

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

*Pursuing Holiness, Part 4
Putting Holiness into Practice
Rev. Dr. Meagan Boozer*

The word *holy* means “sacred, set apart from the profane (unholy) for God.” When you and I heard God’s call on our lives (and I believe you are here because you heard God’s call to come to Him), we were called out from the profane darkness of the world for God. From darkness to light. In our Lenten study in the book of James we have seen what that is supposed to look like in real life.

- † We are called to endure the trials that we face in this world with joy – knowing that if we cry out to God asking for wisdom, God will generously give us wisdom to help us endure this trial and be better prepared for the next one.
- † We are called to accept God’s Word for what it is – Truth. If we truly want to be holy as he is holy, we need to receive God’s Word as the ultimate instruction manual for life and do what it says. We are called to accept and obey God’s Word immediately without compromise or justification of why we can’t obey it right now.
- † We are called to treat one another as Jesus treated everyone - with dignity and honor – even those with whom he disagreed, because the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We must guard against showing favoritism based on outward appearances or anything else. Last week we took slips of paper and wrote the name of someone we know we haven’t treated well, we haven’t forgiven, or we wrote a group of people (maybe people with different colored skin, or of a different religion, or political view, etc.) we know we haven’t been respectful or loving towards. (If you weren’t here and want to do that, or if this week you thought of some others you want to put up here, there are slips of paper on the front pew. Please complete the work God is asking you to do.)

Today in chapter 3 of his letter to the Church, James is challenging us regarding the words we say. If someone followed us around for a week and listened to every word that came out of our mouths, would they know we were serious about pursuing holiness? Let’s pray: *Father God, gracious God, loving God, holy God, thank you for hearing the cries of our hearts. Thank you for pursuing us with your irresistible love and grace. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight – rise up to you as true worship. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

I’m going to read all of James 3 from The Message. The heading of this section (in The Message) is ‘When You Open Your Mouth.’

“^{1,2}Don’t be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you’d have a perfect person, in perfect control of life. ^{3,5}A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it! ^{5,6}It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

⁷⁻¹⁰This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can’t tame a tongue—it’s never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

¹⁰⁻¹²My friends, this can’t go on. A spring doesn’t gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don’t bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don’t bear apples, do they? You’re not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you? ¹³⁻¹⁶Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here’s what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly.

It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor."

James is all about spiritual maturity. He wants us to grow to spiritual maturity through our response to suffering, by our ever-eager and willing obedience to the Word, by the way we treat others, and by the use of the tongue. He begins chapter 3 with a warning to teachers regarding the weight that their words have on those who listen, but he also begins by confessing that though he himself is a teacher, he knows he isn't perfect and doesn't always speak as he should. But James is not just speaking to teachers. He's *warning* teachers about the influence their words have, but he is speaking to all believers!

Anyone who has ever been to the doctor's office has been asked to stick out their tongue and say 'ahhh.' There seemed to be quite a bit the doctor could tell about our health by looking into our mouths and down our throats. In the same way, there is a lot that can be learned about the spiritual condition of our heart by listening to what comes out of our mouths. Where are we on a 'vocal-holiness' scale? And that, by the way, is not just what we literally speak, but what we type in our texts, emails, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.

In the culture today, we are deluged with words. Deluged – meaning overloaded, swamped, bombarded, saturated, snowed under with words. Some of the more mature people here will remember that old song, "Sign, sign, everywhere the sign, blockin' up the scenery, breakin' my mind...". We can change it to, "Words, words, everywhere the words, blockin' up the scenery, breakin' my mind...". Words are everywhere these days, and what words we personally add to the deluge reveal the condition of our hearts – reveal where we are on the vocal-holiness scale. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, "*The mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*" Proverbs 15:4 tells us, "*A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.*" Bruce Waltke in his commentary on Proverbs wrote, "*A fool's tongue is long enough to cut his own throat.*"

James tells us that by our own willpower we cannot tame the tongue. Though it is so small in comparison to other parts of our body, it cannot be tamed and can do incredible personal damage with one well-placed word. He writes that a person truly pursuing holiness is not going to speak blessings and curses out of the same mouth, which reminds me of that phrase in old cowboy and Indian movies, "white man speaks with forked tongue." If we have blessings and cursing coming out of the same mouth it is showing not just a forked tongue but a forked heart (so to speak), which takes us back to the first chapter of James when he wrote about the double-minded man who is unstable in all his ways.

