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I made the mistake of breaking a promise I made to myself: a few nights ago, I watched an episode of Question Time. When the programme ended, I was tangibly disturbed by the diatribe, the polemic of harangue, denunciation and condemnation, I could not sleep for quite some time.

I speak for myself, but I do not find "talk shows" and some news broadcasts, edifying. Everyone has an opinion which they want to be understood as fact. "Talk shows", be they on radio or tv, are just that - shows on which people grab the platform to talk over others! To this, add equal measures of Parliament in session and social media, and I find it a bitter pill to swallow.

Two weeks ago, I was invited to share my Christian life. I was pleasantly surprised when preparing for this talk, to discover how much of my life, esp. my early life, was influenced and shaped by teachers, tutors, instructors, mentors and of course my parents, and I suppose that would be the same for all of us, to realise our self-confidence and self-esteem are often learned (or lost) by a parent or teacher's words, in early childhood.

There are several passages in the Bible which are known affectionately as, **Bible-bashing verses**, passages used out of context, to verbally "bash" people, by making them feel guilty of being sub-standard citizens of heaven, and James Chapter 3 is one of them. But this section of James' letter is not about bashing people for being gossip-mongers, engaging in tittle-tattle, and spreading fake news.

Let's remind ourselves, James is writing to the community of Jews who have embraced Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, who have left their strict adherence to **The Law** monitored by a hierarchy of priests. The

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religion of this community of people, was to recite a liturgy of daily prayers, and those set for every occasion.

Now this community has embraced a personal relationship with Father God, through His Son, Jesus the Messiah, a relationship which does not require visible signs! Jesus did say, *when you pray, go into your room, lock the door and pray to your Father in secret, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him!*

This precious community of Christian believers is facing “trials of all kinds” and James encourages them to be strong in faith, not to despair, not to give in to anger, to let their deeds be rooted in their faith, and their words an overflow of what is in their hearts.

It appears this community was being taunted for their faith in Christ, and getting incensed by what was being said (hence James’ earlier caution to them about anger), perhaps feeling helpless, perhaps even flying off the handle in response to the taunts and trials. James admits ***we all make many mistakes***, because we are not perfect; if only we control what we say, we could be perfect

James draws their attention to three problems:

The first is, ***Controlled Speech Is Directive¹***. A small bit in a horse's mouth controlled by the rider, guides the horse; a small rudder on a large ship under the captain's control, directs the ship where to go. So it is with the tongue, one of the smallest and invisible organs in the human body, yet the most powerful! A slip of the tongue, an off-the-cuff remark, an inconsiderate comment, can make or break a relationship, can show what

¹ 3:1-5

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is important to a person - whether they talk mostly about themselves or whether they have a genuine concern for others. A person's choice of words, directs their lives.

The second problem James draws our attention to is, **Contentious Speech and Controversial words are Destructive²**. More serious than uncontrolled speech, are provocative words which can destroy a person, as completely as a fire would destroy an entire forest. Don't we know only too well, from the way the media trip up public figures, one word out of place can ruin a career, even bring down a government. An unwise remark, reported and circulated on any of the internet's many sites, can cause riots on the other side of the world, in an instant.

In times of difficulty, esp when the problem or struggle is personal, it is not difficult to let the tongue loose, releasing its store of deadly poison

James' final caution is, **Conflicting Speech Is Deceptive³**. We can appreciate this problem: here is a community convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, eagerly wanting to share this discovery which has changed their lives, yet the taunting and teasing, perhaps even bullying, most likely by the community they were formerly part of, stirs up anger, which James says has to be controlled. You cannot bless and curse at the same time, just as a fresh-water spring cannot spout sweet and bitter water, or even sweet and salty water!

James' counsel to this community of Christian Jews, is also one for the Church today: avoid the temptation of taking bits of God's Gospel given to

² 3:5-8

³ 3:9-12

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us by Jesus, bits we like, bits we are comfortable with, and leave aside the more “*difficult*” and challenging bits!

It is a high standard, but we should expect no less, if indeed the Gospel is God's message of Salvation!

The old religion reprimanded and rebuked a person when they went out of line and “broke the law”. James has already identified the new religion, one which honours those created in God's image.

So, to the questions: How do we manage to control speech which so easily misdirects; How do we avoid speaking contentious words which so easily destroys, and how do we steer clear of conflicting words which are deceptive?, to these questions, James offers a solution.

Learn to distinguish between the false wisdom of the world⁴ from the True Wisdom of God⁵.

We have heard all too often the story of the person whom the Doctors have given a clean bill of health, unable to discern the disease eating away inside, until the cry of pain says it's too late. With all the medical advances in diagnostics, people are still walking around as normal, while a disease is consuming the inside.

James is not exclusively referring to physical illness, he is referring to the disease of a ***critical spirit***, one that will not let a good word pass by without poisoning it, the way a diseased cell will not let a good cell pass by without infecting it with the disease.

⁴ 3:13-16

⁵ 3:17-18

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James refers to this as **covering the Truth with boasting and lies** (14), the source of which James identifies as the world of demons (15). It's not a word we use much these days, **demons**; the Tuesday Bible Study is coming to grips with, trying understand what it is and what harm and injury it can cause. To James and his generation who witnessed the way his brother Jesus was treated and killed, demonic activity and influence was very real, which is why he draws our attention to the two kinds of wisdom, the world's so called *wisdom*, and God's Real Wisdom which is rooted in Truth.

Let me close with this. Think of it like this: would you rather live among people described in v. 16 - people steeped in jealousy and selfish ambition, who don't have a good word to say about anybody or anything, **or** live among people described in v. 17 - peace-loving people, gentle at all times, willing to yield to others, full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds, those who are peacemakers (*cf*: Sermon on the Mount), planting seeds of peace and reaping a harvest of righteousness?

Which group would you rather have a neighbour?

The question answers itself, but the challenge James places before us is this: **would you be that neighbour, for whom your neighbour would be grateful?**

AMEN.