normal tone of voice, with reasonableness and dignity.

When the general manager of the team was asked about Tony, he made the interesting comment that, unlike the other coaches with which he had been affiliated, Tony did not use profanity. He said, "I've only heard Tony say one swear word, and that was when we were discussing his plans to appear the various sports talk shows. Tony agreed to participate on 'The Best Damn Sports Show, Period', which is the sports talk show on the Fox network.

I said to Tony, 'You know, Tony, that's the only time I've ever heard you use a curse word.'

Tony replied, 'And I'll never do it again.'

Tony Dungy, on Super Bowl Sunday, followed the commandment that God gave in **Colossians 4:6**, which says:

6 Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Tony prayed that which David prayed in **Psalms 19:14**:

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.

It is an interesting truth that I learned in Chicago, Illinois as I was growing up, that violent language leads to violent action. We used to play a game with which some of you may be familiar, called “playing the dozens”. The objective of this game was to say the most negatively provocative and vulgar things that we could about one another’s family. The game generally lasted until somebody said something really bad about someone else’s mother. It was fair game to talk about someone’s father, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, cousin and grandparents, but if you happened to touch on the subject of someone’s mother, there was a good chance that a fight would break out.

I learned that you should always give people a way to back down from confrontation. The more efficiently that you talk someone into a corner, the more violently that they come out of the corner. A friend of mine and I received an ocular demonstration of this lesson in the field which is now the campus of Chicago State University, but was just a field surrounded with a wooden fence when I was growing up.

My friend owned a BB gun, and one day we went through the fence into the field to see what he could shoot. My friend shot at a large rat and missed, and the two of us chased the rat as he ran away. We caught up with him as he ran into a corner of the fence and we found ourselves able to impede the rat’s escape. I found out, that day, that it is not a good plan to corner a wild rat unless your plan is to go all of the way to the final solution, because when the rat decides that he has no way to escape, he is not going down without a fight, and I mean a fight to the finish.

People are more dangerous than rats, in that they do not have to be cornered physically to reach for the final solution. We can corner one another with harsh language and threats, and, as the news reports often tell us, people are killing one another for things that we would not have considered particularly serious in my day. I doubt that it would be too safe to go on the streets now and say some of the things that we used to say to one another when I was a kid. God instructs us not to speak in the ways that my friends and I used to speak, in **Psalm 34:11-17**, which says:

11 Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

12 Who is the man who desires life, And loves many days, that he may see good?

13 Keep your tongue from evil, And your lips from speaking deceit.

14 Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it.

15 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry.

16 The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, To cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

17 The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles.

Of course, lying on people did not start with me and my friends. The lies of the Jewish religious leaders against Jesus Christ are among the documented reasons that they were not granted repentance after His resurrection. One such episode is recorded, starting with **Matthew 12:22-24**, which says:

22 Then one was brought to Him [Jesus] who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw.

23 And all the multitudes were amazed and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”

24 Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.”

The Pharisees were so irrationally prejudiced against Jesus Christ that they made the totally illogical assertion that Jesus was a devil that casts out the devil. Jesus responded with the argument that when you say something bad about someone, your negative assertion should at least make sense. Of course, the devil could voluntarily quit possessing someone, but why would he cast himself out? It doesn't make sense, and Jesus points it out in **Matthew 12:25-28**, which says:

25 But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand.

26 If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?

27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges.

28 But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Curing people of demon possession is not the purview of Satan; releasing people from the clutches of the demons is the work of the Kingdom of God. Every week, we ask God, not the devil, for the blessing of being in our right mind, and we study the Holy Scripture, not some book of the devil, to learn the things of God and protect our minds from being misled by the evil one. Combating Satan is the work of the Spirit of God that is sent to defend us, and Jesus, in **Matthew 12:31-37**, tells the religious leaders that their illogical assertion to ascribe evil to the Spirit of God will lead to their condemnation.

31 “Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.

32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.

33 “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit.

34 Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

35 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

36 But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.

37 For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

It is of the utmost importance, not just for our witness, but as evidence that we have received eternal life, that we speak graciously and that our speech is seasoned with salt; that we keep our tongues from evil and deceit; that we speak in ways that pursue goodness and peace, and that we speak in ways that glorify God, not blaspheme Him.

