

James 3:3-10

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost (Series C, Proper 28)

Lessons for the Day: Malachi 4:1-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-28

Watch Your Mouth! (Eighth Commandment)

November 17, 2019

“If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, 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 things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way. (SC, Eighth Commandment)

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

It is said that the average person can see a dot as small as eight-thousandths of an inch in diameter, yet this is about 14,000 times larger than the smallest known virus. Small though they are, these microbes are the cause of hundreds and hundreds of human diseases, some of which are very serious and can even be fatal. One small virus strain was responsible for what was probably the greatest pestilence civilization has ever experienced: the flu epidemic of 1918-19. That scourge took more lives than all the years of WWI. (By the way, that may be incentive to get your flu shot.)

The Bible tells of another small thing that can inflict great harm. It's that small part of the body known as the tongue. Unfortunately there is no vaccine to bring its deadly effects under control. Do you remember that old adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me?” It may be true that we don't have to let words hurt us. But ask someone who has been wrongly accused of sexual harassment if the words have hurt them; ask someone who has had a secret revealed that they shared in confidence; ask someone who is constantly put down by others, and you will begin to see just what harm words can actually bring.

That is why we need the guidance and correction of the Eighth Commandment: *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.* God insists that we always speak only the truth. But this commandment also requires us to watch our mouth. Luther rightly teaches in the catechism: *We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbour, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him and explain everything in the kindest way.* In everything we say, we are to use our tongues in the way God would have us do: not to gossip, to hurt or to destroy, but to build up other and to confess His truth before all people.

In our text, James reminds us: *the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!* I have always enjoyed the music of “The Carpenters” (and yes, I know that this shows my age.) How sad it was when Karen Carpenter, the lead vocalist in that brother/sister duo died unexpectedly at the young age of 32 due to heart failure brought on by years of self abuse from the eating disorder Anorexia Nervosa. There has been debate and speculation, as there always is, about what caused Karen's fatal obsession with weight control. It seems a reviewer once called her “Richard's chubby sister”. Three simple words. Most of us would probably laugh off a comment like that if someone said it to us. But these words had such a profound effect on this talented young woman that they influenced her life, and in that sense, helped contribute to her death.

Even a few words can cause hurt from which people may never recover. That is why God teaches us in this commandment to watch our mouth and to keep a rein on our tongue. First and foremost, He forbids us from telling lies about other. We are not to say anything that slanders others or hurts their reputation. And yet, it almost seems that we

delight in saying negative things about others. Personally, I feel that the internet and what we refer to as “social media” allow—and in their own way, even encourage—people to say horrible things about others and to spread so many mistruths. Don Cherry is fired from Hockey Night in Canada because of the things he said. Yet how many comments have been made about Cherry that are far worse than the things he said! What would happen if we were to stand before God to be judged only by the words that have come out of our mouth, especially the things we have said about others?

The psalmist says: **“Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.”** (Psalm 34:11–13, ESV) But it is so hard to control the tongue! James says: **“For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”** So often our mouths are filled with hurtful, spiteful, lying words. We say things we know we should not say; we tell others things that we should keep to ourselves. And yet we excuse our careless and thoughtless words by pointing out that we are still speaking the truth. We don’t gossip; we just tell it like it is. There is no place in the life of a Christian for words of gossip, judgment or bitterness. That is why God tells us: Watch your mouth. God forbids us from speaking falsehood or from speaking evil of anyone. As James says: **“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”**

God also requires us to put the best construction on everything, to explain it in the best possible way. Two boys on the school playground were discussing a classmate. One of them remarked, “He’s no good at sports.” The other quickly responded, “Yes, but he always plays fair.” The critical one added, “He isn’t very smart in school either.” His friend answered, “That may be true, but he studies hard.” The boy with the mean tongue was becoming exasperated with the attitude of the other. “Well,” he sneered, “did you ever notice how ragged his clothes are?” The other boy kindly replied, “Yes, but did you ever notice, they’re always clean!” Every negative observation was countered by a positive one. What an excellent example for us to follow! Let’s refrain from “evil speaking” and be “kind to one another” Rather than contributing to the spirit of criticism, let’s be known as those who cancel it.

Is that not exactly what we see in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ? John reminds us: **“if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”** (1 John 2:1–2, ESV) What a beautiful image of the Saviour we have here. John speaks of Jesus as our advocate, our defence attorney, the One who speaks on our behalf. But what if Jesus were to stand before the judgment seat of heaven and tell it like it is? What if He, who knows everything we have done, and every word we have spoken, even before it was on our tongue, stood before the Father to recount the long list of all that we have done against God’s holy will. But He doesn’t do that. Nor does He excuse our thoughtless words and actions. What He does do is speak of what He has done for us. The Saviour, who was falsely accused by the lying words of men; the Saviour who was mocked and ridiculed through the spite and bitterness of people, whose ears were filled with the taunts and insulting words of hateful, ungrateful people pleads for us, as He did from the cross: **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”** (Luke 23:34, ESV) He speaks in our defence, declaring that He has given His life for us on the cross, and then rose again from the dead so that we may be forgiven people, people redeemed from sin and blessed with the new life only He can give.

It is this new life we have in Christ that helps us to truly watch our mouth. That means we should watch what we say about others. We should also watch all the words that come out of our mouth. A golfer had a terrible day on the links. On the last hole he actually went into a tantrum, cursing and swearing, and beating the ground with his club. Finally recovering himself, he looked woefully at the caddy and muttered: “I guess I’ll have to give it up.” “Give up golf?” asked the caddy. “No, not golf,” he said sorrowfully, “the ministry.” Again, we hear James tell us: **“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”** There is no place in the mouths of God’s people for careless words, for words of cursing, judgment or anger. Let us never forget that we can do so much harm just by the careless words we speak. That is why we need to watch our mouth, and seek God’s help as we try to live in accordance with this commandment. Watch your mouth, that from it comes only words that build up, that defend, that show our concern for others. And in those times when we need to remind others that they have fallen away from God’s expectations, in those moments that rightfully call for “constructive criticism”, let us remember to speak the truth in love, as our Lord Himself does. Amen.