

This morning, let's continue our study of the Book of James. As I noted when we began this study, James is considered by many to be the Proverbs of the New Testament. It contains many short essays on wisdom, ethics and practical Christian living. This morning, let's discuss the third chapter and the proper use of words. In the closing verses of the first chapter James says: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."

Have you ever considered the significant impact that words have on our individual lives; words can either build us up or hurt us to the core. The average person speaks about 18,000 words per day. Of course, you probably know some people who easily exceed that. The Bible warns in the tenth chapter of Proverbs: "When words are many, sin is not absent." Or as the *Message* paraphrases it: "The more talk, the less truth; the wise measure their words." James recognized the power of words. Listen to what he has to tell us in the third chapter of his letter, the first twelve verses.

Read James 3:1-12

Now there may be some disagreement over which muscle is the strongest in the human body; one reference said that pound for pound the jaw is the strongest muscle in the body. However, from the biblical point of view, it's the tongue. With the tongue great kingdoms have been created and destroyed. With the tongue life and death orders are pronounced. With the tongue people demonstrate their greatest moments of wisdom and unfortunately, their worst moments of stupidity. Homes are either blessed or devastated by the spoken word. Words have the ability to cut like a knife. Words have tremendous power to either build up or destroy depending on how used.

Because words are so powerful, the Bible emphasizes that we must choose our words carefully. We spend the first few years of our life learning how to speak, and the rest of our lives trying to control our speech. In the passage that I just read, James focuses on the power of the tongue and the related danger of careless words.

James indicates that the tongue is so powerful that it is indeed the hardest muscle for a person to control. James uses several vivid illustrations to demonstrate his point. First, he compares the power of the tongue to the bit in a horse's mouth. The horse, which is by nature wild and large, may have its fiery temper subdued and its movements controlled by a small bit of metal weighing less than a pound.

The next illustration that James uses is the rudder of a boat which even though it is very small in comparison to the rest of the ship, it controls where the ship goes. On May 21, 1941, the

unsinkable German battleship, the Bismarck, was sighted in the North Atlantic. Immediately planes and ships from the British Royal Navy were sent to intercept it. As the Bismarck headed towards the German-controlled French coast where it would be safe from attack, to the astonishment of all, the massive battleship suddenly swung around and reentered the area where the British ships were amassed in greatest strength. At the same time, she began to steer an erratic zigzag course, which made it easier for the British Navy to overtake her. You see, a torpedo had damaged her rudder and without its control the unsinkable Bismarck was sunk. As the rudder controls a ship, so the tongue controls who a person is.

Next James contrasts the smallness of a spark with the greatness of the fire that can result. The tongue is like fire because while fire can be used for good such as heating our homes on a cold winter night and cooking our meals, out of control a fire can destroy our homes and forests or even entire towns such as we have unfortunately seen here in New Mexico and California; thus, its impact can be devastating. In each of these illustrations, there is a contrast between the size of the instrument and the power it exercises. Thus, in relation to the other members of the body, while the tongue is small, it can achieve great results or cause great harm. The tongue can sway people to violence or move them to the highest and noblest actions.

Think about it, words can lift people up when they are down; encourage them when things are going wrong; comfort those who are hurting; and exhort others on to victory in life. But at the same time, who of us have not said something at one time or another that has hurt someone to the core. While we humans have learned to control and tame the wildest animals, we have never quite mastered our choice of words. The poison spewing from an untamed tongue is lethal in any dosage.

And the best example of this is one of my pet peeves – gossip! Conversation is an exercise of the mind, but gossip is merely an exercise of the tongue. In my lifetime, I have not found anything as destructive to relationships among families, friends, churches and organizations as gossip. Reputations, friendships, marriages, and businesses have been ruined due to an idle tongue. And unfortunately, there are people who just live for the opportunity to spread rumors and gossip. They literally feed on the bad news, problems and crises in other people's lives. Their favorite opening lines are: "Did you hear about so-and-so; it's none of my business, but; and finally, I'm just telling it like it is." Jesus said that where two or three are gathered together in His name, there He is also. But I have also observed that where two or three are off to the side whispering, they may be up to no good and someone's good name is getting trashed.

Someone wrote: "Conversation is when three people are talking; gossip is when one of them leaves." Have ever thought about that? Believe me, if someone tells you gossip about another person, they will also talk about you and repeat everything you tell them, even enhancing your statements each time they repeat it. A gossip's idea of generosity is to keep nothing to

themselves. You may think they are your best friends, but if the gossip about you is juicy enough, forget friendships! Remember these individuals feed on problems and bad news; they are like buzzards, circling any unsuspecting victim of bad luck.

