

SUNDAY 2.9.20

Scripture:

People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish. No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn't be this way!

James 3:7b-10

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

Ephesians 4:29

“Wholesome speech is a tree of life”

MONDAY 2.10.20 Proverbs 15:1-4

Many of the Proverbs have a bit of a scattershot quality to them. But in these four verses, the Hebrew sages put together four wise sayings that address the quality of human speech, both in its ability to wound and damage, but also to heal and give life. (Apart from Proverbs, the image of “the tree of life” only occurs in the Hebrew creation story in Genesis 2 and 3, and in John the seer's visions of God's new earth in Revelation 2 and 22.)

- The *Common English Bible* translates the Hebrew word in Proverbs 15:1 as “sensitive,” and other translations use “soft” or “gentle.” For some, such words give an impression of weakness. But a later proverb said, “A commander can be persuaded with patience, and a tender tongue can break a bone” (Proverbs 25:15). When have you seen wisely chosen words break down barriers that harsh speech would only have made higher and more rigid?
- Professor Paul Koptak wrote, “These proverbs do more than simply urge us to watch what we say and how; they also inspire us to examine the intentions of our hearts.” Have you ever found, when you were (maybe reluctantly) honest with yourself, that the inner sources of your “righteous indignation” were not as “righteous” as you at first thought they were? Does responding to anger with more anger usually make things better or worse?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help my mouth not to “gush” with foolish words. Grow in me your spirit that can make my speech more and more a “tree of life” for the people I meet. Amen.

“Quick to listen, slow to speak”

TUESDAY 2.11.20 James 1:19-21

James, Jesus' half-brother, apparently became a Christ-follower when Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:7). He became an influential leader in the early church. In this short letter, he linked hasty, angry speech with “moral filth.” To James, a cutting outburst was no small matter, but something hurtful and wrong.

- Early Christians faced social exclusion and legal persecution. (The historian Josephus said James himself was stoned to death in Jerusalem about 62 A.D.) It must have been tempting and easy for Christians in those conditions to rage against people who treated them so unjustly. How does James 1:19-20 speak to us, who face much milder tests of our faith and temper, when we find ourselves becoming angry and eager to denounce some person or organization?
- Scholar David Allan Hubbard wrote, “Harsh, vindictive speech—even though apparently based on God’s Word—is not the way to accomplish God’s justice.” Through the centuries, issues like circumcision, slavery, the role of women in ministry, and (today) homosexuality have triggered such speech from Christians against other Christians. How can the “humility” of which James wrote move us away from destructive speech and toward living into what James called “the word planted deep inside you”?

Prayer: O God, make me ever more “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry.” You know that’s not my natural condition, Lord—but I know you can change me from the inside out. Amen.

“Doers of the word”

WEDNESDAY 2.12.20 James 1:22-25

After describing the danger of hasty, ugly words, James moved on to describe “the word planted deep inside you” (James 1:21) that we should follow. He called it “the law of freedom,” God’s wisdom, above all as Jesus taught it. He did not drop the subject of wise speech in these verses. He highlighted the wisdom and freedom of making all of our actions, including our speech, accord with God’s directions for optimal living.

- James’ words about the law of freedom were rooted in Jesus’ teaching. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other” (John 13:34-35). In what ways have you found greater freedom as you’ve grown in your ability to love even those you dislike or disagree with?
- People often mistakenly think James contradicted the apostle Paul. We see their basic harmony as we compare James’ words with Paul’s words to the Galatians: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this” (Galatians 5:22-23). Picture how much better your days, and those of people you affect, would be if your speech more and more reflected the qualities Paul said the Spirit will grow in our lives.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, I want my life to bear your signature. So fill my life with your fruit. As others watch me, may they daily see me growing more and more like the person you want to shape me to be. Amen.

True devotion controls what we say

THURSDAY 2.13.20 James 1:26-27

James used strong language—not angry, but strong. He said if people don’t control their words, “their devotion is worthless.” Some people then (and now) used angry, ugly criticisms of “the wicked” (however they defined that) to try to show everyone else how devoted they were to

God. It didn't work, James said—speaking that way was disobedience to God, not devotion. True devotion, he said, shows when we care for and help the weak, not in reckless speech.

- Ordinary Christians suffered from the social and legal persecution they faced. But those things were even harder on orphans and widows, who had no family and no legal standing to protect them at all. Which, James asked, would help them more—a biting, angry tirade against the oppressors, or a tangible act of love and assistance? How can we apply the principle behind his words to the situations we face today?
- We live in a world where tweets, anonymous comment boards and a 24-hour news cycle seem, at times, to bombard us with contentious, belittling speech. James wrote that one aspect of devotion to God is “to keep the world from contaminating us.” How do you actively seek to keep our world's barrage of negativity from contaminating you? What choices help you do that?

Prayer: Almighty God, you love me. You know that elevated blood pressure and a pulse racing from anger are hurtful, not helpful. Guide me toward your pure, peaceable approach to life. Amen.

A new nature, free from malice and lying

FRIDAY 2.14.20 Colossians 3:8-10

As Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae, he recognized that there is an unbreakable connection between who we are on the inside and what we say for others to hear. He named anger, rage, malice, slander, obscene language and lying as things to “set aside.” The first three are attitudes, but they inevitably show themselves in the harmful kinds of speech the apostle named in the last three items on the list.

- Scholar William Barclay said we can turn the items in this list about speech into positive commands. The first two, he said, tell us that a Christian's speech must be KIND, and it must be PURE. How easy or hard do you find it to speak in those ways if you feel anger, rage or malice toward someone? How can we be kind in our speech even when it is necessary to make an honest appraisal of another person?
- Barclay added that a Christian's speech must be TRUE. He noted, “It is easy to distort the truth; an alteration in the tone of voice or an eloquent look will do it; and there are silences which can be as false and misleading as any words.” In what ways can the standard of “true speech” help us avoid sweeping generalizations or statements about people's inner motives? When have you been the receiver, or the giver, of false statements made in anger?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when Paul said I should “set aside” these bad things, he used a word that means “taking off a garment.” Help me discard nurtured anger, and the ugly speech it produces, as I would a dirty, worn-out shirt, and to put on your new way of life. Amen.

Let the words of my mouth say what is helpful

SATURDAY 2.15.20 Ephesians 4:25-32; Psalm 19:9-14

Ephesians 4 and Psalm 19 contain the theme for this sermon series. We will read these passages each Saturday during the series. As we do this, consider memorizing at least Ephesians 4:29 and Psalm 19:14, and if possible other parts of the passages. Changing our

speech requires letting God change the inner sources from which our speech springs. We want the words of our mouth, AND the meditations of our heart, to be pleasing to God. We aim to be a community in which we “Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.”

- Scholar N. T. Wright, commenting on Ephesians 4:25-32, said, “Living as a Christian demands that we grow up in our thinking: you have to learn to identify your own moods and behaviour patterns, to see which ones are going in the right direction and which ones in the wrong direction ... we should regard our moods, and the speech which flows from them, as we might a strong but wilful horse, which needs to be reminded frequently of the direction we’re supposed to be going in.” When did you last say words that hurt, and then ask yourself, “Why did I say that?” What helps you to understand your “interior landscape” better, to keep you from blurting out words you regret and wish you could take back?

Prayer: Lord of my life, be Lord of my words. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Family Activity: Scripture contains some of the world’s most important words. Create a stack of Scriptures for your home. Pass out colored index cards and pens or pencils along with a Bible to each family member. Ask each person to choose 3-4 favorite Bible verses and write his or her name and a favorite verse on each index card. Collect the cards and keep them on the dining table. Before each meal, select a card, read the passage and pray for the person who chose it. Place that card on the bottom of the stack. If you have young family members, invite them to draw pictures describing the verses or help other family members. Keep adding to your stack throughout the year and see how many verses you can memorize!

This study was adapted from The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.