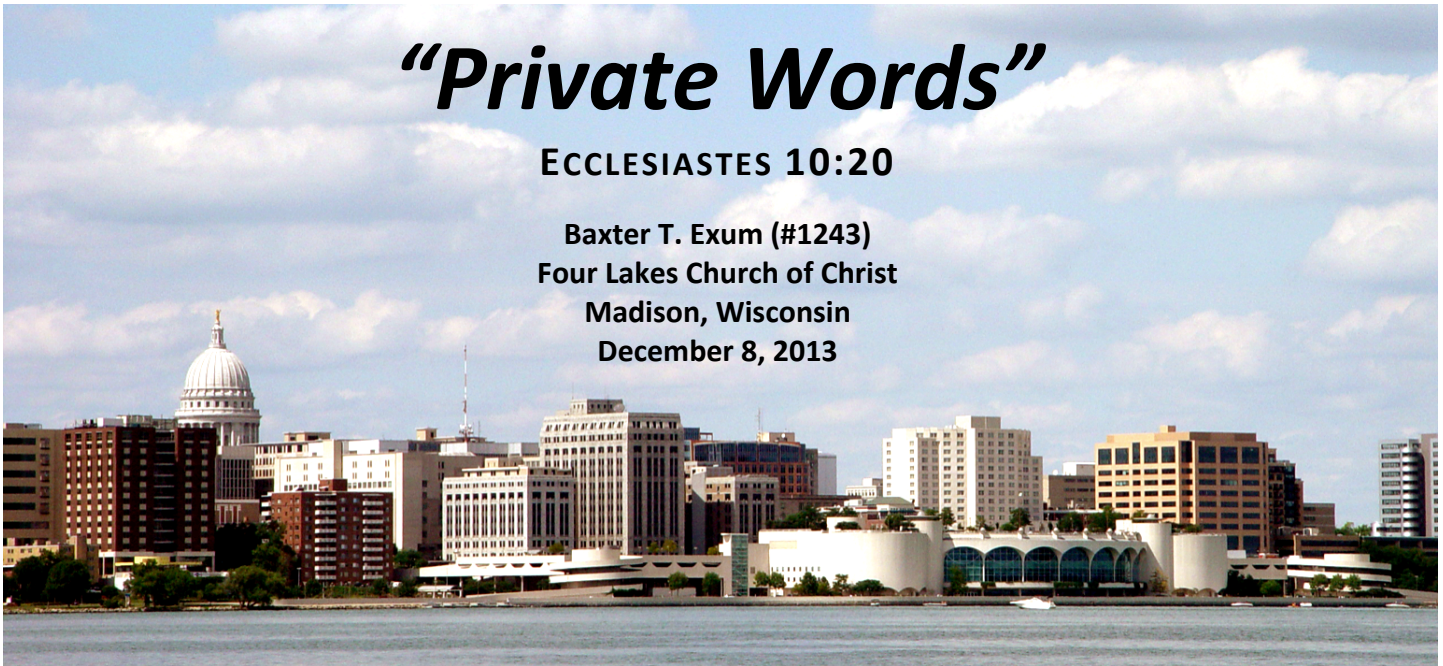


# ***“Private Words”***

**ECCLESIASTES 10:20**

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Over the past year or so, most of us have been at least a little bit interested in the growing role of surveillance in the United States. Our level of concern, of course, picked up recently with the release of a number of top secret documents that were obtained by a government contractor by the name of Edward Snowden. Mr. Snowden has since fled to Russia, but he continues to be in the news. Just a few days ago, for example, he released some additional documents, supposedly proving that the National Security Agency now collects more than 5 billion records every day, tracking the location of cell phone calls that are made all around the world – that is 5 billion records every day! According to an article in the *Washington Post*, these records feed into a “vast database that stores information about the locations of at least hundreds of millions of devices.” Of course, I am a little bit nervous just speaking these words. By the way, I accessed that information on the Wi-Fi network at Duncan Donuts this past Friday morning. And I am sure that soon after I left, agents probably swarmed that location. I am just kidding, of course. For the record, I have nothing to hide. But the point for most of us is: Even in private, it seems that we no longer have a reasonable expectation of privacy. We would like private things to remain private, but more and more, things that are private have a way of getting broadcast to the world.

This morning, as we think about the words we speak even in private, I would like for us to consider a passage of scripture from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes – Ecclesiastes 10 (p. 1059). And the passage seems to be the origin of an old saying that most of us have probably heard from time to time. As I was growing up, this is something I probably heard my grandmother say. She would ask me about something that I had done, I would be surprised that she had this information, and with a twinkle in her eye she would explain how she had that information by saying, “Well, a little bird told me.” And as a kid, of course, I thought that was rather strange. Maybe I got some award at school, and somehow there was a bird that flew from the Chicago area all the way down to Tennessee and informed my grandmother. As children, we tend to think in very concrete ways. We take things literally. Of course, as I grew older, I started to understand that “a little bird told me” is actually a figurative statement, and that saying goes back to a powerful passage in Ecclesiastes 10:20. The author is King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live. If you will, please look with me at Ecclesiastes 10:20,

***Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known.***

This is the word of God, and so as we think about God's word this morning, I would like for us to take some lessons from these inspired words, lessons that will hopefully change the way we live.

