

“Words”

Jesus healed a man who was blind and mute. Everyone is in awe of the miracle – that is until the Pharisees hear about (they are a group of very religious leaders). They claim that Jesus healed the man through the power of the devil. Jesus responds by warning of the terrible consequences of accusing Him of that. He says to them, “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?” (Matthew 12:34). Then Jesus goes on to talk about the importance of the words we speak. What He says is found in Matthew, chapter 12.

Jesus says that the words we speak reveal our true character and heart. “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit” (Matthew 12:33). If a tree is healthy it will produce edible fruit; if a tree is diseased or decaying one shouldn’t expect to get delicious fruit from it. “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Matthew 12:34b).

There is a connection between our words and our true inward nature. Isn’t it true, you can tell much about a person by the way he or she talks? Often, it doesn’t take long for us to peek into a person’s inner life if we just listen to what comes out of their mouth.

Then, there are these sobering words of Jesus: “I tell you that everyone will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned”(Matthew 12:36-37). We will be held accountable for the words we speak! Jesus says we’ll have to answer for every “empty” word we’ve spoken! The Greek word for “empty” is *argos*. It literally means, “idle, non-functioning. An empty word has no legitimate purpose, it’s not profitable at all.

Words are important! You know the old saying, “Sticks and stone may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” But that’s not true, is it? Words can hurt. They can squelch a person’s dreams, or destroy a person’s good name. They can antagonize and make enemies, cause riots and wars. On the other hand, words can soothe, and heal. They can encourage and inspire. They can help people reconcile differences. They can change the course of history for the better.

There are an enormous amount of Scripture passages that relate to our speech, our words. We will just look at a few today. For example, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). “Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin” (Proverbs 13:3). (In other words, don’t be a big mouth!).

Proverbs 15:4 says, “The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.” Proverbs 21:23 tells us: “Watch your tongue and keep your mouth shut, and you will stay out of trouble.”

In the Book of James in the New Testament it says, “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (James 1:26). Later in the Book of James it says this: “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” (James 3:2-6). The tongue is a small part of our body, but it can cause great harm to ourselves and others! *Words are important!*

What are some of the ways our words can hurt and cause harm? *Filthy language, profanity, telling off-color stories are some.* If every other word someone uses is a swear word, if a person is known for telling dirty jokes, does that suggest that person has a clean mind, or a reverence for God? One summer, the summer between college and theological seminary, I worked at Armstrong in Lancaster (back in the time when Armstrong was in its heyday). Boy, did I get an education in the language department! The gang leader for the team I worked on had the same dirty mouth on him as most of the guys. When he found out I was studying for the ministry, he proceeded to tell me he was the Lay Leader in one of the United Methodist churches in our area! I thought, “Oh my!”

Gossiping is another negative use of the tone and our words. Gossiping is mentioned in the Bible. The old King James Version uses words like “talebearers”, “busybodies” to refer to people who gossip. You know what gossip is: idle talk, spreading of rumors. Someone has said a gossip is a person with a keen sense of *rumor*.

There is the story of 4 pastors – all friends - meeting with one another. One suggested that “confession is good for the soul” – and it would be good if they shared some of their weaknesses and struggles so they could pray for one another. After some hesitation, one pastor began: “I tend to be lazy. I spend most afternoons playing games on my computer.” Another piped up: “Well, I must admit I cheat a bit each year on my income taxes.” A third spoke: “Pray for me. I have a gambling addiction. I’m always at the casinos. I disguise myself so no one will recognize me. I’ve probably lost \$30-\$40 thousand dollars. My wife is about ready to divorce me.” There was silence, and they all kind of looked at the 4th pastor. Come on, we’ve all shared, one pastor pleaded. Finally, the pastor yet to speak said this, “Well, I’m a gossip, and I can’t wait to get out of here!”

Careless words about people, passing along unsavory stuff about people (even if it’s true), can cast doubt on that person’s character, or ruin that person’s reputation. Proverbs 26:22 says, “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.”

Critical, insensitive, unkind words also are hurtful. We have all said things, maybe without thinking, that have hurt family members, friends, neighbors. We’ve criticized them unfairly, maybe put them down in a way that embarrassed them, or destroyed their confidence.

