

This Is Us: Living Our Faith – Do No Harm

James 3:1-12 and Ephesians 4:29

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I saw my eye doctor last week and he told me that I needed a new prescription. Now, I love getting new glasses, but I find the selection process to be overwhelming. So, after mulling over all my choices at the optical shop, and there were SO many choices, I decided on a pair. And as I was being measured for the positioning of the lenses the optometrist was asked to come out and help. He stood in front of me and came in close like he was going to adjust their position on my face just a bit, but instead, suddenly gasped and backed up and said, “these frames look amazing on you!” Those six words lifted my spirits and made me feel very confident with my choice! Words have the power to do good.

But we can also have those moments when words can tear us down. I call those the, *me and my big mouth moments*. You know what I’m talking about, right? The times that we’ve said something that we wish, almost instantly, that we could take back. But we know we can’t and so instead, we just say (either out loud or to ourselves) “me and my big mouth!”

I asked some friends and family to share with me some of their “me and my big mouth” moments. Here are a few:

- I was complaining about my boss to a coworker, only to turn around and find my boss standing right behind me. *Me and my big mouth!*
- I asked a pregnant woman when her baby was due, to which she said, “Three months ago.” *Me and my big mouth!*
- The first time I met my girlfriend’s mother, I wanted to compliment her with something like, ‘I can see where Jessica got her good looks!’ Instead, it came out, ‘Wow, I’ll bet when you were Jessica’s age you used to be good-looking, too!’ *Me and my big mouth!*

Robin Williams’ character in *Dead Poets Society* said, “No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.” Words have the power to do amazing good and the power to do evil. James likens the tongue to a rudder on a ship. That tiny little rudder that steers a huge ship in one direction or another. He also likens it to a bit placed in a horse’s mouth and even though that horse is a giant animal, that tiny bit steers it this way or that. That’s the power of your tongue, he says. It’s like a spark and with that one little spark, you can set an entire forest ablaze. This is the power of the tongue on the negative side. The power of the tongue on the positive side is that you have the opportunity to build up, encourage and bless. Great words, well spoken words, sustain a marriage or a relationship. Poorly chosen words can destroy one. Words were the cause of the beginning of many of our wars and the means of peace that ended those wars.

So let me ask you this? Do you think before you speak? Maybe you’ve been asked that question before, perhaps after you’ve said something you shouldn’t have said. Unfortunately, our mouths make it easy for us to get into trouble, whether we’re older and claim to have just lost our filter, or we’re a child who says the darndest thing. We all struggle to say the right things and avoid saying the wrong things. Then there’s that saying that we all grew up reciting, *sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me*. The reality is our words matter greatly and hold great power to build up or break down others. Compliments and well wishes can make us feel great. Criticism and abuse can make us feel terrible. Our words can open doors for us and grant us favor with others or our words can also get us in trouble and hurt feelings.

In this series, we are looking at the teachings from the New Testament book of James along with John Wesley's three general rules as we seek to live lives of genuine faith. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. Last week, we talked about how our faith should be evident in our lives not only by what we do on a Sunday morning, or those times and places where it's comfortable to take our faith out of the box. Instead, we should strive to put our faith into action to the point where it becomes second nature to us and informs the decisions we make each and every day. Our faith has the power to not only change us but our social systems as well. Today we'll add focus to that by looking at John Wesley's first general rule, do no harm.

You may be thinking, another Thou Shalt Not?? Don't we have enough of those? We have the 10 Commandments. There's a lot of "Thou shalt nots" listed there. Do we really need another one? There are a lot of things that we don't do because we know those things are wrong and hurt people. (Sometimes you have to say no to certain things so you can say yes to others. I talked about this with our confirmands just yesterday as they are preparing to say YES and confirm their baptism next week.) We don't murder, steal, lie, cheat, or commit adultery, right? We know those things are all bad. All these things were known in Moses's time when folks were pretty limited in their ability for their words to reach large groups of people. But think about the ease with which our words can travel all over the world in a matter of seconds. Think of how easy it is to post something on Facebook, Instagram, Tick Tock or YouTube. People can have a global reach with whatever they want to do or say... that can be either really good or really bad.

