

“GET A GRIP”

Rev. Becky Stephens

Text: James 3:1-12 NLT**God’s Word: Philippians 4:2-9 NLT****James 3:1-12 NLT**

Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.

³ We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. ⁴ And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. ⁵ In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches.

But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. ⁶ And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

⁷ People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. ¹⁰ And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! ¹¹ Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? ¹² Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can’t draw fresh water from a salty spring.

Nancy’s grade school daughter, Emily, fidgeted nonstop during the new pastor’s first sermon. After 20 minutes of sighing and wiggling, she turned to her mother and whispered, "Mom, does this guy get paid to do this?" Mom smiled and nodded her head. Ten more minutes passed and his sermon still wasn’t close to conclusion. Again, Emily tugged at her mother’s arm and in a low voice said, "How much?"

The power of words!

“The tongue can bring death or life...” Proverbs 18:21a (NLT) All the more reason to GET A GRIP!

One web site allows us to measure ourselves by the words of others. You can find out how attractive you are by sending your picture to AmIHotOrNot.com. The Internet audience will rate you on a scale of 1 to 10. If this is too intimidating, you can simply choose to rate other people. Since opening on October 9, 2000, 163,000 people have submitted photos and the site gets 10 million page views a day.

James called the tongue a raging fire, totally unable to be tamed. In his opening statement of the chapter he cautions believers to not enter a ministry of teaching lightly. The tongue is a dangerous weapon, and there are lives at stake.

James tells us the tongue is like the rudder on a big ship, or a bit in the horse's mouth. It is a small thing, behind the scenes, yet the most powerful muscle in the body. It should be used for the highest of purposes!

Get a grip and use your words to TEACH

George Lucas is Star Wars' creator. He was given a lifetime achievement trophy at the Academy Award ceremonies in 1992. In accepting he said, I've always tried to be aware of what I say in my films because all of us who make motion pictures are teachers, teachers with very loud voices.

A story is told of a woman who overheard her mother passing along to her father a newsy tidbit, concerning a neighbor. "You know you shouldn't repeat stories about others," a friend said with mock seriousness. "That makes you a gossip." "I'm not a gossip!" she snapped back. "I'm a news analyst."

We are all teachers, and we are teaching all the time. Jesus said *you shall be my witnesses* (Acts 1.8). When I attended Maryville College, I had a creative writing teacher who encouraged me greatly. I was young and new to the college scene and I wanted to impress my professor. I confess, I turned in a bad essay. It was full of big words to impress my teacher. But it was poorly conceived, badly composed, and grammatically a stench in the nostrils of all my English teachers combined. She handed it back to me without a grade. What she did say was, How about choosing a subject about which you know something? Write it plain, so I'll understand it.

My teacher wasn't interested in my vast vocabulary, she wanted to help me grow as a writer. So I went back to the drawing board. I turned in a story about our church youth camping trip. It was ok, and even a bit sappy. But her words, written in red on that paper are forever an encouragement: Rebecca, this is more like it!

This is good! You should really do something with your writing!

Little did she know that writing is a part of my weekly life as I prepare sermons and letters, etc. It was that teacher, whom I can't even remember her name, that gave me the courage and the confidence to follow my calling. Her words taught me to try.

Get a grip and use your words to LEAD

As in teaching, leading is always happening, too. Leading, good or bad, is a matter of the example we set by our response to the world around us.

After three years of researching gossip, Indiana University sociologist Donna Eder has identified an important dynamic involved in gossip. Eder discovered that the initial negative statement was not the starting point for gossip. The critical turning point was found in the response to the initial negative statement. "She's a real snob," is not the start of gossip. It's when someone else agrees that the gossip fest begins.

Eder found that the key is whether or not a negative statement is "seconded". If a second is provided, gossip ensues. If not, the conversation changes direction. "No one ever challenged an evaluation that had been seconded. Conversely, no matter how cutting the remark, an immediate quibble from a listener could send talk into a less critical direction."

