



Words Matter

MATTHEW 12:33-37

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Most of us here this morning would hopefully agree that words matter. We know, for example, that God created the entire Universe by speaking it into existence. God said, ***“Let there be light,”*** and there was light! In fact, ten times in Genesis 1 we read the words, ***“God said.”*** The amazing power of words! We know that we are living in a nation where our founding fathers sought to recognize one of our most important God-given freedoms in Article 1 of the Bill of Rights in our constitution. Our founding fathers made sure that they put a limit, not on us, but on themselves as they decided that congress should never make any law “abridging the freedom of speech.” Our founding fathers, therefore, understood the fact that words do matter. From our own experience, we know that words can be encouraging. Words can lift us up. Words can make our day.

But then on the other hand, we also know the danger of words. As James points out in James 3:6, ***“...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.”*** Notice: The word ***“fire”*** was used three times in one verse! Just over the past several days, we have been reminded once again about the destruction of fire that gets out of control. We think of the wildfires out in California and all the lives that have been lost as well as the massive destruction of property. They are obviously still investigating the source of those fires, but one thing we know for certain is that every single one of them started small. That is the nature of fire - it starts with a spark, or a match, or a cigarette thrown out of a car window, and it quickly grows to cause untold damage and loss of life. James says that our words are like fire.

On a regular basis, we see celebrities and politicians get in trouble and embarrass themselves, even embarrassing the nation, through the words that they say (or the words that are shared online). Words have the power to cause tremendous damage. Most of us, though, don’t even need to look to celebrities or politicians, do we? We only need to look at ourselves. Sometimes we’ll say something, even to a spouse or a good friend, and seconds later we think to ourselves, “Wow, I wish I could take that back!” Something slips out, and we suddenly understand very personally what James was talking about. The tongue is a fire.

This morning I want us to cover three requests that have come in concerning the words that we speak. But what makes our study today rather unique is that all three requests have come from the three elders of this congregation. As you might remember, we passed out sermon request cards several months ago, asking for input concerning scriptures or topics that need to be addressed from the pulpit. You know that I will never

embarrass anybody by saying that today's lesson was requested by so-and-so. But today, it seems, is rather unusual. Some of you might not realize that I turn in sermon requests, too, and so all three of us as shepherds, as we surveyed the 1189 chapters in the Bible, as we thought about the more than 32,000 verses of scripture, as we considered an unlimited number of topics, as the three of us asked ourselves, "What does this congregation really need to hear," perhaps, "What do we struggle with personally," all three of us (independently of each other) boiled it down to WORDS - bad language, the impact of our speech on others, the influence our words have not only on each other, but also on those outside the Lord's church, including the sin of taking God's name in vain. If we are caught up in this sin (or in other sins committed by the tongue), what can we do to overcome these sins? How can we bring our words under control?

To try to answer these questions, I want us to go back and study a passage we looked at in sermon form almost exactly seven years ago. A number of you were not here in November 2010, but those of you who were will probably remember the image we used! I considered using something else, but I still have nightmares from this one, so it was apparently quite effective, and I decided to use it again! This morning, then, as we think about the power of words, I would like to ask that we think together about a sobering statement that was made by the Lord Himself in Matthew 12:33-37 (page 1521). The words we are about to consider come right after a discussion concerning some hateful things that the Pharisees had said about the Lord. Jesus addresses that problem, and then He opens it up a bit, and He gives a terrifying warning concerning the danger of the words that we speak. And the main idea is: WORDS MATTER. If you will, then, please look with me at Matthew 12:33-37. Concerning our words, Jesus says,

³³ 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. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. ³⁷ For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

- I. **Again, as we look at this paragraph of Scripture and as we look at the idea that words matter, I would like for us to notice, first of all, that THE WORDS WE SPEAK REVEAL WHAT IS TRULY IN OUR HEARTS.**

