

## **Words that Wound; Words that Heal**

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The Church and Christian Relationships Series

James 3:1-12

Today [tonight] we are going to be taking a look at a passage that focuses on our speech, upon our words as I continue in a series that I have been doing on the church and our relationships with each other. Now, we have been taught from the time we are little that what comes out of our mouth is really no big deal. You know, the old nursery rhyme, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” I often wonder whom the foolish person was who came up with that nursery rhyme, because I would like to throw a few sticks and stones his way. Just a moment’s reflection will tell you that it is infinitely easier to recover from a broken wrist or a broken leg than it is to recover from a broken heart or a wounded spirit that came about by hurtful words – death dealing words.

A lot of times we are very much in touch with the wounds that we have experienced as the result of someone pointing out a flaw in us, tearing us down at a vulnerable moment, calling us stupid, or fat, or lazy. They were words that told us that we would never amount to very much, words that predicted a negative future for us. Most people can call to mind very quickly words spoken to them years ago that resulted in their wounding.

And we can particularly do that when it comes to words that our parents spoken over us. I wonder how many of us can remember words that you spoke that resulted in the wounding of another? I still experience feelings of great shame and guilt because of a rumor that I spread about a girl when I was 15. I absolutely destroyed her reputation. Now, I have no idea what has happened to her in the past 2½ decades since I said what I said or where she is or what state her life is in. I just know that every time I remember what I said, I pray for her that God might bring blessing into her life in the place of my curse.

Is there anyone in your life that you look back on and say, “Lord, I really wounded this other person by what I said? Please have mercy on them and heal them and forgive me.” Maybe it was words that you spoke in breaking up with a boyfriend or a girlfriend and you were particularly unkind. You just had to get in that zinger as they were being dumped or they were dumping you. Maybe it was some words that you spoke in the breakdown of your marriage – just one last parting shot to destroy your spouse, to reduce them to rubble.

Maybe it was a word that you spoke to one of your children or to a parent when you were a teenager, or even as an adult, a word that was empowered by an almost evil force.

Do you know Christians, of all people, ought to respect the power of speech? As I talk about our relationships with each other, your mind ought to immediately go to your speech, because those of us who believe that we are Christians, we have become followers of Christ, we want to imitate Jesus in our lives, we

Christians of all people ought to respect the power of speech and understand that words are a big deal – both encouraging words and wounding words. That what comes out of our mouths is a big deal.

See the Bible tells us right at the beginning of Genesis 1 that God created the world by way of words. We read in Genesis 1 ten times, “And God said...” And God said. And God said. And God said. We are told that the way that God created the world was by words. And over and over in the prophetic books we read the phrase “the word of the Lord came to Micah” or “the word of the Lord came to Jonah” or “the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah or Malachi.”

Now why do I talk about speech and words in a series that I am doing on relationships? Well, it should be obvious to you, but words are the way relationships happen. Words are the currency of relationships. When God wants to initiate a relationship with a person, he speaks to us. In fact, Jesus is called the “Word” – capital W, the Word of God. Jesus, according the gospel of John, is the very expression of God. Apart from people expressing themselves, we have no ability to relate to them. If God did not express himself in Jesus, if he did not let us in, he would remain a mystery to us. Words are the way we relate to each other.

That is why it is so unbelievably frustrating when your spouse or your boyfriend or girlfriend or roommate or teenager won’t communicate with you. I wonder how many of you have a mate – men, in particular, some of you ladies – how many of you have a spouse, how many of you teenagers have a parent, how many of you who are living with someone have a roommate or a friend who you hear constantly saying to you, begging you, asking you, praying to be let into your life? How many of you are constantly being sought out by someone who loves you and who is saying to you, “Speak to me. Let me in. If you don’t talk to me, I can’t possibly connect with you. I don’t know what you think. I don’t know what you feel. I don’t know what you want, what you dream about, what you fear. I don’t know what hurts you. Why do you want to remain so cut off from me?”

Words are the way that we establish relationship. And we withhold relationship when we refuse to speak. Unless we speak, we remain a mystery to others. Our inner life, our persons, is cut off. Words are the way we maintain relationships and nurture or destroy relationships.

