

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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James 3:1-12 (NRSV)

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. [2] For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. [3] If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. [4] Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. [5] So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! [6] And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. [7] For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, [8] but no one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison. [9] With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. [10] From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. [11] Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? [12] Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

THE POWER OF WORDS

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Many of us told our children that, but it's just not true. Words are powerful. What we say can sometimes cause more harm even than sticks and stones. President Bush in a recent interview was asked about regrets, and he said something like, “I wish I had been more careful about my language. I wish I had chosen my words more carefully.”

Don't we all? Words have a life of their own. Once we say something we often go down a path that is irreversible. Carl Sandburg wrote, “Look out how you use proud words. When you let proud words go, it is not easy to call them back. They wear long boots, hard boots.”

Down through the ages this piece of wisdom has been the same. Be careful what you say. You may be forced to eat your words later on. Make sure they're sweet ones!

I always liked what my mother once told me. She said (along with many other mothers I'm sure), "Before you say anything ask yourselves three questions, 'Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?'" How many times would we say nothing at all if we asked ourselves those questions?

We could go on and on about this need to be careful when it comes to our speech. And we could do so without any reference to the Bible at all. This is common wisdom. Everyone knows that we need to be careful about what we say. Ann Landers could tell us as much.

THE WORD

But, as Christians we have a special reason to be careful about our speech. We have an even higher view of the word. We believe it was by the Word of God that the universe was spoken into existence, and we believe that we are saved by that same Word.

I am a minister of the Word and Sacrament. That is, I am entrusted with the job of preaching a particular Word, not just any word. I am called to preach the salvation of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

We believe that the right Word brings salvation. And conversely we believe that the wrong word can do great harm. That's the reason that we're so concerned about what we believe and how we believe in the church.

The right Word has the power to save. And the wrong word has the power to destroy. It's not just about hurting someone's feelings or even causing psychological pain. It's more important than that.

Eugene Peterson in his commentary on the book of James notes that "when Christian believers gather in churches anything that can go wrong sooner or later does." Now those looking at the church from the outside see this and

say, “Those Christians are a bunch of hypocrites. They’re not the people they should be.” And we’re not.

But, those of us in the church know the truth. We’re not a collection of perfect people. We’re a hospital for sinners. We are forgiven sinners and out of gratitude for the grace that is ours in Christ Jesus, we come together to encourage each other. We encourage each other to live in a different way. Instead of trying to cover up our sin we bring in out into the open so that we can face it and deal with it.

That’s what the book of James is all about. It is a letter from one of the church’s early pastors. And this pastor is confronting, diagnosing and dealing with areas of misbelief and misbehavior that had occurred in his church.

We live in a world that thinks that what we say and what we do is our own business. The Bible tells us that this is not true for the follower of Christ. The grace of God in Jesus Christ calls us to live in a different way. And one of the most important differences is in how we speak. We are to control our language.

WINDY PREACHERS

In the opening chapter of his letter James tells his parishioners that they should be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”(1:19) He wrote that the heart of true religion is restraint, especially when it comes to speaking. He wrote, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.” James 1:26 (NRSV)

I went to a gathering of ministers this past week at Presbytery. We did many good things, but our tongues were not bridled. And in some cases they certainly should have been!

An older minister I knew used to say, “I was born in the windy month of May. That’s a good month for preachers. We old preachers have lots of sermons in our files, and they are just getting bigger. It seems like we never delete anything. We just keep adding.”

I think he was using humor to try and get us to look at ourselves in an honest way. We preachers take ourselves way too seriously sometimes, and we talk too much. James says that it's an occupational hazard.

If you can do anything else don't presume to be a teacher in the church. James wrote, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." James 3:1 (NRSV)

I wish James hadn't said that. I don't want to be judged at all, and I especially don't want to be judged with greater strictness because I know that I am more likely to say the wrong thing than the right thing. And indeed that's what the next verse tells us. I like the delightful way Eugene Peterson translates verse 2 of today's lesson,

"And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life." James 3:2 (MsgB)

STEPPING ON OUR TOES

Now that's the truth, not only about teachers and preachers but also about all of us. I told one of our elders that I was going to preach on this passage, and he placed a foot in my direction. I asked, "What are you doing?" And he replied, "You may as well step on my toes now and get it over with!"

That's the problem with James. He knows us too well. Everyone says that they want practical sermons. Well today's sermon is about as practical as it gets. James steps on all our toes.

