

THE MASTER'S APPRENTICE:
EAGER TO LEARN, EAGER TO PRACTICE
October 6th, 2013

There's a lot to be said for encouraging your young relatives—or young people in general—whose hearts aren't set on doing a uni degree in history, or becoming teachers, or something specific in an academic line—to undertake an apprenticeship. There is still a great shortage of and need for skilled tradespeople in Australia which is going to last for some time!

In recent years, the term 'discipleship' has received a lot of emphasis in Christian writing—and rightly so. The word "disciple" means a life-apprentice; it refers to a person eager to listen to and learn from their rabbi, their master-teacher.

As a caring pastor-teacher, James wants to show his readers how they can practically please their Lord and Master, Jesus.

He has identified the fact that they will face various kinds of trials/tests. He has taught them about where sin comes from and about God's Goodness in providing Salvation.

Having painted the background canvas with those large colours, James now wishes to pass on training about specific skills, expertise and poise in living as a Christian apprentice/disciple. He starts by encouraging the honing speech.

(1) Restrain Your Tongue.

The proverbs warn us, wisely, about the excesses of speech:

*"When words are many, sin is not absent,
but he who holds his tongue is wise." [10 v19]*

*"A man of knowledge uses words with restraint,
and a man of understanding is even-tempered." [17 v27].*

James teaches that there is a need to restrain the tongue

[A] from undisciplined, angry speech v19-21.

*"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,
for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.
Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."*

This teaching is not a plea for silent acceptance of all injustice or apathetic ignoring of all unpleasant reality. It does address the common tendency for people under pressure to respond with outbursts of anger which, even Christians, can yield to. I must confess that this 'fruit of the flesh' has characterised my life as a clinging sin. Fits of rage do not advance God's cause. Whether James' readers were angry with their persecutors, other Christians who were compromising or for whatever reason, James encourages them to delight in God's Word.

Man's anger is not to be confused with righteous indignation.

'we can learn a lot about any given situation by being quick to "listen".

There's no doubt that we all know people whom we would love to have speak more than they do, but I'm even more sure it's true we know lots more whom we wish would say lots less.

I'm leaving myself open to your comments at the door, this morning, I realise.

This reminds me of my favourite old piece of wit I can so vividly remember dad imparting to me:

'there was an old owl who lived in an oak,
the more he saw the less he spoke;
the less he spoke the more he heard
wasn't he a wise old bird'''

So James teaches the restraint of the tongue to prevent needlessly angry speech and to promote the hearing of necessary communication.

Secondly, he warns against

[B] claims of godliness without action are empty v26-27.

James is very strong on this matter, throughout his teaching. The tongue oughtn't be used to make fraudulent, pompous, self-congratulatory claims:

"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Notice how James puts verse twenty-six? There were those making claims about their faith. James says, control your tongue with respect to your piety and declare your faith by means of your deeds. Actively do good things by caring for the needy in deeds of practical support and demonstrating a life of personal faithfulness to the Lord in a life of abstaining from godless entanglement with former involvements in godless pursuits. These actions, James teaches, would evidence that a man is crowning his claim to trust Christ as Saviour as genuine. Again, this is a theme he will return to.

It is a significant feature of societies, like Scotland's, that where the Gospel has firmly taken hold, such characteristics as verbal restraint are often to be found as part of the national psyche.

A clear understanding and declaration of the Truths of the Faith go together with practical demonstrations of love for those in need nearby and further afield. Such concern must flow from lives lived in a way which pleases God.

Having taught about restraining the tongue, James naturally speaks about

(2) Retaining God's Truth v22-25.

Apprenticeships are time-consuming and costly businesses. It is the aim of their training that they retain the skills they are taught so that they are equipped to function, independently.

My purpose in preparing notes, in hosting Bible studies, in visiting and otherwise making myself available to you is to help you grow more confident in your individual lives so that you and I can carry out our lives of service for the Lord. As these verses instruct us, the purpose of being present when God's Word is read and explained is so that it will benefit us in our growth to maturity. Of course, it is the Christian disciple's 'instruction-manual' so to speak:

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." [v22]

Remember last week's insert with those various ways in which we can benefit from our reading of the Bible? Act on what you read either by giving thanks, trembling in your boots, taking some other specific action on the basis of what you read.

Verses twenty-three and twenty-four show how foolish it is to approach the Bible in any other way:

"Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."

What is said here is that the person would be coming with a very superficial approach not concentrating on the detail of what is said from the Word or written in the Word at all! Just imagine glancing in the mirror and not combing your hair or attending to your makeup, ladies: wandering out into the day, looking like an unmade bed? Not a pretty sight, huh? The contrast is given at verse twenty-five:

"But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does."

Here is a picture of studied concentration, of absorbed attention and the realisation that this study and obedience to what is found will bring freedom and true happiness/blessing. Ah, now that's true wisdom.

I understand that many apprenticeships aren't completed by the trainees because wages can be low to start with and it does take discipline to go through to the end. How impudent would it be of an apprentice on-the-job to say to an employer "oh yeah, I know all this stuff" on the first few days of his training: or even secretly boast like that to mates? James is pleading for authentic and long-lasting apprentices to stay the course so as to please the heavenly Master!