Friends, words are powerful. They are the currency of our relationships. With words we have the power to wound and with our words we have the power to heal. That is the title of today’s message, Words that Wound; Words that Heal. Let’s pray.

If you have a Bible, I am going to be reading from James 3.

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the

tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

James starts off in his teaching about words that wound and words that heal by focusing on the person in the church who speaks the most, at least publicly, and that is the teacher. He says: "Not many of you would presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

One of the most significant ways that you can be involved in the spread of the kingdom of God is to become a teacher of the Bible, to share the very words of God. These are the very words of Almighty God.

Of course, in the Bible being a teacher is not all privilege and blessing. James says, "Let not many of us presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." In the Bible increased position always brings with it increased penalty and increased scrutiny. Increased influence always brings with it in the Bible a more searching judgment by God and by people. That is why it is the height of hypocrisy when a politician thrusts himself out into the limelight, wanting to lead and then says that it is unfair for people to do a searching look at their private lives or character. They state: "Hands off of that." If you don't want to submit to the judgment of people or the judgment of God, then don't be a leader.

Greater opportunity always brings with it greater accountability and greater penalty. Jesus says that in Luke 12 when he says, "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded. From the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

If you are a leader, the Lord is holding you to a higher standard. Much more will be asked because you have been given a privileged place in his kingdom. Your leadership, in whatever capacity it is in, provides you with an inordinately great opportunity to influence someone else. But it also carries with it great scrutiny from the Lord.

I think of the effect of much of Christian teaching today and how many people have been led astray from God's plan for their lives by bad teaching or false teaching. I think of how many people have gotten a distorted view of who God is and what he wants by the influence of a teacher, someone who opened the Bible up for them. There is teaching in the church today in America that drives people

toward greed and away from what Jesus calls for in terms of self-denial. There is teaching that drives people toward legalism and away from a deep embrace of God's grace and his mercy. There is teaching that drives people to judge others, instead of calling the church toward a posture of mercy and grace. There is teaching in the church of America that attributes the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan or makes people highly suspicious of the practice of the biblical gifts of the Spirit. There is teaching that gives false assurance to people and communicates to people that all is well with them and that they are saved, when the person is not saved and will not be with God in eternity.

And James says, "Let not many of you be teachers, brothers and sisters." I think of all the false teaching and then I ask myself, "Does anyone really want to stand before God on the Day of Judgment and explain how it is that they falsely told someone else who was on their way to hell, 'don't worry, everything is OK with you'" Do we really want to be in the position of having to answer to God for a word of false assurance that we sensed from someone else that was desperately wrong with them, that there was something that was spiritually wrong. That the person was walking in sin, but we put our arm around them and said, "Not to fear; don't worry. Even though there is no change in you. There is no repentance in you. There is no softness toward God. There is just a deliberate rebellion against the Lord, don't worry." We offer cheap grace.

To use the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, cheap grace, preaching forgiveness to someone else without their repentance, grace without discipleship, grace without the cost, grace without Jesus Christ living and active and calling a person to die to themselves, to go the way of the cross and put away their sins. When James says, "Don't let many of you be teachers because we who teach will be judged by a stricter standard," I wonder how many times you and I have offered cheap grace, false assurance, to someone who was in rebellion against God? But in our man pleasing and in our desire to comfort another, we said, "don't worry."

Do we really want to explain that to God?

I wonder about the teachers who will have to explain to God on the Day of Judgment why they attributed to Satan or to someone's emotions activities that belonged to the Holy Spirit? Do we really want to stand before God and say, "Well, God, I saw in the Bible that these things were biblical gifts of the Spirit, but I was taught in another book or by my old pastor or by a Bible college professor that this stuff was demonic. And so I just passed it along." Do you think you get off the hook so easily because you heard something and you just echoed it?

If you are a teacher, you have a responsibility that God will not allow you to escape from. You have a responsibility to search out God's Word yourself, for there is a judgment on teachers for what they teach.

Pastors who break their ordination vows by blessing the marriages of gay couples, pastors who teach their congregations to be suspicious, to question the moral absolutes that we find in God's Word – James says, "Let not many of you be teachers, brothers and sisters, because we who teach will be judged with a stricter scrutiny."

