

Fifth Week of Lent

(this week's devotionals come from James 3:1-12)

Monday – ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” How often did we recite that as children? How often did our parents tell us this when a playmate hurt our feelings? How often did we tell our children this?

But it isn’t true, is it? The truth is, words can break our hearts. I talked with someone last week whose teenage daughter committed suicide last year, in part because of vicious online bullying from peers at school. As a society, we have become more polarized and angrier, more likely to lash out at others without thinking about, or caring about, the consequences.

That’s what we will be looking at this week—the consequences of words, both how words can break our own hearts, and how we can harm other people with the words we use. Think today about both of those things. What words have people said to you, either as a child or adult, that harmed you? And how have you harmed others with your words?

Tuesday – *The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

Have you ever been around someone who is always negative, always complains, and always has nasty things to say about others? It stains...it stains the person, and it stains the relationship.

I visited a man in the hospital many years ago who was recovering from a significant surgery and would be hospitalized for about three weeks. He spent the entire visit telling me everything he disliked about his hospital room, the doctors and nurses, his house, his wife, and his adult children. Partway through the visit, he lamented that his children never brought his grandchildren by to see him, and that his wife had only come to the hospital once. He was so lonely but kept pushing people away with his words.

Think today about the words you speak to others. Where are they edifying, building people up? Where are your words bitter, biting, or just rude? Why do you think that is? Ask God to show you when you speak unkindly to others, and take time to repent.

Wednesday – ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

We have all no doubt heard the phrase: tame your tongue. Watch what you say. Show restraint.

We do not see much restraint these days. News is available 24/7, and so much “news” these days is someone’s opinion with a few slanted facts thrown in. Some online articles have no comment section because of how vicious people were toward one another. In television shows, some characters spend the entire episode belittling each other. And the audience laughs.

The Bible says that the tongue is full of deadly poison. We can cut each other down quickly and effectively with our words. Perhaps some of you have been on the receiving end of that—you know verbal abuse first-hand. I once ministered to a woman who said her pastor had told her that the verbal abuse she suffered growing up was “mild,” because no one had physically or sexually abused her. Back to the sticks and stones mindset.

Where have others hurt you with their words? Can you take them before God and forgive them? Remember what forgiveness is—it is releasing the person to God and telling God that He is the judge. Is it not saying that what happened was okay, nor is it saying that you must go back into an abusive situation. It is saying we are not going to let that person’s sins have a place in our own hearts and continue to affect our lives.

Thursday – ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

“I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” (Gandhi) One of the biggest criticisms I have heard about Christianity is that churches are full of hurtful people, that we are so unlike Christ. I have heard many stories of people who left the church because others gossiped about them to the extent that they didn’t want to go anymore. A man once told me he would never go back to his church because after his wife left him and he was struggling to raise his kids as a single father, many people had opinions about their break-up (in a few cases, the children overheard the gossip) but only a few people asked if there was anything they could do to help him.

We may be the only Christian in some people’s lives. Daunting, isn’t it? But in this day and age, it is very possible. We may be the only example of Christianity someone has. What are we telling them about Christ by our words and actions?

Friday – ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

One thing we want to be as Christians is consistent. We want to be consistent in our faith—steadily walk that narrow path as we continue to grow in Christ. We want to consistently read scripture and pray. We want to consistently represent Christ to others. In these verses, James brings up an inconsistency. If the tongue is inconsistent, there is something wrong with the heart.

From Warren Wiersbe: *I heard about a professing Christian who got angry on the job and let loose with some oaths. Embarrassed, he turned to his coworker and said, “I don’t know why I said that. It really isn’t in me.” His coworker wisely replied, “It had to be in you or it couldn’t have come out of you.” When Peter was out of fellowship with Christ, he uttered some oaths, but he went out and wept bitterly and confessed his sins. The tongue that blesses the Father, and then turns around and curses men made in God’s image, is in desperate need of spiritual medicine! How easy it is to sing the hymns during the worship service, then after the service, get into the family car and argue and fight all the way home! “My brethren, these things ought not be.”*

Where are you inconsistent in your faith?

Saturday – ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17)

We spent a lot of time this week talking about the misuse of our words, ways we hurt others or the ways others hurt us using words. In our last devotional for the week, I picked these verses from Colossians to remind us how we should be speaking.

This passage talks about what we are listening to, reading, watching, letting into our lives. When we let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, it is obviously much easier to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. When we continually sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, it is going to be harder for curses to come out of our mouth...hopefully.

Today, think about what you let into your life. What do you think about? What do you watch? What do you read? What do you expose yourself to? Are they things that encourage, edify, uplift? If they are, it is going to be easier for everything—thoughts, words, actions—to glorify God.