

## **“Watch Your Mouth”**

Salado UMC—16 September 2018: 17<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

Preaching Text: James 3:1-12—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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**“No one has a finer command of language than the person who keeps his mouth shut”—Sam Rayburn (1882 - 1961).**

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Hear the day’s lesson, “Taming the Tongue,” James 3:1-12:

**3 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 figs? No more can salt water yield fresh (James 3:1-12).**

From time to time a playful attitude helps us relax and connect with other people. Often, we are simply too serious for our own good. Maintaining an unvaryingly solemn attitude can rob life of its joy. At the same time, we can be careless or unthinking with our words. I am one of worst offenders because in a minister’s too often earnest world—it is easy to be cavalier/careless with words. Thus, I apologize to all I have offended while thinking myself funny. As Dr. Andy Stoker, and thousands of others have kindly pointed out, I talk too much. Worse yet, when I am making fun of myself, some people interpret me as making light of them—not my intention. All this talk suggests that our lesson from James has to do with the tongue—which he uses as a code for mishandled or mismanaged words. Canadian, Maria Koszler, once wryly observed: “There are those who need to discipline their mouths at times.”

Christians are wordy people. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are ways we connect. Yet our speaking, listening, and writing, are also means to disconnect or disassociate ourselves from others. Ask yourself: “how many misunderstandings have cost me personally and those with whom I am blood relations or close friends?” Yet, words are what we have. It has been true from the beginning according to our scriptures. “In the beginning,” Yahweh created the world by God’s own words. Besides, all through the Gospels, Jesus heals by employing curative words. Jesus raises his dead friend Lazarus saying: “Lazarus, come out” (John 11:43)!

Many of us sanction the idea that Jesus' ability to heal people emotionally, physically, and spiritually was simply because Jesus spoke to them. Then and now, the public regularly ostracized and cast out afflicted people because of their maladies. Yet, as a rabbi and Messiah, Jesus addressed these afflicted folks as genuine people. Perhaps this is why James makes such a fuss about how we control our tongue and words. James knows—at a very real level—that words can build, restore, affirm, and heal. Words indeed can give life. We worship God with our tongues, notes James!

James as a concrete thinker understands that words can also destroy. Words can disfigure God's creative image in another. We simply forget that our words have such great power. Often—and it seems perpetually—we try to save ourselves from the hurtfulness of our words by adding softening phrase. For example, we use phrases like: “just saying,” or “bless his/her heart,” or “just kidding.” If we can avoid using words to belittle, deny, or destroy but rather use words to uplift, build, and give life—then we are on the same page as James.

As school just started it is fitting that James writes: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” This reminds us that teaching is an honored vocation—honored and important. When we think about teaching and teachers, their impact on us is staggering. Most of us remember favorite teachers forever, while often poor teachers fade from our memory. Great thinkers from Socrates to Jesus to your best teacher have reflected over the years on the teaching task. For example:

**“A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops”—Henry B. Adams**

**“The best teacher is the one who suggests rather than dogmatizes, and inspires his listener with the wish to teach himself”—Edward Bulwer-Lytton**

**“The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards”—Anatole France**

If quotations from eminent thinkers fail to convince about teaching esteem, then what of the witness of our Sunday school children? One Sunday afternoon, walking down the hallway of the church, I heard a youngster say with great pride to another: “There is my Sunday school teacher.” Almost no one thinks that teaching is unimportant, for human culture thrives through those who help us learn. Thus, James' verse surprises: “Not many of you should become teachers . . . for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” This comes as a shock in James' epistle. Often, in the Bible, we read of teaching and teachers. Proverbs portrays what may happen to pupils who fail to heed their teacher's good words:

**I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. Now I am at the point of utter ruin in the public assembly (Proverbs 5:13-14).**

Some of our teachers may want to frame this proverbial “word to the wise” and place it behind their desks—and in VERY LARGE LETTERS. After considering this passage, perhaps it means what it says. The phrase “Not many of you should become teachers . . . for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” begins James' remarks about the tongue and its evils. What James writes of teachers applies to all of us believers, but perhaps more to teachers than anyone else. What James

suggests is that teachers particularly should not use the tongue in a caustic way. James points out not only the common problem of human speech, but James directs his specific remarks to Christian leaders who use the tongue improperly.

Again, this means that in the early church, teaching was so vital that early Christian leaders ought to give special care to teacher's demeanor. Teachers are special because those who wrote our Bible draw attention to the need for exceptional conduct and character. As Jesus himself says, even to us Methodist Christians with open hearts, open minds, and open doors: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

No one knows who or what necessarily makes a good teacher. Sometimes those who use the most unorthodox methods and techniques happen to be the finest teachers. On the contrary, some teachers who use the latest educational practices and systems are those who are least effective. No one knows what makes for good teaching. Good teachers are like good jokes. We may not be able to explain them, but we know them when we see them or hear them.

James as a Jewish/Christian sage thinks wisdom is not so much a matter of the head, but in the performance. Wisdom is not merely a way of thinking or believing. Wisdom—and that includes our use of words—is a way of life. So, to those to who ask people like me: "Yes, preacher, but what are we to do with this lesson?" James writes we need to 'watch our mouths.' This will give us plenty to do. Amen.

David Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado, TX 76571