And I, just for one, do not want to stand before God and have to explain why I thought I had a better idea than he does. Why I substituted my words for his words. Why I gave comfort to someone that he was afflicting or afflicted someone that he was trying to comfort.

Words are powerful.

So, James begins his discussion on words that wound and words that heal by focusing on the lead speaker in the church, the preacher. And he gives us guidelines and thinking about the effect of our teaching on others. We must understand our influence, especially our influence spiritually, in guiding people toward making life-changing decisions.

And then as James wishes to further press home the importance of our speech, he goes on to tell us that our tongues and our speech really are a pass key for us to holy living. Look at verses 2-5.

“We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or takes ships as an example, although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body...”

You know, the Bible teaches us that the ultimate goal of the Christian life is that God forms in the deepest part of your personality – a reflection of his own goodness and glory. He wants your habits, your attitudes, your motives, your inner thought processes, your actions, your words to look like the thoughts and habits and attitudes and desires and words and actions of his Son, Jesus. The ultimate goal of the Christian life is that you and I be perfect reflections of Jesus. That we relate the way he would to slights and being overlooked. That we love the way he loves and encourages the way he encouraged.

Now, we struggle a great deal with this issue of becoming like Jesus. We have lots of worship songs about “Lord, make me holy.” We sing, “I want to be holy.” Or “Purify my heart, make me as gold and precious silver.” We have a worship song that is all about holiness unto Jesus.

So we pray, at least I hope we pray, Lord, make me like you. I don’t want to continue to be dogged by this particular sin. Purify me and make me right.

And some of you know that one of the secrets to becoming like Jesus is the practice of certain spiritual disciplines. Committing yourself, disciplining yourself to pray, taking time to dig into God’s Word and making the Bible a part of your life and a part of your thinking so that you would start thinking Christianly. And reading certain Christian books and some of the Christian classics by writers like C.S. Lewis.

The practice of spiritual disciplines is often what is called the indirect approach in dealing with our sin. A lot of time if you want to overcome a sin pattern in your life, say bitterness or unforgiveness, or lust or greed, a way to attack is by drawing in to God through spiritual disciplines indirectly, instead of just attacking greed head on. You approach it indirectly.

Well, James says that there is a missing key in most people’s pursuit of becoming like Jesus. That there is something that goes beyond prayer or Bible

study or fasting or fellowship. James says there is a passkey to holiness – the discipline of your tongue.

James says in verse 2, “We all stumble in many ways.” Literally, we all trip up. There is no one who reflects Jesus Christ perfectly. We all have some rock in our path.

You say, “Well, how can I be perfect?” Literally, the word is not a “perfect” man, but a mature person.

Is there a neglected key for me to be all that God has intended for me to be? I keep stumbling over this one area of my life, even though I have prayed about it and asked God for holiness. I pray in the morning and I read my Bible. I have even fasted, but I don’t seem to be making progress in the area of my jealousy or my pride or my envy, greed or lust.

James says there is a neglected key to holiness, the control of your tongue.

How’s that?

Well, James uses two illustrations of gaining control over something powerful through something small and seemingly irrelevant. He uses the illustration of a bit in the mouth of a horse that can make the horse obey. We just take a little bit of iron and put it in the mouth of a 2000 lb. animal and with a drop of pressure pulling on the reins, we can make the horse turn and obey. We can make him stop. Here is a horse that can pull a huge plow and yet we can cause it to stop with just a little jerk on the reins because of a small piece of iron.

Here is a ship that can carry hundreds of tons of cargo and hundreds of passengers. We can turn the ship and direct it spinning a wheel because of a rudder. James is illustrating for us how we can bring powerful forces in our own personalities, all these drives and inner conflicting feelings that pull us one way or another. James is saying, “You want to know how to bring all of this under control so that it will obey you?” You are focusing on the wrong thing. For a little while don’t focus on your anxiety, focus on your lust, on your envy, or your temper.

Instead, focus your attention on your speech. If you can control your speech, pull that under control, then you will keep everything else under control. James is suggesting that your speech is like the master switch in this enormous power grid.

Here in the church we have large heating and air conditioning units, miles of wire for all the lighting and all the computers. You could flip it all off or on with a master switch. Just throw the switch and whoever controls that control the building. That is what your tongue is like. If you control that, you control everything else. It is a neglected passkey to holy living.

