



Watch Your Mouth

James 3:1-12

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Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 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. 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! 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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 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

According to psychologists—not me, psychologists—the person to your right, is a liar. Also, the person to your left is a liar. Also the person sitting in your spot is a liar. Research suggests that even the most honest people lie at least once or twice a day (Jeff Hancock, *Ted Talk*).

Most politicians lie. *The Washington Post* fact checker claims that President Trump has made more than 5000 false or misleading claims since becoming President. That seems like a lot. On the other end of the political spectrum, Julia Salazar, a Democratic socialist New York state Senate candidate, lied extensively on her resume. Many of the supporters who helped her win the primary argued quite openly, “Yes, she lied, but the lies don’t matter as long as she has the right opinions.” Watching the Supreme Court confirmation this week was painful, because it is obvious that truth is not the goal. Lies seem normal.

Lying starts early. Babies will fake a cry, pause, wait to see who is coming and then go right back to crying. One-year-olds hide things. Two-year-olds bluff. Five-year-olds lie outright. Seven-year-olds manipulate with flattery. Nine-year-olds are masters of the cover-up. By the time we enter college, we are going to lie to our mom in one out of every five interactions (Pamela Meyers, *Ted Talk*).

We wish we were better, smarter, stronger, taller, and richer. We lie to bridge that gap, to

connect our fantasies about who we wish we were with what we are really like. On a given day, studies show that we are lied to from ten to two hundred times. Strangers tend to lie on average about three times within the first ten minutes of meeting each other.

The numbers suggest that extroverts lie more than introverts. Polls show that men tell twice as many lies as women—assuming the women they asked told the truth (Marco Tempes, *Ted Talk*). Men lie eight times more about themselves than they do other people. Women lie more to protect other people.

If you are an average married couple, you are going to lie to your spouse in one out of every ten interactions. That sounds bad, but if you are unmarried, the number is one in three (Pamela Meyers, *Ted Talk*). When we hear the numbers, we are shocked at how prevalent lying is.

Diogenes ran around Greece with his lantern looking for a single honest man—and died without finding one. If Diogenes was still around, he would still be looking. If asked what he had been doing for 2400 years, he would probably lie.

Our words do not mean much. We think talk is cheap. Anyone can talk big: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

We do not think much of people who are all talk. Trying to change the world with words is like trying

to knock over a concrete wall by throwing light bulbs at it. We do not believe that words mean much. We do not expect truth from resumes, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or online dating sites.

We say things like: “You were great.” “I’ll be ready in just a minute.” “This is just what I’ve always wanted.” “You do not look fat in those jeans.” “I just found your email in my Spam folder.”

We type “On my way” when we’re just thinking about being on our way. We are talking to somebody, and say, “Sorry, got work, gotta go.” But really it’s “Sorry, got bored, gotta go.”

Remember the saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” We think we should be judged by what we do and not by what we say. It is hard for us to take our words seriously. But if words are unimportant, then why is it so hard to say some things? Speaking from the heart is difficult. The more important the question, the harder it is to talk about.

How do you bring up the most significant subjects? “Have you talked to your daughter about this? You know how important it is.” “No, not yet, but I will.” “Have you and your husband discussed this?” “No, we never have.” “Have you told her how you feel?” “No. I should.” We avoid talking about many of the things that matter most.

Why is it easier to discuss the weather than the things we hold dear? Why is it that we who attend

worship on Sunday find it hard to talk about faith on Monday?

Why is it so difficult to say, “You were right,” “I think you’re wonderful,” “I apologize”?

Have you noticed that when we are deeply moved our voices go? Our words matter more than we realize. There is cheap talk, meaningless chatter and idle conversation, but there is also the kind of speaking Jesus refers to in Matthew 12, “By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Do we believe that? Will we be justified by what we say? That does not sound right, but it is what Jesus said.

In his letter to the churches, James writes, “Don’t be a teacher because being responsible for your words is dangerous.” James knows that small things make a big difference. The tongue is like a ship’s rudder or a horse’s bridle—tiny by comparison with a ship or a horse, but crucial. Moving the rudder slightly at the beginning of a boat trip is the difference between landing at a resort hotel in Aruba and a police escort in Cuba. A small metal bit properly placed can control Secretariat.

