

In the know: James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

by [Stephen E. Fowl](#) in the [September 5, 2006](#) issue

My wife and I have two sons, 12 and 14, and a standard-size refrigerator. Hence, we spend a lot of time at the grocery store. As I wait to pay for one day's installment of food, I am invited to learn the full story about the semiprivate lives of numerous celebrities. If the number of these publications is anything to go by, our desire for insider knowledge is insatiable. We want to know all of the details and we want to know them now.

Our sons are especially curious in this regard. When our boys come upon us as we are talking about a crisis at work or in the life of someone we know, they want to know what is going on. Sometimes this reflects compassion, sometimes adolescent curiosity, sometimes a concern that this crisis may have a direct impact on their lives. Explaining that they do not need to know or are not yet ready to learn about these matters simply intensifies their desire. They wonder how someone can be trustworthy if he or she will not tell them everything—immediately.

In the so-called information age, the idea that we might not yet be ready—emotionally, intellectually, practically—to know some things tests our patience and our credulity. I suppose this is why conspiracy theories thrive in the absence of knowledge. It is always easier to suppose that there is a concerted plot to hide things from us than to acknowledge our own inabilities or lack of preparation.

Jesus was a focal point for conspiracy theories long before novelist Dan Brown came on the scene. Paying attention to this reading from Mark's Gospel may help explain why. Even at the high point of his ministry in Galilee, people were not quite sure what to make of Jesus. Some thought he was John the Baptist; others said he was Elijah or one of the other prophets. When Jesus asked his closest followers who they thought he was, Peter responded, "You are the Messiah." In Matthew, Jesus attributes Peter's utterance to divine revelation. Luke and Mark are silent about the origin of this remark. Perhaps Peter was inspired; perhaps he simply took up language that he had heard others use. It does not really matter: he said it, and Jesus responded that he didn't want Peter or the others to say it again until further notice.

Jesus, the embodiment of truth, wanted his disciples to withhold information. On the face of it, this does not seem right. Spreading the word that Jesus is the Messiah seems like a worthy and even necessary enterprise. Jesus' call to silence concerning his identity reminds us that knowing the right form of words to say about Jesus might not be sufficient. Clearly, Peter knew the right words, but by the end of the passage, it is also clear that his use of the term *Messiah* and Jesus' identity as the Messiah did not match up.

For Peter, the term *Messiah* was incompatible with Jesus' obedience to God and the suffering and death that would come from his obedience. For Peter, *Messiah* and *cross* just did not belong together. Further, it becomes clear that Peter was not alone in his views. As the Gospel unfolds, virtually all of Jesus' closest followers abandon, betray or deny him as he moves ever closer to the cross. This recognition lies at the root of Jesus' unwillingness to have his followers going around Galilee saying that he is the Messiah but not understanding the nature of his messiahship. As Jesus made clear, such understanding is not simply a matter of mastering the correct vocabulary to use about Jesus. Rather, we learn how to speak properly of Jesus as the Christ only in the course of taking up our cross and following him.

In their formation of new believers the earliest Christians recognized this requirement. As new believers advanced in their lives of discipleship, they were taught more about Jesus. This instruction aimed at further deepening their discipleship, which in turn formed them into people capable of receiving further knowledge about the faith. In this way they were led to make an eloquent profession of their faith in baptism. Christian eloquence is perfected in a life of discipleship.

In this light, it is interesting to note that James's admonitions about the tongue come immediately after his discussion of the connections between faith and works. If faith without works is dead, then we may also take James to be arguing that without faith and works our tongues tend to be instruments for harm rather than good. This is in part because our speech has the disturbing habit of revealing and even magnifying deficiencies in our character. As James laconically notes, fig trees can't bear olives. James's more general concern and Peter's very specific example point out that the tongue can be an all-too-revealing mirror into one's character. This assumption makes sense of James's warnings against wanting to become a teacher. When I read these verses I am always tempted to take a vow of silence.

Nevertheless, James seems to think both that some should become teachers and that all of us should seek wisdom (2:13). This would indicate that the best path is neither speechlessness nor the tell-all tone of the supermarket tabloids and talk shows.

Peter seems to bounce from one verbal extreme to the other—at one point saying more about Jesus than he really understands, later denying that he even knows him. In spite of his verbal gaffes, however, Peter does not cease to follow. His persistence demonstrates that following Jesus to the cross and beyond has the power to transform us and thereby our speech through the work of the Spirit. It would appear that following begets wisdom, and that wisdom will manifest itself in speech and silence appropriate to the various occasions in which we find ourselves.