

“FAITH AND FILM: IV – IN CHRIST WE TREAT EACH OTHER WELL”
“*Emma*”

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James 3:1-12

Mark 8:31-38

The film that I chose for this fourth sermon in the Faith and Film series is a movie that came out back in 1996 that I love. It’s called “Emma,” stars Gwyneth Paltrow and others, and it’s based on the book of the same name by Jane Austen, written in 1815. It’s a light comedy about young society men and women in Victorian England – their matchmaking, games, relationships, break-ups, marriages. In other words, it’s a “chick flick!”

That notwithstanding, let me tell you a little bit about the movie and about the scene I want to show you today. Gwyneth Paltrow plays Emma Woodhouse, the central character in the story. She is young, fancy-free, very popular, and fancies herself quite the matchmaker. The film covers some of the adventures of her matchmaking.

But it also portrays very well the way the women, in particular, of that time tried to one-up each other, tried to make themselves look better than everyone else. Which brings me to the scene I want to show you today.

Emma and her circle of friends and others (some of which, to be frank, get on her nerves) gather in a field one day for an elaborate picnic. They’re sitting around chatting when someone suggests that they play a game of words. The game will be that they should try to say things that would make Emma laugh.

Now, before I show you the scene, I need to say something. If you’ve ever watched British films, you know that sometimes they’re very hard to understand. To we who speak English the American way, it sometimes seems like the British actors are mumbling. So, indeed, you might have a hard time hearing everything that is being said.

But even if you do, I want you to watch for the body language change in the characters about midway through the scene. You’ll see a light-hearted witty gathering turn into an awkward moment, when Emma, in an attempt to be witty, hurts someone very vulnerable very deeply.

Film clip of the picnic scene, followed by the scene with Mr. Knightly and Miss Woodhouse.

As you heard Mr. Knightly say, Miss Bates was an innocent, poor, vulnerable woman, who greatly admired Emma – and in the blink of an eye, with poorly chosen words – just to make herself look cute – Emma wounded her deeply.

Oh, did the writer of the Book of James ever know what he was talking about when he talked about the power of the tongue – how it can set a forest ablaze. That scene was the perfect example of how easily what we say can do so much harm.

Emma wasn't a horrible person, in fact, she was a lovely and honorable person, but the temptation at that moment in time overwhelmed her, and she shot off a hurtful remark to the most vulnerable person there. We're not horrible people either, are we, and yet, I daresay, most of us cringe when we see scenes like that because we've been there, done that. We know how easy it is to lose control of ourselves and say things we ought not say – and how sometimes the effects of what we have done cannot be mended.

I'm sure you've heard the old Jewish folktale about the man who had a nasty problem – he loved to talk about other people. He loved a good story, and whenever he heard something about someone, he loved to spread it around.

Well, one day he heard a rumor about a fellow businessman, and before checking to see whether it was true or not, he began sharing it with others. It took on a life of its own, and the other man was ruined. He went to the first man's rabbi and told him what the fellow had done.

So the rabbi went to confront his parishioner. The parishioner had said that he had no idea how devastating his words would be, he hadn't thought it was that big a deal, but knowing it now, he wanted to make amends.

His rabbi asked him to bring him a feather pillow from home, which the man did. He brought the pillow to the rabbi in his study, and while the rabbi opened a window, he invited the man to cut open the pillow and shake all of the feathers out. Well, he was a bit confused by it all, but he did as the rabbi had asked – he sliced open the pillow and then whirled around shaking every last feather out of the pillow.

Then he turned and looked at the rabbi. Ten minutes went by, and then the rabbi said, "Okay now, bring me back all the feathers, and stuff them into your pillow. Every last one of them. Not one may be missing!"

The man stared at him in disbelief. "Well, that's impossible, Rabbi. The ones here in this room I might get, most of them, but the ones that flew out of the window are gone. I can't do it!" To which the rabbi replied, "Yes, you're right. That's how it is: once a rumor, a gossip story, a secret leaves your mouth, you do not know where it ends up. It flies on the wings of the wind, and you can never get it back!" (On-line, "A Pillow Full of Feathers" – Tales from the Past, Chabad.org)

Oh how true that is! Emma saw it happen pretty quickly, you and I may have seen it happen as well – we might even have been on the receiving end of the idle talk. And we know how it hurts – a hurt that takes a long time to go away – if ever.

You know, Jesus had a special place in his heart for those who were victims of idle talk and gossip. There are some tender stories in the scripture of Jesus reaching out to them – like the woman who anointed him with that expensive perfume – almost as soon as she did it people were jumping on her case, accusing her of waste and doing something stupid. And almost as soon as they did, Jesus gave it right back to them – admonishing them for speaking ill to her, and hurting her so deeply.

I know I keep going back to the Samaritan woman at the well, but oh, that shows so perfectly how Jesus reached out to those about whom others spoke badly. That woman had heard more than her share of painful words, conjectures, and probably out and out lies, and she was so deeply wounded by them that she came to draw water from the town well at the very hottest time of the day, so she'd be alone. Jesus knew her pain and cared for her.

Friends, we have the power to do great things with our words, but we also have the power to hurt others greatly with them as well. How we speak and what we say is our choice, but we would do well every single day to lift a prayer for guidance in our speech to God, because temptation is all around us, and it's so easy to engage in idle talk and gossip, so easy.

We ought to speak kindly and truthfully, because it's the right thing to do, but there's another reason as well – and later in the scene, Mr. Knightly pointed it out to Emma. He said to her that she spoke badly in front of people “who would be guided by her treatment of Miss Bates.”

That can be a lesson for us all, and a reminder that, as followers of Jesus Christ, people are watching us, they're watching to see how we treat others, how we speak to others, how we speak about others. Indeed, they might be guided by how we treat others.

May it be said that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are careful with what we say and how we say it. That, in all that we say and all that we do, we seek to lift people up rather than put them down.

I close with an acronym that, if we choose to use it, will help keep us from going down the path of idle talk or gossip. You've heard it before, it goes like this: The word is THINK, and the guidance is this:

T – Is what I am about to say true?

H – Is what I am about to say helpful?

I – Is what I am about to say inspiring?

N – Is what I am about to say necessary?

K – Is what I am about to say kind?

As we come to Christ's table today, may all of us think on these things and ask Jesus to guide the words that we speak this day and all the days ahead. May it be so. Amen.