I promise to preach on something more theoretical next week.

But this week we're stuck with James. And James knows that we preachers and teachers were born in the windy month of May. James knows that we are full of sound and fury, but quite often what we say shouldn't be said.

And yet it is our job not only as preachers and teachers but also as disciples of Jesus Christ to preach the gospel.

How can we be careful about our speech and yet not be paralyzed by a fear of saying the wrong thing? I know people that are scared to talk about their faith because they are afraid that someone will take what they say the wrong way.

We will never be perfect in our speech. There will always be flaws in what we say and do. But, we can do better. We can learn to control our speech, and in the process learn to control ourselves.

James gave some examples of how speech control can lead to self-control. A powerful horse can be controlled by a relatively small bit. A huge ship can be controlled by a relatively small rudder.

In the same way, James tells us, a word out of our mouth might seem like a small thing, but it has the power to do great good. It can turn our lives around, and it can turn the lives of others around as well.

THE JOY OF A LIFE CHANGED

I remember visiting in a church where I once served as a youth director. About the only thing I learned in that job was that I was not cut out to be a youth director! I felt like a failure as far as that job was concerned.

But, years later that mother of one of my youth was very happy to see me. She had a message for me. She said that her son was now an elder in the Presbyterian Church. He was happily married and had a good job. And he often talked about how much my ministry had meant to him. He was changed by what I had to say.

Now, I'm not sure what I said or what I did to help this young man. But, it sure was encouraging to hear that my words had made a difference. Who could ever guess that a small, seemingly insignificant phrase spoken at the right time could have made a difference in a person's life?

THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVES US THE WORDS

I believe that God has promised to give us the words that we need when we need them. Jesus said that his disciples would be persecuted for the sake of the gospel.

But they were not to worry about what they should say or how they should defend themselves before the authorities. The Holy Spirit would give them the words they needed when the time came. (Luke 12:11-12)

I think that we need to trust in that promise.

We are so worried about what someone else thinks that we talk way too much. We create our own strategies to accomplish our goals or defeat our enemies, and we forget about this promise.

A FIRESTORM

More than that, if we verbally retaliate against those who persecute us, we often lower ourselves to their level and make things worse. James tells us that well chosen words can accomplish great things, but on the other hand, careless words can cause great destruction.

Do you remember Smokey the Bear and his famous line? “Only you can prevent forest fires.” Just a spark can ignite a dry forest.

And, in the same way, one careless word can set off a firestorm of controversy and destruction. Just think about many of the stories in the news this week. Careless or ill chosen words have served to create misunderstanding and even violence.

James tells us in verse 6 that the forces of hell itself are set loose by the spark of careless words. The tongue, says James is like a venomous serpent. We can train our dogs, but we cannot train our tongue.

Eugene Peterson translates verse 6 in this way. Words can “throw mud on a reputation, turn harmony to chaos, and send the whole world up in smoke (James 3:6 Msg.). “ That statement is as true today as when James first penned it. Careless and angry words can create a world of destruction.

So, what do we do? How do we control the “uncontrollable” tongue? In our Bible study this past week I asked if there was some part of this passage that I needed to explain more fully. And someone said, “I understand it completely. What I need are some practical ways to combat this tendency in my own life to speak in a careless fashion.”

James tells us that we can’t control the “uncontrollable” tongue, but we can minimize the power of careless words in our own life by remembering some basic principles. Let me remind you of some lessons that come out of our lesson for today.

WORDS HAVE POWER

First of all, words have power, real power. Words can change things, for better or for worse. So we need to choose our words carefully.

This is a rare case when common sense and the words of the Bible are in total agreement. But, as the saying goes, common sense is not all that common.

Often we in the church seem to forget the need to be careful about our speech. We pass on gossip disguised as concern. Like politicians we put our theological opponents in the worst light possible. Many churches have been destroyed because members have not appreciated the power of the spoken word.

So, before you say anything ask these three questions, “Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?”

And I would put the emphasis on the middle question, “Is it necessary?” We can often fool ourselves on the other questions. We can convince ourselves that something is true when it isn’t, and we can trick ourselves into thinking that our words are kind when they aren’t.

But, that second question can often stand up to our self-deception. If we’re about to say something that we don’t need to say, then it’s quite possible that it isn’t entirely true or kind either.

