

The Constructive and Destructive Power of Words

Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12

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In a brief video, a man sits on a mat on the sidewalk of a bustling city. He stares straight ahead oblivious to the passersby. A message scribbled on a piece of cardboard beside him reads, "I'm blind."

Most people walk by and don't even notice the blind man. Occasionally someone bends over and drops a few coins into his can.

A sharply dressed woman walks by. She stops, returns to the man, picks up his sign, and scribbles something the viewer cannot see. The blind man, of course, cannot see the woman, but he reaches out and feels her shoes. When she leaves, people start dropping more and more money into his can. The coins and dollar bills fill his can and overflow onto the mat where he is sitting.

Some time later the woman walks by again and stops. The man reaches out and feels her shoes. He asks, "What did you do? What did you write on my sign?"

The camera pans over to the cardboard sign. It reads, "It's a beautiful day and I can't see it."

The words we choose make a big difference, don't they? Words can change someone's day. Tell your daughter at the breakfast table that she is a delight to your life, and see how that affects her day. Or tell her that she's a disappointment to you and will never amount to anything, and see how that affects her day.

Words have changed the world. Martin Luther's 95 Theses changed Western Europe and Christianity. John F. Kennedy, at a critical time in this nation's history, spoke words that mattered, "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country."

Martin Luther King, Jr., a master of words, wrote these words in a Birmingham jail, words that changed our country:

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Some of you helped birth these words of Neil Armstrong: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

And who could ever underestimate the power of these words spoken by our Lord, “So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”

One person has claimed that words are not just powerful; they are the most powerful force available to humanity. He went on to say that we can use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or we can use it destructively with words of despair. (Yehuda Berg, former co-director of the Kabbalah Center in Los Angeles)

Consider these three words, “You are smart.” Compare those with these three words, “You are fat.”

Or these, “You are capable.” Compared with these, “You are stupid.”

Or these, “You are beautiful.” Compared to, “You are a loser.”

Some words are so powerful, so laden with emotional energy, that I am very cautious about using them in a sermon. They are legitimate, acceptable words, not profane, but they are raw with emotion. Rape. Retarded. Abortion. Some words are so powerful and emotion laden that we refer to them with only their first letter. And, of course, some words are intended to offend. They are meant to degrade, to anger, hurt, and to shame others. I will not name them. Some could argue that they’re just words, letters strung together in a certain order. But we

know that's not true. Those letters stung together in a certain order are a powerful force filled with constructive or destructive power.

Did you hear how James described the tongue in the text I read earlier? He personifies the tongue, describing it as if it has a life of its own. It is a fire, he says, a fire ignited by the flames of *gehenna*, hell itself. He says the tongue is evil, full of deadly poison. Every kind of animal—cattle, birds, snakes, even fish—can be tamed. But not the tongue, James says. It is so uncontrollable and evil that the same tongue can bless God and curse those who are made in God's likeness. It's an irony, isn't it, that blessing and cursing can come from the same mouth?

James says that shouldn't be so, not for people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. A stream cannot flow at the same time with fresh and brackish water. A fig tree cannot produce olives, or a grapevine figs. Near the end of chapter one, James says that the tongue, the things you and I say, gives a glimpse into the worth of our religion:

*If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues
but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.*

Pretty strong words, aren't they? So what does this mean for us? As people of goodwill, men and women of faith, what does this mean? Let me offer two suggestions.

First, it means we must refuse to use words in a destructive way. It's a discipline. We've all been around a person who refuses to speak badly about another person. Others may freely speak badly about the person. But this one person holds his tongue and refuses to join the criticism. And then we've all been around people who seem to relish speaking badly about others. Their eyes light up. Their voices go up an octave. It obviously brings them great pleasure.

We must refuse to do that. Words can ruin a person's reputation, damage relationships, destroy trust, and undermine community. So we must refuse to use words in a destructive way. This means we do not call people offensive names. Related to race. Ethnicity. Sexual orientation. Religion. We don't use any name meant to degrade or shame someone. It means we do not gossip. We do not join in those

back room conversations that betray a confidence, spread sensitive information, or misrepresent someone. Gossip only exposes the gossiper's insecurity and mean-spiritedness. We must refuse to do that.

Second, it means we must choose to use words in a constructive way. This too is a discipline. We've all been around people whose words make us feel better, lifted, encouraged. Everybody likes being around those kinds of people.

I read a blog by a medical doctor named Bart Barrett. He wrote about his passion for learning. He loved medicine and wanted to be the best doctor he could be. After 20 years of practicing medicine, he discovered he had overlooked an important part of healing—the power of kind words. Like many doctors, his practice was to chastise patients for eating too much, exercising too little, failing to follow doctor's orders, or something else.

He had a patient with diabetes who quit coming in. The staff sent letters and called but never got a response. They made fifteen attempts to get this patient in. One day Dr. Barrett picked up the phone himself and called the patient. To his surprise, the patient answered. Instead of haranguing the man about not taking care of himself, Dr. Barrett said he asked for the opportunity to help him be healthy. The man came in and within a few months his diabetes was under control. He chose to use words in a constructive way. (*Musings on Medicine, Ministry and the Meaning of Life*, July 4, 2014)

I believe it. Words are not just powerful. They are the most powerful force available to humanity. And I believe James too. Our words expose the worth of our religion. So let us be the ones who bridle our tongues and use them constructively.

Closing Prayer

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto you, O Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen.