

09-13-09

James 3:1-12 (Open Wide and Say, “Ah.”)

Open

By now, I’d guess that most of you don’t get too surprised when you find something unexpected in your bulletin. There usually ends up being some ‘method to my madness;’ the trick is to wait to find out what it is. Well for today, that time has come. So let me invite you to take that little wooden stick out of your bulletin... and let me ask you to consider this question: What experience does this remind you of? What experience does this remind you of?

Now if you said, “Craft time at Vacation Bible School,” that’s a good answer...and probably a sign that you’ve been attending church for a looong time. But to tell the truth, it’s not the answer I’m looking for this morning.

- No, I’m hoping that this stick will remind you of childhood trips to the doctor...and of those immortal words: “Open wide and say, ‘Ah.’”

I heard those words a lot when I was younger. I was one of those unfortunate kids who caught just about every sore throat that went around. So my mom was frequently forced to bundle me up and take me to the doctor...and he’d pull a tongue depressor out of his big glass jar...and then he’d stand next to me and say those words I didn’t wanna hear: “Open wide and say, ‘Ah.’” [Do it.]

- Of course, while the stick was in my mouth, he’d usually ask, “So what seems to be the problem, young man?” [Spoken as though mouth open & tongue depressed] “I got a sore throat.”
- Eventually, he’d give me a shot...or prescribe some foul-tasting medicine. And that went on for years until the doctor, I guess, had finally seen enough of me...so he decided to pluck my tonsils...and I’ve been a relatively healthy person ever since!

Transition

Now if I had to guess, I’d bet that few of us really enjoy getting poked and prodded by doctors and dentists and other medical personnel. It’s rarely a pleasant experience...and there’s always that worry in the back of our minds that they’ll find something we don’t want to deal with. And yet, sometimes it’s necessary. Without those occasional exams, all kinds of minor problems—problems that can be dealt with easily when caught early—can grow to become big problems.

- And so we submit. We do what the doctor says. We open wide and say, “Ah.”

Well, in our scripture lesson this morning, I think that James wants to perform a similar test. He knows there might be a problem—not with our tonsils or our temperature—but with our talk. Maybe it’s nothing. As he says in verse 2 of the passage we heard a little while ago, “Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect...able to keep their whole body in check.” And if that sounds like you, then you’re free to go. Here’s a lollipop for being such a good patient...and we’ll see you at your next regular check-up.

- But James is a thorough physician...a doctor of the soul who understands that “we all stumble in many ways” (v. 2). And so, the more likely diagnosis (in fact, the diagnosis that can be made about most of us, most of the time) can be found down in verse 10: “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”
- And so, James tells us to open wide and say, “Ah” ... so that we can learn a little bit more about our talk ...so that it will produce health and wholeness...rather than disease and destruction.

The Power of Words

Now if you look closely, it’s not hard to discover that ‘problems with talk’ were a real issue for the church or churches that James was writing to.

- In chapter 1 he says, “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because our anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” (1:19)
- A little further along he warns, “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.” (1:26)
- Close to the end of the book, he urges, “Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister—or judges them—speaks against the law and judges it.” (4:11)
- Even the issue that we studied last week—the tension between faith and works—involves our talk...and our almost uncontrollable habit of using words to justify ourselves: “What good is it,” James asks, “if people claim to have faith but have no deeds?” (2:1)

Of course, I think we all know that words can be a problem. After all, who among us hasn’t felt the sting of harsh words spoken by a parent or spouse or friend...or for that matter, even an enemy? And while we’re thinking about it, who among us hasn’t used some words ourselves that we wish we could take back?

- I’d bet that all of us have let loose with a remark that was a little too cutting...or a joke that was a little too off-color. We’ve made claims we knew we couldn’t back up...and shared information we knew we should have kept to ourselves.
- But still, there is this part of us that wants to say, “They’re only words.” There’s a part of us that believes the childhood rhyme: Sticks and stones may break bones...but words will never hurt me.

“Well, open wide and say, ‘Ah,’” James says. Take a closer look...and we’ll quickly discover that just because our words are small doesn’t mean that our words are powerless. A small bit can turn a big horse. A tiny rudder can steer a huge ship. All it takes is one little spark to set a whole forest on fire. And “the tongue is a fire,” James says, “a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell...It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” (3:6, 8)

- Do you think that sounds like no big deal?

The Curse of ‘Diseased’ Talk

“Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” (3:10) Part of the heartbreak, of course, in James’ diagnosis is that it doesn’t have to be this way. Our small-but-powerful words can be a source of incredible good. Proverbs 25 says, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” And make no mistake: our words can be a blessing.

- We can offer words of affirmation: “You did a great job! You have such a gift for that.”
- We can speak words of support: “I know it’s been hard. But I’m praying for you.”
- We can be generous with our words of gratitude...and vocal with our words of praise. If we’re prepared...and open to the Spirit’s guidance...we might even find an opportunity to speak words of life—to share a testimony about the things that God has done and is doing in our lives.

But “Open wide and say, ‘Ah,’” James says. He is fully aware of what could be...but he won’t skip over the difficult truth of what is. For our own good, he makes us face the fact—that in addition to all these positive, life-giving, blessing words—our talk so often includes negative, death-dealing, cursing words.

Our talk includes slander. Now, Webster’s dictionary defines this as “the utterance of false charges or misrepresentations which defame and damage another’s reputation,”¹ and based on that definition, I think you’d have to say that slander has become something of a national pastime in our country.

You can’t turn on the radio or watch TV these days without coming across political pundits who are bashing either the “left-wing radicals” or the “right-wing extremists”—and often doing so in crude, violent and intentionally misleading ways.

- And sadder than the fact that these ‘televised shouting matches’ have replaced what used to be civil discourse about issues that really matter...sadder than that is the fact that Christians are often right there in the thick of things—engaging in the same kind of smear tactics.

And we may excuse our behavior by saying, “Well...we’re only saying bad things about the other guys. We’re practically ‘doing our Christian duty’ by undermining and tearing down all those evil people who want to lead our nation in the wrong direction.”

- But where in the Bible does it say it’s okay to slander people...just because we disagree with them? James says, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness...My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” (3:9; 10)
- And if that’s not strong enough for you, Jesus warns, “I tell you that people will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Mt. 12:36-37)

Our talk includes gossip. Here again, our culture has taken what scripture condemns as a vice and turned it into a growth industry. Whether we’re watching Entertainment Tonight or reading People Magazine, we thrive on the juicy details of other people’s lives—who’s sayin’ what about whom...who’s gainin’ weight and who’s losin’ it... who’s shackin’ up and who’s breakin’ up.

- If only gossip stopped at the Hollywood city limit...but somehow, it finds its way into towns like Marshville and churches like First Baptist. Given a chance, we Christians do a pretty good job of ‘spreading the word’ about our co-workers...or neighbors ...or even our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Of course, we—at least—have learned how to be subtle about it. We don’t gossip. We share prayer concerns. “Did you hear what happened with Sister So-and-So and her husband? Bless her heart. We need to pray for her.”

I’ll admit, sometimes it’s easy to convince ourselves that the stories we pass along don’t really matter. “It’s not a big deal,” we say. “Besides, the person I told was going to find out anyway.” But those words are so hard to bring back once we’ve let them go. Pastor Leonard Sweet tells a story about a priest in a small town who was hearing confession from members of his congregation. And one man confessed, “Father, I have sinned. I’ve spread a false rumor about my neighbor, and I need forgiveness.”

- And the priest told him, “Because of Christ’s saving work...and because of your repentance from sin, you are forgiven.” But then the priest continued, “Now before you go, take this down pillow. I want you to cut it open and walk through the town, spreading feathers everywhere. And then—when you’ve distributed all the feathers—come back here...and I’ll tell you your penance.”

So the man did as he was told. He took the down pillow and walked through town, spreading feathers. And when they were gone, he went back to the priest and asked what he should do next. And the priest told him, “Now go and collect every one of those feathers.”

- “But that’s impossible!” the man objected. “By now, they’ve blown all over the place.”
- “That’s exactly right,” the priest said. “You are forgiven...but it will never be possible to undo the harm you’ve done with your gossip. Now go, and sin no more.”ⁱⁱ

Our talk includes grumbling. We don’t get our way... so we gripe. Things don’t match our expectations... so we complain. The Bible actually gives a powerful warning about grumbling...back in the Old Testament book of Exodus. God delivered the people of Israel from slavery...with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. He guided them with a cloud by day and fire by night. When they were in danger, he parted the Sea. When they were thirsty, he gave them water. When they were hungry, he gave them manna from heaven.

