

(Backpack...English book set-up...)

Good morning, my name is Bonnie Ceban, and while many of you know me as the co-director of youth and family life, what you may not know about me is that I spent 15 years of my career teaching college students writing composition, critical reading and thinking, text analysis, and action research. Yes, I can officially claim the title of English teacher! In the classroom, I usually had students for a semester, and it culminated in the kinds of lengthy research papers I'm sure everyone loves and misses so much...right?

You may be grateful to know, then, that I'm not taking you back to freshman comp today, because this month we are in the school of discipleship, that journey of ever-increasing knowledge and faithfulness we begin when we come to faith in Jesus. It's the kind of lifelong learning that truly never ends, doesn't require a written final project, but absolutely impacts every part of our lives and future.

Last week, Pastor David helped us consider the school of discipleship as it relates to history class, as in seeing the world through the lens of God's story told over thousands of years, and our place in that story of redemption.

Today, I'm going to take you to English class as we talk about the transformational power of words.

But before we jump into today's scripture, I'm going to offer you the bonus lesson I gave all of my students over many years...and that's the power of the hand written word.

There is significant neuroscience and research behind the concept of "encoding" which basically says that when we write things down it signals to our brain that something belongs in long-term memory and increases our ability to retain and recall that information later. So when we write things down - yes, I actually do mean the old fashioned way with a pen and paper, though some research supports that typing will create a reduced but still meaningful level of "encoding" as well - then we are literally teaching our brains what we value and want to recall in the future.

I'm not saying you need to write down what I share with you today, though maybe something will stand out to you, but consider if you have a central place where you can take notes on sermons, jot down ideas from Christian podcasts, maybe keep track of an ongoing prayer need.

If you have a place where you are consistently writing things down over time, you benefit from the ability to go back and look at it for reference, but you also start the process of training your brain to organize and retain information about scripture and Jesus that you don't want to forget! That's the power of writing things down, and we can unleash that power as a tool in our school of discipleship when we keep an ongoing notebook or journal over time - even bringing it with us to Sunday mornings or small group meetings.

Ok, that was your bonus concept from my years in the classroom, but let's dive into today's main scripture as we start to unpack the full power of our words.

We're in James 3, and we'll pick up in verse 3:

*"We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. 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. 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. People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God." (NLT)*

Hear that last part again, before we continue: *"Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God."*

Lord, it shouldn't be. But let's be honest, this is an incredibly relatable scripture. How easily have we all found ourselves in situations where our tongues got ahead of our good sense? Or where our emotions drove our mouths in directions we didn't belong.

The fact is that words have immense destructive power. James compares the tongue to a rudder of a ship, this small part of our body that will shape and form so much of the direction of our lives. Can you hear how seriously he takes the way our words can destroy? Literally, it says that our tongues can 'set our whole lives on fire.'

Can you picture that concept? James is warning us that if we allow our words to run out of control, there is no end to the destruction that can occur. In our homes and families, in our workplaces or schools, in our communities, in our church. If we are careless with our words over time, we can do so much harm.

When we allow our tongues to take our lives in directions that are not God-honoring, how quickly relationships, opportunities and our very testimony can be burned down.

Fire controlled and managed brings heat, light and safety. Fire left uncontrolled and unmanaged brings destruction. It is the same with our words.

Jesus shares with his disciples in John 13:35 that people will know they are his disciples if they love one another. So what does it say about us when our language becomes filled with rage or bitterness, degrading those made in the image of God, leaning into division and strife, gossip, anger and cursing others?

What destruction can come from our words! How quickly someone can feel unloved and unwelcome when we do not choose carefully our words.

Maybe you can think of a time even in the last week when your tongue was a destructive fire, using words driven by emotion that tore down those around you (whether they heard it or not) and let loose that awful power in your life. Maybe you can think of a time when you were on the receiving side of those words.

Honestly, we've likely all been on the other side of those words, when someone's words hurt us, made us feel unloved, or otherwise caused damage in our lives. For some of you, I recognize the hurt is deep and comes from very painful experiences. We cannot underestimate the power of words, and I do not take lightly the wounds you may carry from the words of others

Think about those moments in the last week - whichever side of the words you were on this time - what would you give to be able to go back and redo that moment? It's so hard to know that once spoken, words can't be unheard. And while we can apologize and relationships *can be* restored, ultimately, we have to sit with the understanding that words do not disappear with apologies and allow that truth to drive us to change.

(pause)

As a young mom, when my kids were in late pre-school and early elementary school, I worked with them a lot to learn the gospel story, to understand how to read the Bible, and to memorize key scriptures. I'll share with you, while most of those scriptures were about helping them to grow in faith and knowledge of the Lord, one might have been a little self-serving in my hopes of getting them to be a bit more cooperative.

Philippians 2:14-15 (NIV)

*“Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky...”*

Like I said, yes, working with them to memorize that one may have been a little self-serving. But truthfully, I consider it an incredibly pivotal scripture when we are talking about the power of words. And it's an illustration for how so many different habits with our words can become an engulfing fire.

