

I wonder if we can relate to any of the realities that James and the Mother Church in Jerusalem faced as Christianity first grew there.

- Israel had a serious border problem. The Romans still occupied their land. Taxes were astronomical; fear abounded. Plus, there was a great political difference of opinion about whether the Israelites should mount an armed rebellion or merely resist those in power.
- There was a schism in the church. Jewish Christians wanted to remain part of their Jewish community. But many Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah didn't want Christians in their worship, or even in their lives.
- The Jewish Christians and Gentile ones were also at odds with one another. Must Gentiles who wanted to become Christian also become Jews? James thought so. He was the leading Christian conservative. Paul didn't think so. He was the leading liberal Christian. Peter wavered back and forth, depending on who he was with.
- There were ten different High Priests between Jesus' resurrection and his brother James' death in 62 CE. The High Priest served as head of the Sanhedrin, the high court. So, a turnover in chief justice occurred roughly every three years in James' time. And the views of the High Priest could seriously affect how law was interpreted and how much Christians were tolerated or persecuted.

You know how these issues resolved. The Israelites ultimately mounted an armed rebellion. Not only did the Romans squash the rebellion, in 70 CE they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and dispersed the Jewish people throughout the Roman Empire. Of course, this also dispersed Christianity throughout the Empire and helped it to spread the Gospel far and wide, but at the time the people might not have recognized this advantage inherent in their misery.

Jewish Christians eventually got ejected from Jewish worship. And Gentiles eventually got to be followers of Christ Jesus without having to adopt the Jewish faith and Law, as well.

As usual with any such situation, to the winners go the opportunity to create the authorized version of history. What we might not see in the authorized history of the early church is the depth of the fight among the factions. James' faction lost, so we know more about Paul and Peter. The apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews, for example, tells of Jesus' appearance first to his brother James after his resurrection. And the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas has James at the Last Supper and Jesus commissioning James instead of Peter.

I'm not espousing these alt-histories, just telling you they exist. Why? So that we can put James' teaching into perspective when he tells all who teach Christ Jesus better be very careful what they teach. Undoubtedly, the risen Christ has appeared in some way to each of us, and Jesus has commissioned each of us to share God's words.

But, in view of the great tug of war over the Jewish-Christian issue of the first century, we could expect James to argue that teachers take HIS side of the argument. Instead, we get a series of instructions about the need to guard our tongues.

James calls the tongue a "restless evil, full of deadly poison." He warns us to not use our tongues to both bless God and curse other people because other people are the children of God, every bit as much as we are.

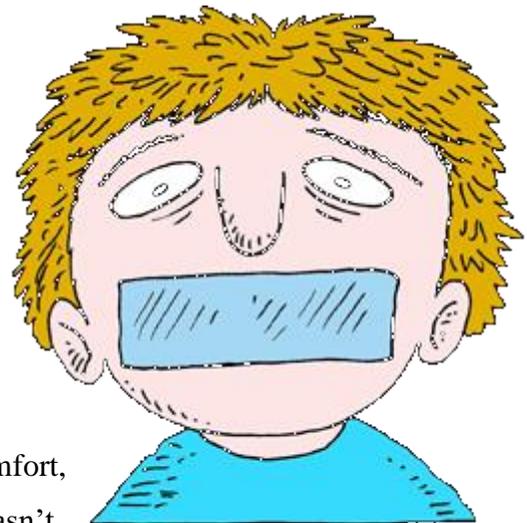
From this, we can see why James has become known as "James the Just." He didn't use his position to unduly espouse his point of view, his political perspective, just to advocate using our tongues for Godly purposes.

James makes a good point. Who among us doesn't know that words can hurt, injure, and tear us and a community apart. Who among us hasn't experienced words used as weapons? Who among us hasn't used our words in these ways?

On the other hand, our words also can share hope, bring comfort, offer healing, and knit a community together. Who among us hasn't experienced the words of others or shared our own words in these ways? The latter is of God, and yet sharing love and hope and joy is a cultivated habit.

James blames the tongue for misguided speech. He thinks misuse of our words can poison our whole body (not to mention that our words can seriously damage other people). In this way our words can be a two-edged sword—harmful to us when we speak them every bit as much as harmful to the object of our critique.

JESUS knew this. He said what we heard a few weeks ago: "It's not what goes into our bodies that defiles us, but what comes out." JESUS knew, as we know, that what we say and why reveal who we really are—not so much the person we put on public display and "curate" on social media, but what we neglect to guard when we think people we care about are watching.



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Most people speak 16,000 words a day. That's what a University of Arizona study discovered. The study also debunked a myth that women speak far more than men. What do our daily 16,000 words reveal about ourselves? That we are wiser, smarter, and more astute than everyone else (or that we're afraid you are none of these things)? Do our daily 16,000 words reveal we are "armed and dangerous" (or wish we were), picking off those who threaten our view of ourselves most? Or do our daily 16,000 words lift others up and comfort them with the same love and grace that thrives within us?

God doesn't need so many words. His one word spoke everything into being. His other word, God's "word made flesh" in Jesus, offers us salvation. God's Word reveals him to be pure love. God's word is the purest of sacraments, the outward and visible sign of his inner and spiritual grace. Are OUR words sacrament?

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer."