

# James 18

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, there are all sorts of reasons people apply for jobs, aren't there? It can just be the need to get some money in. But very often people apply for jobs they think they are in some way capable of doing. This point is probably right to say I never apply for any job in a church. There we go. Read into that when you will.

But yes, there are excellent job application forms if you look online. For example, one person wrote, showing how well equipped they were for this, I was drawn to this global warming research position by my love of penguins and baby polar bears, and I also speak fluent Antarctic.

Good luck. I was extremely motivated to find a position where I could apply my love of interpersonal communication to multifaceted colleagues. I don't know if you have multifaceted colleagues.

Anyway, there we go.

And perhaps my personal favourite, I'm looking for a prof reading position. If you get that in the email from me, you'll know that is the sort of thing I would write.

Anyway, clearly the people in James' writings who also thought they were very qualified for a job, which they were really not qualified for. They haven't filled an application form, but James is, if you like, putting some criteria before them, by which they may assess themselves.

[ 1 : 19 ] Now these people thought they could be great teachers. Unfortunately, they couldn't. And so James gives us first of all the first part of the chapter, verses 1-12, he tells them and us, and not just these particular people, but everyone in the congregation, about our dangerous problem.

And then, verses 13-18, he gets into God's gracious solutions. First of all, our dangerous problem. And reading between the lines of this whole letter, we get quite a picture of what some of the folk in this congregation were like.

They really considered themselves to be pretty mature believers. So, if you look back over the chapters so far, in chapter 1, verse 19, they were obviously quite quick to voice their opinion, quite quick to get angry with other people, who didn't want to follow their suggestions.

And so James has to tell them to be slow to speak and quick to listen. They thought they were good religious people, so chapter 1, verse 26, James confronts them with the truth.

If you think you're religious, but cannot control your tongue, your religion is worthless, he says. In chapter 2, verse 18, there are people who were very good in their doctrine, they liked to believe the right things, and thought that was sufficient.

[ 2 : 37 ] So James had to confront them and say, no, faith is completed by works. Faith is completed by works. It's not a matter of just what you believe or what you profess.

It's how you live it out in your lives. And so probably we shouldn't be surprised when he has to turn around, chapter 3, verse 1, to say this, Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers. For you know that those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. Now the government would love it if more people applied to be teachers for maths or science. There's always a shortage, isn't there?

But the difference here is James is talking about the church. Now, of course, to want to teach is a good thing. Paul writes to Timothy, it says, Those who desire to be overseers, those who desire to be elders, who therefore teach in the church, desire a noble thing.

It's a noble task. So James isn't saying that wanting to teach is a bad thing. Rather, he's reminding us that those who do this task, myself included, Paul included, will be judged with greater strictness.

[ 3 : 38 ] So James isn't trying to put them off the job exactly. Rather, he wants them to recognise the dangers that go with it, and therefore to examine themselves. Perhaps they wanted to be teachers because they thought they were mature.

Perhaps they wanted to be teachers because of the status that came with it. Perhaps they wanted to be teachers because they wanted other people to listen to them. And dangerous for all of us who do teach.

So James warns them, first of all, that's significance of the time. Teachers will be judged more severely. People who use words are always likely to be judged by their words, aren't they? Journalists can write lots of things but easily get done for libel. Lawyers have to be ever so careful about their words, don't they? What goes into contracts? Companies will spend thousands and tens of thousands, millions, making sure the contracts are alright, employing lawyers to check that out. Yet James says there's an even greater task for those who are teaching God's Word. Why? Well, firstly, because it is God's Word.

[ 4 : 46 ] If you make a mistake as a lawyer, you might get your company into a bit of trouble. If you make a mistake as a journalist, you might be subject to libel. If you make a mistake as a teacher of God's Word, you might be libeling the almighty King of the universe, our Creator.

Or you might be leading people astray with false teaching. Or dividing churches. Words carry power, don't they? Words of significance.

And the ultimate significance of the time, I suppose, is... James no doubt has Jesus' words in mind here. Matthew 12, verse 36. I tell you, Jesus speaking, I tell you on a day of judgment, people will have to give account for every careless word they speak.

For by your words you'll be justified, and by your words you'll be condemned. In the previous chapter, it had been reminding us we're going to be judged by our works. And words are, if you like, a special sort of word, aren't they?

And it's out the overflow of our hearts that our mouths speak. So words are highly significant. And especially for those of us entrusted with teaching in a church.

[ 5 : 54 ] Those words are very significant. Not that James is expecting perfection here. That's what he says in verse 2. We all stumble in many ways.

As a teacher acknowledges that, we stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body. Now when he says perfect, I don't think that's the best translation.

That word is also translated mature or complete. Clearly James doesn't expect perfection. He says we all stumble in many ways. But he is looking for maturity, isn't he?

It's the same word he used back in chapter 1. How do we become mature? Well, chapter 1 verse 5. It's through trials. Sorry, chapter 1 verse 4.

Verse 3 really. The testing of your faith produces steadfastness. Unless steadfastness have its full effect. That you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

[ 6 : 54 ] It's the same word. How does maturity come? Through the testing of our faith. It's you cooperating with that. That's how we'll be able to gain some sort of bridle over our times.

So here's James' strategy. He's telling these people who want to be teachers. He's telling them what's really needed to be a teacher is maturity. Increased maturity.

And that's needed because teachers will be judged more severely when Christ returns. There's a strong movement in conservative evangelical circles today. That says if you can teach, you should be a preacher.

If you can teach geography, you should be preaching in a church. And I sometimes wonder if they actually have taken this verse seriously. And various other things in scripture seriously as well. Teaching is a dangerous calling. Because of the significance of the tongue. In case anyone thinks that bridling the human tongue is a simple thing, James goes on to show us, it is not.

[ 7 : 56 ] So having shown the significance of the tongue, he then talks about the power of the tongue. Verses 3-6. And the point of all these illustrations he uses here, the bit in the mouth of a horse, the rudder on a boat, the spark that starts a fire, is that small things have profound effects.

And in case we miss it, look at that last illustration he uses at the end of verse 5. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. And a tongue is a fire.

A world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

See how it describes the tongue? A world of unrighteousness. John Calvin put it eloquently. A slender portion of flesh that contains in it the whole world of iniquity.

A slender portion of flesh that contains in it the whole world of iniquity. With our tongues we can say things we would never do.

[ 8 : 59 ] We can destroy people in ways that we would never do physically. And of course in this day and age we can do that not just with our tongues but with our fingertips online, with our tweets, with our emails, with our Facebook posts.

And so the tongue, James warns, it stains the whole body. Now that could mean that for leaders in the church, for teachers in the church, what we say with our tongues can stain the whole body of Christ, the whole congregation.

And there's no truth in that. I'm sure we all know churches that have torn themselves apart with arguments and rancour, sadly. But I think James is speaking more simply here.

Just with our words. We can stain our whole lives. We can say things we cannot take back.

Remember James said back in chapter one.

The pure religion, true religion that pleases God is to keep our tongues under control, keep ourselves unstained by the world around us. Yet how quickly the stains of the world can be picked up by our tongues and then lead to our whole bodies.

[ 10 : 07 ] It's interesting isn't it? Because I think we very often think of sexual desire as being the thing that's most likely to trip us up and destroy churches. I certainly don't want to diminish the danger of sexual sin and the very real temptation it is for us and the damage it can do.

And yet, James is telling us not to overlook something that in some ways is smaller, in some ways much easier, but also hugely damaging.

What a small fire, what a small spark can set up loads of great forests. And whereas sexual temptation flitches and diminishes through life, do you think it's what James says here?

It sets on fire the entire course of a life, not just the direction of a life that can be changed, but throughout life, the danger of the tongue is very with us, isn't it? Matthew Henry, the Puritan Bible commentator, wrote this, When other sins are tamed and subdued by the infirmities of age, the spirit often grows more tart, nature being drawn down to the dregs, and the words used become more passionate.

Actually, as we go through life, the whole course of life, we set on fire by the tongue. And why is it so dangerous? Well, James says it's set on fire by hell itself.

[ 11 : 26 ] He says in verse 6. See, all Satan's temptations are flaming arrows, aren't they? It's like the tongue is the most flammable part of our bodies. So easily, we can be tempted for that quick word which puts people down, tempted to express that anger which can destroy and hurt and maim.

The tongue is very flammable, and Satan desires to set it on fire. And James is told us how words are significant. We'll be judged by them.

