

Read also James 3:5-18. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

Did you hear the Scripture reading? The Apostle James sounds a little bit grouchy. Perhaps he was having a bad day when he wrote those words, or had a fight with his wife. Perhaps he had received sharp words from a friend, or recalled a past painful conversation that he couldn't quite forget.

Or, maybe he had said words he couldn't take back and grieved over it.

We can relate to his metaphors—the forest fire caused by careless words; a tongue harder to control than a wild animal; boasting causing strained relationships; blessing one minute and cursing the next. Eugene Peterson calls the tongue “the wanton killer.” (Ja 3:7)

We understand this, don't we? We understand when the Bible says, “By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on [someone's] reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it.” (Ja 3:5b-6a, Eugene Peterson, *The Message*)

It's amazing the power of the unrestrained tongue.

How long do you think this has been a problem? Do you believe it has developed just this century? Well, James wrote these words late in the 1st Century.

Let's fast forward to the 18th Century. I have a little book written by George Washington, yes, the first president. Its title is *Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour In Company and Conversation*. He wrote it at age fifteen as a school exercise. It was good enough to be published numerous times and is in fact still being published today. President Washington had a reputation as being shaped by this code of conduct. Even people who did not agree with him respected his character.¹

The book states that in the 17th Century there was a genuine interest in manners, due to the writings of French King Louis and French Jesuits, and those writings were studied by girls and boys in America, like George Washington.

What about later? Did that interest in manners continue?

In going through my father's papers, I came across an article in The Shreveport Times newspaper dated 1957. An AP news-feature, it is about a three-year strike in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The article points out that although the “sound and fury of the country's longest major strike have subsided . . . what remains among people directly affected is hate—deep, abiding, stone hate.” Name-calling; arguments; even six divorces. This was at a time when the divorce rate was around 1-3%.² That result, the author writes, hurts more than the economic loss.

¹ George Washington, *Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour In Company and Conversation*, (Mt. Vernon, VA: The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1989), 11-15.

² http://www.nber.org/vital-stats-books/VSUS_1957_1.CV.pdf, accessed August 3, 2016.

Interestingly, the writer does not take a position on the strike. Instead, he points out efforts being made by community leaders to restore their town's reputation for serenity and hospitality. He writes, "In the riptide of opinions, only one element of the whole long strike remains clear—not who is winning but who is losing? People are losing. Individual human beings are losing—in suspicion and hate."³

Into the 21st Century, have we made progress? Are we more civil? You can be the judge of that.

The Bible addresses matters of civility throughout the Old to New Testaments. The subject is very relevant. The Bible does not simply condemn what we do wrong, but gives some direction. Listen to Proverbs. (READ 15:1-4)

"A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare. The tongue of the wise makes knowledge appealing, but the mouth of a fool belches out foolishness. The Lord is watching everywhere, keeping his eye on both the evil and the good. Gentle words are a tree of life; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit."

Those words were written by the wisest man in the world, King Solomon. It is effective, commonplace truth inspired by God.

Can you remember a time when a gentle answer or wise advice helped you? I certainly can, and I cling to those moments. Is there a person in your life who you think of when you need a gentle word, or who listens to you and is respectful of you, and builds you up with his or her wisdom?

I have such a friend and she is 81 years old. She never looks down on me. If I am upset about someone she always shows me a different angle and never inflames anger over others. She calms difficult situations. Her gentle words are a tree of life.

Once she was in charge of an important reception at a church function. She set the table with a white lace tablecloth and beautiful antique silver trays. She arranged the trays with desserts perfectly. It was all set and everyone gathered around to pray. A woman walked in with a tin tray of brownies and started shoving the silver trays aside and slapped her tray down right in the middle.

My friend was so angry. But a small voice came to her that said, *people mean more than my table*. So she said nothing and did nothing. She realized that her words had the power to divide. Because if she made a scene, the lady's feelings would have been hurt and she would have started the "chit-chat," and all you ladies know what that is. And women in the church have huge power with the tongue to build up or tear down. Men can, too.

Do you have such a friend? Or do your confidants make you more angry about your problems than you were before?

On the reverse, when someone comes to you with their concerns, are you a person who builds them up or do you make matters worse with harsh words about their situation?

³ Saul Pett, "Prolonged Sheboygan Strike Hurts More Than Pocketbook," Feature Section, The Shreveport Times, December 8, 1954, 1-G.

Here are some more proverbs:

- Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing. (Pr. 12:18)
- [Have a goal] to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. (Titus 3:2)
- Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut. (Pr. 10:19)
- The words of the godly encourage many, but fools are destroyed by their lack of common sense. (Pr. 10:21)
- It is foolish to belittle one's neighbor; a sensible person keeps quiet. (Pr. 11:12)

Let's look at some examples of how Jesus engaged with people.

Remember the men who brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus? They demanded Jesus keep the law. He could have called them names—you *judgmental so-and-so's!* However, he did not say a defensive word in response. He was silent. He bent down to write in the dirt. Then he said, "Okay, but let the one who is without sin throw the first stone." He stooped down to write again. Slowly their anger melted away and they dropped their stones and quietly walked away.

He turned to the woman, whom he could have judged. He was, after all, God's Son. He calmly said, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one condemn you?" "No sir." "Neither do I. Go, and sin no more." (Jn 8:3-11)

He did not verbally agree or disagree. He did not take them on. He used as few words as possible. He had gentle, yet truthful, words for the woman.

Another story is that of the rich young ruler. He went to Jesus because he was very proud. He declared that he had kept all the laws since childhood. Now between you and me, that's a little arrogant. No one has kept all the laws, so what's Jesus, who has actually kept all the laws, supposed to say to that?

The passage says *Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him.* Jesus answered out of that love. Accepting the man's statement he said, "There is still one thing you haven't done. Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (v.21) Bingo, he hit the bull's eye. The man loved money.

When he went away sad Jesus addressed the disciples out of the same genuine love, "Dear children, it's nearly impossible for the rich to enter heaven." The disciples were astounded. Who in the world can get in, they asked? Jesus gave them hope—while, humanly speaking it's impossible—nothing is impossible with God." (Mk 10:17-27)

Can you see the hope you bring when your tongue is gentle, wise, and patient, yet truthful? Jesus addresses you with the same kind of caring, grace, and love.

As Jesus would say, Go and do likewise.

AMEN