

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: James 3:1-12

¹ 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 yield fresh.*

A loving father tells this story My wife was busy one evening making porcelain dolls at a doll-making class, leaving me at home to watch our two children, Melinda, seven and Craig, five. While I was chatting with a neighbor on the front porch, the phone rang.

My son, Craig, answered the phone promptly and politely. My pride in him vanished as I heard my son's response to the caller's request to speak to my wife: "No, my mom's not here. She's out making a baby. But my dad is here if you want to talk to him."

Of course, the phone call was from an elder in our church.

Oh, the innocence of children. Words—what we say and how we say them is what we are going to be thinking about today. The scripture from the book of James that was read for you this morning points out the obvious, that words have power to heal or destroy, to tear down or build up a person, a relationship, a community and even a church.

According to statisticians, the average person spends at least one fifth of his or her life talking. Ordinarily, in a single day enough words are used to fill a 50-page book. In one year's time the average person's words would fill 132 books, each containing 400 pages! That is a lot of talking!

The power of the tongue cannot be overestimated. This passage of Scripture deals with the tremendous power of the tongue, mainly on the evil side. The description given here is one of the tongue that is uncontrolled by the Spirit of God.

In verse 2 we are told the sign of a 'mature' Christian is one who has his or her tongue under control. It says that if we are able to bridle—meaning to check, restrain, or moderate the tongue—we can control the whole life. Our words can bring comfort and encouragement, even life, or they can bring discouragement, defeat and even death.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, often lectures on the impact of words. He asks audiences if they can go twenty-four hours without saying any

unkind words about another person, or to another person. Invariably, a small number of listeners raise their hands, signifying yes. Others laugh, and quite a large number call out, "No!"

Telushkin says, "those of you who can't answer yes must recognize that you have a serious problem. He goes on to say, if you cannot go twenty-four hours without drinking liquor, you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go twenty-four hours without smoking, you are addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go twenty-four hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue."

We don't need to look far to find examples of the negative power of words. Every day we hear how words are used to manipulate the work of our government. Even before officials are elected to government positions, around the times of elections, we see and hear negative commercials designed to hurt one's opponent. I don't know about you but, during election times, I get sick of hearing the candidates tear each other down. I would rather hear them talk about themselves, their stand on the issues and what their plans are for leading the nation, the state and the communities we live in, if one or the other is elected.

In today's scripture reading, James began his message about the use of words by addressing teachers. Teachers were highly respected in James' day. Lots of people wanted to be teachers. He wanted teachers, in particular teachers of the Word, to remember that they have a greater responsibility for the proper use of words because of their influence on those hungry to learn.

That indeed is true today too. I guess I would add parents, grandparents and great-grandparents to the list of people who need to heed this special warning. I cannot tell you how many people have come to me over the years of my ministry who describe to me a childhood when they've been told by their parents or teachers that they will never amount to anything.

Let me remind you of what is written in verse 5, "**A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything – or destroy it!**" We need to care about what we say. Many adults who had their self-worth broken when they were children by parents and teachers who carelessly put them down, grew up wondering what was wrong with them, what made them so unlovable? And now as adults, they have a hard time finding their value and purpose in society.

I know what that feels like. My dad did not tell me he loved me when I was a child. In all fairness to him, he grew up in a culture—the Old Order Amish...where those feelings were not expressed. Later in life when I was an adult and I confronted him about some issues, I asked him why he never told me he loved me. His response was that unlike my younger brother, he didn't think I needed to hear it. He always felt that I was the strong one and just didn't need to hear it. Everyone needs to hear the words, "I love you." I am fortunate and blessed because, in later years, Dad was free with telling me he loved me. It takes **A LOT** of work for those adults not nurtured with words of love, to overcome issues related to low self-esteem they fostered over the years. Unfortunately, many never do work through it.

Think about this too. What we say tells others a lot about who we are. Our words reveal our values. They are a dead give-away for what we hold dear to our hearts. That's important for a Christian to remember because we want to draw people towards Jesus—not push them away. If Christians are heard gossiping, continuously complaining, putting others down, judging, manipulating and just being negative about everything or nearly everything, non-believers are left to question whether following Jesus makes any difference in a person's life.