One of the heroes in my life has been the first pastor who was a part of my life. He was my

pastor when I was probably in Junior High. He was the first person who planted the idea in my mind that perhaps God was calling me to be a pastor. Once I grew up we went our separate ways. Years later, when we were looking for someone to preach at the community Good Friday Service in the town I was serving, this pastor came to mind. I remembered him as a very good preacher. I had not seen him in many, many years. When I contacted him he readily agreed to come and speak at our community service. I was so looking forward to seeing my mentor again. Well, the day came, and I was waiting in the church lobby for my pastor hero to arrive. When I saw him come in, we walked towards each other. Now, we had not seen each other for years, and do you know what the first thing he said to me? He said something like this, “You’re just as short as I remember you!”

Now when someone calls me short, they are fightin’ words! And the evil part of me, the unconverted part of me wanted to shoot something back at him that wasn’t nice at all. He was tall, very skinny, and quite honestly, not very good looking. I felt like saying, “You’re just as bony and ugly as I remember you to be!” Somehow the joy and expectation of that day was diminished. My heart sank in disappointment. *We all know, don’t we, that words can hurt.*

But, praise God, words can bless and heal! Words can *give hope* at a time when life seems anything but hopeful. Words can *inspire people* to persevere and not give up, to be brave in spite of their fears. Words can *build up* a person, and give them a sense of value when they have felt worthless.

A woman named Mary Ann Bird writes about the defining moment of her childhood: “I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech. When schoolmates asked, ‘What happened to your lip’ I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

“There was, however, a teacher in the second grade who we all adore - Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, and happy--a sparkling lady. Annually we had a hearing test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back--things like: ‘The sky is blue’ or ‘Do you have new shoes?’ I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, ‘I wish you were my little girl.’” Mary Ann Bird writes, “Those seven words changed my life.” Seven words! That’s incredible isn’t it? That’s all it took. Seven words can change someone’s life. That is the power of the tongue!

Early in my ministry I served a church in the Pocono Mountains. It was in the heart of a resort area. One of the nice things about that church was that in the summer months our attendance would go up, and the church was often full because we’d get a lot of guests, people on vacation.

One day I received a letter in the mail. It was from a man who, along with his wife, had been at a recent worship service. He commented on the worship service, and wrote some very complimentary words about my sermon – it’s content and my delivery, and relevance to daily living, and how very few young preachers were able to demonstrate that level of excellence in preaching. Then he added, “Perhaps my words of commendation may mean a bit more to you if I say that I delivered some years ago the Swartley Lectures on Preaching at the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, although I was professor of English at the Eastern Baptist College.”

I want to tell you, that letter kept me going for days – for weeks – for months! It gave me more confidence in my work and my calling, and was especially cherished because for a while I resisted the call to ordained ministry because I didn’t want to have to preach, I was too shy to get up in front of people! I still have that letter, even though I received it almost 50 years ago!

Mark Batterson is one of the most effective young pastors and writers of our generation. He tells how when he was a teenager a guest missionary named Chris Smith spoke at his church one Wednesday night. He describes something that happened that night. “After the message I went up to the altar to pray. Chris Smith put his hand on me and didn’t just pray, he prophesied over me. Just one sentence. If I told you what he said you’d say, ‘Big deal!’ It would sound anti-climatic. But it was a big deal to me, and still is. There have been numerous occasions when I’ve been discouraged or frustrated and the Holy Spirit has jogged my memory and whispered those prophetic words in my ear. Immediately, I’m encouraged. It gives me the courage to keep going.”

Think what can happen if, instead of speaking words that are critical and uncaring and gossipy, we would speak words of blessing and encouragement, if we would encourage the people around us to see themselves as God sees them!

Being gracious and thoughtful in the words we use is especially important if we claim to be followers of Jesus. Ephesians 4:29, written to Christian believers, says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” This tells us not to allow any “unwholesome talk” to come out of our mouths. The word “unwholesome” is the same word used to describe rotten food. Rotten food will make us sick, but rotten words are worse and more longer lasting. But we are to speak only helpful words that will “benefit” others. The word “benefit” in the Greek is the word for “gift”. Kind and caring words can be a “gift” to others.

Imagine what a difference it would make in families, in the workplace, in our neighborhoods, in churches, in the White House and halls of Congress if we practiced that!

So isn’t it worth the effort to be far more careful about what we say? To eliminate words that hurt, and practice speaking words that help and heal.