James says understand the power of your speech. Your mouth is like the rudder of a ship. James moves on and speaks to us about our tongue being like a fire. He’s talking about the inflammatory nature our speech.

James uses the handy little illustration of a spark lighting a great fire. Of course, in ancient Palestine with the dried out tinder and brush on the hillsides, it is very much like Southern California in the summer. The hot winds blow and turn everything into a giant powder keg. So that someone who lights a fire can spread that fire over hundreds of square miles. James says that speech is

inflammatory, like a spark it spreads and can enflame anti-God perspectives. When you think about inflammatory rhetoric and the power of speech, have we not seen in our century people like Hitler? Or in modern American someone like Louis Farrehkan. The power to enflame passions. The power to enflame hatred.

You know, it is really true that the tongue is a fire. And all over the church, if we want to maintain relationship with each other, there are these little fires breaking out – fires of negativity toward someone in the church – gossip against a leader or a pastor; cynicism toward a direction the church is taking; toward a group. There are fires breaking out all over the church, fires of negativity. And there are fires breaking out regarding what God wants to do – fires of vision, fires of fresh direction, fires of encouragement. So if you could see spiritually everywhere in the church, you would see fires breaking out – fires of negativity and fires regarding what God wants to do within the Vineyard.

Now, Christian leader, John Maxwell, has written a really helpful picture concerning what your role is as a member of the church in dealing with the fires breaking out all around you. He says every Christian is given two buckets – bucket of water in one hand and a bucket of gasoline in the other. And it is the responsibility of the Christian to know which bucket to dump on which fire when we encounter them.

So, you come on a fire of negativity, someone who is being critical, someone who is gossiping, someone who is being cynical, and someone who is slandering someone else. You take your bucket of water and you could douse that right away and say, “I don’t want to hear that. That’s not true. What you are saying is wrong.” Or “If you have a problem, you need to go and talk with the person you are criticizing.” You have a bucket of water when you see that fire of negativity, you can just snuff it out.

Or, you can use the wrong bucket in that case, the bucket of gas, and when there is negativity, gossip or slander, you can pour your gas on and say, “WOW, let me spread this fire around. I will be the keeper of the flame. I will be like one of those marathoners that light the torch and start other fires of negativity around. Let me spread this gossip and slander throughout all Ohio. I will put it out on the prayer line and make the problem worse.

Likewise, if God is doing something, if the leaders in the church are calling for fresh direction, fresh vision, someone in one of your groups has a fresh initiative, there is a ministry being birthed and God is lighting a fire, a fire of renewal in some place in this church, you can come along with your bucket of gasoline and pour it on that fire of what God is doing and spread what the Lord is doing to others through the fire of encouragement, through the fire of speaking faith. Or you can take your bucket of water, the bucket of cynicism, unbelief, the bucket of “I don’t think this is going to work”, the bucket of suspicion and you can douse whatever little fire God has started.

You know, so much of what gets established in a church, whether God’s blessing remains in a church or the church is overcome by negativity and criticism, so much depends on your understanding that you really are carrying two buckets – bucket of water and a bucket of gasoline and when you use which makes all the difference.

Speech is not only inflammatory, it is influential. James says that it corrupts the whole person. Literally, it means that it stains the whole person. It stains. One little word, one little nuance phrased can be like dye from a red shirt that filters onto white clothes in your laundry so that everything comes out pink. Isn't it the case that you can be getting along with someone, viewing a person with great respect and enjoying their company, viewing them as really good people and someone comes up to you and is negative about that person and your whole view of them is stained. Suddenly, mistrust is sown into the relationship.

That is why the Bible speaks so regularly about the power of gossip to destroy relationships. When we talk about Christian relationships with each other and words that wound, there is almost nothing that is more powerful in destroying our relationships with each other than gossip.

What do we mean by gossip? We mean the spreading of a secret or a rumor about someone else, usually for the purpose of casting some shadow over another person's reputation. You say something that causes another person to think less of an individual. You diminish someone else in another person's eyes.

You say, "Am I never allowed to say something negative about Mary to Joe?"

