

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
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Sunday, November 13, 2022
Scripture: James 3: 1-12

Sermon: Taming The Tongue

The other day I was talking with a friend, and she told me that someone she works with said something to her that really hurt her feelings. She didn't know if the person said these things to be mean to her or just thinks out loud and doesn't realize what she says hurts others feelings.

Your tongue is a very powerful tool, and it has the power of life or death. Saying a kind word to people can bring hope and healing when they are going through something difficult. Words can bring healing to the soul. Proverbs 16:24 says, "*Kind words are like honey, sweet to the soul and healthy for the body.*" On the other hand, no one likes it when someone is cruel with their words, and it discourages people and hurts their feelings, causing bitterness and anger. Our speech can encourage and uplift others and even change their life.

Dale Carnegie, who was an American writer and lecturer and the developer of courses in self-improvement, salesmanship, corporate training, public speaking, and interpersonal skills, wrote **How to Win Friends and Influence People** (1936) and also wrote **How to Stop Worrying and Start Living** (1948). He said, "Perhaps you will forget tomorrow the kind words you say today, but the recipient may cherish them over a lifetime."

Albert Schweitzer once said, "Constant kindness can accomplish much. As the sun makes ice melt, kindness causes misunderstanding, mistrust, and hostility to evaporate."

Kind words provide many benefits. Not only to the person it is intended for, but also to the person who is saying them.

Proverbs 12:18 says, "*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*"

In our scripture reading this morning, James is talking about genuine faith in Christ that tames your tongue.

Psalm 141:3 is a prayer that we should all pray as Christians, “*Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.*” The taming of the tongue is a daily battle, and this is a daily prayer for all.

Although we become new creations in Christ, we also carry around with us the old nature of the flesh, which battles against the Spirit.

James reminds the reader how huge this problem is to tame the tongue. To tame the tongue, we must recognize that we will be held accountable for what we say. Our words either validate that we are true believers or reveal that we do not know God. If we sin with our speech, we need to ask God’s forgiveness and also the forgiveness of the one we sinned against. We need to be accountable for our speech.

To tame the tongue, we must recognize its power for good or for evil. James uses two analogies here to make the point that the tongue is small, but mighty. The bit and the rudder are his examples. A bit is a relatively small device but when you put it into a horse’s mouth, you can control the entire horse. The same thing is true of a ship’s rudder. It is relatively small compared to the size of the ship, but with his hand on the wheel or tiller, the pilot can steer a large ship, even in a strong wind.

James is saying the tongue doesn’t control the body but the influence of such a small part is great. James is saying, “Don’t underestimate the power of the tongue, because if you do, you won’t be able to tame it.” If you don’t control your life, you can get into trouble, but if you do control your tongue, it can direct your whole life into what is acceptable to God.

A horse is a powerful animal that can do useful work, but only if it can be directed. A ship is a useful means of transporting cargo or people, but if the rudder is broken, it will be at the mercy of the wind and the waves and could result in a shipwreck. Both the bit and the rudder must be under the control of a strong hand that knows how to use them properly. In the same way, the tongue must overcome the

fleshly desires of causing harm and destruction and be under God's control to accomplish healing and growth.

You know the familiar children's rhyme that says, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." James would disagree with that, and I would too. Words certainly do hurt us and can affect us for years to come; negative words stick to us.

In verse 6, James states, "*The tongue is a flame of fire. It is a tiny spark that can set a great forest on fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.*" The tongue is a deadly, powerful source of evil, and if we don't use our tongues with great caution, we are likely to light careless fires that cause destruction. A careless tongue can damage your life and the lives around you.

James says that it is humanly impossible to tame the tongue; only God can tame it. When we have the fruit of the Spirit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, all of which relate to the control of the tongue. To tame the tongue, you must daily walk in the Spirit, obeying Christ.

Scripture says, "*the things that come out of the mouth, come from the heart.*" Proverbs 4:23 says to us, "*Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.*" Your heart and your mouth work together for building up or pushing down others.

Max Lucado, pastor, author and speaker, wrote a book called "**You Are Special.**" It is a great story that illustrates to us the importance of saying kind words to those around us and encouraging others because what we say can stick to others and affect them.

Listen to the story written by Max Lucado:

The Wemmicks were small wooden people. Each of the wooden people was carved by a woodworker named Eli. His workshop sat on a hill overlooking their village. Every Wemmick was different. Some had big noses, others had large eyes. Some were tall and others were short. Some wore hats, others wore coats. But all were made by the same carver, and all lived in the village. And all day, every day, the Wemmicks did the same thing: They gave each other stickers. Each Wemmick had a box of golden star stickers and a box of gray dot

stickers. Up and down the streets all over the city, people could be seen sticking stars or dots on one another.

