

Word Power – July 8, 2018

We typically study our way through a particular book of the Bible and -as my goal is to educate you about the scripture while encouraging you to follow Jesus better- that's a good thing. But that approach doesn't always allow us to talk about how the **Kingdom of God** connects, or collides with what's happening in the **here and now**.

Now talking about the Kingdom and Current Events can be dicey,...difficult. People can be offended or angered and I hate confrontation and I want you to like me. But for some reason God decided that, for the sake of His Kingdom, I should be in this place with this pulpit and platform and this authority and the unsettling responsibility that comes with it. As the opening verse from James 3 declares: **James 3:1** Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.

And so, in some fear and trembling I'm going to spend some weeks talking about **[slide]** **"Kingdom of God matters in the here and now."**

And one **Kingdom of God Matter in the Here and Now** that's on my mind has to do with **[slide]** words- all sorts of words: written, spoken, texted, posted, chanted, picketed, broadcast, published, billboarded, emailed, blogged, and of course tweeted.

[slide] Free Speech has been the corner-stone of our cultural identity, but somewhere along the line- I suspect along with the rise of the disconnected but very immediate nature of on-line communication and its accompanying electronic courage – our culture has popularly redefined **[slide]** "free speech" to mean I'm free to publicly say absolutely anything I want about anyone or anything. Many -including many who identify themselves as Christians- want to see **"politically Correct speech"** be taken behind the barn and shot. And some of those same folks have developed an affinity for anyone who **"says what he thinks"** regardless of how ugly or inflammatory it might be.

Now if you understand yourself to be a Christian, a lover of God, a disciple of Jesus, then accordingly you hold **the written word of God** –the scriptures- as **the primary lens through which you view life**. If so then this sort of unfiltered, derisive, expression- in any form, spoken or written, should be absolutely renounced by you as a disciple of Jesus.

This communication is absolutely contrary to what both the Old and New Testaments say about how God's people should communicate with each other and the world. Paul tells the Colossians: **[slide]** **Col 4:5** Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. **6** Let your speech always be with grace, *as though* seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

Another translation puts it: **[slide]** Col 4:5 Be wise in the way you act toward those who are not believers, making good use of every opportunity you have. 6 Your speech should always be pleasant and interesting, and you should know how to give the right answer to everyone. (GNT)

Grace in our speech doesn't mean we don't defend our faith in Christ or we don't say hard things when necessary. But we name Jesus as Lord of our Language as well as our life. **[slide]** 1Pet 3:15 in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. **But do this with gentleness and respect,...** James sums it up nicely **[slide]** in the NLT: 1:26 If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue (texts, emails, posts), you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.

Words-especially written ones- are easily misunderstood:

A man whose wife was mad at him decided to apologize by sending her some flowers with two simple sentences on the card: "I'm sorry. I love you." But when the flowers arrived. One period was missing so the note said: **[slide]** "I'm sorry I love you."

And because words are easily misunderstood they can be dangerous:

Like the Blacksmith teaching his apprentice saying **[slide]** "I'll bring the horseshoe from the fire and lay it on the anvil. When I nod my head you hit it with your hammer." Thus the shortest blacksmith career in history.

Words are more than linguistic symbols. **All of us know the truth that words can wound and crush the human spirit.** The old rhyme about "sticks & stones" is a lie. Names hurt. Words hurt. Send the message that someone is stupid, worthless, or "no good" long enough and it can destroy. But the power of words works other way too:

[slide] Words can also bring healing to heart, mind and body.

Prov. 16:24 Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

Prov. 25:11 A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

According to the scripture spoken words (or written, messaged, texted, etc.) are not benign. *They can be a welcome source of healing or a cancerous growth that can kill from the inside out.*

James the bishop of Jerusalem and half-brother of Jesus, spends a lot of ink on **the damage words can do** as we fling them about. He gives us 5 observations about "word power" that should be applied to our every form of communication from FB posts to e-mail to party small-talk.

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I. Controlling Words Is Hard. James 3:2 For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

Sin is a universal problem for everyone- including Christians. God says so. "If we say: "there's no sin in us." We call God a liar and God's word isn't inside us" (1John 1:10). James comment above means anyone who could consistently control his speech must be perfect in every way because the fact is **[slide]** if "self-control" were to wash over us like a wave the tongue would be the last thing to get damp. It's elusive & unruly.

When the prophet Isaiah realizes God is present in the temple his first thought is that he is unclean, not because of sexual misconduct or murder or stealing but because he is “a man of unclean lips” living among a “people of unclean lips.” Isaiah’s sense of doom shows he understands the damage words can do and the pervasive problem humans have with “unclean lips.” [slide] **And it was made clear to him that God takes the quality of our speech very seriously.** Is. 6:6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth *with it* and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

The reason controlling our words is hard is that **Words have power. All the wise know it.** [slide] Prov21:23 Those who guard their mouths and their tongues [SEP] keep themselves from calamity

1Pet 3:10 For, “Whoever would love life [SEP] and see good days [SEP] must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech.