Our words matter. People are listening. Friends are listening. Co-workers are listening. Children are listening. God is listening. What we whisper to someone in class, the way we talk in the dugout, the things we yell at drivers on the road, the words we text to our boyfriend or girlfriend, or to that one person we want to feel lower than dirt, the words we say out loud or under our breath to (or about) our parents, our teachers, our coaches, our boss, our pastor, our youth group leader, the things we post, the things we share, the things we like on social media – give us a reputation, gives us a rating on the vocal-holiness scale and reveals the spiritual condition of our hearts.

I went to the DMV this week for what I thought might be a 30-45 minute task to get my Real ID since my driver's license expires in June. I clocked in at 12:02. At 1:45 I left. I couldn't take it anymore! There is so much I could say about that experience, but that would be a poor example of what James is trying to teach us here. About half-way into my waiting time, Layton Hoffmann came and sat a couple of rows up from me. After a few minutes, I moved up to visit

with him while we waited. I am not proud to confess that throughout our time talking and waiting, I revealed an impatient heart. I had a long list of things I needed to get to and sitting there was not on it. I found myself sharing some of my observations about what I perceived to be unmotivated workers with Layton, all while my studies on the third chapter of James were fresh in my mind and heart. I wasn't mean. I wasn't harsh. But I wasn't patient either, and I didn't take my thoughts captive to Christ so that they didn't come out for someone else to hear. When I go back I will be prepared to fill my time in more in a more God-honoring way.

The first week of this study, our video teacher Philip Nation spoke about 'slowing down the game.' That really stuck with me. If, as those who have been called by and chosen for God, if we can let go of our autonomy and our perceived right to be and do and say and text and post and 'like' whatever we want, in favor of doing and being and saying and texting and posting and liking that which honors God, we're getting somewhere. We're getting somewhere. That means we are slowing things down long enough to ask God for wisdom and wait to receive it before we say something that shouldn't come out of our mouths. And over time, when this becomes our pattern, when we make a deal with our tongue and our texting thumbs to respond to God before we react to the world, we will find ourselves making progress on the vocal-holiness scale. And when we are making progress on this scale, we have a peace within us because guess what we have chosen to do? We've let go. We've let go of our need to control a situation or a person with our words, by replaying a conversation, justifying our behavior, and correcting their behavior. When we slow down just enough to think and pray before we speak, we will find we have a whole lot less to say as we trust God to work it out. Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah 50:4-11 about our Savior Jesus Christ, but words that I believe are a call to us as well in regard to vocal-holiness:

The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

¶The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears;
I have not been rebellious,
I have not turned away.

¶I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.

¶Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

¶He who vindicates me is near.

Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other!

Who is my accuser?

Let him confront me!

¶It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.
Who will condemn me?

They will all wear out like a garment;
the moths will eat them up.

¶Who among you fears the Lord
and obeys the word of his servant?

Let the one who walks in the dark,
who has no light,

trust in the name of the Lord
and rely on their God.
"But now, all you who light fires
and provide yourselves with flaming torches,
go, walk in the light of your fires
and of the torches you have set ablaze.
This is what you shall receive from my hand:
You will lie down in torment.

Let us pray: Sovereign Lord, thank you for your words of truth and life. Thank you for teaching us. Thank you for your example, Jesus, of remaining silent instead of trying to defend yourself. Thank you for showing us how to trust in the Father's will. As we come to the Table this morning, as we take into our mouths the truth of your sacrifice for us, this bread, and this juice representing your body broken and your blood poured out for us, may our hearts find healing in you. Hear now our words of confession silently spoken to you. (silence). May our minds find peace in you. May our need to control find release in you. May our very lives find freedom from all that has bound us in the past. Holy God, we come, eager and ready to do your will. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

When we confess our sins, God, who is faithful, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Know that you are forgiven and come to the Table in peace. Amen.