As the Lord points out in verse 33, a tree is known by its fruit. And this is a concept that all of us can understand. Even the little children here this morning, if they were to walk up to a tree with an apple hanging on it, they could make the judgment that that is an apple tree! As I was growing up, I did a project in 4-H where we had to identify various trees and shrubs and plants based on looking at nothing but leaves, and twigs, and bark, even roots. We studied for several months, and then we went to a huge warehouse for a competition, they gave all of us clipboards, and we had to identify hundreds of basically pieces of various plants. But what Jesus proposes here is much easier, even basic. If we see a tree with a pear on it, we know that it is a pear tree. If we see a tree with a plum on it, we know that it is a plum tree. The Lord is teaching us something here, and yet we know that the lesson is not really about fruit, is it? But rather, the Lord is taking what we know, and He is applying it to the words that we speak: Our words are the fruit, and our hearts are the tree! And the Lord is making the point that the words we speak reveal the condition of our heart.

Just a few days ago, I saw a meme online that said something like, "I've got a good heart, but this mouth though." And if you posted or liked it, I'm not calling you out. But since I was preparing for this morning's

lesson, it caught my attention. The world says, “I am a great person, I have a good heart, but my mouth is out of control.” And I think we see the appeal of that. It relieves us of some responsibility, “I’ve got a good heart, but this mouth though.” Jesus, however, says that a tree is known by its fruit! In the same way, we might say something we shouldn’t have said, and then we might immediately catch ourselves and say something like, “Wow, I don’t know where that came from,” or, “I don’t know why I said that,” or, “That really wasn’t me!” And yet if we’re honest, we would have to admit that what we said really did come from the heart, because again, Jesus says that a tree is known by its fruit!

And Jesus explains it further in verses 34-35 as He says, “...***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.***” In other words, as we speak at school, as we talk to our co-workers, as we type on Facebook, as we Tweet our political views, as we text our friends, as we speak to our children, those words reflect what is on the inside. If our hearts are good and clean, then our words reflect that, but if our hearts are evil, then our words reflect that as well—just as certainly as an apple is found on an apple tree.

And so from a practical point of view, if I lie with my tongue, I cannot blame it on my tongue, but I need to reexamine whether I am really following Jesus in my heart, because Jesus Christ did not lie. If I spread gossip with the mouth that God gave to me, then I need to reexamine my heart, because God’s own Son did not spread gossip. If I log into my Facebook account and start typing f-this and f-that, I need to look at my heart, because God’s Son, our perfect example, would never use that kind of language.

So first of all, Jesus is pointing out here that when we speak things we shouldn’t, it is not a mouth problem, it is a heart problem. As those of you in this room can see, I am holding a salt shaker, and if I were to turn it upside down and shake it, I can guarantee you that salt will come out—not pepper, but salt—and the reason for salt coming out is that salt is on the inside. In the same way, whatever is in our hearts is what comes out when we speak, because the words we speak reveal what is truly in our hearts.

I had a friend as I was growing up whose mom would literally wash his mouth out with soap whenever he said a bad word. I had always heard people talk about that, and I thought it was just a figure of speech, but this guy’s mom actually did it! Maybe you’ve had it done to you, but whenever she heard him use any kind of bad word, she would take a dirty sock, put the sock on her hand, run the sock under some water, put some soap on it, and she would literally wash his mouth out with soap. Well, that might have caused him to think about what he was saying, but I think that all of us know that when we say things we shouldn’t, we are not really dealing with a mouth problem. When we send an inappropriate text or make a crude post, we are not dealing with a finger problem or a thumb problem. But instead, as Jesus points out here in Matthew 12, we are actually dealing with a heart problem. The words that come out simply reveal what is happening on the inside. Just as a doctor will check our blood pressure to determine our physical health, our words are an indicator of how we are doing spiritually. The words we speak reveal what is going on here [in our hearts]. So, first of all, we learn from this passage that words matter because the words that we speak (including the words that we or type or text), our words reveal our true character. Our words reveal what is really in our hearts.

II. There is a second concept here that is tied to the main idea that words matter, and that is: The Lord very clearly says that WE WILL BE JUDGED BY OUR WORDS.