According to Hebrew wisdom our speech and our heart are synchronized- parallel! **One reveals the other.** [slide] Pr10:20 The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, [SEP] but the heart of the wicked is of little value. Pr17:20 One whose heart is corrupt does not prosper; [SEP] one whose tongue is perverse falls into trouble. Ps19:14 May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer

The words anyone speaks into the universe reveal the content of that one’s heart. Words, texted or spoken, tweeted or emailed, shoot into the universe and reveal the truth about us. [slide] As I’ve said before, owning a parrot is a good way to learn just what you sound like to the world. Thanks to Max we heard the way we spoke to our kids and tried hard to change it. And it wasn’t easy because controlling our speech is hard.

Even as hard as James says it is, Jesus demands it of us. [slide]

Matt 12:36 But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.(every post posted, every tweet tweeted, every text sent, every e-mail written.) **37** For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” Controlling your communication could very well be the hardest thing you’ll ever have to do. But Jesus says it must be done for your sake and the sake of the world because...

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II. Damage From Words is Huge. 5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and *yet* it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

Consider these names: [slide] Lenin, [slide] Manson, [slide] Jim Jones, [slide] David Koresh, [slide] and Adolph Hitler. All these men used their considerable verbal talent to manipulate people to do horrible, insane things. Hitler, alone is considered responsible for the deaths of between 46 & 60 million people **and his primary weapon was words.** The words these wicked men flung out into the universe inspired great evil that brought fire and death and destruction to dozens or thousands or millions of people all over the world.

The scripture understands this, describing “The Wicked” saying: [slide]

Ps 5:9 Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; [SEP]their heart is filled with malice. [SEP]Their throat is an open grave; [SEP]with their tongues they tell lies.

Ps 10:7 His mouth is full of lies and threats; [SEP]trouble and evil are under his tongue.

But you don't have to be a megalomaniac or a false messiah to wreak havoc with words. In a poem about the cruel words of a hateful woman Emily Dickenson wrote:

[slide] She dealt her pretty words like blades As glittering they shone.

And every one unbarred a nerve Or wantoned with a bone.

Ms. Dickenson reflects a similar bit of poetry from the Psalms

Ps64:2 Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked, [SEP]from the plots of evildoers.

[SEP]3 They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim cruel words like deadly arrows.

Stories about **kids** [children] **committing suicide** because of **an endless torrent of bullying words**- verbal and online- are sickeningly common these days- and its only getting worse.

Thanks to the internet words can be both a long and short range weapon carrying verbal death around the world at the speed of your broadband connection.

Words are not benign. They can stab and hurt from across the globe or across the room. Herman and Trixie had some people over for the first time since the baby was born.

Everything was good until one of Herman's buddies showed up with a girl that Trixie just couldn't stand. Everything the woman said grated on Trixie's brain. Trix asked Herman to come help her check on the baby. Upstairs in the privacy of the nursery Trixie told Herman exactly what she thought of this woman and while she was at it included some catty remarks about the other women present too. As they rejoined the party it was strangely silent- [slide] except for the cooing of the baby coming from the baby monitor sitting on the end table.

The potential damage from our words, written or spoken is gigantic. The tongue is a little fire that can burn down whole forests- or it can bring the healing and peace of God. [slide] **Ps 12:18** The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

[slide] [KOMO Girls Inglewood Mid School greeting Shelly Kienle]

III. Backfire From Words Is Likely James 3:6 ...the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell.

These days we are all too familiar with how a little spark in dry brush can easily blow up into a destroying inferno. Just like that the words we text and type and speak can get out of control such that the backfire burns [slide] **OUR OWN LIVES** down in the process.

• An official @ChryslerAutos Twitter admin sent these words out to 7,500 “I find it ironic that Detroit is known as the motor city and yet no one here knows how to (blanking) drive”.

• A woman was given a prime job offer but had to weigh a long commute into the deal. She posted: “Cisco just offered me a job! Now I have to weigh the utility of a fatty paycheck against the daily commute to San Jose and hating work.”

- A (former) employee of Walmart, posted that the country's average IQ would increase if bombs were dropped on all the company's stores.
- Another female employee posted this to FB: OMG I hate my job!! My boss is a total pervvy (jerk) always making me do (stuff) just to (tick) me off!! **The Boss's replied this way:**
I guess you forgot you added me here. First: Don't flatter yourself. 2nd: I'm Gay, Thirdly that "stuff" is called your job, you know what I pay you to do. You also seem to have forgotten that you have 2 weeks left on your 6-month trial period. Don't bother coming in tomorrow. I'll put your check in the mail and you can come in to pick up your personal items any time. And yes, I'm serious.