Well, you know the old rule about which mothers used to teach their children what gossip are needs to be restored in the church. The old rule was that is probably gossip if a person you are talking to is not part of the problem or part of the solution. When Joe is not involved intimately in this dispute that I am having with Mary, when Joe is not acting as the mediator between Mary, and me it is probably gossip.

Now, there are a million reasons why we escape the force of what the Bible says regarding gossip. We say we need perspective regarding Mary. We just want to bounce our feelings off of another to get some objective feedback.

What a bunch of baloney. 99.9 times out of 100, we are not looking for objective perspective; we are looking for a sympathetic ear. We want Joe to join us in our anger toward Mary. We have been hurt and upset. We are angry and one way to get back at Mary is to slash her, to diminish her in the eyes of Joe, Josephine, all the other people we talk with about our hurt regarding Mary.

We have a million excuses and a million ways that we avoid what the Bible says regarding gossip. Do you know what the Bible calls gossip? It calls it an abomination. It says that God finds the gossipers and gossip revolting. Look at Proverbs 6. God hates it when people stir up dissension and disunity between brothers and sisters.

We say, "But I am hurt and I am just going for the purpose of prayer."

Again, 99.9 times out of 100 our motives at best are mixed. And at worst, our motives are hateful.

We are super-spiritualizing gossip when we diminish another person in someone else's eyes and we put it under "I would like you to pray for me regarding my relationship with so and so."

We say, "Well, I have a right to talk to this other person, because they are in my women's group. They are in my kinship group. Or they are my good friend."

James says, "You want to become more like Jesus, get control of your tongue, and particularly bridle your impulse to gossip."



Here is the rule we want to teach you here in the Vineyard. I am going to get you to repeat this after me. WHEN I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH SOMEONE IN THIS CHURCH, I WILL SPEAK TO HIM OR HER RATHER THAN ABOUT HIM OR HER. Notice I said “when” we have a problem, because you will if you belong to this church or any church have a problem with someone else because you are a sinner, even if they are perfect. Say it again.

WHEN I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH SOMEONE IN THIS CHURCH, I WILL SPEAK TO HIM OR HER RATHER THAN ABOUT HIM OR HER.

Or, and here is your only other alternative – I will deal with my problem between God and me.

Now, do you know that the Bible is so strong about the issue of gossip that it says that if you listen to gossip you sin? We are told in Proverbs 20:19 to avoid gossips, to run from them, to flee. And our character is revealed by what we listen to, not just by what we say.

You say, “Well, I am not gossiping, I am just listening.”

You show what you are by what you listen to. Someone comes up to you and begins to tell you about an issue that you are not a part of. “Listen, you need to hear what Joe did to me; what Joe did to Mary. Did you hear how Mary was mistreated? It was so unfair and unkind.”

Did you hear that Mary is pregnant, again? I don’t know who the guy is and I am not sure she knows.

What did you think about that worship singer? Didn’t she sound off-key today?

If someone comes up to you and begins to blurt out something that is diminishing another in your eyes, stop them.

You say, “How do I stop them?”

You look at them and then you utter this word – STOP. You say to the other person, “I don’t need to hear this.” Can you say that? I don’t need to hear this. If you are having a problem with Joe, speak to Joe, not to me. If you have a problem with Mary, speak to Mary, not me. If you feel like Joe or Mary are too frightening to you or you have tried to go, are you telling me this so that you want me to go with you?

Invariably the answer is “I don’t want to go. I don’t want you to go with me. I just want to unload.”

Are you spreading this negativity around because you want me to go with you to address this issue?

No, I just want some perspective. I just want some objective feedback. I just need your support during this hard time.

Forget it. Stop them. The Bible doesn’t give me the liberty to listen to you for the purpose of offering you support or sympathy or to just be there for you. Jesus really is enough, even for this other hurting person. He is enough.

I know why we like gossip so much, though, and why we listen to it. It is a demonic counterfeit for real intimacy where we both get to connect and unite around this little morsel criticism. But God wants a different kind of intimacy in the church. He wants literally hundreds of you to say, “I am not going to sit here

and listen to you verbally bash my brother or sister. Stop. I don't need to hear this."