I. **And I would point out, first of all, a warning: And the warning is that WORDS (EVEN PRIVATE WORDS) DO HAVE A WAY OF SPREADING VERY QUICKLY.**

Sometimes we say, "Good news travels fast." We realize, though, that bad news also travels very quickly. Especially with the technology we have today, any news travels at speeds that we can hardly imagine. Several weeks ago, I got in touch with Brett Rutherford via email. As most of you know, Brett used to preach here at this congregation until he moved to Australia to help start a congregation in Devonport on the northern shore of Tasmania. It had been a while since the last family picture, so I emailed Brett and asked for an update. Just a short time later, the brand new picture showed up in my inbox, and we had it in the announcements the following Sunday. To me, that is amazing! I looked it up online this week, and the distance from Madison to Devonport is 9,624 miles. Even on an airplane, it would take more than 24 hours to get from here to there, and yet if we are interested, the flow of news between us and Brett is almost instantaneous.

The speed of words has led to some strange and even tragic situations. Earlier this week, maybe you noticed on the news that a woman had tweeted her own husband's death, even before she knew it was her husband. There is a woman in Washington State who follows the Washington State Patrol on Twitter. In an effort to help with traffic, a spokesman for the troopers tweeted about a fatal accident. This woman follows the trooper on Twitter and re-tweeted with the message, "this accident sounds horrible." A few minutes later, the woman posted the next message, "I'm trying not to panic, but my husband left work early and he drives 205 to get home. He's not answering his phone." Three minutes later, she tweets the trooper asking for a description of the vehicle. At that point, the trooper starts putting it all together, he shuts it down, but within an hour of the accident, because of Twitter, this woman had confirmed that it was her own husband who had died in that accident. She tweeted her own husband's death without even knowing it.

So, especially with our modern technology, King Solomon would remind us here that words (even private words) have a way of traveling very quickly. If he were with us today, King Solomon would probably point out that the icon of Twitter is a bird and that each message is referred to as a tweet. Indeed, "***a bird of the heavens***" is able to carry our innermost thoughts with amazing speed and efficiency.

What does this mean for us? It means that as soon as words leave our lips, as soon as words leave our fingers in the form of a text, or tweet, or status update, the information travels quickly and often cannot be called back. We can apologize, we can try to explain, but often, the damage has already been done. The solution, then, is to guard our hearts, to keep our hearts pure. The solution is to stop those words here (in the heart) before they leave here (the lips). The Lord Jesus referred to this in Matthew 12:33-37. In my Bible at home, the heading on this section says, "Words Reveal Character," and that is truly what the Lord is saying. Notice what the Lord says in Mathew 12:33-37,

***Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.***

We learn, then, that since words travel quickly and since words cannot be unspoken, we are to be very careful with the words that we speak. As the Lord says, our words reveal our character. So, we are to be very slow and thoughtful before just blurting out the first thing that comes to mind.

II. **There is a second lesson from King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 10:20, and that is: EVEN OUR PRIVATE WORDS ARE TO BE APPROPRIATE, BECAUSE EVEN OUR PRIVATE WORDS CAN HAVE TREMENDOUS POWER.**

And this is where we see an emphasis on content – we see an emphasis here on the actual words that are said. In this context, Solomon speaks of cursing the king or cursing a rich man. And here we have one of those general truths in life. Generally speaking, it is not wise to go around cursing those who are in positions of great power. Our words must always be appropriate, because words are significant. Words have power. Words have a way of changing the way we think. This is why Paul tells us in Colossians 4:6 that our speech should ***“always be with grace.”*** This is why Paul said in Ephesians 4:29, ***“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.”***

Because words are powerful, then, we are to make sure that our words are always appropriate. And what a challenge that is! Did you notice here: Solomon didn’t tell us whether the king or the rich man did something that was worthy of being cursed. So, the emphasis here is not on whether our words are true. That is addressed in other passages. The emphasis here is on the fact that our words are powerful, and therefore, our words must always be measured and appropriate – even in private.

