

“The Power of Words”
James 3:1–12
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In his book *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* Henry Fairlie shares the following insight. “Whoever said that sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt us, must have lived among deaf mutes.” Words may not break our bones, but they can do far worse. They can break our hearts and spirits. Words have tremendous power, as we have all discovered at one time or another when we have been the victim of vicious rumors or the grateful recipient of words of encouragement.

Holy Scripture recognizes this reality. James says that the tongue is a fire set ablaze by hell itself. Like a fire, words can cause vast destruction and the damage can spread with frightening speed. James also says that the tongue is full of deadly poison. Like venom from a snake, words can inflict harm on their victim. The language James uses does not evoke the image of some inane, harmless aspect of life. It evokes the image of a very powerful entity, and rightly so.

For words are full of power, the power to destroy or the power to create. Perhaps the best analogies, though not available to the biblical writer, are found in nuclear power and social media. When used with wisdom, both can benefit us in numerous ways. When used carelessly, they can destroy life. The problem lies not with the power itself but with the human beings who use it. Such is the case with words.

Far too often we use words to destroy and there are many ways to do so, including indirectly. Sometimes sarcasm is the vehicle of choice. Other times, it is what we do not say that harms. In an old issue of *Kudzu*, Kudzu is sitting at his desk with a piece of paper in his hand when his mother approaches. “Don’t be shy, Kudzu,” says Mama, “Let me read your poem!” “It’s kinda’ personal, Mama,” says Kudzu, “It means a lot to me... I hope you like it!” Mama reads the poem and then says, “Well, your penmanship is improving and at least your margins are

straight!” In the final frame, Kudzu is left thinking to himself, “Mama is a master at damning-with-faint-praise!” So are we when we want to be. We don’t have to insult people directly when we want to do damage.

But sometimes we are direct. Social media has provided an easy way to attack people without having the character to look them in the eye. Recent stories about athletes being verbally assaulted on social media speak volumes about the worst of human nature, as do stories of teenagers being bullied, sometimes to the point of harming themselves.

But human beings have attacked each other with words long before the internet existed. When someone says, “Let me be perfectly frank...” we know what to do — duck! They are about to lay us out while patting themselves on the back for being honest! The first half of Ephesians 4:15 does say, “Speak the truth...” but the second half says, “... in love.” Christians do not have a charge to say whatever we think is the truth to anyone. We are charged to speak the truth in love.

There is at least one other way we use words to destroy life — gossip. The prevalence of gossip may offer the best argument to support James’ thesis that the tongue is a fire. Think of the pain and suffering rumors have caused, sometimes creating a problem where it did not exist, other times adding to a struggle. William Barclay said, “There are reputations murdered over the teacup everyday; and when a man sees a tale-bearer coming, he would do well to shut the door in his face.” Whether the rumors have any substance or not, if we participate in spreading them, we are guilty of using words to destroy.

A mentor of mine suggested a title for a sermon he wanted to preach on Genesis 9 — *A Sin Worse Than Getting Drunk*. It is the story of Noah, God’s one hope for humanity, leaving the ark and immediately getting drunk and passing out. As my mentor said, if anybody ever had a reason... But Noah’s son found him and immediately told his brothers. The story ends with a curse, not on Noah for getting drunk, but on the son for gossiping, the sin worse than getting drunk!

It is a worse sin because it is so destructive and because it involves an element of judgment. Jesus says, “Judge not!” and, “Let the person who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone.” But every time we sit down to discuss someone else’s life, we judge, and we throw

stones, though we are not without sin. “The tongue is a fire!” says James. There are many ways we can use words to destroy life.

But we can also use words to create life. Words can affirm, encourage and transform. Jesus’ words change Nicodemus, a paralytic, Zacchaeus and countless others. Even his harsh sounding words spoken to Peter in today’s Gospel lesson have the ultimate effect of pointing him toward life. Moffatt’s translation of Job contains a verse which says, “Your words have kept men on their feet.” Words can have this effect. We all know the positive potential of words. Our problem, as James points out, is that we do not choose the creative use of words often enough. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

When James refers to cursing, he is not talking about profanity. He is referring to a first-century practice of wishing evil upon another person. One might say to an enemy, “May your children become idolaters and your wife be unfaithful!” Cursing was a way of expressing deep hatred. While we may not curse each other in this manner, we entertain the attitude involved and it can spill over into words.

James says this ought not be! Words which express an attitude of hatred ought not be found on the lips of a person who claims to love God. Believers ought to use our power for good and creative purposes. We need to examine our attitudes. Then, we need to use our words, like Jesus did, to express love and keep people on their feet. How we use words speaks volumes about the kind of people we are. Jesus says it is not what goes into a person’s mouth but what comes out that defiles. In today’s language, what we say is what we are! It is a sobering reality.

So, how do we break the patterns we have developed which lead to the destructive use of words? The first step is realizing we have a problem and the second step is realizing we can change. To say, “This is just the way I am, words come out before I think about them, I cannot change,” is a cop-out! We ought to substitute the words, “I choose not to change,” or, “I choose to change and grow.”

For all of us can stop to consider whether we are speaking the truth in love before we speak what we think is the truth. All of us can refuse to listen to any gossip we hear so that repeating it is not even an option.

And all of us can examine our attitudes toward one another to make certain that hatred is not allowed to grow. By exerting a little effort, we can avoid a great many destructive uses of words.

Yet the best way to grow in this arena is by choosing to use words in creative ways. Not only should we avoid destructive words, we should use encouraging words as often as possible. In the Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha* Don Quixote meets a rejected call girl named Aldonza. Quixote calls her Dulcinea and sings of her beauty. For a moment on stage, Aldonza is transformed into Dulcinea simply by the encouraging words Quixote sings. It is an amazing transformation!

We have this same power to transform people with our words. Amazing are the results of a compliment about a child's behavior or a teenager's accomplishment, a good word about a teacher's lesson or a musician's contributions to worship, a thank-you for a well-cooked meal or a helping hand around the house. It costs us so little to offer a few kind and gentle words of encouragement, but it helps others so much. Such is the power of words. In a world where there are so many negative and destructive words, we have the power to use words for good and creative purposes if only we will choose to do so.

A story is told about a woman who came to Francis of Assisi, admitting that she had been guilty of malicious gossip. She wanted to know how she might find forgiveness. Francis told her to pluck a goose, lay one feather on the doorstep of each person she had wronged, and then go back and collect the feathers again. By the time she went back, the feathers had been scattered all over the village by the wind and she returned to Francis empty-handed. Francis said, "You can never recall those words you have spoken. They have been carried on their way, doing harm, and no reparation is possible. Ask God to forgive you."

We cannot recall our words, but we can choose them more carefully. Words are full of power — to create or destroy, to build up or tear down, to encourage or ridicule, to keep people on their feet or do more damage than sticks and stones. God speaks and a world comes into existence. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, bringing grace and truth. What will we do with our words?