In verses 36-37, Jesus says, “***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.***” The Lord, then, is referring even to the “careless” words that we speak. The word “careless”

in this passage comes from a word meaning “work,” but it has a negative prefix. In other words, the Lord is referring here to words that are not the result of hard work - lazy words, useless words, idle words, the words that just come out. Even those words will be called up as evidence on the Day of Judgment. Or, as we might say today, “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.” Every careless word!

In our society (and even among members of the Lord’s church), one of the most common examples of a **“careless word”** would be what happens when we take the Lord’s name in vain. It has been said that we can hear God’s name more often on an hour of television, or even during an hour at school or work, than we can by spending the same hour at church. And that is probably an accurate statement! Over and over again, we hear people just casually saying, “Oh, my God!” or, “OMG,” or, “Oh, my Lord!” or any number of other combinations or variations. And yet if we use God’s name as nothing more than an exclamation that something shocking or amazing or repulsive has happened, are we not using his name carelessly? And isn’t that exactly what Jesus is condemning here - careless words?

Back in Exodus 20:7, God commanded the people of Israel, **“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.”** To avoid breaking this commandment, many Jews wouldn’t even pronounce God’s name. Today, I run across some writing by Jewish people who still won’t even write God’s name, even a form of it. They don’t even use Yahweh, God’s personal name, they use God, but they write it as “G-d.” They leave the “o” out so as not to accidentally use his name in vain. We think, “Well, that is ridiculous!” But do you know what’s worse? Using his name in vain! Using his name carelessly. We might think, “Well, that was the Old Testament!” And yet are we not familiar with Hebrews 12:28-29 where the inspired writer says, **“Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.”** We are to think of God **“with reverence and awe.”** Or, we could think about something Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. As he gave something of a sample prayer, do you remember how he started that prayer? He said, **“Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be Your name....”** “Hallowed” comes from a word meaning “holy, sanctified, set-apart, consecrated.” God’s name, then, is to be respected. It is special. His name is holy.

When we speak his name, it is to be on purpose. Years ago, when our daughter was much younger, she came to me after worship nearly in tears, and she said something like, “Dad, we sang ‘Oh, my God,’ in that song, and we are not supposed to say, ‘Oh, my God.’” What a tender heart! We were singing, “Unto Thee, Oh Lord!” and in that song, we do sing, “Oh, my God,” so we explained that it is definitely okay to call out to God like that, but it needs to be on purpose. We are not to use that phrase carelessly. I’ve asked Walt to lead that song at the end of our service today as a reminder that we can either use God’s name carefully in worship (as we do in that song) or we can use God’s name carelessly (as Jesus is condemning here in Matthew 12:36). And so if we say, “Oh, Lord!” or “Oh, my God!” it had better be in a song or in a prayer. It is not to be careless.

Beyond this, there is so much more we could discuss on the words that we speak. Probably the best summary was that passage Aaron read for us a few moments ago from Ephesians 4, where we are encouraged to speak the truth, where we are warned by Paul to, **“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.”** The word **“unwholesome”** refers to something that is “bad” or “rotten.” Have you ever heard a doctor refer to “sepsis”? My understanding is that sepsis is a condition where the blood or tissues of a person’s body become infected with bacteria, and we know that it is a serious condition. Well, the word **“unwholesome”** in Ephesians 4:29 goes back to the same Greek word from which we get the medical term “sepsis.” The word literally refers to something that is rotten or infected, and so Paul is saying: Do not let any

rotten words come out of your mouth, our words are to be anti-septic (not rotten), because (as the Lord explains in Matthew 12), we will be held accountable for those words.

Perhaps we could look at the Judgment Day as an audit, as a time when the Lord will go back and review every single thing that we ever said or wrote—even if we only used our thumbs while we were doing it. And since we know that the audit is coming, wouldn't it be good to go ahead and audit ourselves first? If we will be held accountable for every careless word, wouldn't it be good to be more aware of what we are saying right now, if every word will be recalled for us at the Day of Judgment?

Of course, some people have tried to use euphemisms or abbreviations instead of the actual words, as if God can't figure it out. And so we often hear or see OMG instead of "Oh my God." And yet you know, I wonder whether God might be smart enough to see through that. When God looks at our text messages, do we think that God understands these things, or do we think that maybe it's over His head? Do we think we are like the parents who spell something out so that the kids don't get it, or do we think that God does get it? Do we think that God is not smart enough to figure out what all of these abbreviations actually mean? Every careless word!