The moral, you can abort gossip-bound conversations by quickly affirming the person being targeted for negative comments.

Want to know what to say when someone starts to tell you gossip?

"I don't want to hear it; I don't even believe what they're saying about you."

We have been led with words. Consider Patrick Henry's resounding: "Give me liberty or give me death." Remember Nathan Hale's vibrant words: "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Who can forget JFK's inaugural speech and the words: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

"I have a dream"; Martin Luther King Jr.'s stirring words from the Washington D.C. Plaza mobilized the black community three decades ago, and still ring in our ears.

Words such as those changed the course of history. They challenged our very souls and spirits and as a result our country and we will never be the same.

Words can do the same for people and their perception of themselves. They can be used for good. They can be used to inspire, lift up, motivate, instruct, and empathize.

Get a grip and use your words to HEAL

Finish this statement with me...Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. You and I know that is not true. There are people in this room right now that can tell you in a moment the hurt they have received in their lifetime from words either carefully aimed to wound, or words carelessly dropped that stung just as badly.

A child has a fragile makeup emotionally. Our words, or our temper that is out of control for just an instant can deliver a blow that will cause a lifetime of punctured dreams and hopes. We, with our words, can drive someone down a pathway of doubt and second-guessing.

On the other hand, we can speak words of kindness. Every wedding I do, I suggest the bride and groom speak the words of kindness from Ruth as they light the unity candle. It is the only way to start a marriage, committing to kindness.

In an old PEANUTS cartoon, Peppermint Patty phones Charlie Brown and says: "Marcie and I are about to leave for camp, Chuck. We're going to be swimming instructors." Marcie takes the phone and adds: "We just called to say good-bye, Charles. We are going to miss you. We love you." Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, asks, "Who was that?" Standing there by the phone with an ear-splitting grin of satisfaction on his face, Charlie Brown answers, "I think it was a right number." Right numbers heal!

Get a grip and use your words to SAVE

Jesus said we'd be His witnesses. We sang the hymn, Wonderful Words of Life. Were you listening while you sang?

Sweetly echo the gospel call, Wonderful words of life;
Offer pardon and peace to all, Wonderful words of life;

When you go to the doctor, often he will ask you to stick out your tongue. He wants to examine it. He or she can tell a lot about what's going on inside you just by looking at your tongue. The Great Physician can also tell if there is a revival or a riot going on...by your words.

Selwyn Hughes is the author of Everyday Walk with Jesus. In an interview he told about his grandfather. In 1904, Wales had a great Holy Spirit revival when a hundred thousand people were converted in six months without any preaching, just God coming down, touching peoples' lives. The miners underground would suddenly stop working and cry out to God to become converted. In schools, youth and children would have their heads on the desk weeping, and the teacher, often a Christian, would pray with them, leading them to Christ.

Such was the impact of this movement of the Holy Spirit, this awesome flood of God that was going through Wales that caused many of the drinking saloons and the public houses closed down the magistrates had no cases to conduct. After six months they were given white gloves as a symbol of the fact that they hadn't worked for six months.

One of the men who was converted in that revival was my grandfather, Selwyn says. He was a miner. His job was leading the horses that pulled the tubs of coal from the mine.

He says, my grandfather was a blasphemer and had a filthy tongue. The way he used to train his horses was by swearing at them. Then he got converted, and for days the horses didn't know what to do because he wouldn't swear at them. They had to learn a new language. So even the horses knew there was a revival going on because the change was so dramatic.

My grandfather then led my mother to Christ. My mother led my father to Christ. My father led me to Christ. So I see myself as a product of that revival.

Paul said we should examine ourselves (1 Co 11.28). In our context we should call it a tongue checkup.

- Are your words teaching valuable character?
- Are your words leading in positive pathways?
- Are your words healing?
- Are your words being used by the Holy Spirit in saving?

If your answers do not satisfy you, here's how to change:

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Philippians 4:8 (NLT)

The tongue is your most powerful muscle. To have it under control this way is to follow Jesus. So get a grip! May it be so!