

**Alicia McIver Announcement:** Before I preach this morning I want to share some sad news that happened within our community on Friday. One of our young adults, Alicia McIver, a long time volunteer in our youth ministry, and niece to Joanne and Dave Sattler, collapsed on Friday and died shortly thereafter. It was completely unexpected.

Many of you knew Alicia personally, along with her family. I don't have any details on a memorial service, but I wanted to let you know about this loss so that you can be praying for the McIver and Sattler families in the days ahead. In fact, let's pause for a moment to pray right now for Alicia's family. **Pray.**

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A few weeks ago I was in a coffee shop with a friend, talking about his life. He had a decision to make and was unsure about what to do. As he spoke, I listened both to him and to the Holy Spirit; *God, what would you have him do?* I asked him a few questions, listened some more, and offered a few observations. By the time the conversation was done, he had made a decision that seemed right to him, to me, and to the Holy Spirit.

Just before we got up to leave, he said, "*Mark, I am grateful for our friendship; at various points in my life, God has used you to help me discern what He is saying to me.*" It's generally considered impolite to ignore a kind word that someone speaks to you, and so, I acknowledged his encouragement—barely—and quickly changed the subject.

But my friend, being the perceptive person he is, called me out: "*Mark, did you just brush aside what I said to you?*" Sheepishly, I

admitted that I had. Truthfully, it's something I do quite often. I don't like to be the centre of attention but there's more to it than that. I tend to brush aside encouragement because I live with a painful awareness of my limitations, shortcomings, and failures. People's encouraging words—even when they are offered truthfully—don't ring "true" because other kinds of words often shape the way I think about myself.

All words are not created equal; some words have greater force. I might receive ten positive comments and brush them all aside, but that one negative word—it burrows under the skin, it stays with me, and I tend to replay it over and over again. Some words bring life, other words bring death. *Which words are you listening to, and what kind of words are you speaking? Are you speaking words of life, or, words of death?*

A few weeks ago we looked at a passage of scripture in James that highlighted the power of words. In James 1:19, James encouraged Christians to be quick to listen and slow to speak angry words; these kinds of words do not lead to right relationship with God or others. Just a few verses later, in 1:26, James points to a loose tongue as evidence that our faith has short-circuited.

In our text this morning, James expands on what he has already said about the power of words. If you have a Bible with you, please turn with me to James 3:1-12. If you are using the blue Bible from the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 978.

This morning I am going to be reading from the New Living Translation because it offers a nuance in wording that I believe will aid our understanding.

*“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.”*

At times, a biblical text requires significant explanation because of theological complexity, or, because of the distance between the ancient culture and our own. This morning's text does not fall into

this category, and for that reason I am going to spend less time on explanation and more time in application.

That being said, let me offer a few points of explanation, beginning with number 1:

### **1. A Controlled Tongue is Key to Holy Living (3:1-5a):**

James begins with a warning to those who teach. We all make mistakes, we all say things we regret, but those in teaching professions are constantly dealing in words, and therefore, run the risk of causing greater damage.

For example, when our Prime Minister gives a speech, millions listen, and dissect every phrase. Being a public figure means being under constant scrutiny; the larger the figure, the greater the scrutiny. It would take a “perfect” person to completely avoid sins of speech.

How often have we uttered an angry, hurtful, or exaggerated word? How often have we uttered a condemning, unforgiving, or untruthful word? Have you ever made a promise you had no intention of keeping? And what about words of gossip, slander, or outright lies? Sins of speech are common to us all. But one scholar helped me to see that James' intent in this section is not to make a negative point but a positive one—*by controlling our tongue, we control our lives.*<sup>1</sup>

The two examples James uses makes this clear. With a bit in the mouth of a horse, a rider can direct a powerful animal. A rudder is very small when compared to the rest of the ship, and yet this very small part controls and directs the rest. So too the tongue—*by*

<sup>1</sup> J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, 120.

*controlling our tongue, we control our lives.* Now clearly James isn't teaching a lesson in physiology, he's making a point about the power of words; James knows, as we do, that the tongue does not operate on its own accord.

**illus:** By a show of hands, how many of you have seen the Disney/Pixar movie entitled, *Inside Out*? The setting for this movie is inside the mind of Riley, a young, preteen girl. Inside Riley's mind, we meet five personified emotions—Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust. The movie gives us an inside look as these characters try to guide Riley as she and her parents make a life for themselves in a brand new city. The movie goes back and forth between what is happening inside Riley, and how she responds on the outside.

It's quite a profound movie, and I commend it to you, but the point I'm trying to make here is that what's inside a person always comes out. Jesus once said, "*the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*"<sup>2</sup> Our words provide a window into our heart. A controlled tongue is one evidence of a heart growing in health and maturity. Let me make a second point...

**2. Our Words Can Cause Tremendous Harm (3:5b-6):** A bit can control a large horse, a small rudder can guide a huge ship, and the tongue—like a small spark—can set a forest ablaze. A word, once spoken, cannot be taken back.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 12:34; Luke 6:45.

