

September 6

James 3:1-12

Title **Watch Your Mouth!**

Core True religion requires us to use our words exclusively for blessing and building up.

Call Ask someone to give you honest feedback of the affect your words have on others.

Compel To feel a burden of responsibility for the power our words carry, and to feel hopeful that we can make a genuine positive impact by encouraging others.

James 3:1-12

3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 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. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 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. 5 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! 6 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. 7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Let's review:

True religion is about reconnecting to God, to others, and to our true selves. For James, a right relationship with God (whom we cannot see) is reflected in how we see ourselves and how we treat other people (whom we can see). Over the last three sermons, we have been encouraged to:

Week 1: Look in the Mirror – People who are merely “hearers” but not “doers” are like people who look in the mirror but forget. We are called to allow God's truth to enable us to see ourselves honestly – As God's beloved children who live God's values. From that place – our hearts will inevitably break over the things that break God's heart: The vulnerable and at-risk or the proverbial “widows and orphans.”

Week 2: Look Them in Eye – From this reconnected place, we are going to honor all people by not showing partiality in any form. As we know ourselves to be beloved, so we treat everyone else as God’s beloved Child.

Week 3: Look Out for Others: True religion requires embodying God-trust through neighbor-love. And last week at Service Worship Sunday we got to put that into action! Karen & Mike Clark delivered two carloads of diapers to the African American Community Service Agency in San Jose. Total of 5,510 diapers. Well done WVPC! About \$1800 worth!

This Week: Watch Your Mouth! True religion requires us to use our words exclusively for blessing and building up.

We love James because he is super clear. This is another very straightforward text that doesn’t really need much in the way of explanation. All of us know the power words have over us. They can completely change the way we see ourselves – for good or for ill – for the rest of our lives.

Can you remember a complement that some gave you that totally changed how you saw yourself from that day on? Can you remember how it felt? Can you still connect to that feeling, even if it was years ago?

James’ long reflection – it feels more like a Spirit-inspired rant, doesn’t it? – leads to a key question: *How much of our speech is really blessing, and how much is really cursing?*

Examples of speech that really blesses:

- **Unqualified affirmation.** Complementing someone “just because” instead only when they do something particularly noteworthy. Ex: Praising your spouse’s cooking over eggs and toast as opposed to the gourmet meal.
- **Encouragement about a sensitive topic.** Paying attention when someone is doing their best in an area that are particularly self-conscious. Ex: Telling your shy or awkward friend they told a great story at lunch.

Examples of speech that actually curses, even if we don’t think it doesn’t:

- **Criticism.** We justify criticism as “telling the truth” or “just being honest,” but in the end it is just tearing down. The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the good. Telling people how bad it something is rarely gets a good result. Dale Carnegie begins his bestselling book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by making this point. He observes criticizing people is futile even if they are unquestionably bad people! He uses the example of notorious gangster Al Capone who, when asked to justify his life of crime and violence said, “I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, helping them have a good time, and all I get is abuse...”
- **Sarcasm.** Definition: *The use of irony to mock or convey contempt.* [I describe what it was like growing up in a family in which conversations felt like competitions, and how I

developed my “gift for sarcasm. Then I describe the time a member of my staff had the courage to tell me that my self-described “gift” didn’t feel like a gift to them.]

Out of that experience, I got to do the four things we have considered in this series:

- I got to *look in the mirror*, and face the truth about how my words were impacting others;
- I got to *look other people in the eye*, as equals, and accept their feedback without making excuses or claim privilege as “the boss” or “the senior pastor”;
- I got to *look out for others*, and do what was in my power to do to make their lives better; and
- I got to *watch my words* from that point on, and recognize that I may not be able to completely tame my tongue but I could ask for God’s grace to help me not share my so-called “gift” anymore.

The invitation to you this morning: **Ask someone to give you honest feedback of the affect your words have on others. Ask them:**

Can you remember something specific I have said blessed you?

(Notice the example. Do you even remember saying that? Notice how it feels inside you as they describe that time.)

Can you recall a specific time I have said something that hurt you?

(Again, notice the example and if you even remember saying. Whether or not you do remember, ask for forgiveness. Don’t make an excuse for it. Here’s a script that might help...)

I am sorry that I said “_____.”

Thank you for being so brave and honest to tell me how that affected you.

I am sorry I said that.

I am sorry for the hurt I caused you.

Please forgive me.

Don’t say if you don’t mean it, cuz that is worse than not saying it all. But if you do mean it, then say it. And accept the true gift of forgiveness if it is offered to you.

[Transition to the Lord’s Table, and think about how the Words of Institution we hear every time we share in the Lord’s Supper are intended to comfort, to encourage, to give hope, to speak deep truth, and to build us up as One Church, Christ’s Body, for the world.]