I'm pretty sure John Wesley didn't want us to keep on making up more and more detailed lists of THOU SHALT NOTS. Instead, I think he was trying to give us a way to focus our thoughts, words, and actions, and think about how they affect others. We need to stop occasionally, and ask ourselves, **did any of my words or actions cause someone harm today?** if we can intentionally decide to not harm others, we might just be able to hold our tongues when someone does or says something hurtful to us.

I bet you can think of something someone has said to you that you will never forget. Maybe you're thinking of something positive, good advice or something you come back to time and time again, words that still lift you up. But I'm sure some of us are thinking about something negative that was said to us, something that hurt us. Maybe it's something a family member said to you a long time ago that still bothers you to this day. Maybe it was bullying or verbal abuse at school and you still remember how those words made you feel. We don't want those words to have power over us and yet, they do.

James is giving us a wakeup call to watch what we say because we have all gotten reckless with our words, caused problems for ourselves and done harm to others. As people of faith, we must remember the importance of humility because it's one thing to make a mistake but it's another thing to get carried away because of that mistake. But if we recognize that what we say matters, and the potential harm our words can cause, we can begin to move forward in humility. This is related to the connection between personal and social holiness we discussed last week. The words we speak as individuals do not just stay with us; they have a social impact as well.

Without humility, we lose our filter, and we toss blame and harsh words on others. Humility is what gives us pause to think before we speak. And when we get into those arguments, especially with someone close to us, we really need to be careful. We need our humility to get in the driver's seat and help us to pump the brakes on our tongues in those moments. Because when we are in the heat of the moment, especially with someone very close to us, there's that temptation to go to the low blow, to dig up the old history and old mistakes, and to hit where you know that person is vulnerable.

And here's the thing, just like toothpaste out of the tube, once something comes out of our mouths, we can't take it back. Oh, we can be quick to apologize but that doesn't mean it will be quickly forgotten. Remember what our parents taught us? *If you can't say something nice... don't say anything at all.* Since we can't totally take back what we said so we better work hard on being disciplined about what we say *before* we say it.

Maybe you've heard people say they "love God but hate the church." That's because many people have been incredibly hurt by the church. Sometimes we, as Christians, cause harm because our words and actions do not match up. James points out that we can praise God on Sunday and then say hurtful things about and to other people – all of whom are made in the very image of that same God. Or, we can say things that sound nice and then act in a way that contradicts our words or simply fails to live up to them. There is a deep sense of hypocrisy because of this very thing.

So James' words *should* grab our attention, because as people of faith, we are Christ's ambassadors in this world. And we can cause great harm to Christ's church when we let our mouths run out of control. Throughout history, we have seen the church and its members guilty of harming others with the things we say. We hear those stories of how a person's terrible words caused someone to feel unwelcomed or even abandoned by the church. I heard a story like this just this week and it broke my heart. It is so important that we remain mindful about how we use our words so that we can faithfully live out this rule to do no harm.

So how are we doing that here at Messiah Church? Are our words and actions aligning? One way that we are doing that is with the Messiah Statement of Inclusion. These words are meant to give direction to our actions. Words that say we believe that God's grace is offered to all. These words that say we seek to be rooted in Jesus, grounded in Wesleyan theology, inclusive of all persons, and engage in the work of justice and reconciliation. For those who have been left out, harmed, and pushed aside by the church, saying "*Everyone is Welcome Here*" and leaving it at that is just not enough anymore. And this statement will be just words on a page unless we put action behind these words. We've got work to do but I am thankful for the many ways that we are already living into this.

