

“ANOTHER WINDOW TO YOUR SOUL”

James 3:1-12

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Winston Churchill was at a dinner party sitting next to his arch nemesis Lady Asquith. They really didn't get along, in fact they couldn't stand each other. At one point Lady Asquith finally had enough and snapped,

“Winston, if I was your wife, I'd poison your tea.”

Winston replied, “Madam, if I was your husband, I'd drink it.”

A polite exchange of insults, but insults are not always clever and controlled, in fact, more times than not when you mean to hurt someone badly, it's not unusual, especially when you are angry and hurting, to blurt out horrible, mean things.

In this morning's lesson, James warns be very careful with the most dangerous weapon we have at our disposal, our tongues. But we should also realize that God has given us tongues not to curse and tear each other down, but to bless and build each other up.

A king gave his two court jesters a task. One was to bring to him the best thing in the world; the other was to bring back the worst thing in the world. Each returned quickly with a small package.

The first jester bowed and said, “Your majesty, behold the best thing in the world.” It was a tongue. The second jester presented his container saying, “Your majesty, behold the best thing in the world.” You guessed it, it was also a tongue.

Our tongues are a two-edged sword. We can say encouraging, hopeful things, and the same tongue can say discouraging, hateful things.

I'm sure you can remember someone in your childhood, maybe a teacher or an adult neighbor, who said something devastating to you that crushed your spirit. Maybe you were trying something new for the first time, or maybe you were trying to please someone with a gift you made or a task you completed, but instead of getting a “well done” you were cut down to size. You were hurt, deeply hurt, so much so you began to doubt your abilities and self-worth.

Hopefully you can also recall when someone went out of the way to praise and encourage you with, “Atta boy!” or “You go girl!” Even though you knew you could do better these affirmations encouraged you to try again and try harder.

There's a growing awareness out there that the quality of the culture is taking a big hit, and I believe it begins with our quality of speech.

Have you noticed how everyday speech is peppered with obscenities? Raw language, once confined to the locker room, has made its way into the workplace, schools, even our homes. I'm sure movies and television played a role in this. You can watch old movies on TCM all day and never hear a curse word, but go into any theatre today and it's unusual not to hear four letter words. Movie makers today defend their use of coarse language by saying, "It's reality, people talk this way all the time. Having George Clooney say, 'O fudge,' just wouldn't be realistic." Maybe so, but I'll still take Humphrey Bogart or Jimmy Stewart films any day. Somehow they made great movies creatively and realistically without dragging their audiences down into the gutter.

But crude speech isn't confined to cuss words. We also find ourselves saying hurtful things to one another which is even worse. Why do we cut people down behind their backs and for that matter why do people curse and swear for emphasis without caring who's listening? Why do we blurt out and say harmful, destructive things even to the people we love?

One word, sin. We are broken human beings. Yes, we're created in God's image, awesomely and wonderfully made, but sin has distorted our beautiful image and try as we might, we're unable, on our own, to put all the pieces back together again. And because we are broken, our relationship with God is broken. Our eyes have been opened, but our vision is blurred; we can't tell the difference between good and evil. The result, we've lost a sense of the sacred because we've cut off from the beauty and glory of the eternal, and so our culture regresses deeper into the gutter as we continue to define deviancy down.

Certainly our generation is not the first to experience this collapse of justice and civility. You can be sure the early Christian Church was also enveloped in an atmosphere of injustice, coarseness and immorality. James' letter was meant to be, not just a warning, but especially a primer for God's people to rise above abusive speech and become careful with what we say, because words, carelessly or carefully spoken, have a definite impact either for the good or the bad.

Case in point for the good impact: We have a church member, I won't say who, who is very careful about the words she uses. She tries not to speak badly about other people and she never uses profanity, unlike many of her coworkers. They know she's a Christian and because she strives to be humble and authentic she has their respect. In fact, they try to clean up their language when she's around, and if they do slip, they usually apologize. Who knows, maybe they'll be more careful about what they say even when our member isn't around. Wouldn't it be great if all of us earned our coworkers' and neighbors' respect because they sense we are authentic Christians? Maybe it would start a chain reaction.

Now, I'm not advocating we all become Language Police handing out citations whenever someone speaks inappropriately, but I am suggesting we be very careful not to tear others down with our sharp or lazy tongues. Instead, say only what Christ himself

would do or say, using a variation of the theme “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.”

To help you become that positive, Christ-like presence, let’s refer back to James who speaks positive words of truth we need to hear. Listen.

“Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check... If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships, though they are so large it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.” (James 3:2-5)

You’ve heard the expression, “your eyes are the window to your soul.” You get the sense James makes the case your tongue, though a small member of your body, even so it reveals to the world who you really are. Just as a bit in a horse’s mouth keeps it under control, or a rudder determines a ship’s direction, the Christian’s tongue needs to be controlled and directed under the authority of Christ. Yes, you have free will and you can choose to use your tongue to either bless or curse, to build up or tear down, but Christians are empowered to let Christ speak through us whether you are at home, your school, or workplace, even here at the church.

Now the bridle and the rudder implies discipline. God never controls what you say, remember free will, unless you let God control you. So as it is with all things in the Christian life, it comes down to obedience. Will you repent, that is turn away or change direction away from the obscene and coarse and instead become aware of the source of life? In other words, are you willing every day to bow down to the awe and mystery of God?

Almost every day we’re tempted to blurt out an insult, cut someone down, say something hurtful, inappropriate or profane, usually because we let our anger get the better of us, or because we’re linguistically lazy and careless. Remember this: just as the eyes are the window of your soul, your tongue also reveals your soul. Be careful with words you choose and to motivate your desire to say the right things. Therefore, keep your relationship with Jesus open and clear. Let him speak to you. Each life is sacred. Every man, woman and child you encounter in church, the workplace, school, your home has been created in God’s image, awesomely and wonderfully made. So let’s be about the business of building each other up so you and the people around you are prepared to encounter the beauty and glory of the eternal. Amen.