

THE BIG LITTLE PROBLEM. A sermon delivered by Rev. Steven Schafer at First Congregational of Royal Oak as part of a series on the book of James - November 13, 2022. Text: James 3:1-12

Three ministers are out in a fishing boat one sunny Saturday afternoon and, as you might guess, their conversation turned to their work. And they got onto the topic of confession of sin and how important it is for a person's spiritual life. So, not being hypocrites, they decided to do a little confessing to one another. The first minister admitted that he had a drinking problem. When things got too tense at church he would drive to a town 30-40 miles away, check into a motel and visit the local bar and drink himself into oblivion. "No one knows," he said. "But it's nice to make that confession to you fellows."

The second minister said his was a secret sin, too. He wasn't sure it was to the point of being an addiction yet, but he loved to gamble. He said he would sometimes, on his day off, head for one of the casinos and could easily blow a thousand dollars. Sometimes he would win, but he had to admit that he probably wasn't all that good at it. But, like the first minister, it felt good to finally tell someone.

It was the third minister's turn. He, rather sheepishly, looked at the other two and said, "Gosh, I wish I had gone first. You've shared some pretty personal and important secrets. I'm not sure I ought to tell you mine." He hesitates to share his, and they encourage him to go on... He says, "I REALLY wish I had gone first. My big sin is that... I'm a gossip..."

If you ever said it as a kid, finish this little poem with me... Sticks and stones may break my bones.... but words can never hurt me.

That seemed to be a bit of comfort if someone told you you were too fat or too skinny or that you looked funny in glasses or when you put on two different socks... But even as you said the little poem to your persecutors, you knew, in your heart, that it wasn't really true. The words those other kids said DID hurt. Some of you still remember those words to this very day – years later – decades later...

Someone rewrote that little rhyme to make it more truthful. They wrote, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but those will soon be mended. But names and words hurt my soul and the damage has never ended." That sounds a little more realistic, doesn't it?

Have you ever heard the expression “Loose Lips, Sink Ships”? That came from World War II. It seems that enemy spies used to hang out at British pubs to hear the loose talk of sailors about their upcoming assignments and what they would be doing. The information they gathered allowed German submarines to locate and sink many ships and end the lives of thousands of people. The government came up with the slogan to try to help stop the flow of important information to the enemy.

On a personal level, we all know what it means. For some, loose lips have caused divorce. For others, loose lips have ended friendships. For others, loose lips have ended in the lose of employment, and, I sadly have to admit, more than a few churches have been lost due to loose lips – gossip or harsh words or unrestrained anger - people saying things to one another that no son or daughter of God ought to say...Hurt - resentment - alienation - leaving - and the church dies...

One of the most popular reasons that people give for not attending church is that the church is full of hypocrites. We sometimes assume that that means they have observed people being very pious in church on Sundays but on Monday through Saturday they live like the Devil. But it is probably much more subtle than that. People generally don't observe us so closely as to see our inconsistencies from Sunday to Monday. What they do observe, though, is us making reference, in some way, to our church or our life as a church-goer, then, maybe days or weeks later, hear us telling a dirty joke or saying unkind things about a fellow employee or using colorful language. They put those two things together (sometime consciously and sometimes not) and conclude that church really doesn't make much of a difference in a person's life – that God doesn't make a difference... so why go? A good question with an obvious answer... Some of our words have kept people away from Jesus instead of drawing them to him...

Today we have come to the third chapter of the book of James and he begins with the one verse in all the Bible that has often made me want to resign from being a pastor (or at least it used to). He says, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers...because we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

That used to scare the bejivies out of me. Many of us ministers think James is talking directly to us. We spend our lives teaching spiritual truths. We “presume” to teach about eternal things. If we are wrong, we are jeopardizing the spiritual welfare of our people and, perhaps, even their eternal lives... YIKES! (I say it USED to bother me, but I've been doing this so long that if I'm in trouble, I have been for a long time and probably can't redeem myself now, anyway - but it is still something I think about often - what if what I say and how I live don't match up and you find out about it and it devastates your faith?).

The tongue – our words – may be the most powerful force on earth. From our lips can come praises to God or curses from hell. Our words can hurt or heal. Words have the ability to bring world peace or nuclear annihilation. ...And James suggests that anyone who can control his/her tongue completely is, in effect, the perfect person.

