

Focusing On Our Speech

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Growing Into Maturity
James 3:1-12

Last week I asked folks on Sunday morning to consider moving services. I took a few minutes to just describe the crowding problem we were having on Sunday mornings at 11:00 a.m. I asked folks to consider moving, especially to Saturday evenings where we have more room. We passed out a card in our bulletin and right on the spot we had 150 adults immediately sign up to change services. I want to tell you that we have a really wonderful church here, in that week by week I am struck by your responsiveness, your willingness to lend a hand and to pitch in, to get involved and do something that may be inconvenient. I am always struck by your responsiveness when I call people forward for prayer. You have a softness. It makes it a real pleasure to serve as pastor here when I am dealing with people who really do want to respond to God. So, I just wanted to start tonight [today] saying to you that I appreciate you and I especially appreciate your willingness to be inconvenienced so that others would be able to come here and so that the church will grow.

Now, we have been going through a study of the book of James. James concerns the subject of spiritual maturity, growing up as Christians before we grow old. I decided to preach through the book of James on the heels of our Summer Harvest when we saw so many people make decisions for Christ. It is really important that as a church, and this is true at all levels—it is true with the teens; it is true with the children; and, it is true with adults, it is really important that we grow deep in the Christian life. That we as a church don't become a mile-wide and an inch deep, but rather there is depth to the character of the people in the church. James' concern is about spiritual maturity.

Tonight [today] we are going to look at a passage that concerns our speech—what we say; how we use words, what comes out of our mouths. I think it is interesting in a study of spiritual maturity that we would focus on speech. I think it is interesting because if I were to ask you what sins make you feel the most guilty, what things you do that stain your conscience and rob you of peace, things you think, attitudes you have, I suppose that a significant percentage of you might point to a sexual sin, or perhaps a habit or addiction that you struggle with, maybe smoking, or even an attitude like envy or jealousy, greed, pride, maybe prayerlessness, which is a sin.

But I would venture to guess that unless we were talking about it and focusing on it, most folks as an initial impression, in terms of thinking about the things that mar their consciences and actually break fellowship with them and God, most people would not think about their speech. It does not occur to most folks that God considers our speech to be a big deal. The fact is that we measure sin differently than God.

To use one example, smoking, which I in no way condone. I think it is a terribly unwise practice and so has the Surgeon General thought it to be unwise for 30 years. We have been warned about the dangers of smoking and the

dangers of second hand smoke. But the fact is, friends, you can't find a Bible verse on the evil of smoking. Yet, it is universally condemned in our culture right now.

We tolerate things like lying and gossip, profanity by the truckload, boasting, sarcasm, put-downs, and angry words. As a culture, we are insensitive to the priority that God puts on our speech. We continually say to ourselves that it is no big deal. I know I talk too much. We laugh it off and say, "I am just a big talker." James says, "Be quick to listen and slow to speak." Yes, I know I talk too much.

I am just a plain speaking person. I just speak my mind, however the chips may fall.

I remember talking with a guy, "let the chips fall where they may", that was one of his favorite lines. It didn't matter who got hurt.

I know someone who felt they had a ministry of correction and rebuke.

I know I gossip too much, but I just can't help it.

I grew up in a family that used put-downs or sarcasm or lied and exaggerated.

It is just so hard for me to not use profanity, right? It is no big deal.

It is hard for us to get clarity on what are big deals to God and what are little deals because our consciences are not always reliable guides. The culture and environment can harden your conscience. The Bible talks about the seared conscience, the conscience that has become insensitive. Friends, it is the case that by living in an environment that tolerates sins of speech, we have become insensitive to how big a deal our speech patterns are to God.

Do you realize that the first sin, right after the fall of men and women, right after Adam and Eve sinned against God by disobeying his command regarding eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, do you realize that the first sin was the sin of speech? Adam turned to God and in a blame shifting, lying way said, "The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit and I ate it."

Perhaps in a not too subtle way he was holding God responsible for his sin. I am not responsible. It is my parents. It is my background. It is the school system. Adam was the first to claim victim status so many thousand years ago. The first sin was the sin of speech.

When the apostle Paul wants to prove a point that every human being is a rebel, that every person turns their backs on God and shakes their fists at God, that no one really goes after God and seeks God, when Paul wants to bring a bill of indictment against the whole human race and say to us that we are born in sin, do you know what two sins he raises to our attention? One is violence and the other are sins of speech. He puts those two things together in making us look at the sinful condition of humanity. He talks about violence in Romans 3, that their feet are swift to shed blood. Ruin and misery are in their wake. But he also calls our attention to sins of speech; their throats are open graves. Their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.