The story is told of a young man during the Middle Ages who went to a monk saying: "I have sinned by making slanderous remarks about someone. What should I do now?" The monk replied: "Put a feather on every doorstep in town." The young man did this and returned to the monk wondering if there was anything else that he should do. The monk said: "Now go back and pick up all the feathers." "That's impossible," replied the young man, "By now the wind will have blown them all over town." To which the monk replied: "So has your gossip become impossible to retrieve."

A three-year study at Indiana University identified an interesting dynamic involved in gossip. They discovered that the initial negative statement was not the starting point for gossip. "She is a real snob" is not the start of gossip; however, it's when someone else agrees that the gossip begins. They found that the key is whether or not a negative statement is "seconded." If a second is provided, then it's gossip.

The moral from this study is that you can abort gossip-bound conversation by quickly affirming the person being targeted. Judy had a friend back in Virginia who practiced this. Anytime someone said something negative about someone else in the neighborhood, she would come back with a positive statement about them. The Apostle Paul recognized this principal centuries ago when he wrote in the fourth chapter of Philippians: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." In other words, always look for the best in others.

The best way to stop those who gossip is to starve them, cut off their food supply; don't listen or acknowledge their gossip; and don't give them any information that is not necessary; in other words, keep them on a need-to-know basis. But above all, be careful. As James noted gossip is like a wild fire and if you get too close, you will get burned.

Now I have used this story before, but it's worth repeating this morning. Once there was a woman named Mildred, the church gossip and self-appointed enforcer of the church's morals, who was always sticking her nose into the private lives of the other members. The church members did not appreciate this, but feared her enough to maintain their silence. However, she made a mistake when she accused George, a new member, of being an alcoholic after she saw his pickup truck parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She told George and others that everyone seeing it there knew what he was doing. George, a man of few words, just stared at her for a moment and then walked away. He didn't explain, defend or deny

anything, he said nothing. However, later that evening, George quietly parked his pickup truck in front of Mildred's house, and left it there all night!

But gossip is not the only way that our words can hurt others and jeopardize our relationships with them. Many of us suffer from foot in mouth disease; we are always putting our foot in our mouth by trying to be funny or making wise cracks. In conversations, we try to be witty. We need to heed the old proverb: "To be thought wise, keep your mouth shut."

Have you ever squeezed too much toothpaste onto your toothbrush? And then have you ever tried to put the toothpaste back in the tube? You can't! There was another old proverb that states: "Three things once released will not return again: a missed opportunity, a shot arrow and a word spoken in haste."

Sometimes in our efforts to say exactly the right thing at the right time, we speak in haste. Usually, we immediately wish we could retract our words. Words spoken in haste are those words that we speak without taking time to consider how they will be understood or taken by the other person. We need to remember what we discussed a couple of weeks ago. God gave us two ears and one mouth; in other words, we should listen twice as much as we speak. James understood this when he wrote in the first chapter: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." It is much wiser to choose what you say than to say what you choose.

Over the past year, if someone had given you ten dollars for every kind word that you have said about someone else, but also collected five dollars from you for every unkind word that you have uttered about someone, would you be richer or poorer? In verse 10, James questions how praise and insults can come out of the same mouth. How can we sing praises to God on Sunday morning, but before we get in our cars and head home, we are criticizing other people? Is our heart that divided? Jesus told us in John 13:34-35: "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this others will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Here Jesus is talking about agape love where we always seek the best for others, no matter what they have said or done to us. Do we practice agape love in our choice of words or does our tongues run wild?

Remember when you went to the doctor when you were a child. He would ask you to stick out your tongue (of course, this was the only time you were allowed to do that). The doctor could tell a lot about your physical health by looking into your mouth. In the same way, you can tell a lot about the spiritual well-being of a person by the words that they use. Are they mature Christians who control their speech and practice agape love or do their words show a lack of love for others? A Christian's walk and talk must go hand-in-hand.

When I was a child, I often heard that little jingle: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That’s a cute little jingle, but it’s not true. Words can hurt us, and sometimes very deeply. God looks into our hearts; and the heart that speaks hurtful words to others never pleases God. So let us be careful about the words we say, and the thoughts we think, that we may have clean, pleasing hearts for the Lord. As Jesus stated in Matthew 12:37 – “By your words you will be either judged innocent or condemned guilty.”

So, choose your words carefully, because you may have to eat them sometime. Follow the advice that James and Paul left us; be quick to listen, slow to speak, and when you do speak let your words be the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly, always looking for things to praise and not criticize. In our speech, may we practice agape love, always seeking the best for others. Remember, if Jesus wouldn’t say it, neither should we. Amen