

## Me & My Big Mouth: 2. The Power of Words

James 3:2-12

October 20, 2019

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For me, it's the hair dilemma or the new outfit dilemma, and what do I say? I've learned you only get this wrong one time. You see I thought I was supposed to be totally honest, but the words came out brutally honest. And now I still haven't figured out what to say. "That looks cute on you!" I heard a salesperson say that to her, but it didn't sound the same when I said it. So, I keep my head down and try not to notice – but that gets me into even more trouble. Help! Last Sunday, I was returning home from Seattle. A couple – a husband and wife – were in the row behind me and before they even sat down, he made a comment about how he wanted to sit in first class, but she had purchased the tickets and said she didn't want to use that many points to sit in first class. He said something back to her and she said something to him. And then she said something that I won't repeat here and then he said something that made me cringe. Have you ever been in that situation? For a moment, I thought about handing them one of my business cards and saying "call me," but then I was afraid I'd end up in the middle of something and I'd be the one escorted off the plane. Words matter.

The average person uses 16,000 words a day, and once our words are out there, they are out there. Often I wish there was the kind of delay that exists with radio where they can catch a word and bleep it before it is heard, but we don't have some who is ready to stop us. We all have a pause button, but what we need is a rewind button. Because once our words are out there, there's no rewind.

To catch up, we began this series last week, and Pastor Tami gave us a great start. She said, Be: **Quick to listen and slow to speak**. Say it with me: quick to listen; slow to speak. She gave us a hand motion – quick to listen. When we are in conflict, we tend to tense up, but when we open our hands like this, it is a reminder to open our heart, open our mind – because, we want what the other person wants – to be heard and understood.

Words are powerful. Your life and my life is shaped by words spoken to you, over you, and about you. Words shaped our childhood experience. I've never forgotten the day my 6<sup>th</sup> grade art teacher told me I was not good at art. Her words shaped my sense of self. Words impact your self-confidence. Words impact your relationships. Words impact who you see in the mirror. People who have no confidence gain confidence by words spoken to them. What's challenging is that **words are not equally weighted**. How many positives does it take to counter one negative? Last week, I read an article in the Harvard Business Review which said it's five to one. It take five positives to equal one negative. But that's not what I've found. I need about 100 positives to equal 1 negative! And we never forget the hurtful words, do we? Criticism, sarcasm, put downs are etched into us, while the positives seems to go in one ear and out the other.

So words are not equally weighted, and the **source isn't equally weighted**. I'm a boss, and my words weigh a lot. I've learned there are times when someone else should carry a message because their words weigh less than mine. Parents, your words weigh a lot. It's why I make sure the final word with my children always, always, always is "I love you." I never want them to wonder even in the midst of a tough conversation. Regardless what else comes from my mouth, I want my final word to be love. It's what I want Amanda to hear from me – first thing in the morning and last thing at night – it's love. Back in my youth ministry days, I remember one young woman from a challenging family environment. As a junior and a senior in high school,

she volunteered to work with younger children and as I observed her interactions with children, I said to her, "Have you thought about being a teacher? I can see you working with kids and making a difference in their lives. You are gifted and talented." And she said to me, "I wish my dad would say that." My words mattered, but they didn't weigh as much as her dad's words would. I remember meeting with a family to plan the funeral for their dad and the oldest son with tears streaming down his cheeks said, "I don't ever remember my dad saying I love you." Words matter.

And the **recovery time is not equally weighted**. The hurt is immediate, but recovery takes time. There are no words that can bring immediate recovery. You said it and suddenly realize what you said – "Sorry!" But sorry doesn't make it better. If I slammed the car door on your hand and then realized it and opened the door – Sorry! It doesn't make your fingers stop hurting. We're still going to Urgent Care. More words won't make the hurt immediately better. My point is that our words matter. I have this poster beside my desk at home: **Sticks & stones can break my bones but names will really hurt me**. The most powerful muscle in the body is the tongue. You can do more damage with words than any other part of the body.

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote a letter to the first century Christians, and he talked about the power of words. Your greatest regret in a relationship might have been avoided if you took seriously what James said 2000 years ago. And if you will lean into these words, who knows how many regrets you will avoid. He says, **We all make mistakes often...** Can I get an Amen about that! We all make mistakes often. ...**but those who don't make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity**. In other words, gaining control of your mouth and the words you use will keep you out of trouble. If you need examples of this, James offers a few. **When we bridle horses and put bits in their mouths to lead them wherever we want, we can control their whole bodies**. If you can get control of the horse's mouth, you can control the whole animal. I don't know much about horses, but it also works with dogs. We put a gentle leader on our dog and he goes wherever we want him to go. James says, here's another example. **Consider ships: they are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilot direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder**. Here's a drawing of a ship from the first century A little rudder can determine the direction of the ship. A small part has a big influence. **In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly**. The tongue is 4 inches long, 8 little muscles, and it never wears out – to the dismay of some of you! Haven't some of you have been praying that someone's tongue would wear out? Then James provides a third example. **A small flame can set a whole forest on fire**. Thousands of acres and millions of dollars lost as a result of something that began like this (strike a match). Something so small can do great harm. Next week, we will look at all the good that our words can do, but words can lead to divorce. Words can lead to violent encounters. There are wars around the world that got started with words. We are all born with our pilot lights lit. Are you with me, this morning?

