

## It's Only Words

James 3:1-12, Mark 7:31-37

About a year ago, Joanna and I were getting ready to travel to Honduras to visit our daughter and son-in law. The day before we were to fly, I began experiencing this pain in my lower abdomen. The symptoms seem to be pointing to my appendix, and I wasn't thrilled with the idea of going to Honduras and finding out after I got down there that I needed surgery. So that evening I ended up in the emergency room and after extensive testing, it was determined that it wasn't my appendix. I left the hospital around midnight and we left around 2:30 in the morning to get to the airport. That was cutting it close. And the end of the matter is they never figured out what had caused the pain and I still have my appendix. You know the appendix is one of those small parts of the body that seems to have little use or function and whether you have yours or not probably makes little difference in your everyday life.

But this morning I want to talk about a small part of the body that has great significance and impact in our everyday world. I'm talking about the human tongue. Your tongue is a small, but very important part of the body. Those who study the tongue are amazed at its thousands of taste buds, its 8 muscles and the miraculous way it has the capacity to allow us to communicate by forming words. The ability to speak and communicate with words is an amazing and powerful thing. And we all have experienced those times when our words have gotten us into trouble. We have all said things we wish we hadn't said. We have all suffered from foot-in-mouth syndrome. Saying things we didn't mean to say. Hurting someone with an unkind word.

I guess that's why James makes such a big deal of this issue. Through the inspiration of the Spirit, he realized how great an impact our words can have. And so we have this (I would call) instructional passage on the use of the tongue. The way he describes it is by making analogies to three different things that portray the power of the tongue. It speaks about a horse's bit, a ship's rudder and a fire's spark. The point he is making is that something so small can have such powerful and sometimes damaging effect. The tongue may be a small part of the body, but James describes it as a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. And then to demonstrate the power of words he reinforces his point by saying the tongue can corrupt the whole person, set the whole course of his life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell. Maybe a little

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intense, but you get the point. For James is writing about the destructive nature of our speech. We may say: "It's only words", but we know that the words we speak can put up walls between one another. They can deeply affect human relationships and even destroy deep friendships.

I think it's interesting that the very concept of the "word spoken" has great meaning in the Bible. When God created the heavens and the earth, God spoke them into being. Over and over Genesis records..."And God said..." The authority of the prophets in the Old Testament was validated with the words: "Thus saith the Lord." John gives us the understanding of who God is and the nature of God's son by saying: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The apostle Paul warns about idle words and careless speaking. And Jesus himself said: "Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay." In other words, let your words count, let them be honest and straightforward.

Well, we all struggle when it comes to the careless use of our words. It's so easy to pick up on the skeptical and sometimes cynical nature of the world. Words of judgment and criticism, negative remarks, off-color jokes, hurtful words...Unfortunately it is what we hear everyday, and we find ourselves conditioned and influenced by the world around us and we end up falling right into the trap of what James is talking about. Listen again to James 3:9-12: "With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? James makes it clear what we already know. There are two natures of the tongue that in essence come from the human heart. That which is of the world and that which he calls godly. And what a difference it makes when we allow the Spirit of God to speak to our hearts about this matter and we allow the Lord to address the use of the tongue...when we can experience the Lord's touch in such a way that it impacts the very words we use.

How about Jesus' encounter the man who could hardly speak in today's Gospel lesson in Mark 7. I like how there were persons who were concerned enough to bring him to Jesus. I am grateful and I'm sure you are too for the people in our lives who have cared enough to bring us closer to Jesus. Jesus takes this man aside to a private place, away from the crowd and then takes his own saliva and touches the man's tongue. And then looking up to heaven, he says to the man: Ephphatha.

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Which means "Be opened." The Scripture says immediately the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. This Jesus who touched this man's mouth can touch us as well. We may not have a speech impediment, but we all need to have our speech affected by the Master's touch. I was thinking about the difference it makes in our lives when we are willing to have Jesus speak to us about our words.

For one thing I believe we become more intent on acknowledging the God we worship. Like we shared last weekend we can cultivate this heart of worship and the words we speak become more of praise and thanksgiving. The Psalmist constantly reminds us to be people of praise. You hear it in Psalm 34: "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.": Psalm 63: "Because your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise you...My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips." Psalm 66: "I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue."

If we allow God to touch our hearts and our tongues, we more naturally live in the spirit of praise, rather than the negative spirit often around us. To have an attitude of praise...to want to sing like Charles Wesley wrote...O for a thousand tongues to sing, my great Redeemer's praise.

Secondly, when we give our speech to God and allow the Lord to work in our heart we begin to notice a change in how we speak to others. We feel inspired and compelled to speak words that are more uplifting to those around us. We develop a more positive approach in our words. Paul writing to the Ephesians talked about it like this: "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 change doesn't always happen overnight, because we have been conditioned to be critical and often find ourselves putting someone down, if an effort to defend ourselves and deal with our own insecurity. I think it's a trap that we can all get caught up in and it's so easy to let this negative speech become a part of who we are. Lots of times it happens right in our own families, and sometimes there most often, maybe because we become so comfortable with each other that we become careless with our words. A husband or wife can easily become critical of each other, Sometimes in a counseling session I have asked couples to tell me what they appreciate in each other or what they like about each other. What are the positive qualities you see in each other? And sometimes such a request brings about a period of silence,

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because the two of them have been in such fault-finding mode for so long that it take a while to re-focus. But that re-focusing is so important if we are going to allow God to take control of our speech.

Well, we've all said things we've regretted, sometimes out of fatigue, sometimes out of stress, sometimes out of carelessness. Sometimes it is just a thought pattern that has become a habit that is hard to break. A counselor was speaking to a person about the importance of being more positive in his speech to help his own self-confidence. The counselor said: You have to avoid words life can't and not. Do you think you can do that?" The man replied: "I can't see why not." Yes, this negativity is a hard habit to break...so each of us like the man in today's Gospel lesson need Jesus to touch our tongues. That we would become more intent on speaking to encourage others, to build one another up.

One last area where we can use help when it comes to our speech...is to beware of the danger of gossip. Isn't interesting that over and over again the Scriptures warn those who gossip. In I Thessalonians: "We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy, they are busybodies." In I Timothy: "Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to." We all know that gossip is such a destructive form of communication. It tears up families, it divides churches, it fractures relationships.

This morning I want to encourage you to give attention to the use of the tongue, how we use our words, how we treat one another with our words and our actions. To concentrate on speaking life giving words It does make a difference, the words we use. If we become more people of praise, encouragement and positive speech. I came across some rules for speech which I think is a helpful guideline when we consider the use of our words. It is called the threefold rule of speech to determine whether we should voice our comments: Is it kind, is it true, and is it necessary? If each of us could follow those rules it would make a tremendous difference in how we relate to one another...in our families, in our church family and in our everyday world. The human tongue...it's such a small part of the human body, but it's impact can be deadly, or do a world of good. May the Lord touch our tongues. To speak God's praise, to lift one another up that our lives may glorify God's holy name.