When Isaiah was in the Temple and caught that glorious vision of God back in the Old Testament in the days of the prophets, Isaiah walked into the Temple and was worshiping. Suddenly the heavens opened and he caught a glorious vision of God and the angels worshiping God crying out, "Holy, holy,

holy, holy” what sin was Isaiah immediately conscious of as he glimpsed the holiness of God? What came to his mind, in terms of his own impurity and his own uncleanness? It was sins of speech. The part of the body that Isaiah immediately became self-conscious about was his mouth. He said, “Woe unto me! I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” He suddenly realized that as he listened to the heavenly choir singing praises to God, it occurred to him that he could not join in that praise because of the impurity of his own mouth.

When Paul wants to explain to us why God’s wrath is coming on the earth, why God is coming to judge, we know that God judged once. We know that God judged once. He judged sin at the cross and all those who accept the sacrifice of Christ and the gift of forgiveness given at the cross can escape from the coming wrath of God. But why is God coming a second time? To judge. One of the sins that Paul points to are sins of speech in Ephesians 5. Profanity that flows out of our mouths, coarse jesting he calls it lying and slander.

The casualness in which we consider sins of speech. The easy way we excuse ourselves. I know I talk too much. Oh, she is just such a gossip. Well, that is just the way I joke using sarcasm and put-downs. That is the way my family was. It contrasts so sharply with the book of Proverbs that says things like life and death is in the power of the tongue.

Proverbs 10:13 says, *“He who guards his mouth preserves his life. But he who opens wide his lips will be destroyed.”*

To people who talk too much, Proverbs 10:19, *“In the multitude of words, sin is not lacking. But he who restrains his lips is wise.”*

Let me share with you a little illustration before we turn to God’s word. A lot of times when we think about giving our life to Christ completely, we come to the altar and say, “Lord, here I am. Anything you want.” It could sometimes occur to us that maybe God is looking for the ultimate sacrifice. Am I really willing to die for Christ? We have all of these fantasies of being martyred for Jesus. I don’t know if you ever have, but I have had fantasies of going out in a blaze of glory as I am preaching the gospel in some far off land.

We think that giving our life to Christ is like giving a \$1000 bill and putting it on the table saying, “Here is everything I have. Take my life, Lord. I sacrifice it to you.”

But the reality is the Lord rarely asks for our lives in \$1000 denominations. Instead, he sends us back to the bank and tells us to get dozens of rolls of quarters. He says, “Really, what I want you to do is sacrifice yourself to me 25 cents at a time. You want to spend your life on me? Fine. I want a quarter’s worth of encouragement to go to that little neighbor boy who is hanging around your backyard. I would like you to spend two quarters holding your tongue from responding harshly to a provocation. Spend a quarter restraining yourself from sharing that juicy morsel of gossip that you just heard.”

The Lord requires us to give ourselves to him a quarter at a time, generally. Much of the way he wants us to spend down our life on him is by focusing on our speech. That is the title of today’s talk, *Focusing On Our Speech*.

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."

Now, I think that I want to draw a distinction here between an unhealthy presumption and a healthy passion to teach or to even to lead. James 3 does talk about selfish ambition. But there is a healthy passion that is completely right. I might compare what I am saying to 1 Timothy 3 where Paul says, "Here is a trustworthy saying, 'If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble test. [Some versions say 'if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he aspires to something noble']." It is entirely right and good if you are saying, "I just want to be used by God. I want my life to count for something. I don't want to waste my life accumulating possessions and running up debt on my credit cards. At the end of my life I don't want the only thing that is said about me to be, 'Well, he sure had a lot of stuff. She sure had a large credit card bill.'"

It is completely noble to see that the greatest enterprise that anyone could ever be involved in and the most exciting adventure that you could ever embark on is the spread of the kingdom of God. I mean to watch God save someone and to realize that you had a part to play in moving someone's soul from eternity in hell to eternity in heaven, what could be better than that? Collecting little porcelain dolls? Tinkering on your car? Lowering your golf score? It is a good, right, noble thing for many of you to say to God, "I want to get off the bench. Put me in the game. Use me. Lead me. Empower me to save someone's marriage. To persuade someone to give up sin and encourage someone in fresh obedience in an area where they are presently disobedient." But you have a part to play in moving them toward obedience.

I think that some of us need to be guarded against not a presumption, but a false humility, which says, "Who am I to want to be used by God in significant ways?" What else do you want to spend your life doing? It is right to be passionate about being involved in the spread of the kingdom of God.