These are real-life examples of how our own words, our "free speech" can backfire on us and damage our lives. The scripture warns us clearly to guard our words/texts/posts carefully. **[slide]** Pr 15:4 The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. Pr 15:1 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Just like a parent watching a child with scissors or a first pocket knife, God warns: "Watch out! Those words are sharp and you could hurt yourself with them if you're not careful." So, God is looking out for your well-being when He warns you to let all your words be full of Grace, and gentleness and respect.

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IV. Perfection In Words Is Impossible 8 But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison.

James is practical about the reality. God calls us to guard our words carefully and commands us to speak with grace, gentleness and respect but *God knows no matter how hard we try, we'll blow it.*

While we are redeemed and filled with God's Spirit we are still in the process of being made holy which will not be completed until His return. Thus: *no matter how much we grit our teeth or hold our tongue, sometime, somewhere we'll say the wrong thing, the hurtful thing, the thoughtless thing.*

It's going to happen. *So James' warning is a call is to "CONSTANT VIGILANCE."* We need to slow down and consider our words and pray for the Fruit of the Spirit called **self-control**. *And we must be prepared to "eat our words" when necessary, take responsibility and apologize for the sins of our speech.*

And that's not only so for you internet whippersnappers on "the Youtubes and the Facebooks." Don't know if you've noticed but some of you are getting older. And for some as we age our "politeness filters" start to wear out and run out of grace or gentleness. Or we might figure at 70+ years we've earned the right to freely "say what we think." I'm sorry my dears, remember what Jesus said earlier **[slide]: Matt 12:36** But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.

Perfection in our words may be impossible but we will still be held responsible. So constant vigilance and a willingness to take responsibility and apologize are critical to our communication.

Now there's something else that needs to be mentioned here and this is as good a place as any. Here it is: People in authority over us will sometimes need to speak words of correction and we will typically define those words as "mean." When my parents told me in harsh tones "Go to your room!" because I'd done something wrong- I declared them to be mean. In my late twenties, called into the boss's office for some hard correction, I used mature language but I considered those words mean, too. Jesus used corrective language easily characterized as mean: "Get behind me Satan!!" "Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God." To the Pharisees: "You look clean on the outside but you're full of robbery and wickedness." You're white-washed tombs full of uncleanness and death. He calls them "blind guides" and says you make your converts "twice the the sons of hell as you are."

So, hypothetically speaking, being appointed as your pastor I may –at some time- need to offer correction. And I will try to do that as gently as possible. But still I guarantee – because it's human nature- that you will think I'm being mean to you- just like I thought my boss was mean, just like I thought my parents were mean, just like the Pharisees thought Jesus was mean. And it might be that when the dust settles I might have to apologize to you because "backfire from words is likely" and "perfection in words is impossible."

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V. Consistent Grace-filled Words are God's Goal ⁹ With it (the tongue) we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

In the Mid Nineties Rabbi Joseph Telushkin –author of "Words That Hurt, Words That Heal"- put forward the idea of a National **"Speak NO Evil Day."** While sponsored in the Senate in '96 it "died" in committee!

At speaking engagements Telushkin would ask his audience if they could go 24 hours without saying any unkind words about or to anyone: laughter and some "no way!" Then he would say: *"Those who cannot answer yes must recognize that you have a serious problem. If you cannot go for 24 hours without smoking you are addicted to nicotine. If you cannot go 24 hours without a drink you're most likely an alcoholic. Similarly, if you cannot go for 24 hours without saying (texting/posting/e-mailing) unkind words about others then you have lost control of your tongue."*

The national resolution may have faded away but God's expectations have not.

God expects us to make every effort to "speak no evil." Our communication has to reflect our identity in Christ. When we name ourselves Christians we are saying we want to be human reflections of Jesus, human reflections of God. The written word of God makes it clear from Gen. to Rev. that that reflection has to encompass every form of our communication as well.

James asks rhetorically: **11** Does a fountain send out from the same opening fresh and bitter *water*? Of course not! It's one or the other.

We cannot come here and sing praise to God who's made humans in his image and then go home and say or post derisive comments about someone or some people, or condone the derisive words of someone else "saying what he thinks."

That is incompatible with the life God expects of you and me.

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Words have immense power. They can build up or they can destroy the lives of others and backfire, bringing destruction to our own lives and relationships. Controlling our words is hard and it's likely impossible to do it perfectly but by the power of God's Spirit we followers of Jesus have to make the effort because all of us will be held accountable [slide] **Matt 12:36** But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.(every post posted, every tweet tweeted, every text sent, every e-mail written.) **37** For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

This is why God calls on us to guard our words, to pray for self-control and wisdom in our speech and writing and that God will guide our words with Grace. And so we pray:

[slide] **Say it with me...**

Psalm 19:14^[SEP] Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.