

## “WORDS OF WISDOM: II – MIND YOUR TONGUE!”

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James 3:1-12

Matthew 7:21-23

Well, welcome to week two of “Words of Wisdom” - sermons this summer centered on words of wisdom all of us have received during our lifetimes from family and friends. We started last week with “Say thank you!” and I have to say I was pleasantly surprised by the response to the sermon. Several of you spoke to me during the week about it and about hearing that phrase or seeing it lived out in the days since. I was also delighted to be walking around after the services and hearing all of you thank each other for things you were doing. It was like a great, big “thank you” fest!

Well, let’s see what happens this week! It might be a little different, because the words of wisdom are a little touchier, if you will – “mind your tongue!” Actually, I could have used a number of different titles for the sermon. I was originally going to call it “watch your mouth!” but that seemed a little harsh. But you get the general idea – “mind your tongue!,” “watch your mouth,” “watch what you say.” It’s all about the power of our words.

Like the direction to “say thank you,” the direction to “mind your tongue” started early in life for all of us. It’s something our parents tried to help us learn early on. Unlike, though, when the direction to “say thank you” was urged upon us after something good came our way; most likely, the direction to “mind your tongue” probably came at us when we weren’t; when, early on, our little lips uttered something they shouldn’t have. Then we heard, “No, no, we don’t say that.”

You see, our parents and others were trying to teach us from early on the power of our words. As one person put it so well: “With our words we name our world and each other, and in some sense our naming creates a genuine reality. Once our speech and narratives take hold, they have a tremendous power for good or evil. They can exclude or embrace, heal or humiliate, lift up or tear down. How many of us (he continues) have internalized self-hatred that resulted from repeated criticisms from a parent? How many can still remember a compliment made by an elementary school teacher even though it was made many decades ago?” (On-line, “Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak,” Dan Clendenin, Sept. 9, 2012)

He’s so right, our words have tremendous power for good or evil. That’s the whole point of the lesson from James that we read this morning. I don’t know if you’ve ever read the Book of James, but I commend it to you. It’s a small book but full of wisdom. Actually, it’s the only book of wisdom in the New Testament, reminiscent of wisdom literature in the Hebrew scriptures such as Proverbs.

James' purpose in writing his book was to talk about how to live a Christian life. He begins by talking about what true wisdom looks like – taking care in how we speak, giving care to those in need, and being careful about what we let into our lives. It is in this third chapter that he focuses in on how we speak, and is it ever interesting. He uses some incredible imagery.

He talks about horses and bridles and bits – and how those things help keep rein on what a horse does. Then he talks about ships, and how just a small rudder can change the direction the ship will go. And then he talks about a fire, and how just a small fire can set an entire forest ablaze! What incredible images of the power of our speech, and its potential for spreading good or spreading evil!

Unless we're totally clueless, I think most of us are well aware of the power of our words. We've probably found out a time or two how we have hurt someone by something we've said; and hopefully we've heard a time or two as well how something we have said has lifted someone up and helped them.

Clearly, James would encourage us to do the latter, as would Jesus. Jesus, of course, was the master of words that helped and healed. He spoke but a few words of encouragement to a few fishermen about how gifted they were at fishing, and then he invited them to a whole new life fishing for people! He spoke kind words to the woman at the well, a woman so used to hearing horrid words from the people of her town that she came for water in the heat of the noonday sun to avoid those same people. And when Jesus could have lashed out in anger and words of hate as He hung from that cruel cross, instead, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus always had a care for what He said and how He said it, and James says that as His followers, as people who have committed our lives to following Him, we too should strive to have the same care with our words. And he intimates that because we call ourselves followers of Christ, we will be judged with greater strictness on how we "mind our tongues."

The sad reality is that, many times, we're like the rest of the world, and say things we ought not say. Far too often, I think, we might resonate with something Oscar Wilde once said, which was, "If you can't say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me." (On-line, "Heard About the Pastor Who . . .?" William Willimon, *The Christian Century*, 10/31/90)

There's something about gossip that draws us in and causes us to say things we ought not say – even we "church people." One preacher in a Seattle church even went so far as to say that "we come to church on Sunday morning, and we sing our songs of praise and thanksgiving. And then, on the way out of church, we may say to our friend or spouse, 'Did you see so and so today? Did you see the way that so and so took care of her kids? Did you see the look that so and so's husband gave to her?'" (On-line, "James, the Tongue," Edward Markquart, *Sermons from Seattle*)

Hmmm. Ever happen here? Probably so, and I daresay that there have been times when the person being gossiped about overheard those words and were terribly hurt by them, maybe prompting them to walk out the door and never come back. Words spoken with no good intent have the power to do that, and could not be further from the words Jesus invites us to speak.