And brother or sister, if you want to take the imitation of Jesus Christ seriously, then you are going to be ruthless in the area of governing gossip – what you say and what you listen to. If you have a problem and have become the CNN, spreading stuff far and wide, stop it. It is unholy. It is not the role you want to play.

James says that our speech is not only inflammatory and can stain and influence toward evil, but it itself is infiltrated by Satan. Verse 6, "It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire and is, itself, set on fire by hell."

What he is saying is that your mouth can become an instrument of Satan entering this world. Did you know that you could be used by Satan? That you could release a little piece of hell into your home? That you could release hell into your marriage? Or, you could release a little piece of hell into the church? That even good people can be instruments of Satan and have their speech flowing from hell?

Jesus saw that in his friend, Peter, when he was attempting to tempt Jesus to compromise about the cross in Matthew 16. Jesus explained that he had to go to the cross and Peter took him aside to rebuke him and said, "Lord, this shall never happen to you." Jesus saw that behind Peter's words stood the devil himself and he said, "Get behind me Satan." You are a stumbling block to me. You are trying to throw something in my way to trip me up.

You can be an instrument of Satan, which is a very heavy charge. But that is what James is saying.

How? How would I be used by Satan?

When you tempt someone to sin. Jesus says in Matthew 18, "Woe to the world because of things that cause people to sin. Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they may come."

Guys, you try to push your girlfriend into having sex, trying to talk her into that, you are an instrument of Satan and are bringing hell into the world. You try to get an employee to lie or your boss tries to push you to lie to a client, or your spouse to lie, to bend the truth on a form, to lie to the government—whenever someone's words are designed to tempt you to sin, they are being used by the devil. When you slander someone, when you slash their reputation and make them less than in the eyes of another person, you are being used by the devil.

Do you know that the devil's name in Greek really means the "slanderer?" He is, by nature, someone who slashes people's reputations.

When you lie, when you deceive, you are being used by the devil. Because John 8 tells us that he is a liar and the father of lies. He is the inspirer of lies.

In speaking to us about words that wound and words that heal, James speaks to us about the power of speech to curse or bless. In verse 9 he says, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be."

James says this cannot be, it should not be. This is hypocrisy.

Words are so powerful. Proverbs 18:17 says, “Life and death is in the power of the tongue.” You have power to kill or power to give life. Death words destroy and hurt. They create humiliating and resentful feelings. Life words build up and increase confidence. They strengthen character. They center on the truth and they set people free to be who God has intended them to be.

Do you remember what Jesus said when He cursed the fig tree? “Cursed be to the fig tree and may you never bear fruit.” They walked by that same place the next day and saw that it had withered. That is what we are talking about by cursed. Death words, like put-downs or destructive criticism. They destroy self-confidence and put shame in someone’s life. People speak death words in their marriages destroying loving feelings – killing.

I will bet every one of you can think of a time many years ago when you were a child that someone spoke death words to you and brought shame into your life. Maybe some kids at school mocked you for your physical appearance. The fact that you wore glasses or were overweight or spoke with a lisp or weren’t great in sports. Just something about you was different.

You know, sometimes we speak death words in our desire just to be honest. We live in a time when this quest for authenticity and transparency gives people the notion that they are free to say anything as long as they are being sincere.

I don’t know what the big problem is; I am just being honest with you.

I am not sure I still love you, my wife. I just need to be honest with you.

I don’t know, my darling husband, if I am still attracted to you. I just thought you needed to hear me say it, because it is my honest reflection – words that kill.

So many of the spear thrusts that we run into each other’s chests are the result of this perverted idea that we have a right to say anything we wish to say to one another, because we are just being honest and authentic.

Well, ladies, you seem to be putting on a few pounds.

Or, it’s just me, but I don’t think I would live in Upper Arlington, or in the suburb you live in.

Or, I wouldn’t make the choice that you make regarding your house, your furnishings or your purchases – but I just needed to be honest with you.

I am just being me. Yes, you may be being you in all of your rudeness and insensitivity and lovelessness, but you know you have the power to speak death into someone or life. And the goal of my words ought to be, if I am calling myself a Christian, Paul says that the goal of our instruction is love. I want to be a life-giver, not a death-dealer. There is really no value in the Bible in self-expression – just letting it hang out and being authentic. That is not a biblical value.