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

We get so excited about people being touched in renewal and something happening when we pray. We ought to be excited. But what can be better than the words that proceed from God's own mouth? And if you get a chance to explain them and handle them, what could be better? 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. 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. We see that, of course, all through the Old Testament. Look at the way the Lord dealt with Moses for one simple act of disobedience, striking the rock in the desert instead of speaking to it and commanding it to give water. Moses was barred from the Promised Land and ended up dying on the other side of the Jordan.

Or consider the way that the prophets in the Old Testament were dealt with for delivering a false prophecy. They were stoned. Because of their influence in the Old Testament community, because they were the ones shaping people's perceptions of the will of God, they were the communicators of doctrine that would either save or would destroy the nation. They had to be 100% accurate or they were stoned.

Just as an aside, some people say, "Well, why don't we stone people who give inaccurate words of prophecy today?"

They misunderstand the Old Testament prophet has been taken over not by the New Testament prophet, but the New Testament apostle. It was to the apostles that Jesus gave the commission to lay the foundation of sound doctrine. It was the apostles that had to speak infallibly. We weigh doctrine not by the words of prophetic people, but against the words of the apostles. Prophetic people's words we always judge, discern, weigh and measure. So we don't stone prophets today, we discern the accuracy of their words.

My point, though, is that anytime someone has been given influence in the church, there is a greater penalty for error. The classic example in the Old Testament is the story of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-3. I want to read that to you because it summarizes God's heart on the matter very plainly.

"Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Moses then said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord spoke of when he said, 'Among those who approach me, I will show myself holy in the sight of all the people I will be honored.'"

When the Lord's anointing is on a man or woman, I have often thought of that presence of God, that blessing for leadership, blessing to teach and empowerment to influence as being like the fire that was on the burning bush that Moses saw. And the fire of God is such that it reveals the character of whatever it comes on. If the character of the person that the fire of God falls on is just wood, hay and stubble, just tinder, the person lacks integrity; God's fire will burn them up. They will be reduced to ash. So many so-called anointed teachers and great leaders with great anointing on them end up collapsing, sinning. If the person has integrity and substance, they will be able to remain for the long-term.

Teaching in the church, influence in the church, carries with it a greater penalty. So James says, "Don't presume to be a teacher." In other words, don't

push yourself into that position. It is good to be passionate and to be used, but the desire inside of you needs to be discerned. It is important anyone who aspires to be a teacher or in terms of vocational ministry, it is important for a person to feel inside a pressure in which they sense that God is requiring this of them. That God is dealing with them. That God is acting on them. You just don't decide to go into vocational ministry. That is something that you just don't say, "Well, I think it would be a really cool thing to do and here is my great sacrifice to the Lord. I will put my hat in the ring." Being involved in vocational ministry and standing in front of people ought to come from a sense of constraint from God. You may try to be rid of the sense that God is calling you. You try to push it aside. You try to submerge it, but it is there. The Lord has put a hook in you. And even though you are trying this and that – Christian missions, community service, ministry in the political arena, with teens, with kids, with folks with AIDS – there is a sense that God will not be satisfied unless you yield to him and obey his call.

Of course, this all needs to be confirmed by the church. It is not just an internal sense, but the church comes along and says, "Yes, I see this calling on your life." Nevertheless, it is not something you presume upon.

I like what the great Charles Hadden Spurgeon, the Baptist pastor from England in the last century once said about calling. He said if you can do anything else, do it. If you can stay out of vocational ministry, stay out. Not because it is a bad thing, but that is the test of your call. The only person who is called to pastor a church is the person who honestly in their heart feels that anything else would be complete disobedience. That they could not live peaceably with the Lord and with their own conscience.

So James starts off his discussion on speaking and the tongue by focusing on the lead speaker in the church, the preacher. He gives us guidelines and thinking about becoming a speaker. In helping us to focus on the importance of speech, James goes on to tell us that in fact our tongues and our speech is really a pass-key for us in holy living.

James says, *"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."*

We struggle a great deal with the issue of holiness and wanting to become holy, wanting to become like Jesus. We sing to the Lord, "Lord, make me holy." We sing the song "I want to be holy." Or purify my heart; make me as gold and precious silver. We have a worship song that is "holiness unto Jesus, holiness unto you, Lord."

We pray to become holy, or at least I hope you do. That you are asking God day-by-day, "Purify me. Make me holy. Make me right." We repent, or at least I hope you do. We ask for forgiveness.

In a quest for holiness we involve ourselves in various spiritual disciplines, in prayer and fasting, Bible reading. But sinful habits remain in our lives. James says that we all stumble in various ways. Literally, we all trip up. There is no one who walks the Christian walk perfectly. We all trip over some rock in our path.