Here is a thought question: Instead of always ranting against the president or those who are rich, is there something better we could do? What does the Bible tell us to do? At least with regard to the king, the Bible tells us that we are to pray for those in positions of authority. We think of what Paul said in 1 Timothy 2:1-4,

***First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.***

Does it say anything there about the king being worthy of our prayers? Does Paul say that we are to pray for those in authority only if we agree with their position on some issue? Does Paul say that we are to pray for the president only if he is a member of our political party? No! When Paul wrote these words, the Roman emperor at that time was Nero. Nero was one of the most evil men to ever rule any nation at any point in history. And yet instead of ranting about the evils of Nero, the apostle Paul told the early Christians to pray. That is why, here at this congregation, we often pray for our leaders. We pray for Mr. Obama. On Wednesday evening, we will sometimes pray for Michelle, and Sasha, and Malia – we pray for them by name. We can hardly imagine the pressure of leading a nation such as ours. So, even if we do not agree with various policies (and I might say, ESPECIALLY if we disagree with various policies), we have an obligation not to rant, but to pray, not to express words of scorn or hatred, but to pray. This is why we always order the prayer guides from “Intercessors for America” ([www.ifapray.org](http://www.ifapray.org)). The guide simply lists the top 130 US officials. It is completely non-partisan, just a listing of the top officials in this nation, and the reason we order these guides on a regular basis is to give us a tool to use in praying for our officials, as the Bible tells us to do. As Solomon points out here, we are not to curse the king or those who are rich – even in private. Here in our nation, we have the freedom to speak up, we have the freedom to disagree, we can respectfully point out differences, we can

state facts, but we are not to curse. Because our words are powerful, then, we are to be careful with the words that we speak. There is spiritual danger in constantly whining and complaining against the rich and powerful.

**III. There is a third idea in these words from King Solomon, the implied warning that OUR WORDS SPOKEN IN PRIVATE MAY ACTUALLY COME BACK AND HURT US.**

And I don't think I'm reading too much into this, but to me, there seems to be some level of warning or threat here: If we curse a king or a rich man, the matter may become known – and that is not a good thing! In fact, that's bad, very bad! If I curse the king and the king finds out about it, then I have put myself in danger. In the same way, if I curse a rich man and the rich man finds out about it, then I have also put myself at a disadvantage there. And so the idea is: When we curse, when we lash out with our words, when we gossip and it goes viral, the situation has a way of taking on a life of its own, and it can come back and bite us in the end. There is the danger of retaliation. There is the danger of payback. We are familiar with God's law of sowing and reaping. We reap what we sow. The person who curses the rich and powerful will reap what he sows, and in many cases will reap more than what he has sown. As one author has pointed out, "the critic will be criticized, the measurer will be measured." Of course, people should not retaliate, but in the real world, when people are slandered they tend to fight back. They tend to pay back evil for evil.

And so, as we think about the danger of words spoken even in a private setting, there is a warning: We are to be extremely careful when it comes to what we say. Before we speak, before we type, tweet, or update, we are to remember the Golden Rule. As the Lord said in Matthew 7:12, ***"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."*** This is true in public and when we speak about somebody face-to-face, but it is also true concerning what is said in private.

We think about what Solomon said earlier in this chapter, in verses 12-13, ***"Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness."*** Words have a way of multiplying and spreading and getting us in trouble in the end.

Did you notice the role of words in our scripture reading this morning? Silas read Matthew 5:21-24 from the Sermon on the Mount, where the Lord said,

***"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."***

We notice in that passage that words play a role in getting us in trouble. Words are powerful. Words are dangerous. So, the lesson from Solomon is that words (even when spoken in private) have a way of getting us in trouble, so we are to be careful with our words.

**Conclusion:**

What does all of this mean for us? It means that we are to control our tongues. In James 3:6, James uses some strong words as he says that, ***“...the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.”*** The things we say can get us into some serious trouble. God, then, wants us to be careful.

And yet when it comes to the words we say, not only are we to avoid saying what is bad, but we should also focus on using our words for good. So, we are to avoid cursing the king, we are to avoid cursing the rich man, but on the positive side, the Bible says so much about using our words to uplift and encourage. In Proverbs 16:24, for example, King Solomon said, ***“Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.”*** In Proverbs 12:25, Solomon said, ***“Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad.”***

In terms of salvation, our words also play a role. For those of us who are Christians, when we sin we are called upon by God to confess those sins. Words are involved there. If we sin against another person, we confess, we work it out – we apologize, we make things right. If we sin against God alone, we speak to God about it and ask for forgiveness. If we sin publicly so as to embarrass the congregation or in a way that might cause someone to stumble, we confess our sin publicly to the congregation.

But even for those who are not yet Christians, the Bible also teaches that words play a role. Before we are baptized, we make the good confession, the statement before those who are present that we believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And at that point we are buried with Christ in baptism.

We have learned this morning that words are important, even the words we speak in private. This morning, if you are ready to make the Good Confession publicly, in front of all of those assembled here today, if you are ready to turn away from sin and be buried with Christ, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)