

Sermon Transcript: Hey! Watch Your Mouth!(James 3:1-12)

This may be hard for some of you to believe, but when I was a kid in school, I used to talk a lot. Like, a lot. It was a problem. But you got to understand, I mean, I was an only child and when I got to school, it was like being in a candy store. There were all these kids and I mean, wouldn't you want to talk with them and play with them? And you mean we just got to sit here and be quiet? It was insufferable. So, I talked a lot. I mean, I didn't get in any big trouble for it, but I talked a lot. But then about twice a year, there was a reckoning.

Reckoning known as the parent-teacher conference where they would say, "Rob's doing great. He's doing great doing his lessons and reading and math. It's all great. But he talks a lot and he talks to the other kids and it's a bit of a problem." I remember Mrs. Baines in first grade gave me this speech about how I shouldn't talk so much. She's like, "You need to do your work." And I was like, "Got it." So, I'd get my work done and then I'd go around the room and start talking to people. Well, then I got in trouble for that. She's like, "You can't do that." I was like, "But I was done with my work." She's like, "Well, they're not done with their work yet." Like, "Oh, okay."

So, a couple weeks later, I got the same speech because I was over with Scott and we were hanging out together and we were talking. She goes, "Rob, I just talked to you about this." And I remember telling her, "No, no, no. It's okay. It's okay. We're not talking. I'm helping Scott finish his work, so then we can talk." I was a rule follower. Just got to know how to work those rules.

But indeed, every parent-teacher conference had the same profile. And then came fourth grade with Ms. Woy. And the problem with Ms. Woy is that Ms. Woy went to my church. And I thought, "Oh my goodness, every Sunday is going to be a parent-teacher conference. I'm going to get that speech from my mom every Sunday about not talking." So, we had the first day of class and Miss Woy gets up there and she explains. She's like, "You'll see these two desks that are up front here next to my desk. If you don't behave yourselves, you're going to have to sit at one of these desks." Well, at the end of class that day, I went up and I go, "Miss Woy" And she said "Oh, hi, Rob. How are you doing?" You know, because she knew me from church. I said, "I need you to give me one of those desks." And she said, "Why?" And I said, "Because I have a problem and that I like to talk a lot and I think if I sit out in one of the regular seats, I'm going to get in trouble. And I don't want to get in trouble, so I'm gonna need you to give me one of those seats now." And she went, "Okay." So, I sat right next to Ms. Woy's desk all through fourth grade, and I didn't get in trouble. Well, not for that at least.

So, I don't know what you have to do to watch your tongue. I don't know. I doubt there's a special place you can go sit that'll help that. But I bet there's things that you can do to help tame that tongue of your own. In the book of James, James is trying to give us some lessons on how to manage this troublesome part of our body and who we are—our mouths, our words, how we use them. I like the book of James because to me the book of James is like someone who's like, "Okay, okay. I got all this like Jesus teaching stuff and I understand this, but like, how do you like really do it in regular life, you know?" And we talked about in the previous chapter about how, you know, you got to make sure that your works match up with your faith and this week we're talking about watch that mouth of yours because it's going to get you in trouble. That's some real practical theology stuff right there. Watch your mouth.

And he gives us a lot of amazing images in this scripture to talk about that. The first of which is to think about the tongue as this, like, the small rudder of a ship. This little part of you that can steer your entire experience of life and what reality is like for you. Or like a bit that you put in a horse's mouth to make it turn this way and that. Just the smallest thing can steer the entire vessel or animal. And in the same way, the words that we choose to use can actually change our reality. This is the whole basis of psychology, folks. It's the book of James. Your actions and your words can change your experience of life. That's what psychologists do. I know. I live with one.

And so it's important we think about the words that we choose when even talking about ourselves. Some of you talk so horribly to yourself. You say things to yourself you would never say to a friend who is having a difficulty. You say words like, "I'm just dumb" or "I'm a failure." We need to be careful because when we use those types of words, we're shaping our very identity. In the Bible times, that "to be" verb was reserved for very special purposes because it defined something. And we need to be careful with that too because when we say words like, "I am dumb," "I am a failure," "I'm stupid," you start to shape your own experience of life and who you are.

You need to be more careful with that amazing instrument of a mouth that you have and make sure that the words that you say to yourself or think to yourself are words that build up and don't tear down. Instead of "I'm a failure," thinking, "There's some things I still have to learn." Instead of "I am dumb," "I'm probably going to need to spend a little bit more time on this subject or this idea." It's important that we love ourselves and take good care of ourselves because it shapes our reality and then it starts to affect the way that we treat other people.

