

WATCH WHAT WE SAY!**James 3:3-12****(Read James 3:3-12)**

Intro: One of my favorite things to do at the Fair (when I'm done eating, which IS my favorite thing to do at the Fair) is wander through the horse barns and especially the draft horse barns. The beautiful and gentle animals can weigh as much as a ton and yet be guided by a child using only a bridle and bit. James wasn't kidding.

There are allegedly shortages of TVs, furniture, clothes, auto parts, and other goods like toilet paper, from the stoppage caused by a ship that got cross ways in the Suez Canal a month ago. We cannot get away from the toilet paper problem can we?!!!! The word at the time was a gust of wind caught the ship and caused it to jam into both banks of the Canal. That was what the ship owner said anyway, but the real story, according to officials, was that pilot error was at fault. In other words, the guy at the wheel messed up. The little rudder that steered the huge container ship into the Egyptian sand is controlled by a helmsman and he took his eye off his work for just a little bit and made a nearly worldwide crisis.

This is a forest fire in in Washington State. Every year hundreds and thousands of square miles in the American West, in Australia, in the Amazon Rain Forest and elsewhere are burned by wildfires, causing lots of material loss, and worse, loss of life. These fires are caused by many things including lightning strikes, careless campfires, discarded cigarettes, or even a simple spark from a dragging muffler on a vehicle. One fire last year in San Bernardino, California, burned 90,000 acres and killed a firefighter – and was started by an expectant couple firing off a pink or blue smoke bomb at their “gender reveal” party for their eagerly anticipated little one.

It only takes a spark to get a fire going says the Ralph Carmichael song and it's oh so true. And James was right on the money to use the illustration of a bridle, a rudder, and a spark to illustrate the impact of something so small, and seemingly insignificant to make a huge difference. As you know from what I read in our text the Apostle was using them as an illustration of the impact of the tongue. He is, of course, talking about the power of words to lift up or to tear down.

I was motivated to do this talk by several things. One was a column in the April 10 edition of WORLD Magazine by Andrée Seu Peterson entitled “*April Fool*” where she wrote about her struggle with the use and misuse of humor. Her first paragraph is this, “*Skip this column if you have never made a joke you regret. In my house that would be just the cat, although my husband is more admirable than most in this regard. Nor let me diminish his virtue by saying that his sense of humor does not admit of censurable excess.*”

Well, I've made more jokes that I regret than I can count so I read on, and, while I think my sister Andrée was being very harsh with herself, she made a lot of good points and I was chastened and got to thinking about the entire issue of our words and how they can build up or tear down. You see, if you haven't noticed, this is a huge issue in society. Angry and hateful rhetoric is common fare on social media, the news, so-called comedy, and, well, just about everywhere. Things are so ridiculous sometimes that we want to smack our heads and say, EXACTLY THE WRONG THING!

On Friday as I prepared this talk, something came up on Facebook and I thought it was right in line with my subject. It's a play on the famous Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr, which is *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.* But this one went like this. (Read)

Smacking heads is tempting, and figuratively doing it, at the very least, has become the default setting for too many people. But even though angry and coarse language might be more and more the way of the world, it must not be that way for Christ Followers. The words that come from our mouths must reflect the fact that we are kids of the King. We must WATCH WHAT WE SAY! Now, I know that your bulletin says the title is WATCH WHAT YOU SAY! but this message is for me too so I've changed the YOU to WE. We need to watch our words. Of all people, Christ Followers cannot fall into the trap of hatefulness. Let's watch what we say.

Probably about 5 years ago I preached through the Epistle of James and I know I covered this very subject, but the world has not gotten any better since then, and even though ABCer's are a beacon of light in the darkness

– we need to be reminded. So in the brief time I have left, let’s learn from James, the brother of Jesus. The first thing is to state the obvious . . .