<sup>3</sup> Motyer, 123.

<sup>4</sup> Motyer, 124.

James speaks of the tongue as corrupting the entire body and he goes so far as to say that the tongue is set on fire by hell itself. This is James' way of saying that our rash, angry, vitriolic words can end up being an instrument in the hands of Satan.<sup>3</sup> Some of us here this morning are still recovering from hurtful words that were spoken to us many years ago. Is it not Satan's work to keep us angry, afraid, embittered, and unable to move on?

### **3. We Need God's Help To Control Our Tongue (3:7-8a):**

Humanly speaking, we cannot control our tongues any more than we can transform our hearts. Hoses can be tamed, elephants domesticated, and dolphins trained, but the tongue remains wild and unconquered.

In vs. 8, James describes the tongue as "a restless evil." This phrase conveys the image of a half-trained beast; it appears to be under control but every so often it reverts to its savage tendencies.<sup>4</sup> Just when we think we've got our tongues under control something happens and before we know it we are snapping in anger, or telling a lie, or gossiping with an old friend.

To control our tongue, we need God's help. James speaks about the tongue in terms of a fire that sets a forest ablaze—it's an image that communicates destruction. But in the Book of Acts we are told about a fresh fire that fell upon the church. At the Feast of Pentecost, while the church had gathered to pray, the Holy Spirit descended upon

them and we are told that they heard the sound of a rushing wind and they saw what seemed to be “tongues of fire” that came to rest on each person.<sup>5</sup>

And what was the result of this fresh fire? Each person was given the ability to declare the good news concerning Jesus in a language they had never spoken before. With God’s help, our tongues, our speech, can be renewed and reclaimed. Let me make one final point...

**4. Our Tongues are Plagued by Inconsistency (3:8b-10):** Sadly, James notes that blessing and cursing comes from the same tongue. With our mouth we bless the God who made us, and with the same mouth we curse people who are made in God’s image. We may be offended when God’s name is mocked and yet think nothing of mocking, accusing, or criticizing others. James cries out, “*my brothers and sisters, this is not right!*”

Fresh, sweet, water and bitter water do not flow from the same spring. And where sweet and bitter water mix, is it not the bitter that overpowers the sweet? As I said earlier, all words are not created equal; hurtful, hateful, words typically have greater effect in our lives and in the lives of others.

**Application:** In the time remaining I want to move from explanation to application and talk about speaking words of blessing. The first point I want to make is this...

**1. If you want to speak words of blessing, then deal with your hurts privately, before you speak publicly.**

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:1-4.

**illus:** A good friend of mine grew up in a home with an angry father. His father wasn’t angry all the time; he was often generous and kind. But like a half-tamed beast, his tongue was a “restless evil” and it didn’t take much for him to snap and speak an angry, demanding, or demeaning word.

This past Summer, my friend and his son spent time with his father and it wasn’t long before angry words were directed from grandfather to grandson. My friend pulled his father aside and asked a simple question: “Dad, *do you want your grandson to remember you as an angry man?*”

What’s inside a person always comes out, and when it comes to our words, “*the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*” And so, if your heart is filled with anger, or fear, or hurt, or accusation, it will infiltrate your words. Ignoring, or stuffing, what’s in our heart is a dangerous strategy.

Proverbs 12:18 says, “*The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*” Proverbs 13:13 says, “*Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.*” So how do we guard our tongue? We begin by dealing with our hurts before God, and in this way, our praying can help our speaking.

Consider David’s example. Hounded and hunted by King Saul, David was forced to run for his life and hide in caves. For years David was estranged from his wife, his friends, and his country—he had done nothing to deserve this treatment. Was David angry? Did he

feel betrayed? Yes of course! He wrote a number of Psalms during this chapter in his life and they are filled with anger and anguish.<sup>6</sup> But keep in mind that these psalms were prayers prayed to God. In praying this anger and anguish to God, over time, it lost its grip on David's heart.

As his heart was emptied of anger and anguish, there was room for forgiveness to grow. There came a time, much later, when Saul fell into David's hands, but instead of ending Saul's life, David showed mercy. In fact, when Saul eventually did die, in battle, David wrote a song extolling Saul's praises.<sup>7</sup> His song wasn't forced or fake; he was able to bless Saul publicly because he had processed his hurts before God privately.

Do you want to be a person who consistently speaks blessing? One of the first steps is committing to bring our hurts before God.

**2. If you want to speak words of blessing, let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.<sup>8</sup>**

If what's inside will come out, then we need to be wise about what's filling our minds and hearts. In Philippians 4:8 the Apostle Paul writes, "*whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*"

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<sup>6</sup> Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, and 52 are thought to have come from David's time of running from Saul in the wilderness.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Samuel 1:17-27.

<sup>8</sup> Colossians 3:16.

What we set our mind and heart upon will determine what we think, how we speak, and who we become.

