

Sermon: Sept. 13, 2009

Scripture: James 3:1-12 New Testament
Proverbs 1:20-33 Old Testament

Sermon Title: Free Speech: Blessing and/or Curse

Call to Worship: from: Psalm 19

Leader: The heavens are telling the glory of God
And the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.

People: Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night declares knowledge

Leader: There is no speech, nor are there words
Their voice is not heard;

People: yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world.

All: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Hymns: #485 To God Be the Glory
#281 Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah
#327 O Word of God Incarnate

Prayer of Confession:

Heavenly Father, we have learned from Scripture that when You spoke, the created order was formed. And when you spoke Your Word came forth in the form of Your Son. We know Jesus to be Your Word spoken from Your very heart. But when we speak, Lord, our words do more to confuse than to clarify. Our mouths send forth words that hurt and destroy others. And our words are often cutting and derogatory. Forgive us, Heavenly Father for being so insensitive as to the ways that our words hurt and maim. Forgive us when we speak without thinking about the ramifications of our words. And remind us of the love and grace that Jesus' words brought to a very troubled world, so that we might model our language after our Savior. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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The first thing I want us to remember about this passage is that it is directed toward those who claim to be members of the household of faith. It is not written to upbraid the heathen or to chastise the infidels. It was written directly to those who are members of the Church scattered across Asia Minor. James writes at the very beginning of his epistle:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.

James has never forgotten that he is a child of the Hebrew Nation, that his roots are in Judaism and that Christ came first to restore God's Grace to the Children of Israel. So, James' little book of wisdom is directed to all of the remnant of Israel who are scattered abroad, who have been drawn to faith in Christ, and who now live as scattered islands of faith within the ocean of the Gentile community.

So, when James gets to the use and misuse of our tongues in Chapter 3, he is pointing directly at how we unleash our tongues within the fellowship of the believers. James paints a picture of a tongue that is both evil and good, an instrument of both blessing and cursing. When James says that the tongue is

unruly evil, full of deadly poison, he means exactly what he says.

The truth is, my friends, words can kill. Words can maim and hurt. Words can cut to the quick and cause mental and emotional anxiety in those upon whom the words are directed. I am reminded of the recent case of a mother who became upset at the way her daughter was being treated at school, especially by one particular girl. This mother used the internet and assumed the identity of a young boy to berate and chastise that girl. She spread false rumors and eventually that young high school student committed suicide. Such things ought not to be, and especially among those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ as their savior.

Is there something going on in James' world that he does not want to state openly? Could it be that he had gotten wind of the fact that believers were attacking each other with their tongues? Had James gotten messages from some of the young churches in Asia Minor that members were engaged in slander and verbal attacks on each other? It sure appears to be the case. Why else would James bring it up? What kind of witness would this be to the Gentiles who were beginning to be drawn to the message of the Gospel of Christ?

This is one of the most difficult challenges that I face as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. To say nothing of my position as a minister in Christ's Church. I really have a difficult time holding my tongue when I see certain behaviors taking place among Christians. Let me give you an example. Just last week I missed Committee Night here at Altavista

because a friend's daughter was murdered in Roanoke and her funeral was that night. The minister who conducted the funeral preached for one solid hour. It was a tirade against the public school system, the government, the power of the Devil and anyone who did not believe the King James Bible to be the infallible Word of God. There were no words of comfort for that poor mother sitting in front of him. There were no words of comfort for the deceased woman's two children. There were no words of comfort for her friends who had come to pay last respect. There was not one word of hope, not one iota of the Gospel of Grace for those who were hurting. And I sat there and I seethed, and once or twice I mumbled under my breath. And Elaine punched me in the ribs. I was so upset that after the service I went to the car and waited for Elaine to say goodbye to the family.

And I have to constantly remind myself that as a member of Christ's Body, I simply cannot allow myself to unleash my tongue. If, as James writes, the tongue can be an instrument of both blessing and cursing, then it is beholden upon me to struggle to let my words be words of blessing. But try as I might, I could find no blessing words to say about that funeral, and certainly no words of blessing could I find to speak to that poor misdirected preacher who felt that he was doing what God had called him to do. Preach judgment and condemnation.

