

For the next 5 weeks, our worship focus is on the theme: *The Power of Words*. We begin this Sunday by taking a look at how our words can be used to either tear down or build up. We've already heard from the epistle of James. Listen now to what Paul writes to the church in Ephesus. (Insert)

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It's difficult to launch into a series with this focus without being thrust into a mode of 'self-inventory'. As I reviewed the scriptures we'll explore for this series, I found myself noting much more failure than success in my own life when it comes to adhering to scriptural wisdom about the right and redeeming use of words. (Based on what I often see on Facebook, I don't think I'm the only one...)

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To begin, I want to share that Ephesians 4:29 will serve as our theme verse throughout the series. (This verse is printed on a card. The ushers will begin passing a basket so you can take 2 or 3 or 5 cards for yourself. I do encourage you to take more than one, so that you can carry it with you and share it with others.) For the next 30 or so days I want to invite you to read this card daily; that these words would become embedded in your hearts and minds: "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."

As we can infer from Paul's words, the church in Ephesus - like many first century churches - struggled with conflict. In his letter Paul tells the Ephesians to be humble, gentle, and to speak the truth in love. He tells them to put off falsehood. He tells them not to sin (presumably in their speech) when they are angry. Then comes the memory verse: "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."

What does Paul mean by 'evil talk'? The Greek word he uses here is *sapros* and it refers to food that's gone rotten. Ever find something in a Tupperware container in the back of your refrigerator that you no longer recognize? That's *sapros*. It means something rotten, disgusting, and putrefied. Paul is saying that we must not let rotten, disgusting, putrid words come from our mouths! (Put a little differently, Paul is saying 'don't vomit all over people with your words' and certainly there are times when that happens, right? We vomit on people with our words, and we spew vomitus words about others...)

But Paul also gives us a positive command. "Speak words that are useful for building up, words that give grace to those who hear." Grace, as we know, is an undeserved gift; it's un-earned kindness. So, even if another person has done nothing that deserves kindness - even if we think they deserve a comment to 'put them in their place' - we are to give grace instead. Grace unreservedly seeks the good for others, and so Paul is reminding us that our speech needs to be grace-filled.

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With this goal front and center, let's look at our reading from James. Most likely, this epistle was not written by the Apostle James, but rather by Jesus' half-brother who became a Christ-follower when Jesus appeared to him following his resurrection. Mark 6:3 names James as 1 of 4 of Jesus' brothers (or half-brothers) and Paul alludes to James' conversion in 1 Corinthians 15:7.

After his conversion James became a leader in the early church and in this short epistle, beginning in ch. 1:19-27, James sternly admonishes those who speak recklessly; without compassion and grace. James writes: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." James goes on to say that those who speak without charity are 'polluted by the world' no matter how 'Christian' they claim themselves to be.

The epistle then focusses on a couple of other issues in ch. 2, namely that Christians should not show partiality (or favoritism) to the wealthy over the poor, and that our faith must be made manifest through our actions. This is where James famously states: "faith without works is dead." In ch. 3, after addressing those two matters, James returns to the theme he raised in ch.1 (and that Paul raises in his letter to the church in Ephesus) - the power of our words to build or tear down.

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When talking about the power of the tongue, James uses three potent metaphors. He compares the tongue to a small bridle that can be used to make a large animal - a horse - go where we want it to go. He also likens the tongue to a rudder on a ship that, though comparatively small, can steer a very large ship. (I suspect Navy folks can really relate to that metaphor.) Finally, he compares the tongue to small fire (a match) that can reduce a whole forest to an ashen heap. (James clearly is NOT at a loss for words when talking about the power of words!)

James then states: “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 made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. *My brothers and sisters, this ought not be so.*”

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So here are a few questions to ponder: Do you speak uncharitably about others? Do you ever tell half-truths? Do you spread rumors? Do you engage in gossip, back-biting, or slander? Have you heard something so-and-so supposedly said, and repeated it, without going to the source? If you don't do these things (or you haven't), you probably don't need to come to church – *because you might learn how!* As one biblical scholar observes: “Local congregations are always a potential cottage industry for gossip.”

But the truth is that this is a universal problem. At church, at work, in our homes and schools... Taming the tongue is a theme in all religions because it's such a pervasive toxin to our relationship with God and others. I certainly know Christians who regularly, freely, and cheerfully speak evil of others. As for me, I sometimes – too often – do all of these things! (And honestly, isn't there a strange sense of pleasure in the destructive way we can deploy our words? People don't gossip or spread rumors because they feel bad doing it - until they realize they shouldn't have! We gossip and we listen to gossip because there's a charge we get out of having 'the dirt' on others.)

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A 16th century saint, Fr. Philip Neri, was said to have assigned a woman an unusual penance for spreading gossip. When she came to this priest and asked him what she could do to repent of this sin, Neri instructed her to go home and get a feather pillow and then to return to the church. When she returned they went together to the top of the church bell tower where the priest instructed her to rip open the pillow and to fling the feathers into the wind. The feathers went everywhere...

Then Neri assign her penance. He told her to go collect all the feathers that had been scattered. The woman remarked that it would be impossible to collect all the feathers. The priest agreed, ‘Your gossip has spread throughout the entire town and there is no way you can take it back.’ When gossip or other malicious words are scattered abroad we can't gather them back. (It's the same as 'cc'ing' people on email, right? We can't undo that!)

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Based on what James has to say about the power of the tongue, and based on experiences that confirm what he says, it's a wonder to me that James doesn't just counsel those who follow Jesus to take a vow of silence!

But James offers different counsel. He says, “With our tongues we both bless the Lord and Father and *curse beings made in God's likeness.*” James is letting us know that we need to remember that any person we're speaking about, with, to, and for, is made in God's likeness; and therefore, imbued with sacred and infinite worth. C.S. Lewis once stated, “There are no ordinary people; it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.” We need to keep that in mind as our foundation for the way we speak about, with, to and for others.

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A few years ago, to open a committee meeting, a layperson shared a devotion which expanded on C.S. Lewis' thoughts. “The person sitting next to you is a unique world of experience. Within this person there is a world premiere of unique experiences going on - experiences which no other persons ever had, or will ever have. Thus the person sitting next to you is a cluster of memories of the past and expectations of the future. They are really a whole colony of persons, of inner inhabitants, of people met all during life. Something of those people has entered into this person sitting next to you. So that the person sitting next to you is really a city - a community. In that community lives still the father and mother of this person, the brother and the sister, the children they played with most, the people they met at school, at work, at worship. All of the living things of this world that came and interacted with this person - they are still deep within. *The person sitting next to you is the greatest miracle and the greatest mystery you will ever meet.* The person sitting next to you is sacred.”

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I began today talking about the difficult work of self-inventory when I consider the way I wield my words. I want to close by articulating an intention I want to live by (and maybe you will to). It is this: Each of you is a sacred. A beloved child of God. I will do my best to treat you that way. Amen.