

BEST BEHAVIOR

James 1:17-27

We came ever so close to a family tragedy. It was a couple of weeks ago on a warm evening I thought it would be a good idea to take our dogs for a walk through downtown Centerville. We parked by the library and walked our dogs through the charming side streets and enjoyed the exercise and the warm breeze and looking at the marvelous trees and gracious homes. But the walk back took us on the Main Street sidewalk with all the traffic.

Our dogs are used to being in the backyard chasing squirrels not on a sidewalk with cars whizzing by. Their skittishness turned into panic when ahead there came a lady walking a large dog of some sort and it became too much our dogs. The leash held them while they were walking forward but when they pulled backward it slipped over the heads of both dogs and we were just barely able to grab them before they ran into oncoming traffic.

With a better leash, with better restraint, there would have been no potential for crisis. And so when the tongue is kept on a leash speaking straight forwardly it is safe and civil and can go into the world and do good. But when things get stirred up, when we feel threatened or angry or scared and pull out of safe behavior and speak with unbridled tongue it has potential to damage us and all around us.

The words of today's lesson are really great, practical advice: be quick to listen, slow to speak. It puts me in mind of the man who bought a parrot, brought him home and only later discovered the parrot swore like the proverbial drunken sailor. The bird could swear for five minutes straight without repeating himself. The man, however, was a quiet, conservative type, and the bird's foul mouth was driving him nuts.

He spoke with the bird about his language but to no avail. One day, it just got to be too much. He grabbed the bird by the throat, shook him hard and yelled, "QUIT IT!" But this just made the bird mad, and he swore more than ever. The man got even angrier and said, "Okay for you" and locked the bird in a kitchen cabinet. This really aggravated the bird, who clawed and scratched and continued to swear.

Finally he threw the bird into the freezer. For the first few seconds, there was a terrible racket. Then it suddenly got very quiet. So he opened up the

freezer door. The bird meekly climbed onto the man's outstretched arm and said, "Awfully sorry about the trouble I gave you. I'll do my best to improve my vocabulary from now on." Then the parrot asked, "By the way, what did the chicken do?"

Sometimes it takes that and more to make us reconsider words we speak. Shakespeare asked, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." And it would. But the names we use can make all the difference. Do any of you remember the story of changing the name of horse mackerel? Horse mackerel does not sound very tasty so the name was changed and many of us have it regularly – but now we call it tuna fish. Doesn't that sound much nicer?

Words can make things better or much worse. Oscar Wilde was quoted as saying, "If you cannot say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me." Tabloids. How can we check out of the supermarket without looking at the tabloids? Tabloids are the most dependable source for telling us about things that never happened. A book was written about tabloids a few years ago with the quintessential tabloid headline: *Dwarf rapes nun, escapes in UFO* – still available at Amazon.com. Tabloid writing involves meanness and lies, and it sure does sell, but don't let it sell you. We need to be known by something better than purveyors of gossip.

"Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." United Technologies used to place a full page ad in The Wall Street Journal. There is one entitled: "The Snake That Poisons Everybody." It says, "It topples governments, wrecks marriages, ruins careers, destroys reputations, causes heartaches, headaches, nightmares, indigestion, spawns suspicion, generates grief, dispatches innocent people to cry on their pillows. Even its name hisses. It's called gossip. Office gossip. Shop gossip. Party gossip. It makes headlines and headaches. Before you repeat a story, ask yourself: Is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary to repeat? If not, shut up."

There is a reason that James mentioned careful listening before eventually speaking. It is the old notion that God gave us two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak. Maybe we cannot control our thoughts, but we can control our tongue. If we cannot control our world we can control our behavior.

One of the most widely printed and quoted statements of business ethics in the world is the Rotary 4-Way Test. It was created by Rotarian Herbert J. Taylor in 1932 when he was asked to take charge of the Chicago based Club Aluminum Company, which was then facing bankruptcy. Taylor looked for a way to save the struggling company mired in depression-caused financial difficulties.

He drew up a 24-word code of ethics for all employees to follow in their business and professional lives. The 4-Way Test became the guide for sales, production, advertising, and all relations with dealers and customers, and the survival of the company was credited to this simple philosophy. It was officially adopted by Rotary in 1943 and has been translated into more than 100 languages and published in thousands of ways.