What kinds of things are filling your mind? Are the words you see and hear—at school or work; on the radio, tv, and internet—words that bring life or death? We can't always control the words that we see and hear, but we can certainly offset words that deal in death by choosing to engage words that bring life.

Psalm 119:37 says, "*Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.*" When we turn our eyes, tune our ears, and open our heart to God's Word, we begin to think, act, and speak differently. If you want to consistently speak words of blessing, pay attention to words you are taking in—what goes in, will come out.

**3. And finally, Keep in Step With the Spirit.**

**illus:** For much of my life, I've kept my cards close to my vest. Not wanting to look the fool, I used to keep to myself the positive and encouraging thoughts and feelings I had about others. When there was admiration, love, or gratitude in my heart towards another, more often than not, these words went unspoken. But when my mom was diagnosed with cancer, this tendency began to change.

When you realize that your time with someone is short, each moment

becomes precious. Every time I spoke with my mom, I spoke words of encouragement, honour, and love, knowing that if we were graced with another conversation, I had the opportunity to bless her again.

This experience changed me. I began to pay attention to what I would have previously described as “random thoughts”. When I was at work, or out for a run, and a person came to mind and I felt prompted to pray—I would call, text, or email the person to tell them what I had prayed for them. When my mind would “wander” and I’d find myself thinking about someone who I admired, someone who had guided me, helped me, or loved me well, I would take it as a sign from the Holy Spirit that this person was in need of a blessing or encouragement. I would call, text, or email and tell them how much they meant to me.

I want to let you in on two little secrets: (a) Everyone is in need of encouragement and blessing; (b) God is blessing God. What I found is that when I began to reach out to others with words of encouragement and blessing, the words I shared with others were often the very thing the person needed to hear. What I had previously considered a random thought, or a wandering mind, turned out to be the leading of the Holy Spirit.

So the next time someone comes to mind, don’t push the thought away, lean in. Ask the Holy Spirit if there is something He would have you pray for them, and if He gives you something to pray, let them know what you prayed. The next time someone comes to mind—a friend, a teacher, a family member—and you think about what they mean to you, tell them—speak words of blessing. If you see

God at work in someone’s life, if you them changing, growing, transforming, commit to telling them what you see. You won’t be sorry, and neither will they.

**The Lord’s Supper:** This morning we come to the Lord’s Supper, and symbolically gather at His table, remembering that we have been invited into God’s family. All of us enter the Christian faith as individuals; our mother’s, father’s, or grandparent’s faith won’t do—it’s your personal confession of faith in Christ that activates the forgiveness He offers.

That being said, the moment we place your trust in Christ, we are adopted into God’s family; spiritually speaking, none of us is an “only child”—we are surrounded by brothers and sisters.

Our communion with Christ has been compromised when we praise God on Sunday, and curse our classmate, neighbour, or co-worker on Monday. We have misunderstood God’s great love and mercy when we claim it for ourselves, and then treat others with contempt.<sup>9</sup>

This is Jesus’ meal, He is our Host, and He is present among us by the Holy Spirit. We can only come to this table because of His loving, generous, welcome. This is the Table of Mercy. We come to commune with Him, and in so doing we are strengthened to be people of blessing in our world.

**Instructions for Communion:** At this time I want to invite the worship team to come and join me on stage, and the communion

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:20-21; c.f. Matthew 22:37-40.

servers to come forward. As they do, allow me to offer a few, brief instructions.

We will have three serving station up front, and one/two in the balcony. I'm going to invite people to come forward, row by row, beginning with the back row. As each row is served, the next row can come forward to receive. As you wait for your turn, perhaps you would like to receive prayer; our prayer is available to pray with you while people are being served.

**First Service:** For those in the balcony, those serving will begin on the left side first, and then they will bring the elements over to the right side.

As you come forward to receive, the servers will invite you to tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and then eat with thanksgiving.

At this time, I'm going to turn things over to Paul.

## **Worship**

### **Special Announcement**

As our service concludes this morning there is something that I want to share with you. Since 2006, Linda Rae has been a part of our staff team, serving as our Children's Pastor for 12 years. In recent weeks, Linda has made a decision to resign and she will be leaving her role at the end of December.

I know this will come as a shock to most of you—you're hearing it for the first time—but the possibility of transition has been on

Linda's mind for some time. Linda has given us plenty of notice which allows us to plan for transition in our Children's Ministry; we do have a plan in place that will include a hiring process.

As I said, Linda will remain in her role until the end of December, and we will host a farewell party for her on the evening of December 22nd, but I've asked Linda to come a share a few words with us this morning.

### **Linda's Words**

#### **Prayer**

**Benediction:** If you have been coming to North Shore Alliance for some time, then you know that I end every service with a word of blessing. Many of you know what is come and before I even raise my hands to bless you, you hold out your hands to receive.

All of us hear hundreds and thousands of words every day, many of which are hard, angry, unkind words. I want the last words you hear me speak each Sunday to be a blessing because God Himself is a blessing God. And so, my dear people, receive this blessing today:

*May the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace.*