James goes on giving us more metaphors to think of and talks about how the tongue or the mouth can be like a spark—a little flame that can set ablaze a huge fire. And it's so true that the words that we choose can change the way others are treated, the way others are seen. There was a psychology study where what they did was they gave people two different headlines for a story and then they started seeing if the people had questions. What would they want to know next about the story just based on the headline? The two headlines were: the one was "Woman attacked in man's apartment" and the other version was "Man attacks woman in apartment." And the people who heard the first one, "Woman attacked in man's apartment," did more victim blaming than the second group. "What was she doing in the man's apartment? What was she wearing? How much had she been drinking?" These are the questions that that group had. Questions that are not appropriate. Questions that are not good. Questions that do not build up, do not bring justice or mercy into a situation, but instead bring an ugliness. And those that heard the other sentence, "Man attacks woman in apartment," they actually had questions like, "Did they catch that guy?" Just by the way we speak the words, we can change the way others are perceived.

We need to be careful about that. We need to be careful about how we're going to change the experience that others have by the words we choose. There's certain phrases or words that we do here in church for that very reason because we know that the words that we pick in worship and in teaching will change the way we look out at the world. There's a version of preaching that I could give you where I could tell you about, "Let me tell you about the evil in the world. Let me

tell you about the sin in the world and what's going on and what is being done wrong," and that will shape you and that will cause you to think about what's going on out there and what you think of those people. But instead, we're very purposeful. We use words like talking about the brokenness that is out there in the world. Because when I speak of that which is out there as brokenness, it invites you and I into thinking about how can we help? How can we fix? How can we build up what has become broken? Because what we know is that hurt people hurt people.

And if we start to look at the world and see that when pain and suffering is happening, that's an indication of something broken around that system and those people. And maybe there's something that we can do about that or something that we should participate in that gets shaped by the use of the words that we choose. Words that decide instead of blame and finger-pointing, we're going to look for what might need our involvement—our heart, our mind, our soul. So, we have to be careful because the blaze we could set out in the lives of others could be harmful to others.

James goes on in this passage to give us yet another image of the idea of how can you have a spring that would give you both fresh water and salt water? It doesn't work that way. It's either good for drinking or it's not. It can't give both. And so he's saying to us that we have to be careful about the source of our words. The source that provides those words to us. And we live in a world that gives us a lot of words and a lot of ways to think about things. We are constantly soaking it in. Whether it's through what we're scrolling through, what we're watching on our computer or on our television, what we're listening to, we are filling our mind with other people's words. And if we do not choose that source carefully, it will change us.

My wife, who's a psychologist, majored in psychology in school. Her senior thesis at Princeton was an experiment where they had people sit in front of a computer screen and it would flash words on the screen so fast that you couldn't read it. Super fast. And then at the end she gave the subjects each a kind of like Mad Lib of "fill in the blank." And it was very common that people used the words that had been flashed on the screen faster than they could even read it than other word choices. So imagine if flashing a word on the screen faster than you can even read it causes a thought to reside and then for you to use that word. Imagine how much more so it is when it's words that you actually sit and read explicitly or words that you listen to explicitly. When that television is on 24/7 in your house, it is filling you up with words and phrases and your mind will like to use those words and those phrases more often than others.

So, we have to be careful as the people of God that we've got enough input going there of God's words that come to us in scripture as all this other junk that gets in there because we end up just repeating that which we've read and repeating that which we've heard. And no matter how clever it might sound in the moment, I'm telling you that engine out there that's filling your eyes and your ears, it doesn't care about grace and mercy and peace and justice. What it cares about is clicks and attention and fear because that gets more clicks and attention which sells more advertising which makes someone else more money. And you're giving it away. You're not just giving away your attention. You're giving away your words.

And we all have to be careful. We have to be careful about the words that we use because they shape how we think about ourselves. We have to be careful about the words that come out of

these mouths because it shapes the perception of other people around us and threatens community. And we have to be careful about what we're pouring in the ears and the eyes because it shapes the words that can shape a culture, a community, a society, a faith, a trust, a hope in you and in this world. And James knew it all those years ago. And we should know it too. And we should be careful. You can even hear it now, can't you? The words from the outside sneaking in.

Perhaps just to summarize all that James is saying here is just to say these words: Hey, watch your mouth. Watch your mouth. Watch your mouth. So that the very words of God might proceed from your lips and that love and grace and mercy and justice and peace might be what comes forth from that spring. To God be the glory. Hallelujah. Amen.