

Proverbs 15:1-4, 23; James 3:1-12

I recall a time in sixth grade. Entering class after lunch and recess, I looked up at the blackboard. On that board were two names, mine and one other student. Beside our names the teacher had written the results of the recent math story problem test. It might not have been so bad except we had the two lowest scores on test. With other students listening in the teacher looks at me and says, ""Chuck, you ought to be expelled for that score". My emotional system was being flooded with shame and embarrassment. I had not intentionally tried to do poorly on that test. Math story problems at that time were difficult for me. Secondly, I didn't know what 'expelled' meant. I had to ask my mother the meaning of that word when I got home. She told me, though I did not relate to her what had occurred that afternoon in the classroom.

My retelling of this account illustrates several things. Words have meaning and impact. People in positions of authority possess a great responsibility in how words are chosen and delivered. Third, the person or persons on the receiving end of the words we speak may be deeply affected. Ask Fox News 'Megan Kelly. Have you been following 'The Donald' lately?

James clearly understands these things. You might wonder why he appears so direct and overly harsh in his tone to the congregation. A little background might help. Teachers in the early church are highly esteemed and important. The same respect Rabbis held in the Jewish community is transferred to teachers in the newly formed Christian community. In Paul's letters teachers are second only to apostles and prophets.

Converts were handed over to these teachers for instructions. For Christianity everything depends on believing the truth about Christ. We hear Paul talk about 'false teachers'. Some tried to turn Christianity into a new Judaism, introducing circumcision and Jewish law and ritual as a basis of faith practice beyond Christ alone. Others did not live out the beliefs and values that they taught and professed. Their lifestyles contradicted their teaching and dishonored the faith. Then there were those who tried to teach before they knew anything.

Walk with me to 1Timothy 1:3-7 and listen to one of Paul's concerns. "Instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions". This is why the Presbyterian Church has ordination and educational standards.

Paul also addresses the concern of teachers and preachers who draw attention to themselves and not Christ, pandering to the crowd. He chides those "who will not put up with sound doctrine, but having

itching ears, will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” (2Timothy 4:3-4).

A correlated concern comes from experiences with Jewish Rabbis who became seduced by their position, knowledge and esteem. Jesus depicted such spiritual teachers as tyrants, ostentatious in their demonstration of piety, lovers of high places socially, glorying in their subservient respect by others.

Observant and aware of all this and the effect of words, James writes, “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”. He goes on, recognizing our human frailties, “Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle”. And nobody is perfect.

Our Presbyterian Polity addresses this issue by placing responsibility upon the Session for approval of teachers and the source of study embraced. It is a matter of quality, approving what is taught and the credentials of those who teach within the church.

Perhaps you have heard the story about the pastor walking down the street when he came upon a group of about a dozen boys, all of them between 10 and 12 years of age.

The group had surrounded a dog. Concerned lest the boys were hurting the dog, he went over and asked, “What are you doing with that dog?”

One of the boys replied, “This dog is just an old neighborhood stray. We all want him, but only one of us can take him home. So we’ve decided that whichever one of us can tell the biggest lie will get to keep the dog”.

Of course, the pastor was taken aback. “You boys shouldn’t be having a contest telling lies!” He then launched into a 10-minute sermon against lying, beginning, “Don’t you boys know it’s a sin to tell a lie”, and ending with, “Why, when I was your age, I never told a lie”,

Dead silence embraced the moment. Then, just as the pastor thought that his words, his speech, had gotten through to them, the smallest boy gave a deep knowing sigh and said, “All right, give him the dog” (Homiletics, September-October 2014, p. 42-3).

Politicians, when caught in a lie, often fall back on one particular statement from their rhetorical bag of tricks. “Mistakes were made”. A Wikipedia article on the subject draws from a New York Times article calling the phrase ‘a classic Washington linguistic construct’. Commentator William Safire has defined the phrase as ‘a passive-evasive way of acknowledging error while distancing the speaker from responsibility for it (Homiletics, p.45).

Recently Hillary Clinton apologized for using a private email server for her work as Secretary of State. Guess what she said? “That was a mistake. I’m sorry about that. I take responsibility”. Earlier she declined to apologize. All of us have experienced similar moments. We fess up when we have to do so.

A study led by the Cornell professor Jeff Hancock, who has extensively researched the dynamics of dishonesty, found that one in 10 text messages involves a lie of some kind. In a Consumer Reports survey, one in four people admitted to falsifying information on Facebook. According to a study of online daters, a full 81% exaggerated their attributes on their dating profiles” (Homiletics, Megan Garber, “How to Catch a Liar on the Internet”, The Atlantic).

James won’t allow us any wriggle room, however. He takes us directly into the evil effects of the tongue. Using the image of a horse’s bridle, the rudder of a ship, and the blaze a small fire may start, he writes, “The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body....no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison....with it we bless the Lord and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing”. His conclusion? “My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so”. As one Lord Fisher put it, “Life is strewn with orange peel” (Barclay, James, p.96). Even secularists in the ancient world recognized the dark bent of human nature reflected in the tongue. Thucydides writes, “It is the nature of man to sin in both private and public life” (Barclay, p.96).

Jesus had some pointed things to say as well about words avalanching from the tongue. In Matthew 12:36 Jesus is recorded as saying, “I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”. Character is revealed by one’s speech.

Words can heal, deceive, and hurt. Our Proverbs passage puts us on the right path. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger...A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit...to make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in season, how good it is!” Ecclesiasticus 14:1 is on target, “Blessed is the man (or woman) who has not slipped with his (or her) mouth”.

James wants us to examine our speech and hearts, not ply us with hopelessness. Our identities don’t have to be tied to the multiple slips of the tongue to which we have unfortunately succumbed. None of us has avoided slipping on the banana peel of the tongue. Would not each of us wish to be thought of as a person who is capable of turning away wrath by a soft word or as a person who builds others up by a good word in due season?

The way forward is to bathe our minds and hearts in the wisdom of God. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”, Jesus observes (Luke 6:45). I have to answer a basic question. Is my aim in life to sow the seeds of God’s Spirit in my heart so that what comes out of my mouth will reflect the intent of God for another made in the likeness of God? I suspect that when I position myself to be influenced by the Holy Spirit my heart will not be so inclined to manipulate others with my tongue by clever speech and devious intentions.

Or is my aim in life primarily to gratify my ego needs and personal pleasures? We are all on a trajectory toward God or self. James frames it by a rhetorical question. "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?"

The power of sin is centrifugal. It pushes everything out toward the periphery....sin is whatever you do, or fail to do, that pushes God away, that widens the gap between you and God and also the gaps within yourself (Frederick Buechner, 'Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, p.88).

James points us to the wisdom of God as the source for redirecting the destructiveness of the tongue. Will it ultimately be the desire of God in me or the desires within me that direct my character and destiny?

What might have been the difference if the words of my teacher that day had been influenced by the wisdom of God? How would the meaning and impact have been different on an impressionable child?

We have commissioned our teachers today to a great responsibility. Their words and lives have the power to impact and influence many lives this year. But all of us as Christ's people have a responsibility in how our words are spoken and delivered.

"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".