Often the biggest temptation is to say the wrong thing

- F. B. Meyer writes, “*Even the best of us stumble in many respects; but our most frequent failures are in speech.*” How many times have we asked ourselves, or with a grin, asked those around us, “*Did I really say that out loud?*” I know I have. That is why the 11th question of the 13 questions my MIGHTY MEN ask me on Thursday mornings begins with “*Have you damaged another person with your words, either behind their back or face to face?*” They need to ask me that because all too quickly damaging words can come into my mind and come bursting forth unchecked from my mouth. Because I’m trying to be more like Jesus and because my Mighty Men have held me accountable for the past 23 years, I’m much better at this than I used to be; but I’m not where I know I should be. I am learning more and more that sometimes a joke isn’t appropriate at the time I’m thinking it. It’s also just better to bite your tongue sometimes than to wag it. The concept that Bill Moore taught me years ago is to ask the question, “*Is this a hill that is worth dying on right now?*” and that has kept me from opening my mouth and inserting my foot many, many times. Meyer puts it in these simple words, “*The refusal to express a thought will kill the thought.*” It is often far better to leave things unsaid – especially if they will tear someone down.
- James’ point here is this, we can’t tame the tongue, but Jesus can. He told his listeners, *There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.* Mark 7:14, 15. When we watch our mouths, we keep from defilement. The Psalmist looked to God to guard his heart, *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.* Psalm 51:10. As we watch our words, as we listen to the Holy Spirit, we more and more have a right spirit.
- Going back to the forest fire illustration, one commentator wrote, “*A tiny spark can kindle a forest fire which may blaze for weeks and go on smoldering for months. Speech is equally dangerous and hence its effects run riot. A little book of heresy can set the church a blaze; a whisper of gossip can inflame a city.*” Misplaced words can be so damaging. The so-called insurrection in Washington, D.C. could have been averted if President Trump had not used such inflammatory language when he spoke to his supporters prior to the riot. He didn’t want a riot – at least I choose to believe that, but his words did not indicate that. The riots last year after George Floyd needlessly died in police custody could have been little more than just a few protests if leaders had on both sides had not inflamed the protesters with dismissal on one side or encouragement to violence on the other. Words matter.
- Words matter is what you write in texts, emails, and social media posts. Just the wrong choice of a word can raise hackles or deflate a fragile psyche. Bill’s words really work again in this case – “*Is this a hill worth dying on?*” and it’s a question we need to ask ourselves when we type up some tough words and are about to push the send button. Maybe a good solution is to wax eloquent with what you want to say and then push the delete button instead. And maybe when a discussion elevates in an electronic conversation, to pick up the phone, or better yet, go to that person in person and talk out the issue. And as you do that, be praying the entire time for the Holy Spirit to sort out your words so you say what Jesus would say. We need to allow God to watch what we say.
- Because, you see, as Christ Followers, . . .

It’s up to us

- Paul told his Roman friends, . . . *give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* Romans 12:17b-18. Watching what we say is our responsibility. It seems that society has reverted to a cultural childhood with the way, “*Well he/she started it!*” or something like it is the rule of the day. Others may start it. Others may be inflammatory and try to poke your bees nest to get a rise out of you, but we do not have to give them the satisfaction of getting us to lose our cool.
- The temptation through the centuries was to say that since James was saying here, *And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.* James 3:6, that the tongue was uncontrollable and the speaker got a pass. Like a rudder on a ship – the tongue could run a perfectly good person aground. But

James was thinking about this in a completely Hebrew way, which said that the tongue is a part of the complete human and therefore part of the unit. So if the unit is a follower of Jesus Christ, than the tongue is under his control. So while the wrong words might come forth, it couldn't be said "The devil made me do it!" Our words are our responsibility. Watching what we say is up to us.

- So,

Some practical things

- I've already covered some ideas on this in our internet communication, but how about some other key points
- How are we when we're driving? How much "horn swearing" do we do? How many dirty looks do we give to those who cut us off? First of all, our driving needs to reflect we are followers of the Prince of Peace. But our behavior when we're behind the wheel can inflame people who are not able to control their rage. About a month ago a funeral was held at a church where I once served for a beautiful young lady who was shot and killed in a road rage incident as she and her husband were down south for a vacation. Neither she nor her husband, who was driving, did anything to aggravate the young killer, other than cut him off as they drove on an unfamiliar highway – but he was having a bad day and will pay for it for the rest of his life.
- How are we with what we say? William Barclay writes, "*The fire of the tongue has been used to burn many. Children are told sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me. But that child's rhyme isn't really true; the bitter pain of a word spoken against us can hurt us for a lifetime, long after a broken bone has healed.*" Darla Whyel says, "*Sticks and stone can break my bones, but words can break my heart.*" I have seen harsh words and unfeeling words literally wilt a child before my very eyes. Discipline and chastening are necessary for raising children in a way they will seek after God's own heart, but how we put that into words can make or break a spirit. Likewise with how we speak to our spouses. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say it really works here. But sullen silence can be just as bad. Christ Followers talk things out. Barclay writes, "*What others say to us and what we say to others can last a long time, for good or for evil. The casual sarcastic or critical remark can inflict a lasting injury on another person. The well-timed encouragement or compliment can inspire someone for the rest of their life.*" Soooo true!!!
- Here's one for me. How are we with joking? This brings me full circle to Andrée Peterson's column since she referred to inappropriate joking. She referred to Proverbs where the writer speaks of the person who doesn't consider the destructive power of his words. *Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, "I am only joking!"* Proverbs 26:18-19. If something cuts a person to the quick, it's not funny and it's not a joke. If no one laughs, even the joker, it's not a joke.
- Here are some good Proverbs that talk about good words. I'll read them and let them soak in rather than commenting on them in the interest of time.
 - *Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad.* Proverbs 12:25.
 - *Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.* Proverbs 16:24
 - *Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.* Proverbs 18:21

Conclusion: James asks a wonderful series of questions, *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.* James 3:11-12. And the answer to all them is no! And the answer to the question, "Can a Christ Follower bless God and curse those in his image with the same mouth?" is the same – NO, it cannot.

And that is why we need to allow him to help us as we watch what we say.

Amen.