

“Watch Your Mouth”

James 3:1-12

June 23rd, 2024

I heard a phrase a while ago that has stuck with me. “Words create worlds”. Doesn’t that make you think? I think about one of my favorite hobbies: watching movies. When you sit down at a theater with your favorite snack and the lights dim and the screen comes on...or you click through your preferred streaming service on your couch. That story, those characters, the costumes... everything you see on your screen started from words.

Most everything starts with words either written down or spoken. Buildings can’t be built without discussions between architects, contractors, and workers. Any piece of technology starts with an idea that has to be communicated to engineers and developers. Even our country...born from words written on pieces of parchment by our founding fathers.

There’s an example that’s pretty relevant to our faith that you’re probably surprised I haven’t mentioned yet. All you need to do is turn to the first chapter of the Bible in Genesis. God speaks the world into existence. God created you and me in His image with His words. Giving us the ability to communicate like he does, to create as he does, is a powerful tool.

And how do we wield this power? We talk. A LOT.

I read an article that said the average American speaks SEVEN HUNDRED times a day. 700! I can’t think of anything I do in a day 700 times! Another statistic I read is that we spend 1/5th of our life talking. AND if you wrote down all your words just from today, it would make up a 50-page book. That’s saying a lot.

In fact, we're saying so much, that we create brand-new words to use! In the last year, Merriam-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary added over 1700 words to their database. A few standouts Millennials and Gen-Zers will recognize:

- rizz: means romantic charm or appeal; charisma
- Mid: mediocre, unimpressive
- Bussin': extremely good or excellent

So here's what we know:

- Words have power
- People use a lot of words.

These two truths, when you stick them together are like gasoline and a match. It's only a matter of time before something bad happens.

Sometimes you say the right thing, but the wrong way. I'll give you an example: if one of my friends had lost a lot of weight. I could say "Oh my gosh, you look so great!" I could also say "You're not as fat as you used to be." The same general idea, only one of those would end with a slap to the face.

Other times you say the wrong thing at the right time. When I was a kid, whenever someone would make a wisecrack...something like "You're a Doofus." I would never be able to come back with a response. Y'all know how that goes down: At the moment you stand there like an idiot without anything to say. Minutes, hours, days go by and you're laying in bed staring up at the ceiling or brushing your teeth in the bathroom mirror and you finally think of that comeback. "No, YOU'RE the doofus"

And then one day, whatever switch I had in my head that prevented me from saying everything I meant to say in the moment...well it flipped.

Suddenly, every thought, every clever jab, every biting piece of sarcasm was right there on the tip of my tongue, ready to leap out with precision timing. At first, it felt liberating! I was the quick-witted person I always dreamed of being.

But then, reality set in. I realized that those sharp comebacks while satisfying at the moment, left a trail of hurt feelings and misunderstandings. The line between being witty and being hurtful becomes dangerously thin.

When I was younger, I regretted the things I didn't say. Now...I find I regret more what I do say.

Our words have power! Words create worlds. But also, words can destroy worlds.

Today's scripture comes from the New Testament in the Book of James. I've always found James to be one of the hardest books of the Bible to read. There are not any complicated names or unfamiliar pronunciations or anything like that. It challenges me as a believer because James teaches us that our faith has to be lived out. Because faith without works is a dead faith.

Right off the bat, he grabs my attention (*verse 1*) **"Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths."**

Maybe this wasn't the best scripture to read up here this morning...

On the surface being a teacher is appealing because, let's face it, you get to stand in front of people and they have to be quiet while you talk. Sometimes you get to be on the stage with all the bright lights! And you get a microphone! Sometimes it's one you don't even have to hold!

The attention is seductive. It can be tempting to do it for your own personal gain, to elevate your own status. But James warns that teachers are judged more harshly because their words are held in such high regard.

He's not saying that you should stop pursuing teaching as a calling. James is saying don't do it unless you're willing to accept the responsibility. Because he knows that there are people who want to be teachers just for the acclaim and attention.

When your words hold that much weight, they should be thoughtful and intentional. Words should be chosen carefully because the power teachers wield with their words can do a lot of good...or a lot of harm.

I like that he expands this emphasis on our words to everyone. **“If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.”**

James had jokes, y'all. The sarcasm is being laid on THICK.

Y'all know James is saying that no one is perfect, because no one can control what they say all the time, right?