The words used by a Christian should express love, understanding, acceptance, concern, and compassion. Even when trying to challenge or correct someone, a disciple of Christ will do

so with words that will build another-up rather than belittle them and tear them down. Believers will stop and ask themselves before speaking, especially in difficult situations, "Is what I want to say true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?"

It's kind of unnerving to think about how much damage we can do with our words. We need to remember that after our words are spoken, we cannot take them back. The damage is already done. We can't expect people to just forget hurtful words and "move on." It may take a long time to repair the damage done to a relationship or to a person's emotional self if it can be repaired at all. James compares our words to an out of control raging forest fire.

More than a thousand firefighters battled a wildfire for two weeks in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The fire started August 24, 2000, and was not contained until September 8. Meanwhile, more than eighty thousand acres of valuable timber burned.

Janice Stevenson, forty-six, was arrested on suspicion of starting the fire. She pled guilty to second-degree arson, was sentenced to twenty-five years in the South Dakota State Penitentiary, and ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$42,204,155.48.

Federal investigators who filed charges against Stevenson say she admits stopping by a road on August 24, lighting a cigarette, and tossing the still-burning match on the ground. "Rather than putting out the fire," an affidavit said, "she looked at it and decided to leave the area."

Like starting a forest fire, producing a "wildfire" with our tongues requires little effort. Rumors, half-truths, grumblings, sarcastic remarks, hurtful things said in the heat of anger – all of these smoldering matches have the potential for burning down acres of community morale, family peace and church unity.

James wrote that our tongue, which is a small part of our being, cannot be tamed. So, the question then is, why even bother trying to control it. One commentator wrote, "Even if we may not achieve perfect control of our tongues, we can still learn enough control to reduce the damage our words can do. It is better to fight a fire than to go around setting new ones! The truth is that if we want to have any control over the tongue, we need to pay attention to our inner lives from which either blessing or cursing can come from."

If we read the entire book of James, we find that a major theme of his is that faith without works is dead. It seems to me that James makes a similar point through this message about the use of words. The point being that what's inside a person determines our choice of words that we use. If we're going to be the kind of people who use words wisely, then we've got to first cultivate an inner life that sees everyone as a friend created in God's image. **We need a vision of life that doesn't put us at the center of the universe, but rather centers on God and God's purposes.** The God who spoke the word of creation and sent the Word to become flesh in his own Son, urges us to choose the kind of words that reflect his character, life and love.

Nancy Ortberg wrote in a sermon: "I needed to do some last-minute Christmas shopping but was having difficulty finding a parking space. I finally saw a couple carrying a lot of bags and walking very slowly to their car. I thought, 'If I can follow them down the aisle and wait for them to get into their car, that parking space will be mine!' So, I waited patiently with my blinker on.

The couple put their gifts in the trunk, and he opened the door for his wife. I thought, 'This is no time for chivalry. Get in the car and go!'

They pulled out slowly, and as I was ready to turn in, a beat-up old van pulled in front of me and stole my space. I got out of my car and had a chat with the driver. Had my mother been

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there, she would have washed my mouth out with soap. I chatted with such interesting words that he backed out of the parking space.

I felt good initially. I thought, 'I'm good. I stood up for my rights. I'm pretty feisty.' But then the verse came into my head that says, 'The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a person unclean' (Matthew 15:18)

The painful truth is that the Bible says the condition of my heart is reflected by what comes out of my mouth and how I live my life. Many days later, I came to the conclusion I was wrong. I told God my actions and words did indeed reflect the condition of my heart and I wasn't proud of it."

I have never done this exact thing; I may have thought it, which is a topic for another sermon at another time, but I know that I have said things that I am not proud of, things that I regret saying, words that I chose when I wasn't focused on Jesus. We all have done this, and the chances are high that we will do it again. Thank goodness we can be forgiven if we repent.

May we learn from our failures, and may we all remember that words have a lot of power...and may we use that power to bring honor and glory to our God. Amen.