You say, "Well, how can I be perfect?" The word literally in James 3:2 is not a perfect man, but a mature person. We saw the same word used in James 1 when James said, "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature." That you would be all that God wants you to be. Is there a neglected key for me to be all that God has intended me to be? I keep stumbling over this one area of my life and even though I have prayed about it and have asked God for holiness sincerely and I pray in the morning and read my Bible. I have even fasted, yet I don't seem to be making progress in the area of jealousy or pride or envy or 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. For a little while don't focus on your lust. For a little while don't focus 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 controls 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 he speaks to us not only about the tongue being a pass-key to holiness, but in calling us to focus on our speech, James reminds us that our speech has the potential to kill. *"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."*

James is deliberately contrasting, and it works much better in the Greek, the smallness of the tongue and the greatness of the evil produced by the

tongue. “Likewise, the tongue is a small part, but consider what a great forest is set on fire.”

A year ago the western grid of power stations in Nevada, Utah and Arizona was shut down. Electricity for several million customers was cut off because a squirrel had chewed through the power line at some substation in the middle of the desert. I assume that that poor squirrel had a shocking experience once he chewed through the insulation of some million-megawatt line. But that just serves as a helpful illustration of the profound power of something as small as a few ill spoken words.

James uses the handy little illustration of a spark inflaming 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 blowing and turning 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 inflame 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 inflame passions. The power to inflame hatred.

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

That is why; by the way, you have a duty to not only focus on what you say, but also what you are willing to hear. Very often, very often you need to communicate to people that you do not want to hear slander or gossip. You are not involved in the situation and you are not involved in the solution. I have often said to people, “I really don't need to hear this. I don't need to hear this.” But I sure listen to a lot more than I ought.

Speech can stain. How is it that a 4- or 5-year old will already have prejudiced attitudes toward members of a different race? A different ethnic group? At a very young age children are stained with prejudiced and bigotry and racism.

You don't think that everything comes out dyed from a little bit of speech? Think of the coarsening effect of profanity. You sit and watch a video and say to yourself, “Well, it is just rated “R” for the language. That is okay. There is not a lot of sexuality in this movie. There is not explicit violence. It is just the profanity, the language.” You don't think that profanity stains you.

Or the profanity that spills forth from the media doesn't have a staining effect on our culture. Just listen to people's speech patterns. As a common occurrence, there is a profanity that would have made sailors blush 40 years ago.

One of the marks to me of someone's conversion is that you see this cleaning up of their speech almost right away especially if they are around other

Christians. There is almost a sudden awareness that “Oh, my goodness. My speech is full of profanity.” It needs to be cleaned up.

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 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, 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 you 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.

Our tongues are infiltrated by the devil and it is actually incurable, James finally says. “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.”

The picture that James is using is of an animal that may be caged up but is pacing the cage. It is completely untamed. You can pull it back in, but there is a restlessness in our speech that wants to get the evil out there, wants to slander, wants to gossip, wants to slash and boast. We have to focus on our speech because it is so incurably evil.

If you let up for a little while, then something is going to pop out. It is not enough to keep on this for a day or a week or a month. You keep on top of your profanity and then something pops out when you are in traffic, when someone

pushes the wrong button. When you hear something that is just too good to not pass along. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison.

In calling us to focus on our speech, James speaks to us about the power of speech to curse or bless. Verse 9 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 comes praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be."*

Of course, James is talking about our duplicity, our inconsistency. James hates double-mindedness and hypocrisy. James spoke about this in Chapter one, verse six.

"When we ask we must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea. He is a double-minded man."

He spoke to us about our double-mindedness regarding our discrimination and favoritism. And now here in our speech, he points out again the hypocrisy of coming to church and worshiping God with our mouths while all the while during the week we put down people who are made in the image of God. We say, "Praise you. Praise you. Praise you." To God and then every time we see images of God in the guise of other people [that is what you are looking at, by the way, everyone in the room is the image of God to you] you are looking at images of God all around the room, to your right and to your left, in front of you and behind you, images of God. You say, "I want to worship you, God" what do you do with his image when it meets you face to face? Do you slash it? James says this cannot be and should not be, this inconsistency.

Words are so powerful. Proverbs 18:21 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 when Jesus cursed the fig tree? "Cursed be the fig tree and may you never bear fruit." They walked by that same place the next day and saw it all 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 trust.

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. Something about you.

