

“By My Words?”

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Matthew 12:33-37

As a man was boarding a plane and making his way back to the place where he would be seated, he noticed his seatmate, a young woman, was obviously upset. She was not making a scene, she was crying softly, but obviously something was wrong. When he sat down beside her, he asked her, “Is there anything I can do to help?” She said, “No, my father has died and I am returning for his funeral in California.” He said, “I’m sorry for your loss. It’s obvious that you and your father were close.” She said, “No, not at all. In fact, I haven’t seen or spoken with my father in over 15 years. The last time we were together, we had a horrible argument. The last words that I spoke to my father were: ‘Go to hell!’” Will she be condemned for her words?

In our scripture lesson today Jesus said, “By your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned. Do we really believe that? “By my words, Jesus? Will I be condemned for the words that I speak?” And Jesus says “It is not your faith, your works, your prayers, the way you read the Bible, how often you attend church, or how much money you give. It is by your words, by your words.” What’s going on here? What’s the deal, what is so important about our words?

If you will, help me a moment. Will you all stand at this time, please? Thank you. You may be seated now. (chuckle) I’m sure we have some people in here this morning who are physically strong, but no one by their physical strength could lift everyone who is present here in the room, but just by those simple words, “Will you please stand?” everyone was lifted up. Jesus, are you saying that by my words I might be condemned?

In preparation for this service I came across some wonderful words about words. Listen to this:

Words can be weapons and words can be healing. Words can unite in friendship or sever in enmity. Words can unlock who I am or mask me from others. Two words, “Sieg Heil,” bloodied the face of Europe; three words, “Here I stand, divided the body of

Christendom. Words have made slaves and freed slaves, have declared war and imposed peace. Words sentence to death (You shall be hanged by the neck”) and words restore to life (“Your sins are forgiven you”). Words covenant a life together in love, and words declare a marriage dead. Words charm and repel, amuse and anger, reveal and conceal, chill and warm. Words clarify and words obscure. A word from Washington rained down atomic hell on Hiroshima; words from an altar change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.”— Walter Burghardt

The gospel writer John understood about the importance of words and the power of words. You remember how he started his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Words. Words reflect who we are. When we open our mouths it is as if we are holding a mirror to our soul. Jesus said our words reflect the abundance of our heart, whether it be good or evil. Words affect others. Have you ever heard this? “Those who are closest to us tend to become what we mutter about them under our breath?” Words.

But by my words, Jesus? Is it really true that I might be condemned by the words that I speak? Jesus understood about the importance and power of words. He knew the scripture. When God created the world it was by a word. “And God said ‘Let there be light.’ And God said ‘Let there be a firmament among the waters.’ And God said ‘Let us make man in our own image.’”

Jesus understood the power of the words in the context of our scripture today. Jesus had just healed a man who was blind and mute. When some of the crowd asked about it, some of the Pharisees said, “He does this because he is in partnership with the devil.” Jesus understood about the power of the words, and the Pharisees understood too. They were afraid what this man who had been mute would say, so they had an excuse in advance.

Where’s the Good News in this scripture? Have you thought about that? I suppose 99 out of 100 of us who would read this scripture would remember the last thing—the last word that Jesus would say, the word condemned. Remember also that Jesus said, “By your words you are justified.” Jesus didn’t heal the man who was mute so he would

refrain from saying bad things. It is not enough to have a “bite your tongue policy” and not say things that are harmful and hurtful. We are supposed to say things that build up and encourage. Just as Jesus didn’t heal the mute man so that he could refrain from saying things, so God did not create us simply to refrain from saying things. It is not enough just to not say bad things. We are called by faith to build each other up, to say words that give hope and life and healing.

Do you remember the turning point in John’s Gospel? It is one of the hard sayings of Jesus. Jesus has said, “I am the bread of life, and if you don’t eat this bread you have no life in you.” He is criticized by the Pharisees for saying this and at that point in the 6th chapter of John we read that “Many of his disciples fell away and no longer followed him. So at that time Jesus turned to the Twelve and said, “Will you also fall away?” It was Simon Peter, speaking for all the disciples, who said, “Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of life.”

So do we. We have words of life that we can share with each other and we need to share with each other desperately. I suppose honestly that husbands and wives are the worst at saying words that can be unkind to each other. I knew a couple one time—I’ll call them Sue and Stu. They would do anything for anyone. They were nice to everyone except each other. It was uncomfortable to be around them when they started in on each other—being unkind to each other. Thank goodness none of the rest of us ever do that in our marriages.

It is not enough, however, just to refrain from saying the bad things. We are called to share support and encouragement with each other. A word of advice for you men who are the “Silent Sam” type who may not say a lot of bad things but maybe never say much good, either—kind of ease into it. If you aren’t used to complimenting your wife, you don’t want to give her five or 10 compliments the first day. If you do, she’s likely to say, “What have you been up to?” Kind of ease into it—one or two compliments here and there.

For you “Silent Samanthas” who are not used to encouraging your husbands, kind of ease into it. You remember the three words that every man loves to hear. Bob Rorschach, you know those words: “Time to eat!” Kind of ease into it. Don’t say too much

all at once.

As Christians, we have other words of life to share that are even more important. You might not realize how close you are to someone who is hungry and thirsty for those words: a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker, but kind of ease into it. You don't have to share all of your faith with them at once. You might invite them to the service tonight or next Sunday morning or Christmas Eve. Did you know that this season of the year is the easiest for many people to work their way into church. It is a time that they remember something maybe they haven't even known before, a longing for home, so to speak, a longing to come into the presence of Emmanuel.

This past week I was in the neighborhood anyway, but I suppose even if I hadn't been I would have driven by there. I was drawn to the place as if I were drawn to a magnet. Remember the plane crash that happened down at the airport in Jenks? I drove by there one afternoon last week. For some reason I felt the need to see the site of that plane crash. When I first drove by I don't know if I would have noticed the plane, but there was a group of reporters, actually a press conference going on. I pulled over and parked and noticed that the cameras were arranged so that the man who was speaking was in front of this plane that was upside down. I walked up and stood with the rest of the reporters. I had decided that if anyone asked me why I was there I would say I was representing the "Disciple News Service."

The man who was speaking was a representative of the National Transportation Safety Board. He was explaining what happened—what they thought was the cause of the crash. If you read about it in the paper or saw it on the news, you probably heard that the plane clipped some highline wires, but that wasn't what happened first. Back behind the highline wires were some trees. The plane had clipped some trees, gone into the highline wires and flipped over.

If you remember, there were three people in the plane. A man, his wife, and his wife's father. Two of them were killed: the wife and her father. As I looked at that scene, I thought "Would it be a good idea that close to the end of the runway to maybe cut down some trees and bury some power lines?" What struck me even more was this: how close they came. They were just a few hundred yards, maybe even less from the end

of the runway. They came so close to landing safely! What I am suggesting is that you know people who are just that close to God. All they need is one word of encouragement, one word of life from you, and maybe they can land safely.

At the beginning of each sermon I repeat a verse of scripture from the 19th Psalm. You know it: "Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight O Lord, our rock and our redeemer." I take that Psalm very seriously. It is my hope and prayer that the words I share with you will be acceptable in God's sight. That Psalm is also a good prayer for all of our living. For every day, might each of us start the day by praying a fervent prayer to God. "This day, O Lord, might the words of my mouth be acceptable to you." May it be so for each of us. Amen.