**The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire**. Some of us have scorched the people we claim to love the most with our words – with our sarcasm. The people we ask to spend the rest of their lives with us – we scorch them with our words. And then when we are confronted, how do we respond? We defend ourselves. With what? Most words! "I was just being honest, or I was just being made, or I didn't really mean it." The truth is – if you start a fire accidentally, you are still responsible for the fire you started. If you start a fire with you words, you are still responsible. And then James says, **The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell**. What's that mean? Whatever it was, you said it and where did that come from? James says, it's evil in you. It's why we should be quick to listen, slow to speak. The tongue is so volatile it

should come with a warning label. Standing here, I could make this day my last day with you. I could end my ministry right here with my words. And next week, the District Superintendent would be here, and say, "You remember Steve? If you were here last week, you know why he will not be back. He says, he is so sorry, but he's still not coming back." I could use my words to ruin my life. That's the power of words. There is within every one of us the propensity to use our words to do great harm. That's our human condition, and we will wrestle with this our entire lives. So what do we do? James does not provide us with this answer, but I want to provide 3 words – 3 words that many of us learned in childhood. It's how we were taught to put out a fire. If the tongue has the potential to start a fire, then how do you stop the fire? **Stop. Drop. Roll.**

First, stop. Remember that your words have power. You were born with your pilot light lit. At any moment, you have the potential to tear down or to build up. Each morning, I say, "God, I give my life to you." That means everything – my hands, my feet, my eyes, my ears, and my mouth. There are times when I hear something or I receive an email that triggers emotion within me, and I've learned to stop. Now is not the time for me to say anything. Now is not the time for me to respond to that email. Stop and remember my mouth, my words are not my own – they belong to God. Quick to listen, slow to speak.

Second, drop. When I mess up – not if, but when, because we all make mistakes often. So when you mess up, own the fire you set. The words or sarcasm or putdowns, cut it out – put it out. There is no place for sarcasm in a relationship. People might chuckle when you say it, but you have wounded someone with your sarcasm. Put it out. Confess it. Own up to it. And for some who grew up in a home where you were scorched, you will be inclined to repeat the cycle. Break it. Confess it. Put it out.

And then after stopping and dropping, it's time to roll. Engage God's Spirit. Think about the words that you use. You have the power to bless – the power to bring life. James tells us the tongue is the rudder of our lives. We don't have time to get lost. Seek the things of God for your life. What is the most loving thing I can say? 1 Peter 3:9 **Don't pay back evil for evil or insult for insult, Instead, give blessing in return. You were called to do this so that you might inherit a blessing.**

There have been people throughout my life who have done that. Without them, I would not be here today. One was Mrs. Olauson – I've told you about her before. She was my high school speech teacher. I only took her class because someone said it would help me get into college. The only time I ever got an "F" was when she said, "You can do better." And she kept encouraging me – this shy kid who didn't want to speak to anybody. She persuaded me to enter a speech contest – almost made it to the state competition. And when I was appointed here – and I knew I would be preaching most Sundays – something I had avoided for 16 years – hers were the words that I remembered – You can do this. Stop. Drop. Roll. **Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak.**

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 20, 2019**

**Weekly Prayer:** Merciful God, you give life and invite me to be in relationship with you and others. I know what it's like to be lifted up by other people's positive words. And I know what it's like to be hurt by other people's negative words. Help me be quick to listen and slow to speak so I can build others up and join you in giving life and love to all. Amen.

## Monday, October 21

### **Scripture: Proverbs 15:1-4**

A sensitive answer turns back wrath, but an offensive word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise enhances knowledge, but the mouth of a fool gushes with stupidity. The LORD's eyes are everywhere, keeping watch on evil and good people. Wholesome speech is a tree of life, but dishonest talk breaks the spirit.

**Observation:** Many of the Proverbs seem random and not particularly tied together. But in these four verses, the Hebrew sages put together four wise sayings that address the quality of human speech, in both its ability to wound and damage, and also to heal and give life. (Apart from Proverbs, the image of "the tree of life" only occurs in the Hebrew creation story in Genesis 2 and 3, and in John the seer's visions of God's new earth in Revelation 2 and 22.)

**Application:** The Common English Bible translates the Hebrew word in Proverbs 15:1 as "sensitive," and other translations use "soft" or "gentle." For some, such words give an impression of weakness. But a later proverb said, "A commander can be persuaded with patience, and a tender tongue can break a bone" (Proverbs 25:15). When have you seen wisely chosen words break down barriers that harsh speech would only have made higher and more rigid?

**Prayer:** Gracious God, help my mouth not to "gush" with foolish words. Grow in me your spirit that can make my speech more and more a "tree of life" for the people I meet. Amen.