Words of blessing are life-giving words. What does it mean for you to be a life-giving encourager? When someone is communicating to you that they want to quit. That they are going through a hard time. They want to give up. You put fresh strength into them through life giving words, life-giving actions. To your child, instead of put-downs and sarcasm you say things like, “Good job. I am really proud of what you did on your test. Nice game! That is great. I really appreciate the hard work that you put in. I love you. Let me help you with that. Let me assist you with that project. I am here for you. I want to talk with you. I

want to improve our relationship. We haven't been getting along recently. What can we do together to get along better?"

We have such an enormous capacity to speak life-giving words, words that heal. Friends, there is no way for the pastors to rescue every one of the 5000+ who call Vineyard their church home but who may be falling through the cracks. Some of them who are in your relational circle who you see walking away from church and walking away from God, but you can speak life words to them to encourage them back into their relationship with God and back into their relationship with the church. As you see someone drifting and you begin to understand the role of the church in bringing people to maturity, take on the responsibility of speaking life-giving encouragement. Drop someone a note. As you see someone who wants to quit, to quit on God, to quit on his or her marriage, to quit on a ministry life-giving encouragement is "You can do it. Don't give up. Hang in there. Let me walk this out with you."

I told this story just recently at a leaders' meeting here at the church. Many years ago I lost my first job when I was fresh out of law school. A law firm that I was a part of and my wife, Marlene, was pregnant fired me. We had just bought our first house and were about to have our first child. We were having no income and the law firm was spreading around town that I was not to be hired. I became increasingly discouraged as my mailbox was filled with rejection letters from law firms that I easily could have gotten a job from fresh out of law school. My grades were good and, yet, I wasn't getting any nibbles at all. I got depressed. I was so depressed that I literally tore my bathroom out down to the floor joists and the studs in the wall. And if anyone knows me, they know I would have to be pretty depressed to redo my whole bathroom. I put in a new sink and dry wall. I tiled the floors and put in ceramic tiled walls in the tub.

A friend of mine came over and saw what I was doing. He was a life-giving encourager. He said to me, "Rich, I am not going to let you waste your life by hiding in your house and fixing your bathroom. Now, I am going to stand with you, but you are going to move yourself out of your home and you are going to get yourself a job. Your job for 40 hours a week, Rich, is to get a job. And I am going to hound you if you aren't out of your house tomorrow morning at 9:00a.m. wearing a suit and looking for a job. You are better than this. You don't need to let this thing beat you. You can do it."

Using words that heal. You are better than this. This is not the end of your life. God is still for you, not against you. God is with you. God has bright prospects ahead of you.

Haven't there been times in your life that you needed to hear that? That you hadn't come to the end of the road, that God wasn't through with you because you failed. Drop someone a note. Speak a word of encouragement, a life-giving word to someone this week.

James finally tells us that we need to focus on our speech because our speech is a pointer to the condition of our hearts. Verses 11 and 12: "Can both fresh water and salt water blow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

Again, he is talking about the impossibility of inconsistent speech. Bless God and curse those in his image. Fig trees don't produce two different kinds of fruit. You don't get apples from a vine. One spring doesn't produce two different kinds of waters.

But he is also communicating something akin to what Jesus said in Matthew 12. We will finish with these thoughts. Matthew 12:33, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good. Or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad. For a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks."

You want to figure out what spiritual condition you are in? Focus on your words for a little while. Someone comes up to you and says, "How are you doing?" Most of the time we superficially and glibly say, "Great." But if we were honest and really wanted to know how we were doing, how is your heart? How are you really doing spiritually? Just listen to your words. Think back over what you talked about in the last day or two or three, because words point to the heart. They go back to the source. Words are the overflow. We don't know what is in the heart, but it is like waiter carrying a tray full of soup above his head. You don't know what is in those bowls until the waiter gets bumped and the bowls come tumbling over. Then you know what is in that bowl. That was a bowl of minestrone.

You don't get it until you see the overflow. And a lot of times you don't get the overflow until you get bumped. What is flowing out, friends? The way we talk in our homes, to those around us, to our spouses, to our children, to our friends, to those in the church, to those at our jobs, it is not a little thing. Our words can wound; our words can heal.

Let's pray.