And I hope I've been clear this morning, but God listens to what we say not just in this room on Sunday morning from 10:30-11:30, but the Lord God hears and sees everything. Maybe if we cover the keypad...do we think that might work, that perhaps God might not be able to see through our hand? No, but instead, God will hold us accountable for **"every careless word,"** and we will give an account for those words on the Day of Judgment.

It may be possible to fool our Christian family, to fool our parents, to fool our children, to fool our co-workers, to think that we can get away with saying whatever we want to say, but Jesus tells us that we will be held accountable for every careless word. We will give an account for words that hurt others. We will give an account for every word of gossip. We will give an account for every word that disrespects the name of God. We will give an account for every word that causes someone to doubt whether we are really Christians as we say we are.

This morning, then, we have learned from Matthew 12 that WORDS MATTER. We have learned that words matter because words reveal our character—the words we speak and the words that we type or text are a reflection of what we really are inside. But secondly, we have also learned that words matter because the Lord says that we will give an account for every careless word on the Day of Judgment.

Conclusion:

I realize that this has been somewhat of a heavy lesson, so I want to close on more of a positive note, and that is: If we have messed up in the past, God can wipe it all away. The good news is that forgiveness is available. The good news is that God has taken the first step. In our passage this morning, Jesus Himself has pointed out something that we need to deal with. The next step we need to take is to agree with what the Lord has said. Our job is to say, "God, you are right! Dear Lord, my heart is messed up. I realize that this is not a mouth problem, but it is a heart problem." Sometimes we refer to this as "confessing" our sin. Literally, the word "confess" means "to speak together with." In other words, God says, "You have messed up," and we say, "Yes, Lord, You are right!" That is what it means to confess something. For those of us as Christians, we can confess our sins to God, and as John writes in 1 John 1:9, **"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** So we start by confessing this sin to God.

We then make a decision to change our behavior. We repent. Speaking of those things from our past, the apostle Paul says in Colossians 3:7, ***“But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.”*** In other words: Stop it! We make it our mission to change our behavior. But what if the words keep on coming? What if we just can't stop? This is where we remind ourselves that words are a symptom of a deeper problem. And we know that in a physical sense if I start having chest pains, and shortness of breath, and maybe a tingling in my left arm, I need to call a doctor - not just to try to get rid of the tingling, but because my heart is most likely having trouble. And the same thing goes for the words that we speak. Our words are symptoms, and so our speech is a matter of the spiritual heart. If we constantly have trouble with profanity, that's a warning light. Profanity is to the spiritual heart what a blood pressure of 250/170 is to our physical heart. It is a warning sign. It is a symptom of a much deeper problem.

So the question is: What if we have a hard time with this? What do we do if the words keep coming? I would suggest that we go to God for help - we read the Scriptures, we focus on those things that are good and clean, we spend time with our Christian family, and certainly we can take our concerns to God in prayer. As Christians, we open up our hearts to God and we ask God to protect us and to keep our hearts clean. I would suggest that we pray what King David prayed in Psalm 51:10, ***“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”*** And then, as David also prayed in Psalm 141:3, ***“Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.”*** Sincerely ask God to help conquer this challenge, and I believe that he will heal our heart.

For those who are not yet Christians, the Bible teaches that you must first decide how you will respond to the death of Jesus on the cross. The Bible teaches that God allowed His only Son to die in our place, to take the punishment for sin that we deserve. We accept that sacrifice by turning to God, by turning away from sin, and then by making an appeal to God for a good conscience through baptism, by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried in water (as the Lord instructed) for the forgiveness of our sins.

If you are a Christian and would like for us to go to God on your behalf this morning, we would be glad to do that. If you are having a special struggle with the things that you say and would like for us to pray about it as a church, please let us know - write it down and bring your concern to the front in just a moment - we can pray about it together. But if you are not yet a Christian and you would like to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com