They're also powerful. And thirdly, he tells us they are uncontrollable. And this is where he gets us to how deep our problem is. We get verses 6 to 8. And he talks about this.

Well, verse 8, for example, he gives all these illustrations of these beasts that can be tamed, and birds that can be tamed by humankind. Verse 8, But no human can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. We just cannot, 100% of the time, control what we say. We cannot do it.

[ 12 : 29 ] It is not humanly possible. We have this poison here, ready to damage, and we cannot bring it under control. So the tongue is significant. It is powerful.

It is uncontrollable. And finally, it reveals our hearts. That's really the point of verses 9 to 12. It reveals our hearts. Look at verse 9.

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. It's so easy as you can sing hymns wholeheartedly on a Sunday.

And maybe even just in the gossip over coffee at the end of the service. Say things about people which are judging them, and therefore cursing those who are made in the likeness of God.

We don't go on a Sunday. And what about on a Monday lunchtime, sitting with colleagues? I don't know how it is in your workplace, but in my old workplace, the easiest form of conversation was to criticize the management.

[ 13 : 27 ] It could be your immediate line managers, or it could be those people over there in the head office who are making bad decisions all the time. With our tongues we can praise God and curse people made in God's likeness.

From the same mouth, verse 10, come blessing and cursing my brothers, these things ought not to be so. And yet they are so, aren't they? They certainly were in James' church. Look over to chapter 4 verse 11 for a moment.

This type of thing is going on all the time. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. You are setting yourself up as a judge, aren't you? And here comes the warning. There is only one lawgiver and judge.

He who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour? In other words, if we end up judging one another, we are trying to take God's job, aren't we?

[14:31] It is treason. Not only with cursing people made in God's image, but pretending we are God ourselves. We are saying, oh God, you sit over there, I can sit on the throne, I can cast judgements.

James says, brothers, don't do it. Don't do it. It is easy to judge, but only the true judge can save and destroy. And why shouldn't he destroy us if we are deposing him, taking his role?

So the tongue is our biggest problem, James says. But do you notice what he doesn't say? Do you notice what he hasn't said? He doesn't say try, Ponder.

He doesn't say speak less. He doesn't say have a swearing box. Have you ever had one of those? I know parents who have used this. If someone swears, you have to put 10p or a pound or whatever it is in the box.

And that's kind of the incentive not to use that language. Here, try that. Have a criticism box or something. James doesn't say do this. Put money in every time you judge your neighbour. Every time you say something you shouldn't say about someone else.

[15:33] James doesn't say that, does he? He doesn't give us 10 strategies for managing our tongues. Why not? Well, the answer is simple, isn't it? It's because we can't do it.

He's told us back in verse 8, no human can control the tongue. No human can control the tongue. Yet we need to take these warnings seriously in verses 11 and 12, don't we?

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? No, of course not. It doesn't. What comes out of spring is either fresh or salty.

It's one or the other. It depends on the nature of the spring, doesn't it? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives? Or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Do you hear his implication?

If we are bringing forth bitter speech, then it actually is telling us what's in our heart. James remembers the words of his half-brother the Lord Jesus.

[16:34] Out of the overflow of the mouth, the heart speaks. So your heart, James says, is like a salt pond that cannot produce fresh water. We need something to change our hearts.

And who can change our hearts? Well, he's told us, don't he? Hasn't he? But in chapter 4, it's God who can save or condemn. So having seen our biggest problem, then James takes us on to God's gracious solution.

In verses 13 to 18. Who is wise and understanding among you, he says. Now you can imagine, all these people who want to be teachers at that point stepping forward. Yes, I'm wise and understanding.

I've read all the theology. I understand things better than the person next to me. I can articulate it. I'm wise and understanding. What do you want, James? Well, James says, here are the qualifications you really need.

By his conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. In other words, James is saying, if you're really wise, you'll see it in your life.

[17:34] You'll see it in the way you live. Not purely what you say or what you claim, but the way you live. Because wisdom in the Bible is never about knowledge or never purely about knowledge. It's not the same as intelligence.

Rather, wisdom, to borrow someone else's phrase, is about skill in the art of godly living. Wisdom is about skill in the art of godly living. It's about skill in living in God's ways, in God's world.

A generally key characteristic James mentions here about wisdom is the meekness of wisdom.

That is the meekness that is produced by wisdom. Now, wisdom in the Bible begins with the fear of the Lord.