Another effect of speaking words that harm is that they take on a life of their own, much like that wildfire of which James wrote. Listen to this little poem: “I lost a little word only the other day. It was a very naughty word I had not meant to say. But then, it was not really lost, when from my lips it flew, my little brother picked it up, and now he says it too.” (On-line, “Taming the Tongue,” William Varner, 1999)

I know a lot of people have gotten caught in that trap, when suddenly one day your child comes out with something not good, and you ask “where did they learn that?” Guess where!

You never know where your words will go when you say them. But mark my words, especially in this electronic age, they can go far and wide! One commentary that I consulted this week rightly observed that “As we move ever more into the information age, we also move ever further into the misinformation age. Always powerful, language reaches farther faster.” (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, p. 66)

That truth was illustrated incredibly well in a movie I saw a few weeks ago, called “Chef.” It was in and out of theaters in a heartbeat, but it showed how words take on a life of their own. The main character in the movie was a great chef, and one night a food critic came into his restaurant, and following the meal, wrote a scathing review of the chef and his food. The chef read the review on his young son’s smartphone, and was livid.

In a fit of anger, he fires back an angry, hateful response. What he didn’t know was that his son had pulled up the review on Twitter, and his angry, hateful response went, not only to the food critic, but out into cyberspace for all the world to see – and it went viral! It took on a life of its own – not at all what the chef had intended. Oh, how often that can happen when we say what we ought not say – it can take on a life of its own, and people can be hurt.

Did you ever hear about the little boy who had a bad temper, whose father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, he should hammer a nail into the back fence. By the end of the first day, the boy had driven 37 nails into the fence. Over time, it gradually dwindled down because he discovered it was easier to hold his temper than to have to drive the nails into the fence. Finally, a day came when he didn’t lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and his dad suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day he was able to hold his temper in check.

The day came when the boy was able to tell his dad that all of the nails had been removed, he had learned to tame his temper. “Great,” the dad said, “but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar. You can put a knife in a man and draw it out. It won’t matter how many times you say ‘I’m sorry, the wound is still there.’” (On-line, Stories for Preaching, source unknown)

Oh friends, the words we say with our lips have great power. We can indeed hurt people by what we say, and it’s hard to patch up the wounds.

On the other hands, the words we say with our lips also have great power to help and heal. If we indeed, strive to live as Jesus lived and speak as Jesus spoke, we will lift people up and make their lives better. How do we do that? Well, I came across some pretty interesting ideas in my research this week.

The preacher Charles Swindoll says that when somebody is dying to tell him something about someone else, he always asks them first, “Wait a minute, may I quote you on this?” Interesting, huh? Most often, he says, they won’t say what they were going to say! So perhaps, before we say something, we ought to ask ourselves, “would I wanted to be quoted saying this?”

Another pastor named Alan Redpath came up with a little acronym that has helped him speak good, instead of ill. It goes like this: the acronym is THINK – T, H, I, N, K. T – is what I am about to say true? H – is what I am about so say helpful? I – is what I am about to say inspiring? N – is what I am about to say necessary? And K – is what I am about to say kind? Redpath says that “If what I am about to say does not pass those tests, I will keep my mouth shut! It’s never failed me!” (On-line, Sermon illustrations.com, Alan Redpath, *A Passion for Preaching*)

And finally, a word of wisdom from the ages, from Publius, a Greek sage: “I have often regretted my speech, never my silence.” (On-line, Sermonillustrations.com) You can almost never go wrong with silence!

My friends I don’t have to tell you that we live in a world that loves to spew evil, hurtful words. It sells newspapers, it fills the airwaves, it’s all over Facebook and Twitter. It’s so easy to fall into the world’s trap and join in that kind of speaking, but you and I are called to something more, something higher, something holy. You and I are called to, like Jesus, use our tongues to encourage, lift up, affirm, help and heal.

Never underestimate the good you can do by speaking a good word. I want to close by telling you something that happened to someone on our staff here at the church. You may or may not know that each person on the church staff has a Secret Pal, someone on the Staff Parish Relations Committee that does things throughout the year to lift up the staff person. It might be a note, a small gift, you never know what it will be or when it will come.

Well, this staff person hadn't been on the staff too long, when the first gift from her Secret Pal showed up. I get this phone call and she says to me, "You're not going to believe what happened! I went to my mailbox in the church office and there was an envelope there, and I opened it up and there was the most wonderful note about what a great job I was doing and how it helped everyone in the church – and then she said, "I almost cried. I've never gotten a note like that before." Now, this person has worked in a number of places in a number of jobs, and this was the first thank you note she had ever gotten for her work. In the scheme of things, it was no big deal – but in terms of what it meant to her – it was huge!

You never know the good you will do when you speak a good word to someone or about someone. You can speak a harmful word, and like a fire destroy someone, or you can choose to speak a good word, and turn that fire into one of passion and life and possibility. What will it be? Good or evil. Only you can choose. Choose well. May it be so.

Amen.