That's a pretty good argument for never speaking, but I think we shouldn't take it all quite that literally. I think he isn't speaking just of speaking. He's referring to all forms of communication – verbal or non-verbal. James just wants us to think, once in a while, before we speak – to not just say whatever pops into our minds – to be sensitive and thoughtful when we talk or write or roll our eyes or get a scowl on our faces that screams how we are feeling, even without making a sound... A hard thing to do, he admits, but worth the effort if we call ourselves Christians...

Just about every one of us are teachers of some sort on a regular basis. Some of you probably have someone at work that you teach, someone who is newer to the company than you and to whom it is your responsibility to train them to know what is expected at your place of employment. You, like me, “presume” to be teachers. And, of course, those of you who are parents or grandparents know that you are teachers or instructors of your children every day.

What James is trying to say to us here is that teaching involves very powerful responsibilities. When you or I teach, whether at work, at home or in the church, we are seeking to mold and change someone else's life – pretty serious stuff...

As our daughters have grown up, both have repeatedly said - and yours have too - and it's sobering: “Wow! I'm becoming more and more like my mom and dad every day.”

We taught them the values they hold and the ways of relating to others and what it means to be a child of God... Parents are the most potent of teachers... James is talking to each of us parents and grandparents... We, as teachers, will be judged at a higher level of expectation. Be sure your children know what it is you believe by how it is you live...

Words have the power to change the direction of our lives. Most of us remember, quite clearly, the day we stood in front of a minister and said two little words that changed the direction of our lives forever. We said “I Do” and, for better or for worse, *nothing* has ever been the same since...

Where in your life right now do you feel you are, or may be, heading in the wrong direction? Have you thought about what your words might be able to do to bring that situation back under control? What words will help? Maybe it's your marriage. Maybe it's that you've been moving in a negative direction for a while. What can you say to your spouse to begin to change that direction? How about words like: "I love you. I really do," or "I am sorry. I was wrong," or "Please forgive me." (Maybe all of those). You have to mean them, of course, but saying them is the first step... You'll be amazed at how powerful your words can be when used in the right way... How healing and renewing and releasing of emotions...

James isn't talking too much about the positive aspects of the tongue, of course – and there are many. He is warning about how devastating words from our mouths can be. He admits our tongues are small, but assures us that size has nothing to do with it. A little piece of metal – a bit of iron – in a horse's mouth, he says, can make the beast head in whatever direction you want it to go. A rudder on a ship is just a small thing in comparison to the size of the vessel, but controls it easily. A little match isn't much in itself, but it can start a California forest fire that can burn over tens of thousands of acres...

Someone has said that "The mouth is the billboard of the heart." People can tell what's inside of us by hearing what comes out of our mouths... Our attitudes, our prejudices, our passions, our motivations, our desires, our hopes – who we are – are all known by the things we say or don't say. And, unless we never say anything, those things WILL be known.

James holds out little hope any of us. He says that humans have been able to tame and train all kinds of animals – birds, dogs, cats, even reptiles and creatures of the sea, but **no one** has yet figured out how to tame his or her own tongue. He says that it's a bizarre thing to think that from the same mouth can come songs of praise to God – hymns, prayers, scripture readings – glorious things... and also curses and hatred and vulgarity. He assures us that that is simply wrong.

There is only one way to keep our mouths from hurting others and from hurting God and from revealing some of the evil that is in us. That is to change what is in us. If, even when our tongues lie, they tell the truth about us, we need to be transformed inside so that, when the truth is revealed, good is there.

On a scale of 1-10 where would you rate yourself in the positive use of your tongue? Are you an encourager or a destroyer? Are you a lover or filled with anger? Are you careful or careless? Do you usually express positive things - Godly things - faithful things - or do your words express pessimism and doom and fatalism? Can you

change any of the bad that comes out of your mouth? OF COURSE YOU CAN! But you will need a closer walk with God to do it consistently. You will need to have at least some of those words be prayers, some of them songs of praise, some of them words of joy... And you will need to find the discipline within (with God's help, maybe) to squelch some of the negative that bubbles up. Then, ultimately, you will need to let God transform you from the inside so that what bubbles up is nothing but the fruit of the Spirit of God.