Proverbs 9 verse 10. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. A knowledge of the Holy One. A knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

In other words, if we want to be wise, that's where it begins. It begins with fear in God. If we fear Him, if we understand ourselves properly in relation to God, then that's bound to bring meekness, isn't it?

[ 18 : 39 ] It's bound to bring humility. Because we all see that we are sinful creatures with nothing to offer before this holy, powerful, creator God.

What do we have to offer before Him? See, if we fear the Lord, that is the beginning of wisdom, and that always results in weakness. We can't be proud and judgmental when we see ourselves true before the awesome, one true God.

So meekness is a product of wisdom. And meekness is something James has talked about before. Meekness is how we are to receive God's word. Look back to chapter 1 verse 21 for a moment.

In the context of people being quick to get angry, and quick to speak their minds, James tells them to be the opposite. Then chapter 1 verse 21 says, Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, your desire to dominate, your desire to have your voice put forward.

And instead, receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls. See, this is the good news James has. This is God's gracious cure.

[ 19 : 52 ] It is to receive His word. To receive the gospel message of the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to die on the cross, to take our sin with Him.

It was nailed to Him on the cross that we could live a new life. That our old life could be taken away. He was raised to new life, to offer us new life.

To give us new hearts. So we may think we are great teachers, says James. But you are not. You need to receive with meekness God's implanted word.

And in case anyone still thought that actually they were still pretty hot and still pretty good and still capable of teaching, James goes on to lay things out for an honest self-evaluation. Look at verse 14.

But, in contrast, in contrast to living this meek-like, this living out in meekness. If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

[ 20 : 51 ] You know, we may think we are great teachers. We may think we are mature believers. We know more than others. We may think we deserve to be recognized in the church.

Given a role. We may think other people should listen to our ideas. But James is saying if you think like that, look carefully at yourself. Why do you want those things?

If you really are wise, show it by your actions. Consider your actions and your attitude. Does the way you live demonstrate that meekness that comes from knowing God? Or are you really just wanting more influence?

Are you wanting to be admired? Is it about your ambition? Desiring to be respected? For those of us who are in full-time ministry, this is always an issue. We go to conferences and people want to know.

How big is your church? How many people look at your website? How many people download stuff that you've preached? It's so easy without pride and selfish ambition.

[ 21 : 54 ] I have people who ask me, do you have a strong, cool group going with you to plant this church? There are a million ways I could answer that. And the best way I can answer is to say, yes it is strong.

Because when we are weak, that's when we are strong. We're dependent on God's grace. He's the one who makes us strong. Yet so easy isn't it? Selfish ambition can easily creep in.

So James is giving us this test there. Are there fits of jealousy there? Is it selfish ambition? Do you want what other people have? Do you want the status and admiration they have?

Or are you living a life that shows the meekness that comes from wisdom? And by the way he says, at the end of the verse, Do not boast and be false to the truth.

Don't claim you're wise. Don't boast about your wisdom. If actually you're not wise. That is being false to the truth. You're saying that wisdom is something that is not.

[ 22 : 52 ] In fact, what is it? If you're all proud. If you're full of selfish ambition. If we want others to make us this. Or verse 15. This is not the wisdom that comes from above.

But it's earthly. Unspiritual. Demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist. There will be disorder and every evil practice.

That word disorder. Is the same word translated back in verse 8 as restless. The tongue is restless. It's also the word James had used back in chapter 1 verse 8. Where he talks about the double minded man who is unstable.

Disordered. Restless. In all his ways. So again, James is pointing at the heart of the problem. The heart of the problem. Is that many of the people he's writing to.

Were double minded. They would say one thing and do another. They pray. But really be daydreaming about other stuff. Chapter 1. They would judge others.

[ 23 : 51 ] As they create divisions in the church. Because they're really judging by worldly standards. Not by God's standards. They think that faith is just about agreeing with the right doctrines. Or saying the right words. And that they don't need to do anything. It's all double mindedness.

And James is pointing to that double mindedness again. You may think you're wise. But your wisdom is not God's wisdom. It's demonic. Set on fire by hell. It's not so much that these people were hypocrites.