I have also learned that I should temper my speech to other people because I actually have no control over that which other people do. I recognize that other people have the right to make their own decisions and learn from their own mistakes, even as I have, and, if someone

asks me to give them advice, that I recognize that my advice is not binding on the person that asks for it.

While I know how my journey led me to the Lord, I have to give other people to whom I speak the space to get to the Lord in their own way. Yes, I would prefer that everyone be saved immediately after hearing my voice, but I happen to know that it took me 27 years to come to a saving knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ, and that it is likely everyone will complete the journey to salvation on their own timetable, as some people are coming to the Lord by a circuitous route. My job is not to judge your journey, but to give advice by pointing to Biblical references that fit your situation in the sure knowledge that the Word of God is more accurate and more likely to draw you into the Kingdom than my personal opinion of what you are doing.

My job is to try to find something praiseworthy in everyone to which I speak, and then, to develop a degree of mutual admiration with them that will allow them to listen non-defensively as I present the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I have to avoid condemning their behavior, recognizing that, as we are all sinners, I have no power to condemn. Of course, neither do I condone sinful behavior, but I remove my judgment entirely so that my judgment is not the focus of my discussion, but the focus of my discussion is the teaching of the Bible, not on my opinion of the behavior of others.

I try to avoid having hurt feelings if the person rejects my advice, and I also try to avoid a personal investment in the outcome of their situation, because the advice that I am giving them is not mine, but that which I received from the Lord. I do my best to emulate the thinking of Jesus in the matter, as He instructed His disciples, in **John 5:30**:

30 I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

It is certainly true that I can of myself do nothing. There is nothing that I can do for or about your situation or that of anyone else, except to warn you about that which God has promised.

When my judgment of your case is righteous, it is because I am telling you the will of God for your life, rather than trying to get you to do what I want you to do.

Jesus warned Judas about the consequences of his planned betrayal, in **Matthew 26:24**:
24 The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born."

and He warned the other disciples that they would deny Him, in **Matthew 26:31-35**:

31 Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

32 But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."

33 Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble."

34 Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

35 Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And so said all the disciples.

Neither Judas nor the other disciples were able to avoid sin surrounding Jesus' arrest. Judas was eternally lost, and the other disciples all failed Jesus, although they were saved by His grace. I doubt that Jesus loved the other disciples more than Judas, because He loves us all, and gave His life for all of us. It happens to be a fact that God gives us all free will, puts us at the crossroads of the choice of Godliness or the choice of evil, and then allows us to reap the benefits or consequences of our own choice, as Judas did when he hanged himself.

I started preparing my son for manhood at his eighth birthday party. I called him away from the friends with whom he was playing, and informed him that he had ten more years to live at our house. He was nonplussed at this information, as he did not understand its' context, and I did not explain it at the time, as my plan was just to plant a seed in his mind. Every year after that, on his birthday, I reminded him of how much time he had to go. Having had this knowledge for ten years, when he reached his eighteenth birthday, he was ready to move into the next phase of his life.

Since he began college after turning eighteen and graduating from high school, he has not made my house his primary domicile, and I have not tried to regulate his behavior as I did when he was a child. I have tried to pattern our relationship after that of Jesus and His disciples. We have a relationship in which I give advice, and then he decides whether or not my advice will fit into his program, because he is living his own life. When my part in our relationship has been successful, it is because, in my opinion, I have avoided becoming overly invested in seeing him take my advice, recognizing the reality that whether or not he sees fit to take my advice, I do not have the knowledge of the future required to tell someone, with absolute certainty, whether or not their own plans are going to succeed.

James 3:2b tells us:

2 If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

The only competent advice that I can give anyone about life is based upon my experience with and understanding of the content of the Scripture. I know that the teaching of the Scripture is relevant to every situation, and if I can constrain myself to only give advice based upon the teaching of the Scripture, I will be doing the service to which God has called me.

If we can restrict our advice to others about life to that which the Bible tells us, and recognize the sovereign right of each individual to make up their own minds, we can avoid investing too much ego in that which we say and the advice that we give, which will have the benefit of making our arguments more reasonable to those with whom we wish to have influence, and making ourselves more able to help them to avoid the pitfalls through which experience has taught us. Our recognition of our own sinfulness and our humility about our own journey combined with a knowledge of the Scripture and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will make us wise councilors of those with whom we come into contact, and will allow the Lord to use us in the further extension of the great work of Building the Kingdom of God. So, let us not stumble in word, but use our tongues to teach that which God teaches.

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