

“...But Words CAN Hurt Me”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Matthew 12:33-37 “A good person brings good things out of his treasure of good things; a bad person brings bad things out of his treasure of bad things” (v. 35).
- James 1:19-27 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness (vv. 19-20 NRSV)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Learning to control anger is an example of being “doers” of the word.

The Epistle of James is a curious little book in the Bible's New Testament. It mentions Jesus only twice. It contains nothing about his life, death and resurrection, or the miracles he performed. It doesn't touch on the meaning of baptism, the Lord's Supper or the Holy Spirit.² In a few areas it bears some resemblance to the book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Scriptures because James, too, contains similar words of wisdom that stand on their own, unconnected to any historical episode or narrative. Proverbs, for instance, offers these words of guidance on the topic of anger:

- *A gentle answer quiets anger, but a harsh one stirs it up.* –Proverbs 15:1
- *People with a hot temper do foolish things; wiser people remain calm.* –Proverbs 14:17
- *It is better to be patient than powerful. It is better to win control over yourself than over whole cities.* –Proverbs 16:32

Similarly, James offers the proverbial, “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.”³ James also presents strong argument for living out one's faith. In fact, he includes an illustration about a mirror to explain the difference between a person who does live out her faith and one who doesn't.

We modern readers of this passage from James miss the meaning of this particular illustration – his mention of a person looking at his reflection in a mirror. In our day and age mirrors are ubiquitous – we can look at our reflections in a clothing store, at a cosmetics counter, as we wait for an elevator, by flipping down the sun visor in the car. But in the ancient times when James wrote this letter, mirrors were not nearly so common. A wealthy person may have had a mirror, but the average person would see her reflection by peering at a piece of polished metal or at the surface of still water in a pond or a bowl. It's surprising for us to realize that in ancient times people weren't terribly aware of what they looked like.

¹ Adapted from a sermon originally preached August 30, 2009

² New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XII, p. 180.

³ James 1:19b-20

So what does he mean when James likens a person who *hears* God's word but *doesn't do it* to a person who looks into a mirror rather than into her soul to see who she is? Let's approach it from the positive: if you live according to God's command, your whole being – what you say, think, do and are – will reflect and project the image of God. But if you hear God's word, merely nod your assent, but do not incorporate God's will into your life, God's will stays with you about as long as the image of what you look like. In that era, when people did not see their reflection constantly, they gave little thought to their own appearance.

This author James is a brash evangelist. He's "in your face." He lays it on the line, saying, "Look, if you're going to live for God, do it! Don't just give it lip service!"

Now there are innumerable aspects of our daily lives that we could pick to explore whether we are "*doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*,"⁴ but the one I'd like us to think about today is our attitude, and how anger is expressed.

Early in my ministry at another church a church member who was a teacher told me that he has a colleague at his school who yells at students all the time. He thinks the colleague doesn't realize that he's always yelling at the kids. He also thinks the colleague doesn't realize that he doesn't *have* to yell at the kids in order to be effective. But yell he does. How must the students view that teacher?

Many years ago Mary and I were flying to a conference in Salt Lake City. Even though we arrived before 6 a.m. for an eight o'clock flight, the ticket counter at the Cleveland airport was already a tangled mass of passengers and luggage. It seems that thunderstorms across the Midwest the day before had snarled air traffic. Dozens, even hundreds of cancelled flights had resulted in aircraft and passengers not being where they needed to be for that morning's departures. We learned very quickly that we simply would not be leaving that day, and that once we reached the ticket counter they would try to put us on other flights the next day or the day afterward. Naturally this was not happy news for anyone there. But Mary and I had already arranged our flights so we could do a day of sight-seeing in Salt Lake City before the conference, so we knew that if we arrived the next day we would still be in time for the conference.

As you can imagine, many fellow air travelers were in nasty moods. Perhaps they had finished a long trip and were anxious to get home. Maybe they had time-critical business or personal matters awaiting them in Salt Lake City. There are any number of reasons any number of people could have given for being angry. But to a large degree, anger is a choice, not an instinct.

Several years ago I took the famous Dale Carnegie Training class. It's not simply on how to give speeches; it provides people from all walks of life insight into how to be more effective and influential in relating to other people. I've mentioned before the thing I learned in the twelve-week class that has stuck with me the most and, I believe, has had the most profound effect on me. One of their principles for becoming a friendlier person who people will want to *be* with and *work* for is this simple: "Smile." That's it. Smile.

⁴ James 1:22

Well, I don't think of myself as a dour person, but as a result of that class I did some reflection—literally, I looked in a mirror to see what my natural, normal expression is when I'm not conscious of what I look like—and I discovered that it was not terribly pleasant. Indeed, I've taken to noticing people's natural expressions when they're not aware of the impression they're conveying. It's interesting how many people look bored or angry standing in the supermarket or listening to others during a Zoom meeting or waiting in the doctor's office. That observation was motivation for me to try to take to heart that principle I had learned in that class—to smile more.