Back in 1967 when I left seminary and took my first church, I hadn't been on the field more than two weeks when an elderly gentleman in the church was killed in an automobile accident. It was my first funeral. I thought I did a pretty good job, what with me not knowing the family that well. But no sooner had I

returned home than the phone rang and a local Baptist Preacher introduced himself and said that he had been at the funeral I had just conducted and he wanted to inform me that I was way out of line for praying for the deceased man. He spent ten minutes explaining where I had gone wrong, how bad my theology was, and how many folks there needed to hear about the judgment of God, not the mercy and grace of God. He became quite agitated and I finally had to excuse myself and hang up. I've never forgotten the feeling of inadequacy that rushed over me as he ranted and raved about my praying for the deceased member. What a horrible pastor I was.

It is a difficult lesson, but those of us who follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ need to learn the lesson. Guard our tongues when it comes to making comments about other believers. Yes, right here in the walls of this sanctuary, in the Sunday school classrooms, in the fellowship hall, or out on the streets. Put a bridle on our tongues. We need to be in control. We need to guard what we say because anything we say has the potential to hurt and destroy another of God's creatures. And, because we never know if an unbeliever is listening and will immediately say to himself, "Well, if that is what Christianity is all about, I'll have none of it."

Have you ever noticed how some folks can criticize and berate an individual and then turn right around and say "Bless their heart." As if that made the earlier words of criticism OK. "Well, you know Mary Sue, she just has to have everything her own way. She simply cannot let others make any suggestions. She's a tyrant. Bless Her Heart"

“Well, you know George. If the entire congregation wants to put down new rugs in the sanctuary, he will oppose it and threaten to leave the Church and take his pledge with him. He is so hard headed. You simply cannot work with him. Bless His Heart.”

As if that phrase “Bless His Heart” can counteract the poison of the words you have just uttered. Why do we do that? We will talk about others behind their backs and then to justify ourselves we pass a blessing. James says: “*out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.*” Vs. 10

We need to watch everything we say, because the old devil is just waiting to trip us up and to use our words of hate and vindictiveness against the Gospel.

This all reminds me of the story of the elderly Presbyterian minister who had served a church for over thirty years. And every time a new baby was born into the congregation he had greeted the new child on its first Sunday in Church with a wonderful heartfelt complement, which always made the parents feel good. As a matter of fact, he had developed a reputation for coming up with just the right words for each new baby. Well, as fate would have it, a baby was born into that congregation that every member of the Church knew the pastor would have a difficult time with. No one in the Church wanted to say it out loud, but everyone was thinking: “O my, what a sad and ugly little baby.” Whatever will the pastor find to say? Indeed, the pastor himself was wondering and praying about what he would say to those parents. The Sunday arrived and

the mother brought her babe to Church for the first time. Following the service she presented the child to the pastor as she left the church. She thrust the child up into his face, and in a moment of sudden inspiration the pastor sounded forth in his baritone resonance: **Now that is a real baby!** And the mother and father left the church that day floating on a cloud.

Words matter! What you and I say is a reflection of what is going on inside us. If we say that we love each other as Christ loved us, then the words we utter need to reflect that truth. If we say in our Apostles Creed that “we believe in the Holy Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints”, then our words about other branches of Christ’s Church need to be uplifting and loving. There is room for honest disagreement with our Baptist and Methodist and Holiness friends in Christ, but there is no place for vindictive rhetoric that belittles other branches of Christ’s Church.

And out there in the world at large, we need to remember that folks who disagree with us socially or politically also worship and serve the same Lord and Savior. When I hear the kind of bitter rhetoric that has occurred on national TV over the past several months, the calls for the death of Our President and his family, attacks on political rivals condemning them to Hell, I wonder if people even hear the words that emanate from their mouths. There has to be a disconnect between the vocal chords and the brain and the heart.

When I hear such things I am reminded once again of what James wrote: ***No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.***

And I am also reminded of James' earlier warning: "*the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles.*" We know how a little fire can ignite an entire forest. Just ask the folks in California. One ill spoken word can start a Church on a downhill slide to destruction. How many little chapels are there dotted over the countryside that once were thriving congregations when someone started taking pot shots as the pastor, or at the elders, or at the Sunday School Superintendent?

You know, that's how the Devil operates. The Devil uses those who see themselves as the Saints of the Church, who have an inflated sense of self worth and self justification, and the Old Devil turns these folks loose on the world. And their words become the Gospel, the truth, because most folks want to be told what to believe and there is no end to the folks who will tell you what to believe. Before you know it, the world is divided and factions have chosen up sides with each side claiming the real truth. But the real truth does not lie in vindictive poisonous words and hateful attacks. The real truth lies in the Gospel of God's Grace in Christ.

And James has hit the nail on the head. What comes out of our tongues ought not be words that curse and destroy. But rather words that uplift and build and bring the light of God's Grace to bear on all of life. Amen.

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