James knows about fires. It only takes a spark to lose a forest in California. Words are matches that destroy woods that have been growing for decades. Friendships that have grown slowly are torn apart quickly by the wrong words said in the

wrong way. A careless comment at a weak moment creates jealousy that smokes and smolders.

We too easily condemn and belittle. We would rather sound clever than kind. We say things that turn harmony into chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send whole families up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke which comes, according to James, from the pit of hell.

James has been around churches enough to recognize the way nice people use words that sound soft to hit hard. His letter reads like James heard a church member say something mean to another church member. James is furious that the same tongue that sings, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" cuts down those who have sung the same words. We know about insults disguised as compliments. We have read, heard, and used words that demean others because of their gender, ethnicity, orientation, or economic status. We are surrounded by so many lies that we do not recognize how much the truth matters.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "There is no God higher than truth." We cannot live in community if lies carry the same weight as truth, if bad words are allowed to destroy good ones. We cannot get used to empty words. We cannot accept alternative facts. We cannot stop insisting on gracious words.

Thoughtless words hurt everyone by distancing us from thoughtful ones. They make us forget how

good words can be. Uncaring words turn harmony into hatred.

We know how to gripe about our family, our job, and our church. We know how to use empty words, to talk about prejudice and poverty with no intention of doing anything more than saying the right words.

We know how to use our words to gain advantages over others, show ourselves more intelligent, and whittle away at those who disagree with us.

Words hurt more than sticks and stones: “Have you gained a little weight?” “What did you do to your hair?” “Did someone give you that dress?” “I’m surprised you weren’t invited.” “When are you finally going to get married?” “Did you mean to get pregnant?” “I don’t think I love you anymore.” “I’m not sure you’re the right one for this job.” “Your son is in a better place. God knows more than we do.” “I don’t think this will work. We better not try it.” “I’m too busy right now. I won’t be able to help.”

Our words reflect our hearts—even when we wish they did not. We are what we say. We recognize it when we listen to others. We hear it in the words we speak. We are only as good as our words and our words are not always good.

James’ letter is clear on how dangerous words are, but it does not spell out the hope of good words

nearly so plainly. Free speech is a mixed blessing. We bless as well as curse with what we say. Our words not only hurt, but also heal. At their best, words flow like fresh water. Our words sing, teach and encourage.

God teaches us to give grace to one another with our words. Judaism begins with faith in words. Genesis tells us that it all began as God spoke the words of creation. Isaiah writes, “The word of God goes forth and will not return until it accomplishes its end.” The Christian faith is faith in words. John’s gospel starts, “In the beginning was the word.” Jesus said, “By your words you will be justified.” Christ changed the world with his words. We are his imitators, his followers.

Every good word we speak comes from God. Peggy Noonan said, “Words have the power to make dance the dullest beanbag of a heart.” We can be the people whose words help others dance. The words we say affect others’ hearts. We need words that bless. We need words that heal. We need words that make others better.

Speaking has such power. Walk down a hospital hall. Find a door open, stick your head in and say, “Hello.” That one word turns on the light, straightens the sheets, opens the blinds, fluffs the pillow, and changes the face of the patient—just one word.

A young couple, nervous and frightened stands before a minister. The young man says, “I do.” The young woman says, “I do.” The minister says, “By the authority vested in me.” And by those words a home is begun.

A man sits at a table with his friends. When supper is over he asks for some wine and leftover bread and says, “This is my body, this is my blood” and by those few words a supper becomes a remembrance of God’s love.

A kind word is such a gift. Good words cost so little and mean so much: “You’re the best person to do this, so I hope you’ll consider it.” “I know we’re having problems right now, but I’ll do whatever I can to make this work.” “You’re one of the best students I’ve had. I think you’d be a great teacher.” “What you said in the meeting was important. You made a difference.” “You’re an amazing child. I hope you know that.”

We leave too many powerful words unsaid: “Thank you for asking.” “I appreciate you.” “I’m sorry.” “Let me help.” “I love you.”

Our words reveal what God is doing in us. Our words have such power. We bring life with our words. By our words we will be justified. From our mouths come blessings. What do you need to say to the person you love most, and to the person you love least? What should you say to the God who calls you to speak good words?

Choose your words carefully, because we leave too many good words unspoken.

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