Well, I cannot tell you how many times having a smile on my face has made life easier for me. At that airport ticket counter, by smiling and sympathizing with the ticket agent about how difficult his job was that day, Mary will back me up when I say that he worked for twenty minutes, exploring dozens of possible routings, to find a way to get us from Cleveland to Salt Lake City the next day instead of having to settle for a flight two days later. I've had that kind of positive interaction often, like when I've had to return defective merchandise, or correct a bill at a restaurant. By having a smile and an attitude that assumes cooperation, I cannot tell you how much people are willing to try to resolve issues.

Is it manipulative? Not when you sincerely want to try to be positive and friendly. For me the smile is a physical reminder of the instruction we hear from James the disciple when he writes, "*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.*"⁵

On the other hand, think about people who decide, "I have been wronged. I have a right to be angry; anger will satisfy my insulted ego. I'm going to express that anger and demand satisfaction." Will the angry person achieve the result he or she desires? Maybe. Not definitely, but maybe. Just like when I choose to smile and be positive—I may achieve my desired result... not definitely but maybe.

But what is the result of the interaction? When you *choose* anger you put the other person on the defensive. Anger creates an adversarial relationship. Anger creates a winner and a loser. Anger is often insulting, degrading. A sincere and easy smile, on the other hand, breaks down barriers. It invites an approach, creates a connection, implies a desire for cooperation.

To borrow from poet Robert Frost, the road diverges, and you have the chance to choose which road to take. This letter from a Christian disciple named James asserts that the Christian who is a *doer* of the word and not merely a hearer will choose to act in a manner consistent with a godly life, forswearing anger for the sake of peace.

Elizabeth McLean is a former member of this church and is now herself a Presbyterian minister. In one of her sermons Elizabeth noted that, most of the time, most people in our society have chosen "the other road." She writes,

We have become a culture characterized not by humility, introspection and personal accountability, but by arrogance, self-denial and a pervasive victim mentality which says that even if we've done something wrong, the resulting problem was still someone else's fault. Someone else should have

⁵ James 1:19-20

warned or stopped us; someone else must have misled us or interfered; someone else failed to deliver or deprived us of what we deserved.⁶

People in our society feel entitled to a sense of righteous indignation, a feeling that their own rights (that is, what they want) are ultimate, and consideration of others is secondary. Consequently too many of us too often feel entitled to vent, to express anger.

Now let me be clear: my epiphany about the powerful effectiveness of a smile has not chased every seed of anger from within me. One day I was in a line of cars stopped at a light. Heeding the sign warning against blocking driveways, I had stopped several car lengths behind the vehicle ahead of me. I could see in my rearview mirror that the car right behind me had its turn signal on. I guess he wanted to turn into one of the driveways I was keeping unblocked. While the traffic light was still red, he pulled around me into the center turn-only lane, shot past me and yanked his wheel to turn sharply in front of me into one of the driveways I had lawfully kept unobstructed. For what it's worth, he saved himself perhaps eight seconds.

Well, his impatience and disregard for traffic laws angered me, but here's what added to it was that. As the traffic light turned green and I started to remove my foot from the brake, the car that had been behind him had begun to pull around me. Perhaps he thought that the previous car had pulled around me because I was daydreaming or asleep or distracted. As my car started to ease ahead, that second car cut me off, pulling in front of me as though I wasn't there.

Okay, the first driver had been impatient. This second driver was clueless. Even though I wasn't in danger of colliding with him, in my anger I laid on my horn and hit my brakes to make him *think* that I had just avoided a crash because of his cut-off maneuver. I was angry because I was obeying the traffic laws and signage, and these — well, my favorite word for them is “jerks” — were being selfish and inconsiderate. I didn't offer any gestures, but it did take about a mile before I was able to settle down and let it go.

So you see, sometimes anger is a natural reaction to circumstances, but James the disciple notes that still we have a choice. We can choose whether we will be doers of the word or merely hearers. By choosing to be a “doer,” we gratefully receive God's grace-filled spiritual resources, and seek to cultivate them within us, so that we will call upon those spiritual resources to enable us to live the lives we profess through our faith in Jesus Christ.

From childhood we've heard the expression, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But as adults we know that it just isn't true. Words can hurt: hurt deeply, hurt for a long time. People sometimes say, “I was just talking; I didn't mean it.” But the effect is the same. Whether mean-spirited words are shouted as road rage, whispered as gossip, or snarled in a venomous attack, such words do not reflect the spirit of Christ dwelling within us. But let's take the example of Jesus into our lives. Let's discover the ability, more and more, to overcome some of our cruel

⁶ From a sermon entitled “Getting the Point” by the Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church, Good Friday 4-14-06, based upon Is. 58:9b-11; Mk. 14:17-20

instinctive behavior. Let's offer the world the blessing of more Christlike mercy and peace.

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