When speaking and acting Rotarians are expected to take this 4 way test: (1) Is it the truth? (2) Is it fair to all concerned? (3) Will it build good will and better friendship? (4) Will it be beneficial to all concerned? “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” “Pastor, that was a wonderful sermon,” said the parishioner at the door after the service. “That remains to be seen,” said the preacher. “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

It is easy to think we have engaged in faith when all we have done is to think about it, perhaps agree with a point from a sermon, maybe pondered the words from a Bible reading. It is one thing to leave church inspired by a beautiful offertory or moved by a stirring hymn. That is all well and good. But to complete what the scripture says we are to be doers of the word, not just hearers.

Jesus was not seeking disciples who agreed with his teachings but disciples who followed in his way. He did not say, “Agree with me and think as I think.” He said, “Pick up your cross and follow me.” He was not simply looking for feelings of sympathy toward a cause but companionship with him in confronting a sin sick world. It is not so important that we express an opinion as that we commit ourselves to following his way.

I remember one of my first assignments in seminary was to work with a church youth group. It is always a bit of a puzzle as to what will appeal to youth. So I decided to survey these young people. I had a whole list of possible activities. One at a time, I went through and asked which of the

several program ideas sounded interesting. I carefully tabulated the level of interest in each possible program. I had finished what I thought was a useful planning session when one teenager casually said, "This is an interesting sounding program but I would never go to it." I went back and started all over. "Don't just tell me what you are interested in. Tell me which program you would attend." It turned out to be a very different list.

Over the centuries there has been some controversy over this letter of James. Martin Luther once said he thought the Epistle of James is an epistle of straw. He thought it lacked substance because it did not come down as heavily as Paul's letter to the Roman about salvation through grace alone. What this epistle of James does proclaim is that we do not do the work of Christ in order to become saved; rather, we do the work of Christ because we are saved. It is through service to others that we show the new life that Christ has given us who follow him.

The plea to care for orphans and widows is directed toward those who are traditionally the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. They were those in first century Jewish culture who were in the most helpless and usually under the most pressure as they sought to attain the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter. They are to be the focus of Christian love in action.

Added to the mix is where James says, "But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing." We are freed from the law, free to do wrong. We are also freed to do what is right not by the constraints of law but the freedom of Christian love and compassion.

There is a silly story which goes back to the day when the Roman Catholic Church had a law that you could only have fish on Friday. One day, a Methodist moved to this small town loved to barbecue steaks on Fridays. The aroma of barbequed steaks on Friday was beginning to become too great a temptation to these Catholics. So before they fell into temptation the priest did everything he could to get the man to join the Catholic Church, which he did.

When he joined the Catholic Church, the priest looked at the former Methodist and said, "You were born a Methodist. You were raised a Methodist. Now you are a Catholic!" The church erupted in applause.

Everyone was happy until the next Friday when the neighbors again smelled the aroma of barbecued steaks. They couldn't believe their noses. They got the priest and together they walked up to the former Methodist's fence. He was looking down at the steak on the grill and said, for all to hear, "You were born a cow. You were raised a cow. Now you are a fish!" We are free of fear and self-concern, free to listen and not speak ill, free to serve the least of God's people.

We are freed from the law do what is right because the love of Christ compels us. We are freed from the way of the world to follow the way of Christ. In Rick Warren's new book **God's Power to Change Your Life** he tells the story of a converted cannibal on an island in the South Seas who was sitting by a large pot reading his Bible when an anthropologist wearing a pith helmet approached him and asked, "What are you doing?" The native replied, "I'm reading the Bible." The anthropologist scoffed and said, "Don't you know that modern, civilized people have rejected that book? It's nothing but a pack of lies. You shouldn't waste your time reading it." The former cannibal looked him over from head to toe and slowly replied, "Sir, if it weren't for this book, you'd be in that pot!"

"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."
Our parents used the words and we who are parents use the words: Be on your best behavior. What children do is a reflection on their parents. There is for Christians in these words from James a standard of best behavior. It is not just a reflection on the believers but also a reflection on our heavenly Father. Be careful to listen and constrained in what you say. Be sensitive to the least of God's people and generous in helping them. In so doing our best behavior is a reflection of our loving God.

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