Or your parents spoke death words to you that put shame in you. And if you think about it and stir it up you can still feel the sting of the words. I can't emphasize enough the importance of the ways that you moms and dads talk with your children. Gordon MacDonald, who is a pastor in Massachusetts, wrote one of the best books I ever read on parenting. It is called *The Effective Father*. I have read it and reread it over the years and thought about it. I got convicted by it. I was called up short. Dads, it is a great book to read.

But in the book he describes a scene that is so typical and so painful. He says, "A 42 year old man has allowed me to look into his inner recesses to see

what he is today, a man who is frantically working himself into exhaustion. One who spends every dime he makes for impressive artifacts of luxury and success. A volatile human being, his temper explodes at the slightest hint of disagreement. As we talked, I asked Tom to describe for me his childhood. Here is the story. At one impressionable point in boyhood, when my friend was apparently displeasing his father with the way he was doing a chore, the father said to him, 'Tom, you will always be a bum. You are not going to amount to anything. You are a bum.'

Tom went on to tell me that whenever he and his father had an angry moment, the same prediction was repeated until it burned its way into the boy's spirit so deeply that like shrapnel, embedded in the flesh, the words could never be removed. 30 years later Tom still suffers from his father's verbal malpractice. These words drive him day and night from a self-conscious source to attempt to prove that his father was wrong. And even though his father is dead, the habit patterns of Tom's inner life still maintain a fevered pitch to convince a dead father and a slightly insecure Tom that he is not a bum. And if anyone suggests to Tom that he is doing something wrong, that he is deficient in some aspect of his life, a hostility, a defensiveness and furious energy are unleashed to guard against what he senses is a resurrection of the old accusations from a thoughtless father who verbally set out a wrong pace." Hear this, Tom was attacked and verbally abused. Death words.

And in contrast, words of blessing are life words. Life and death are in the power of the tongue and we can sow life words. What are life words? Life giving words? I think one of the most neglected ways for us to give life to other people is the ministry of encouragement. It is important to bless God. But in blessing the image of God, that is other people, one of the ministries that is needed now in American, perhaps more than ever, is the ministry of encouragement.

Hebrews 10:25 says that we shouldn't forsake getting together, not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as is the habit of some, but to encourage one another all the more as you see the day approaching.

As we are living here in the last days and the time of Jesus' coming we need more encouragement and not less. Hebrews 10 says encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near. As the time gets more evil, and the world around becomes more wicked and more anti-God, more prone to violence, in such a time people need more encouragement, not less. In fact, the last days in the Bible are said in 2 Timothy 3:1 to be dangerous days, savage days.

What would it mean for you to become a life giving encourager? What would that look like?

There is a wonderful example in the Bible of an encourager, a man by the name of Jonathan, who was the best friend of David. And David was going through a particularly brutal time because Jonathan's father, Saul, was hunting David like an animal. Saul was jealous of David. He knew that David was the one that God had picked to be the next king. And so rather than submit to God's will, Saul went after David with a vengeance. And David is racing around in the wilderness. He is disillusioned. He is depressed. He is fearful.

It says in 1 Samuel 23:15, "*David became aware that Saul had come out to seek his life while David was in the wilderness of Zib at Horash.*" Night after

night he is by himself running from this crazed attacker. But the very next verse says, "And Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horash and encouraged him in the Lord."

The Hebrew word for encourage conveys the idea of putting strength into someone's hands. Putting strength into their arms so that they can resist a pressure, an attack. To encourage means to put fresh courage into someone's life to keep going.

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?"

Encouragement can come through a note. One of the things I try to do in this church over the years is just write a lot of notes. It is impossible for me to talk to even a small percentage of the 2700+ people who are here. So I just write a lot of notes because I know that people get encouraged. I do. People send me thank you notes and little cards. I just love it. It makes my day to open a little card and have someone say, "That was helpful." The church is blessing their lives and they are growing in the Lord.

Life giving words can resonate in your own being for decades. I grew up in a home that was—the picture of it was next to the word "dysfunctional" in the dictionary. It was not a healthy home. One of the things that blessed me growing up was that I had some teachers who were so nurturing and so encouraging to me. I still remember a teacher in the 3rd grade, over three decades ago, who got pregnant. Back in those days when you began to show, you had to leave school. They were afraid that would be catching or something. She was pregnant and she had to leave. We were going to get a new teacher. I remember that she was leaving and I was really sad because I liked her so much. Before she left she called me forward and sat me down on her lap. She said to me, "Richard, I hope when my baby is born he turns out to be just like you. I love you." She whispered that in my ear.

It was one of the most nurturing and kind things that anyone had ever said to me. She put life in me.

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 grape vine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

Again, he is talking about the impossibility of inconsistent speech. Bless God, 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 spiritually? 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 a 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.