



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Watch Your Mouth” **Sermon on James 3:1-12**

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James 3:1-12

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. 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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the 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? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

In high school, I had a good friend who, after a couple of years of our friendship, became verbally abusive to me. I can say that looking back. But, at the time when it started and continued, it didn't click. In other words, I didn't say, "Hey, that's abusive. Hurtful. I want you to stop." I just brushed it off.

The words, though, didn't really brush off. They stuck. The colors of the world began to fade. At some point, I began to believe the words he was saying. I began to feel depressed. I self-diagnosed my situation, quit hanging around him, and latched on to people who chose their words more carefully.

It was, for me, an experience of just how powerful the tongue can be. False words can be lived as true.

So it is that I should know what the tongue can do, and yet I am guilty of letting the words of my lips and the meditation of my heart tear down those with whom I am close. Oh, I say it to be funny or cute, but I should watch my mouth.

James writes, "All of us make many mistakes."

How many mistakes have you made this week with your tongue? Was your mouth silent when you should have said something? Did you say something when you should have been silent? Was there a time when you were tired and overloaded, and as a result, an innocent question directed at you got cut off at the knees?

I have a friend whose wife was married before to an abusive man. My friend has said that on occasion, he will do something or say something that will trigger a memory of abuse. They have to work on the words together. Unearthing some painful history to move to healing and better days. Sometimes you have to watch what you say, because of the sins of those who lived before you.

From the same mouth comes blessing and curses. From your mouth can come lies you think are the truth and truths that just happen to be lies.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you people say that I am?" The word about town was that he was "John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets." What the polls at that time showed was that no one had any idea what they were talking about. Or, in other words, the truths that they were telling were lies.

What if some of the things that you and I believe right now are wrong? We believe them to be true, but we're wrong. We're spreading lies.

History is filled with people who believed they were so right that they were willing to die for causes that were wrong. The Nazis in Germany had belt buckles that proclaimed, "God is with us." The neo-Nazis have come to Nashville to see if they can make what is wrong right. Sometimes, what turns a wrong into a right is just getting a majority of people to say the same words that you say. I heard a story many years ago of some hate group having a march in a city up north, and the churches brought everyone out. Instead of yelling at these people and playing their game, the congregations just stood on the curbs and laughed.

"Who do people say that I am?" "Well, if you believe the polls, Jesus, you're John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the Prophets."

But then the question of Jesus comes to the heart. "But who do you say that I am? And Peter, being Peter, is always quick to speak and says, "You are the Christ! You are the Messiah!" The answer is the truth, but his answer is a lie. Peter has the right answer for all the wrong reasons.

A friend of mine told a story about a woman who wanted to get re-baptized. Re-baptism isn't in the Presbyterian playbook, "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism." So, my friend asked, "Why do you think you need to be baptized again?" The answer was, "I got baptized to get my child into daycare with the church member discount."

"Ok!" My friend said, "Why do you think you need to be baptized again?" She said, "I just told you! Now I want to do it because I know God's love."

And my friend responded, "You still don't know. I don't know. None of us know the height, depth, and breadth of who Jesus is. It's a lifetime of correction, rejection, and holy awe. And do believe that the baptism that got you a discount into the preschool has claimed you and will not let you go? It's working on you!" They went into the sanctuary, and the priest dipped his finger in the font and made the sign of the cross and said, "Remember your Baptism, and be thankful."

Peter said, "I know who you are! You are the Christ! You are the Messiah!" The great confession of faith! The right answer, for all the wrong reasons. Because when Jesus explains the definition of Messiah, that the Son of Man must suffer and die, Peter will have nothing of it. He corrects Jesus. It takes a pretty bold guy to correct a Messiah, but if you know the truth, you can do that kind of thing. When you know you're right, why, you can think you're better than God.

People who correct God. They exist. James says, "They're the people who have an eye out only for the rich and treat the poor with no respect." They're the people who need to save God from sacrificing himself for people who, well, they're not worth giving the time of day. "Messiah, Christ! You have it all wrong! We're going to the palace, and I'm going to sit beside you on the throne, and "Get Behind me, Satan!"

The mouth. The mouth can utter some rough words. But Jesus says them only because the words are true. There are times in life when the words land harshly only because they're true. There was a day before we were all into protecting our self-esteem, there was a day when you learned the truth and you made adjustments accordingly. When someone said to you, "You know, you really can't sing, so maybe the choir isn't for you." When the finish line said, "You're not getting a trophy." There was a time when the votes said, "Hey, you lost."

Maybe there was a time this week when you heard some rough words that were true. Someone might have said,

"You really don't need to act that way." Or...

"You're driving too fast." Or...

"I need you to calm down." Or...

"Can you think about how what you're doing affects me?"

"Get Behind me, Satan!" Harsh words! True Words!

Jesus heard in Peter's words the call of the devil to live in the palace, to wear the gold crown, to be fed the frosted grape in the room with the view." In the vision, Jesus had to call it what it was... Satan. "Don't tempt me to make my life about me. I will give my life, my love, my grace, my light, for all!"

Peter, I'm going to give my life for you who believe that life is found in the politics of Jerusalem. And...

I'm going to give my life for those who know the tune but do not have the voice to sing. And...

I will give my life for those who don't have a GPA but are smart enough to see the day that God has made. And...

I will give my life to those who believe lies that they think are the truth and those who have turned truths into lies. And...

I had a friend who, with his words, made me depressed. I started to hang around a new group of friends. They were in a youth group at the Methodist Church. Methodists can be good people. But they said to me with their lips...

"You are a child of God. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit. You are worthy! Redeemed, Forgiven. You are the Body of Christ."

I say to you, "You are a child of God. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit. You are worthy! Redeemed, Forgiven. You are the Body of Christ."

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