Just checking ;-)

Verses 3 through 5: **“A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!”**

I'm always impressed with people who can ride horses. Whether it's horse racing like the Kentucky Derby or the jumps. Isn't there one where horses dance too?

I've seen Horses in their environment enough to know that they're giant animals. It's crazy how big and fast they are. They could trample over a big guy like me with no problem whatsoever. That's why Horses and I have a healthy respect for each other. By that, I mean we stay away and avoid each other at all costs.

I had to learn this lesson the hard way, of course. The only thing more embarrassing than falling off a trail horse...is falling off a trail horse twice.

Our family spent a couple of Christmases in the North Carolina mountains. There was a stable nearby that offered trail rides through the mountains, which seemed like a lot of fun. So we're walking through the stable and the leader is walking around assigning horses to each of us. She walks me over to one of the horses and as I'm getting into the saddle, she says "Be careful with this one. He can be difficult."

Not exactly what you want to hear.

So I'm on top of this enormous animal that has been described as difficult and could destroy me without a second thought. She hands me the reins that are attached to a 6-inch piece of metal and says "Here's what you use to control the horse."

As we're riding down the trail, my horse is not following my commands. It's trotting up beside its friend, they're stopping to nibble on leaves. No matter where I direct it, the horse refuses to listen.

Finally, there's a small bend in the trail. The right side is clear and easy. The left has a bunch of low-hanging branches of an old tree. I pull the reins so the bit guides it to the right. Guess which side the horse ends up on?

Exactly.

The horse goes into a trot & is bending the limbs to brush against her face and she moves forward, those limbs slap me in the face. That happens a couple of times before she goes under the lowest part of this thick tree limb. I'm faced with a situation just like that Michael Jackson song: "Too high to get over, too low to get under. You're stuck in the middle..."

The limb hits me square in the chest. I hold on to it and my feet slide out of the saddle. This is how I know the horse was being a jerk. A few feet away, it stops and looks back at me. I shamefully walk back, get back on the saddle, and finish the ride.

The point of this image here is that a small bit in a horse's mouth controls a large, strong, and powerful animal. The illustrations James uses are incredibly clear and we can get the picture.

Our tongue is this little small thing. It's this tiny muscle. And yet it has the power to direct the course of your life. The tongue has the power to control your whole self. You can use it for good. Or it can cause a lot of damage if you're not careful.

Look at verse 5: **"It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that."**

A couple of years ago we had a clean-up day here at the church. We trimmed trees and bushes and put the clippings in our fire pit out by the road. That Sunday night we built a huge bonfire from those fallen leaves and branches. It was carefully planned and thought out beforehand so that when the fire consumed the wood, it wouldn't light anything on fire we didn't want it to. Even as it got 10-15 feet high and cars passing by were calling the fire department, I never got worried.

On the other hand, remember the California wildfires a few years ago that burned over 20,000 acres? That fire started from a smoke bomb that went off at a gender reveal party. The party was on September 5th. The flames were finally extinguished on November 16th.

This is what James says happens when we're careless with what we say.

You can recover a letter after it's been sent. You can even unsend a text message from your phone now. But a careless or hurtful word spoken from the tongue? There's no putting that toothpaste back in that tube. Once our words are out in the world, they carry that impact and the consequences with them. They can wound, destroy trust, and leave lasting scars that are difficult, if not impossible, to heal. The damage words can cause lingers long after they are said.

“We can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.”

James continues with verse 7: **“This is scary”**

No kidding.

“You can tame a tiger, but you can’t tame a tongue—it’s never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer.

Human beings have the unique ability to train animals to do all sorts of cool things. It’s not just horses with the bit in their mouth like James mentioned earlier. Eagles are trained to fly into a stadium on command. Have you seen the sea lions at the Georgia Aquarium? They’ve been trained to do all sorts of amazing tricks. I read a story this week about the baseball manager Buck Showalter who had someone bring a pair of monkeys to throw batting practice.

Taming 2000-pound animals, poisonous snakes, and birds? Been there, done that, made ‘em do silly tricks. A piece of cake.

But the tongue? Can’t do it. It doesn’t make sense! Weren’t we raised right? We were taught to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ and to hold the door open for the person behind us.

And yet taming the tongue escapes us. We can keep it at bay, but only for a moment. The CEB translation calls the tongue “a restless evil, full of deadly poison”. I can spend all hours of the day holding my words off, keeping my biting comebacks at bay. I can duct tape my mouth shut so all you can hear is (*try to speak while covering my mouth*).