Deliberately deceiving others. Rather in their pride and naivety. They were deceiving themselves. And isn't that a danger for us as well. That's why James is putting this side by side contrast here. In verses 15 to 17. He's saying look at these two things. It's like the old washing up liquid adverts. Side by side demo. Is it clean? Look at this. It isn't really clean.

You think you're wise. Look at your motives. If you really are wise. The meekness of wisdom. It's what we see.

[ 24 : 50 ] So in contrast there's wisdom that is earthly. Unspiritual. Demonic. James calls us to verse 17. The wisdom from above is first pure. Then peaceable.

Gentle. Open to reason. Full of mercy and good fruits. Impartial and sincere. So how do we get this wisdom?

Is there a course to go on? Is there a book we need to read? Is there a group to be part of? No. We simply ask God.

Right back at the beginning of this letter. Chapter 1 verse 5. James said if anyone lacks wisdom. Let him ask God who gives generously to all. Without reproach. And it will be given him.

In verse 17 of chapter 1. He told us that every good and perfect gift. Is coming down. Like the wisdom that comes down from above. From the Father of light. The same expression.

[ 25 : 46 ] Chapter 1 verse 18. He told us that it is of God's own will. He brought us forth. By the word of truth. That we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

This is God's gracious solution. To give us new birth. To give us wisdom as we ask for it. To make us new people. And that can only happen through the Lord Jesus Christ.

It can only happen because he has died on the cross. To pay for all our speech. To pay for the way we've misused our words. He's raised a new life.

To offer new life to us. Because the result. Is that the barrenness and ugliness of disorder and vile practices. To be replaced by the beauty of peace. Look at verse 18.

This beautiful description. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace. By those who make peace. See righteousness in this context is about right relationships. Particularly right relationships in the church.

[ 26 : 47 ] In chapter 1 James has said that the righteousness God requires. The right relationships in the church God requires. Is not brought about by man's anger. But by God's ways. In contrast the meekness that is produced by wisdom.

Makes us peacemakers, doesn't it? When we see how great God is. How sinful we are. We see the cost that Christ has paid.

To make peace between us and God. And surely that wisdom turns us into peacemakers. And that can generate a harvest of righteousness in the church.

A harvest of righteousness in the sense of a church family. Where relationships are right. As God pleasing to God. The way God wants them.

See James has shown us our biggest problem. The tongue we cannot tame. Because it reveals our hearts. And he's shown us God's gracious solution. Bringing us to new life.

[ 27 : 47 ] Through his word of truth implanted in us. So why is James written this? What does he want us to do about it? Well first and foremost we need to examine ourselves don't we?

What's my speech going to be like at work tomorrow? Do we praise God one day and curse our neighbour the next? What does my life? What does your life reveal about the wisdom we claim to possess?

Is it from above? Are we pure? Peaceful? Full of mercy? Having been shown mercy? Or do we harbour selfish ambition? And jealousy? Wanting other people's success?

See James has written this because people in his community were just after their own pride. Are not concerned with meekness and God's wisdom.

But is it also a temptation we feel proud about our own situation? That this church is very united. I've lived in churches where that was not the case. It's so easy for us isn't it?

[ 28 : 51 ] To look down on churches we know where there are arguments and disorder and every kind of vile practice. Yet James says don't do that. As soon as we're proud about how good we're doing, how well we're doing, then that's the opposite of meekness isn't it?

We reveal our folly there rather than our God given wisdom. So if we're tempted to think we're doing alright, we need to come back to receive with meekness the word implanted in us.

Maybe some of us here are tempted to think I'm not all that bad. I control my tongue a lot of the time. I don't get that angry. I think I'm basically good. Well who does James say is good?

Who does James say actually controls their tongue? Verse 8. No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil.

That's the Bible's diagnosis of our hearts naturally. And so we need help. We need help. We need help. Maybe you're sitting here thinking I'm actually, you know, I'm a nice person.

[ 29 : 56 ] Look at your heart. Don't you acknowledge you need help? And this help is freely available. Receive with meekness the word implanted into you.

Don't try and rationalise your behaviour. Don't try and say I'm alright really. Or it's okay what I said what I said back then. Rather come to the one who can help you. Come to the Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sin.

Come to him in repentance and faith for the new life, for the clean heart he gives us. Every good gift comes down from the Father of lights, our heavenly Father.

So please let's go to God tonight for this wisdom, for this clean heart, for this new life that only he can bring. Let's pray.