## Tuesday, October 22

### **Scripture: James 1:19-21**

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.

**Observation:** James, Jesus' half-brother, apparently became a Christ-follower when Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:7). He became an influential leader in the early church. In this short letter, he linked hasty, angry speech with "moral filth." To James, a cutting outburst was no small matter, but something hurtful and wrong.

**Application:** Early Christians faced social exclusion and legal persecution. (The historian Josephus said James himself was stoned to death in Jerusalem about 62 A.D.) It must have been tempting and easy for Christians in those conditions to rage against people who treated them so unjustly. How do these words from James speak to us today, who face much milder tests of our faith and temper, when we find ourselves becoming angry and eager to denounce some person or organization?

**Prayer:** O God, make me ever more "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry." You know that's not my natural condition, Lord—but I know you can change me from the inside out. Amen.

## Wednesday, October 23

### Scripture: James 1:22-25

You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

**Observation:** After describing the danger of hasty, ugly words, James moved on to describe "the word planted deep inside you" (James 1:21) that we should follow. He called it the law of freedom, God's wisdom, above all as Jesus taught it. He did not drop the subject of wise speech in these verses. He highlighted the wisdom and freedom of making all of our actions, including our speech, accord with God's directions for optimal living.

**Application:** James' words about the law of freedom were rooted in Jesus' teaching. Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other" (John 13:34-35). In what ways have you found greater freedom as you've grown in your ability to love even those you dislike or disagree with?

**Prayer:** Holy Spirit, I want my life to bear your signature. So fill my life with your fruit. As others watch me, may they daily see me growing more and more like the person you want to shape me to be. Amen.

## Thursday, October 24

### Scripture: James 1:26-27

If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

**Observation:** James used strong language – not angry, but strong. He said if people don't control their words, "their devotion is worthless." Some people then (and now) used angry, ugly criticisms of "the wicked" (however they defined that) to try to show everyone else how devoted they were to God. It didn't work, James said, because speaking that way was disobedience to God, not devotion. True devotion, he said, shows when we care for and help the weak, not in reckless speech.

**Application:** We live in a world where tweets, anonymous comments, and a 24-hour news cycle seem, at times, to bombard us with contentious, belittling speech. James wrote that one aspect of devotion to God is "to keep the world from contaminating us." How do you actively seek to keep our world's barrage of negativity from contaminating you? What choices help you do that?

**Prayer:** Almighty God, you love me. You know that elevated blood pressure and a pulse racing from anger are hurtful, not helpful. Guide me toward your pure, peaceable approach to life. Amen.

## Friday, October 25

### **Scripture: Colossians 3:8-10**

But now set aside these things, such as anger, rage, malice, slander, and obscene language. Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it.

**Observation:** As Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae, he recognized that there is an unbreakable connection between who we are on the inside and what we say for others to hear. He named anger, rage, malice, slander, obscene language and lying as things to set aside. The first three are attitudes, but they inevitably show themselves in the harmful kinds of speech the apostle named in the last three items on the list.

**Application:** In his Bible Commentary on this reading, William Barclay said we can turn the items in this list about speech into positive commands. The first two, he said, tell us that a Christian's speech must be KIND, and it must be PURE. How easy or hard do you find it to speak in those ways if you feel anger, rage or malice toward someone? How can we be kind in our speech even when it is necessary to make an honest appraisal of another person?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, when Paul said I should set aside these bad things, he used a word that means "taking off a garment." Help me discard nurtured anger, and the ugly speech it produces, as I would a dirty, worn-out shirt, and to put on your new way of life. Amen.

## Saturday, October 26

### **Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-32; Psalm 19:9-14**

Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, *Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor* because we are parts of each other in the same body. *Be angry without sinning.* Don't let the sun set on your anger. Don't provide an opportunity for the devil. Thieves should no longer steal. Instead, they should go to work, using their hands to do good so that they will have something to share with whoever is in need. Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Honoring the LORD is correct, lasting forever. The LORD's judgments are true. All of these are righteous! They are more desirable than gold—than tons of pure gold! They are sweeter than honey—even dripping off the honeycomb! No doubt about it: your servant is enlightened by them; there is great reward in keeping them. But can anyone know what they've accidentally done wrong? Clear me of any unknown sin and save your servant from willful sins. Don't let them rule me. Then I'll be completely blameless; I'll be innocent of great wrongdoing. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

**Observation:** Ephesians 4 and Psalm 19 contain the theme for this sermon series. We will read these passages again next Saturday. As we do this, consider memorizing at least Ephesians 4:29 (Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth.) and Psalm 19:14 (Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.). Changing our speech requires letting God change the inner sources from which our speech

springs. We want the words of our mouth, AND the meditations of our heart, to be pleasing to God. We aim to be a community in which we “Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.”

**Application:** When did you last say words that hurt, and then ask yourself, “Why did I say that?” What helps you to better understand your interior self, to keep you from blurting out words you regret and wish you could take back?

**Prayer:** Lord of my life, be Lord of my words. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.