GOD GIVES US WORDS

Second, I think we need to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to give us the words that we need when we need them. An anxious person is often a talkative person, and sometimes what that anxious person talks about is not all that helpful, to themselves or to others. If you feel like you always need to be speaking, this may be your problem.

We need to learn to trust God to give us the words we need, and to be comfortable with silence when the words do not come. It's okay not to talk. It's okay just to be with someone and listen carefully to what they have to say.

How many times have you talked with someone and you realize that they're not really listening to you at all? They are just looking for the next opportunity to jump in the conversation and say what they want to say. James tells us that our approach should be just the opposite. We should be "quick to listen and slow to speak." James 1:26.

I believe that trust in God can enable us to be good listeners. When I'm listening to someone I'm listening not only to what they say but also to what they mean. I'm asking God to help me understand why this person is saying what they're saying and to give me a word that can be of help to them.

Quite often that surprising word of healing comes in a situation filled with anxiety and hurt. People can be changed by a word. But, in the final analysis that word is the Word. It is Word with a capital "W." It is God's Word given by the power of the Holy Spirit that enables true change to take place.

In order to bring that Word, we must stifle our anxieties and our needs for a while.

We must trust the fact that God will give us the right words when the time comes.

THE PROMISE OF FORGIVENESS

And third, we need to trust in the promise of God's forgiveness. That same elder who offered his toes for stomping also said, "My wife is always telling me, 'I can't believe you said that!'" My wife often tells me the same thing.

I am living proof of what James said about being reluctant to become a teacher in the church. Your mistakes and failures are very public. But, if we had to wait for a teacher who was perfect, we would be sorely disappointed. None of us are perfect.

I take solace in that. James said in verse two of our lesson for today, "All of us make many mistakes." All of us say the wrong thing ... often. I think of what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. He said that he knew the right thing to do, but quite often he did not do what he knew to be right. Instead, he often found himself doing the very thing he should not do.

Paul cried out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Romans 7:24 (NRSV) Paul's answer was the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. By the grace of God Paul was enabled to find a new way of life. And the same is true for us.

We should try to outdo one another in overlooking and forgiving harsh words. Instead of emphasizing how people have said the wrong thing and done the wrong thing to us we should remember the grace and forgiveness of God and be gracious toward others.

The reason that one wrong word can set off a firestorm in our world is because our world is not based upon grace and forgiveness. Our world is based upon doing it to others before they do it to us.

In order to break up the cycle of harsh words and violence, we need choose our words carefully. We need to speak gracious words in an ungracious world. If God in Christ has forgiven us, should we not forgive others in the same way?

This is the heart of the gospel, and we need to hold it close to our heart as well.

Oscar Wilde once said with tongue in cheek, “If you can’t say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me.” I’m afraid that we’re more inclined to follow Oscar Wilde than the Bible when it comes to forgiveness. We’re all too anxious to gossip about what someone else did wrong and lick our wounds.

But, that goes against the very nature of the gospel. If we are saved by grace, shouldn’t our words be gracious? James wrote that when the same mouth praises God and then curses fellow human being who are made in the image of God, something is wrong.

Once again let me use Peterson’s dynamic translation to help us get to crux of the matter. Peterson translated verses 10 through 12 in this way,

James 3:11-12 (MsgB)

A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? [12] Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?

Jesus simply said, “By their fruits you shall know them.” Matthew 7:20

And one sweet fruit of the Spirit of God is the fruit of gracious speech. We might not be perfect when it comes to our speech, but there is also no need for us to purposely go around setting fires either! We can learn to be gracious in what we say. We can learn to bridle the tongue instead of always giving someone a tongue lashing.

It’s not just a good thing to do. It’s the Christian thing to do.

John Bunyan tells us of Talkative, “He was a saint abroad and a devil at home.”

Is this not true of many of us? We always hurt the one we love. We take them for granted and do not watch our words around them.

James wants our words on Monday to match our words on Sunday. James wants our public speech to match our private speech. All of us fall short of the glory of God, and we especially fall short when it comes to our speech.

But, with God's help we can do better.

Listen to the words of our next hymn as a personal challenge in the coming week.

*Lord speak to me that I may speak, in living echoes of Thy tones,
As Thou has sought, so let me seek, Thy erring children lost and lone.*

*O teach me Lord, that I may teach, the precious things
Thou dost impart,
And wing my words that they may reach, the hidden depths
of many a heart. [Frances R. Havergall, 1872]*

May God give us the grace to hear the divine word that we might bring our human word under its control.

Amen.

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