But do you think they were grateful for all those blessings? Do you think they thanked God for the generous way He provided for them? No. They grumbled instead. They cried out, “We wanna go back to Egypt. There—at least—we had plenty of good things to eat. But out in this wilderness, we’re tired. Our feet hurt...and all we get is manna. Manna cakes. Manna waffles. Ba-manna bread.”

- Years later, the apostle Paul wrote, “These things occurred as an example to keep us from setting our hearts on evil...So do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.” (1 Cor. 10:6, 10) You think God doesn’t take grumbling seriously?

“Of course,” we tell ourselves, “we would never grumble about God. And the things we do complain about...they’re just little things. It’s no big deal.

- But I wonder. How much damage we do to our own spirit...when we focus on the negative rather than the positive?
- How much discontent do we create...when people take our complaining as an excuse to do some griping of their own?
- How badly do we wound the church of the Living God...when—instead of celebrating and sharing all the positive things that take place in our ministry—we choose to grumble...and tell people how we didn’t like the music or the way a decision got made or something the pastor said?

We could go on and on about the negative things our talk so often includes.

- We betray the trust of others...even though scripture says that “a person of integrity won’t violate a confidence” (Prov. 11:13).
- We exaggerate our accomplishments or our knowledge to make ourselves look good...even though Jesus said simply to “let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no” (Mt. 5:37).
- We use profanity...even though the Bible tells us to “let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up” (Eph. 4:29).

And we don’t even have time this morning to talk about the damage that’s done by the things we don’t say—the ‘thank you’ we never articulate...the forgiveness we never offer...the love we never express.

The Cure

Open wide and say, “Ah.” Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Do you see yourself anywhere in James’ diagnosis of our talk—slander...gossip...grumbling...betrayal...exaggeration...profanity...all the wrong things we’ve said and all the good things we’ve left unsaid?

- Do you think God might be trying to help you understand the truth about your talk this morning? And if so, what’re you gonna do about it?

I suppose one response would be to say, “Well...I guess I need to watch my words a little more carefully. Maybe I do need to work harder at controlling the things I say.”

- And that sounds like a good idea, of course...but good luck. James is both refreshingly honest and amazingly accurate when he says, “All kinds of animals—birds, reptiles and sea creatures—are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings, but no one can tame the tongue” (3:8).
- No—our problem—and its cure—lie deeper than that.

James, you see, understands that the real issue isn’t our words at all. It’s our hearts. That’s why he says, “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?” (3:11-12)

- And in putting it like that, he’s really only paraphrasing Jesus, who said: “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good...or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad...For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Mt. 12:33-4)

Conclusion

Open really wide and say, “Ah.” What do our words tell us about the condition of our hearts?

- Not “What do we think the condition of our hearts is...and do our words reflect that?” because that’s a different question.
- But “What do our words reveal?” Because out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.

I’d like you to do two things for me this morning. First, I’d like you to take your tongue depressor home with you—maybe put in your Bible or on your kitchen counter or the dashboard of your car—and let it remind you this week to ask yourself: Who needs to be blessed by my words?

- Who do I need to apologize to? Who do I need to stop complaining about? Who do I need to thank or encourage or affirm?
- I actually thought about asking you to write the name of that person on your tongue depressor (which you’re perfectly welcome to do) but it seemed like that might be a little too much trouble. So just take it with you and let it jog your memory: Who needs to be blessed by my words?

And second, I’d like you to ask Jesus to deal with the heart issues that your words reveal. When you open wide and say, “Ah,” I don’t know what you find. For me, there are still words I shouldn’t say (but do)...and words I should say (but don’t)...and again, those aren’t just words. They’re indicators of what my heart is like.

- But the good news is that Jesus can change our hearts. If we’ll open the door, he’ll come in and clear away all the hurt and anger and jealousy and junk...and he’ll begin to remake us.

Now, you can ask Jesus to deal with your heart right where you are. But that’s what this altar is for. It’s a place to do business with God...to say without shame and without reservation: Jesus, I want the life that you promise. Take my heart, and make it new.

- Won’t you open your heart to him as we stand and sing our hymn of response, “My Jesus, I Love Thee,” #364.

ⁱ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/slander>.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from *Soul Salsa* by Leonard Sweet (Zondervan, 2000), p. 95.