The early Methodist movement strived to gather people together to work out their salvation. And that's what we're doing here today. We are working it out, working through it together and to do it we must be mindful, not only of our actions like we discussed last week, but also of our words. Our words and actions should be doing the same thing.

So how do we get better at thinking before we speak? I want to offer 3 things we can do to help us remember to think before we speak.

**1. Ask for more time before responding.** If possible, ask for a few extra seconds or minutes to gather your thoughts before you begin to speak. This enables you to form a response and will ease some of the pressure you might feel to speak right away. For example, if someone asks you a question you could respond, "That's a good question. Let me think for a moment."

**2. Practice active listening.** When we practice active listening skills and use engaged body language, we can be fully present during a conversation. Notice the other person's posture, tone of voice, and mood. Absorb what they are asking or saying. Steven Covey would say listen so to understand. James says *be quick to listen and slow to speak.*

**3. Take a breath.** Practice taking a few breaths before you start to talk. While you are breathing, you are naturally pausing the conversation and de-escalating charged emotions, both yours and theirs. Then ask God to guide your word choices.

Our words can lift someone's spirit and make their day better. So, let's watch our words. Let's work on our humility. Let's ask God to tame our tongues and use our words to transform our lives and the lives of those around us. May our witness be so authentic to Christ that others may see Christ in our actions and hear Christ in our words.

Prayer: God, we confess that too often, we have used our words carelessly. Too often we have said words to other people that came from a place of insecurity or anger in our own hearts. Please forgive us for this. Help us to give not only our hearts but also our tongues to you as well, that we might be more careful in the ways we use our words and make sure that we use our words to lift up and not put down, that we use our words to glorify your kingdom and nothing else. Amen.

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 17, 2023**

**Daily Prayer:** God, you spoke, and the world was ordered. Through studying your Word today, may I remember the power of my speech, too. May I recommit to speak in ways that help create hope and not harm, justice and not suffering. May my words flow forth faithfully and truthfully to honor you and care for others. Amen.

### **Monday, September 18**

#### **Scripture: Proverbs 15:1-4**

A gentle answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge,  
but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.

The eyes of the Lord are everywhere,  
keeping watch on the wicked and the good.

The soothing tongue is a tree of life,  
but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.

#### **Observation**

Many of the Proverbs have a bit of a scattershot quality to them. But in these four verses, the Hebrew sages put together four wise sayings that address the quality of human speech, both in its ability to wound and damage, but also to heal and give life.

#### **Application**

These proverbs do more than simply urge us to watch what we say and how; they also inspire us to examine the intentions of our hearts. Have you ever found, when you were (maybe reluctantly) honest with yourself, that the inner sources of your "righteous indignation" were not as "righteous" as you at first thought they were? Does responding to anger with more anger usually make things better or worse?

#### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, help my mouth not to "gush" with foolish words. Grow in me your spirit that can make my speech more and more a "tree of life" for the people I meet. Amen.

## Tuesday, September 19

### Scripture: James 1:19-21

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

### Observation

James, Jesus' half-brother, apparently became a Christ-follower when Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7). He became an influential leader in the early church. In this short letter, he linked hasty, angry speech with "moral filth." To James, a cutting outburst was no small matter, but something hurtful and wrong.

### Application

Scholar David Allan Hubbard wrote, "Harsh, vindictive speech—even though apparently based on God's Word—is not the way to accomplish God's justice." Through the centuries, issues like circumcision, slavery, the role of women in ministry, and (today) homosexuality have triggered such speech from Christians against other Christians. How can the "humility" of which James wrote move us away from destructive speech and toward living into what James called "the word planted deep inside you"?

### Prayer

O God, make me ever more "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry." You know that's not my natural condition, Lord—but I know you can change me from the inside out. Amen.