The pretty ones, those with smooth wood and fine paint, always got stars. But if the wood was rough or the paint chipped the Wemmicks gave dots. The talented ones got stars, too. Some could lift big sticks high above their heads or jump over tall boxes. Still others knew big words or could sing very pretty songs. Everyone gave them stars.

Some Wemmicks had stars all over them! Every time they got a star it made them feel so good that they did something else and got another star. Others, though, could do little. They got dots. Punchinello was one of these. He tried to jump high like the others, but he always fell. And when he fell, the others would gather around and give him dots.

Sometimes when he fell, it would scar his wood, so the people would give him more dots. He would try to explain why he fell and say something silly, and the Wemmicks would give him more dots. After a while, he had so many dots that he didn't want to go outside. He was afraid he would do something dumb, such as forget his hat or step in the water, and then people would give him another dot. In fact, he had so many gray dots that some people would come up and give him one without reason. "He deserves lots of dots," the wooden people would agree with one another. "He's not a good wooden person."

After a while Punchinello believed them. "I'm not a good Wemmick," he would say. The few times he went outside, he hung around other Wemmicks who had a lot of dots. He felt better around them.

One day, he met a Wemmick who was unlike any he'd ever met. She had no dots or stars. She was just wooden. Her name was Lucia. It wasn't that people didn't try to give her stickers; it's just that the stickers didn't stick. Some admired Lucia for having no dots, so they would run up and give her a star. But it would fall off. Some would look down on her for having no stars, so they would give her a dot. But it wouldn't stay either. "That's the way I want to be," thought Punchinello. "I don't want anyone's marks."

So he asked the stickerless Wemmick how she did it.

“It’s easy,” Lucia replied, “every day I go see Eli.”

“Eli?”

“Yes, Eli. The woodcarver. I sit in the workshop with him.”

“Why?” asked Punchinello.

“Why don’t you find out for yourself? Go up the hill. He’s there.”

And with that, the Wemmick with no marks turned and skipped away. “But he won’t want to see me!” Punchinello cried out. Lucia didn’t hear. So Punchinello went home. He sat near a window and watched the wooden people as they scurried around giving each other stars and dots. “It’s not right,” he muttered to himself. And he resolved to go see Eli. He walked up the narrow path to the top of the hill and stepped into the big shop. His wooden eyes widened at the size of everything. The stool was as tall as he was. He had to stretch on his tiptoes to see the top of the workbench. A hammer was as long as his arm. Punchinello swallowed hard. “I’m not staying here!” And he turned to leave. Then he heard his name.

“Punchinello?” The voice was deep and strong. Punchinello stopped “Punichello! How good to see you. Come and let me have a look at you.” Punchinello turned slowly and looked at the large, bearded craftsman.

“You know my name?” the little Wemmick asked.

“Of course I do. I made you.” Eli stooped down and picked him up and set him on the bench. “Hmm,; the maker spoke thoughtfully as he inspected the gray circles. “Looks like you’ve been given some bad marks.”

“I didn’t mean to, Eli. I really tried hard.”

“Oh, you don’t have to defend yourself to me, child. I don’t care what the other Wemmicks think.”

“You don’t?”

“No, and you shouldn’t either. Who are they to give stars or dots? They’re Wemmicks just like you. What they think doesn’t matter, Punchinello. All that matters is what I think. And I think you are pretty special.”

Punchinello laughed. “Me, special? Why? I can’t walk fast. I can’t jump. My paint is peeling. Why do I matter to you?”

Eli looked at Punchinello, put his hands on those small wooden shoulders, and spoke very slowly. “Because you’re mine. That’s why you matter to me.”

Punchinello had never had anyone look at him like this-much less his maker. He didn’t know what to say.

“Every day I’ve been hoping you’d come,” Eli explained.

“I came because I met someone who had no marks.”

“I know. She told me about you.”

“Why don’t the stickers stay on her?”

“Because she has decided that what I think is more important than what they think. The stickers only stick if you let them.”

“What?”

“The stickers only stick if they matter to you. The more you trust my love, the less you care about the stickers.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“You will, but it will take time. You’ve got a lot of marks. For now, just come to see me every day and let me remind you how much I care.” Eli lifted Punchinello off the bench and set him on the ground. “Remember,” Eli said, as the Wemmick walked out the door. “You are special because I made you. And I don’t make mistakes.”

Punchinello didn’t stop, but in his heart he thought, “I think he really means it.” And when he did, a dot fell to the ground.

We all need to know that we are special and precious in the sight of the Lord. What others say to us or think of us doesn’t need to affect us in a negative way because what does matter is knowing the unconditional love of God and His grace that is freely given.

Proverbs 15:4 says, “*Gentle words are a tree of life; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.*”

Speak words of life to those you meet!