It is SO EASY to get caught up in grumbling and arguing - some versions of scripture say 'complaining' - and to go down a path of negativity, criticism, and dissatisfaction. This is where we can see an example of the destructive power of words over time. Because, sure, anyone can have a bad moment and be critical or argumentative, but what happens when we allow criticism, negativity, complaining, grumbling and arguing to begin to define our words? To be what others consider part of our personality? What happens when it takes over like a blazing fire, when we have a problem for every solution, a frustration for every situation, and when we are so seeped in our negative words and complaints that we find ourselves always dissatisfied? How that would rob us of joy and peace in the Lord!

Over time, the habits we create with our words have so much power to shape our lives. They are building blocks, and if we feed into the kinds of words that scripture warns against, cursing 'those made in the image of God' (reminder: that's everyone!), gossip, grumbling and arguing and complaining, then they build and build and BUILD in power like an inferno until it drives our every conversation, our every interaction, in ways that tear relationships down. It steals from us the very *community* God designed us to live within.

If we allow words to build into that kind of destructive power, we also rob ourselves of the offer at the end of that scripture in Philippians 2:15 - the opportunity to shine like stars. To be God's light for others. But we don't have to allow that destruction! This scripture shows us there's an offer of another way. A way that sets us apart and leaves us like those shining stars in a 'warped' generation.

Because the incredible thing about the power of words is that when we harness their power for good, they can be incredibly, wonderfully life-giving.

In fact, we are invited over and over again in scripture to use our words for good, not evil. Let's look at a few of those invitations:

*Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)*

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

*1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV)*

*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*

*Hebrews 10:24a (NIV)*

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds...*

*Proverbs 12:25 (NIV)*

*Anxiety weights down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up*

What is the theme running through each of those verses? We can use our words for the benefit of others!

Our words can be the life-giving force that gives someone confidence through encouragement, peace in moments of anxiety, motivation when they are weary...church, this is part of why fellowship with other believers is so important in our lives!

At times, we all will feel insecure, we will feel anxious, we will feel weary, and in those moments, we can harness the power of our words to build one another up in the Lord. It takes awareness. It takes intentionality. It takes looking up from our own lives, our own

struggles, our own complaints or negativity, long enough to pour the love of God over others with our encouragement.

The decision is clear. Our words can be used to give life, hope and peace...or they can be used for great harm.

If we pick back up in James 3, we find this in verses 10-12:

*“And so blessings and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can’t draw fresh water from a salty spring.”*

You can’t draw fresh water from a salty spring. And we can’t pour encouragement and life over others while cursing, gossip, complaining and more are pouring from our lips!

At this point, I hope you are thinking to yourself that there are some changes you’d like to make in your words. Some taming of your tongue God may be stirring in your life. I would venture to suggest there is something God can do in all of our lives in this area. When it comes to our words, the school of discipleship has many, MANY levels!

But I want to share with you some incredibly important wisdom that Jesus offered on this subject. We find it in Luke 6:45 (NLT)

*“A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.”*

Hear that again... “What you SAY flows from what is IN your heart”

While we may say today “I’m going to clean up my mouth,” Jesus says that it’s actually our hearts that need to be cleaned up first.

Our words reflect our hearts. Our words overflow from the values treasured deep inside of us.

- If we are insecure, we may be prone to gossip
- If we are anxious, we may be prone to negativity
- If we spend our time listening to podcasts and newscasts full of negativity, that negative spirit can begin to show up in our words
- If we focus on money and accumulating worldly possessions, our words may become self-centered instead of focused on generosity
- If we fill our minds with media full of profanity, violence, or rage, it’s no surprise if that starts coming out in how we speak

The straightforward spiritual truth is that what we store up in our hearts will eventually come out of our mouths.

The best way to change our words and begin to tame our tongue? Get our hearts more fully in the hands of Jesus. Confess. Pray. Seek. Read scripture. Fill up so completely on Godly words, Christ-like music, Christian podcasts, life-giving messages that this becomes what flows from our mouths. That encouraging words become our default setting.

We don’t change our words with decisions or good intentions alone, we change our words by resetting our hearts and through inviting the power of God to work in our lives.

We adjust the input to transform the output.

Don’t we want to live Ephesians 4:29 lives? Remember it says:

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

What a glorious invitation to build a culture of life-giving words, a body of believers who build one another up according to their needs!

But it won't happen by accident. It happens when we recognize the potential destructive power of words, become inspired by the life-giving impact of words, and then reset our hearts to focus on Godly values.

And sometimes, it takes a little bit of intentional practice.

You know, you can't ask a teacher to come up front without expecting a little bit of homework, right? This week, I want you to participate with me in the 'speak life' challenge. Each day, intentionally share a word of encouragement or thoughtful support with someone in your life. I'm not suggesting you be fake or fill people with false flattery, but I am suggesting that with a little intentional awareness, we can see opportunities to build one another up in love to call out the best in others, and in doing so, use the transformational power of words for good this week.

And maybe, we'll be so inspired that we'll find even more ways to turn our hearts towards Jesus and allow the goodness of God to flow from our mouths each day.