## Wednesday, September 20

### Scripture: James 1:22-25

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

### Observation

After describing the danger of hasty, ugly words, James moved on to describe "the word planted deep inside you" (James 1:21) that we should follow. He called it "the law of freedom," God's wisdom, above all as Jesus taught it. He did not drop the subject of wise speech in these verses. He highlighted the wisdom and freedom of making all our actions, including our speech, accord with God's directions for optimal living.

### Application

James' words about the law of freedom were rooted in Jesus' teaching. Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other" (John 13:34-35). In what ways have you found greater freedom as you've grown in your ability to love even those you dislike or disagree with?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, I want my life to bear your signature. So fill my life with your fruit. As others watch me, may they daily see me growing more and more like the person you want to shape me to be. Amen.

## **Thursday, September 21**

### **Scripture: James 1:26-27**

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

### **Observation**

James used strong language—not angry, but strong. He said if people don't control their words, "their devotion is worthless." Some people then (and now) used angry, ugly criticisms of "the wicked" (however they defined that) to try to show everyone else how devoted they were to God. It didn't work, James said—speaking that way was disobedience to God, not devotion. True devotion, he said, shows when we care for and help the weak, not in reckless speech.

### **Application**

We live in a world where tweets, anonymous comment boards and a 24-hour news cycle seem, at times, to bombard us with contentious, belittling speech. James wrote that one aspect of devotion to God is "to keep the world from contaminating us." How do you actively seek to keep our world's barrage of negativity from contaminating you? What choices help you do that?

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, you love me. You know that elevated blood pressure and a pulse racing from anger are hurtful, not helpful. Guide me toward your pure, peaceable approach to life. Amen.

## **Friday, September 22**

### **Scripture: Colossians 3:8-10**

But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

### **Observation**

As Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae, he recognized that there is an unbreakable connection between who we are on the inside and what we say for others to hear. He named anger, rage, malice, slander, obscene language and lying as things to "set aside." The first three are attitudes, but they inevitably show themselves in the harmful kinds of speech the apostle named in the last three items on the list.

### **Application**

Scholar William Barclay said we can turn the items in this list about speech into positive commands. The first two, he said, tell us that a Christian's speech must be KIND, and it must be PURE. How easy or hard do you find it to speak in those ways if you feel anger, rage, or malice toward someone? How

can we be kind in our speech even when it is necessary to make an honest appraisal of another person?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, when Paul said I should “set aside” these bad things, he used a word that means “taking off a garment.” Help me discard nurtured anger, and the ugly speech it produces, as I would a dirty, worn-out shirt, and to put on your new way of life. Amen.

### **Saturday, September 23**

#### **Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-32; and Psalm 19:9-14**

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

The fear of the Lord is pure,  
enduring forever.

The decrees of the Lord are firm,  
and all of them are righteous.

They are more precious than gold,  
than much pure gold;  
they are sweeter than honey,  
than honey from the honeycomb.

By them your servant is warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.

But who can discern their own errors?  
Forgive my hidden faults.

Keep your servant also from willful sins;  
may they not rule over me.

Then I will be blameless,  
innocent of great transgression.

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart  
be pleasing in your sight,  
Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

### **Observation**

As you read these passages, consider memorizing Ephesians 4:29 and Psalm 19:14. Changing our speech requires letting God change the inner sources from which our speech springs. We want the words of our mouth, AND the meditations of our heart, to be pleasing to God. We aim to be a community in which we “Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.”

**Application**

Scholar N. T. Wright, commenting on Ephesians 4:25-32, said, "Living as a Christian demands that we grow up in our thinking: you have to learn to identify your own moods and behavior patterns, to see which ones are going in the right direction and which ones in the wrong direction ... we should regard our moods, and the speech which flows from them, as we might a strong but willful horse, which needs to be reminded frequently of the direction we're supposed to be going in." When did you last say words that hurt, and then ask yourself, "Why did I say that?" What helps you to understand your "interior landscape" better, to keep you from blurting out words you regret and wish you could take back?

**Prayer**

Lord of my life, be Lord of my words. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock, and my redeemer. Amen.