

**17th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**September 16, 2018**

Text: James 3:1-12

Theme: We All Make Mistakes

In the commentaries I read this week it was suggested that those of us who choose to preach on the lesson from James should first spend some additional time in reflective prayer before we attempt to share our wisdom with the congregation. All of our lessons from the *Letter of James* have been offering us some real practical advice on how to live in harmony with one another. We are to endure temptations. We are to be quick to listen and slow to anger. We are to hear the Word of God and then act on it. We are not to show favoritism or partiality to the rich and famous but rather we are to treat everyone with equity.

And the lesson we heard this morning is particularly relevant to our current culture. We are to think before we speak. We all must hold ourselves accountable for what we say and how we say it because words are the most powerful force available to us as human beings. Words have energy and they have the ability to encourage or to help others and even to heal fragile relationships. We can also turn around and use our words to hurt or harm others and even to humiliate them.

In my vocation and in my personal life, I have witnessed the influence our words have on how we perceive ourselves and how it defines our relationships with others. Children who consistently are told that they could do better in school and/or in sports will remember those words as they struggle to decide what they want to be as adults. Families who argue about anything and everything will remember the intensity of their exchanges long after the fights are over. And how many times have our friendships dissolved because someone just dumped the contents of their mind without thinking and hurt us?

I have seen families who no longer speak to one another because of a verbal exchange. In one's grief it is so easy to lash out at our loved ones. In our frustration it is so easy to blame others for what is out of our control. In the words of the author of James none of this ought to be.

Our words matter. But also the tone that we use matters. Some of the time our words are intentional and are meant to hurt. But most of the time our words spew out of us in the midst of our anger or frustration or tiredness or impatience or stress. And once out there is nothing that we can do to pull them back inside.

The author of James warns us that without some kind of honest self-examination we go unchecked and it can cause severe damage. He uses teachers as his example because of the authority that they have been given over their students. I want to broaden that to include all Christians. As followers of Jesus Christ our speech and our behavior should be judged with greater strictness. As a follower of Jesus Christ my own speech and my own behavior should be judged with greater strictness. We have been entrusted with the authority to speak the gospel message and that carries with it enormous consequences.

And the author of James brings home his point by discussing this small muscular organ called the tongue. He states that this little thing that resides in our mouths can affect how the rest of our bodies function. In and of themselves our tongues are neither good nor bad but they are at our mercy and under our control. So when we choose to say things that hurt others then we have just steered our whole body in motion down a dangerous path. However, when we choose to say things that build up the other then we have just steered our whole body on a path that leads us towards life and love.

Let that errant tongue go unchecked and it affects everyone in our sphere of influence. Take those lies and act on them and then all of a sudden our lives are spiraling downward and out of control.

The author of James is so adamant about the power of our words that he also states that the tongue is like a small flicker of a fire that could start flames so massive that it destroys an entire forest. We have the visual reminder from the fires that have spread through California. All it takes is one second to lay a match to a bunch of dried twigs at the base of a red-wood tree and soon acres of land will be scorched and inflamed. One small flicker of a fire! One small word can plant the seed of doubt in another human that then spreads until its damage seems irreparable.

So before we all go into complete silence for the rest of our lives so as not to fall into the trappings of our tongue the author of James makes this little incredible grace-filled statement:

*For all of us make many mistakes.*

There it is! This is the gospel message for today! It acknowledges that none of us are perfect especially when it comes to our speech. There is power in how we use our words but there is also power in what we do with our mistakes. We hate making mistakes but they are inevitable so it is equally important to choose how to deal with them. We can ignore them or we can see our blunders for what they are and we can learn from them. We can blame others for leading us to say the things we do or we can admit we are wrong and apologize. We can let our mistakes fester inside of us or we can grow from them.

In Matthew 12:34 Jesus tells us that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will speak. Out of our hearts we must discipline ourselves to use our tongues in a way that conveys respect, gentleness and humility. Before a word comes out of our mouths we need to take a moment to contemplate what we will say and how we will say it. We need to consider the impact our words will have on the one who is listening to us.

As followers of Jesus Christ we should speak in a way that solidifies peace and compassion. Speak the truth in love and do not use double standards for different people. We are not to manipulate others or insult or belittle them. Since the tongue steers our whole body we must align our words, our voice inflection and tone, our eye contact, our body language and actions with an inner awareness that shows the other that we want an honest exchange.

In my vocation and in my personal life, I have witnessed people who speak from the heart. The sincerity of their words washes over you and it is evident that they genuinely care. There is a passion in their voice that matches the compassion of their words. In spite of what is said or done the heart allows the tongue to say things that speak of forgiveness and it can make right a wronged relationship.

The perfect antidote to the taming of our tongues is one of my favorite passages that we read just three weeks ago from Ephesians 6. Listen as I blend the two lessons together –

*Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the temptations of this world. Stand firm and fasten your belt so that you can speak the truth.*

*Put your running shoes on so that you are ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Take hold of the shield of faith to quench the fires inflamed by the tongue. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit (the Word of God) and use your tongue to pray at all times.*

*Pray also for me so that when I speak, a message may be given to me that makes known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.*

In the words of our author this is what our life together ought to be!  
Amen