And in a time of weakness, a thoughtless word slips through the filter. An outburst followed from a moment of tiredness. And then the fire rages, the poison is injected, and the wanton killer strikes again.

“With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!”

If this passage of scripture hasn't already had the Holy Spirit convicting you & making you a little uncomfortable, I bet it's doing it now. Between you and me, this is the moment where I get angry and I want to throw my Bible across the room. I'm not angry at God or at James. I get upset because James is right about me and I don't want to admit it!

In this part of the passage, James is using the scriptural equivalent of “You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

We praise God here at church. We sing songs about how much God loves us and how our lives are changed because of God's amazing grace. When the benediction is given and we leave the service, then we spend the rest of the day gossiping and talking about everything that's happened that we don't agree with.

Or we read our morning devotional with a cup of coffee and have our quiet time with God. We close our Bibles, turn our phones back on, and hop on social media to get into fights in the comment sections with people who don't agree with us.

We are made in the image of God. He has given us the power to speak. We can build worlds with our words. Why are we so determined to destroy them instead?

One of our foundational beliefs in the Methodist church is the concept of prevenient grace. This is the grace that goes before and prepares a person to accept the Salvation

that is freely given to each of us. The beauty of our faith is that WE get to play a part in this prevenient grace. We are given the incredible opportunity to guide others to that moment where someone accepts Christ as their Savior.

But the other side of that reality is that our words can lead people away from Jesus just as easily. When we speak carelessly or harshly, we risk creating barriers that prevent people from experiencing the transformative love of Christ. Our words can damage and undermine any work that the Holy Spirit is doing in people's lives. Honestly, the thought that what I've said could have turned people away from God terrifies me.

“My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?”

It doesn't make sense, does it? God created nature to do one thing. A spring can't provide fresh and salty water. An apple tree can't produce strawberries. So how can our tongue give blessings and curses at the same time?

You would think that James would give us a clear answer on what to do next. Nope. James just leaves it here. It's really frustrating on our end, isn't it? He gets to drop these bombs and move on. It's like when your best friend rats you out to your parents and then leaves. “Hey, Miss Unger. Remember how Andy told you we were at church late last night? He wasn't, we were at the movies. Alright, see y'all later”

We're left with trying to piece it all together. If we want to be better Christians and followers of Christ, we have to tame our tongues. But James says no person can tame the tongue.

James isn't being a jerk. He not trying to give us an unsolvable riddle. He doesn't write out the answer because we should already know the answer.

We need Jesus.

We can't rely on ourselves to fix this. Let me give you an example

(Show gross water bottle)

I left this half-empty water bottle outside in my yard with the top off for the last few days. See how gross it looks? I don't care how thirsty I was, I would never drink this. Who knows what bacteria and stuff are in that water?!

But say I get a nice water bottle. It's very clean on the outside. It's even got a fancy straw thing you can pull out to sip from. You'd definitely be more trusting of anything that's inside of this.

When we accept the salvation that Christ offers us, it's kind of like going from this water bottle that's all crinkly, faded, and dirty to THIS one. Shiny and new. Ready to be filled with the living water of Christ.

The problem though, is even though we have the living water of Christ inside of us, our sin gets in there too. When our hearts and minds are filled with anger, jealousy, and hurtful thoughts, the dirty water can represent the harmful words we speak.

Pour water into a new bottle

It definitely looks better on the outside! But no matter how clean it looks from this point of view, the inside is what truly matters. It's only when we repent and ask for forgiveness that God can give us the living water that will restore our hearts.

Words create worlds. Our words are powerful.

Words bring life—Think about a time when you were struggling and someone took the time to offer a kind word or a piece of advice. Those words likely had a profound

impact on your outlook and your actions. Encouragement can spark the courage needed to take the next step, to try again, and to keep moving forward.

In the same way, words of grace and mercy can heal and restore. When we fail, we are often our harshest critics, burdened by guilt and shame. But when someone speaks words of forgiveness and understanding, it lifts a weight off our shoulders. When our words reflect the heart of God, they can make a lasting difference.

Just as God spoke the universe into existence, our words hold the power to build up or tear down. Whether we realize it or not, each word spoken is like a seed planted, capable of growing into something beautiful or harmful.

As believers, we are called to use this incredible gift responsibly. The only way we can succeed is by allowing Jesus to take control and change our hearts. May we speak thoughtfully and our words reflect the goodness of God.