

February 23, 2014  
Authentic Christianity

*Authentic Christianity Speaks*  
James 3:1-12

**Opening words:** History tells us that Harry Truman would hold every letter he wrote twenty-four hours before he mailed it. At the time of his death, his desk was filled with un-mailed letters. That story makes it clear that Harry Truman knew the importance and complexity of words.

This is sermon number six in my seven-part sermon series on James, *Authentic Christianity*. Each one of these messages revolves around a different characteristic that must be present in true discipleship. I chose to look at James because James is so practical. There is no scripture more practical than today's passage, James 3:1-12. The topic is the tongue. How much damage in the life of the church has been caused by untamed tongues? How much damage have you caused with your untamed tongue? Let me call this message today *Authentic Christianity Speaks*.

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**James 3:1-12** Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. <sup>2</sup> We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. <sup>3</sup> When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. <sup>4</sup> Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. <sup>5</sup> Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. <sup>6</sup> The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup> All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. <sup>11</sup> Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? <sup>12</sup> My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

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It must have been the fall of 1967. I was ten years old, and my music teacher asked who would be interested in playing an instrument. In my family, it was not really an invitation. It was a demand. My father had a great passion for music, which he passed on to my sisters, who played the flute and the French horn into college. I decided my instrument was going to be the trumpet. I chose that brass instrument for two reasons. First, my father played the trumpet. Second, I always felt a distance from my father and longed for his approval. At first, I really worked at it. Without threats, I practiced. I thought I was making some progress and I felt good about the whole thing.

I knew my father would be proud of me. One day, my father came down the basement stairs as I was practicing. He looked at me and said, "Do you need some help?" I was thrilled because I thought we would have a breakthrough in our relationship. For an awkward couple of minutes, he listened to me play. Without saying a word, he got up and walked upstairs. He closed the door behind him, looked at my mother and said loud enough for me to hear, "Well, he is loud, but he is no damn good!" Those words cut my heart. I placed the trumpet back in the case and never practiced again. It was on that day I decided to be like my mother, who struggled with music. For years to come, I seized every opportunity to communicate to him how much I hated music. It was my opportunity to hurt him, like his words had hurt me. At ten years old, I learned that words are important. If you believe words are important, say, "**Amen!**" Words are not only important, they are very complex. If you don't believe me, then look at the eleventh chapter of Genesis.

That chapter ends the pre-historical period in the Bible. The next chapter begins the story of Abraham. The first eleven chapters of Genesis give us the origin of many things in the world today. For example, the first chapter explains how the world was created. The story of Adam and Eve explains how sin entered into the world. I want to look at those eleven chapters sometime before the end of this year. The story of the Tower of Babel, in the eleventh chapter, explains why there are so many languages in the world today.

According to the story, at one time everyone spoke the same language. Using this common language, mankind decided to build a city with a massive tower. They would be permanent structures, made of brick and mortar. The goal was to make a bridge between earth and heaven. It was a project that was rooted in human arrogance. When God came down from heaven and saw the tower, he knew something had to be done. It is at that moment God decided to scatter mankind around the world and give each group a different language. When God does something, he does it well.

Did you know:

- there are approximately 6,500 languages in the world today?
- approximately 2,000 of those languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers?
- approximately 3,000 languages spoken in the world today will be extinct by the end of this century.
- the most common language spoken in the world today is Mandarin Chinese, 1,213,000,000 speakers? The second most common language in the world is Spanish, 406,000,000 speakers. The third most common language in the world is English, 375,000,000 speakers.
- the English language has 1,013,913 words? That number has doubled over the past 100 years.
- the average American woman speaks about 20,000 words a day?
- the average American man speaks 7,000 words a day?

Words are important and complex.

Have you noticed how easy it is to say some words, and how difficult it is to say others? Just think about it for a moment. I can yell some things. I can yell, "Get your motorcycle off the lawn!" I can yell, "Who taught you to drive?" I can yell, "Close the door. I'm not heating the great outdoors!" However, I have never yelled, "The tests came back. It is cancer." I have never yelled, "I am proud of you." I have never yelled, "I love you." It is my experience that the closer to the heart, the harder the words.

When I was young, my mother would play word games with us. She wanted to help us build a vocabulary. We learned some funny words. We learned "oviparous" and "viperous". We learned "ovoviviparous". However, the one word I can hardly say today without emotions is "God"! Words are important and complex. If you will admit that is true, say, "**Amen!**"

At the very heart of the scripture lesson for today is this complex and important topic of words. I love the epistle of James because it is so practical. There is nothing more practical than the scripture lesson for today. James tells us it is vital for the church, or the individual members within the church, to be able to control their tongues. With the right words, we can save the world, but the wrong words will destroy the church. He equates it with the bit in an animal's mouth or the rudder on a great ship. He equates the wrong words with a spark that ignites a raging forest fire. Once it begins to burn, it is nearly impossible to get under control. Words are important and complex. Using the same tongue, you have the ability to praise the Lord or curse your fellow man.

The other night, I attended the Trustees meeting. I always appreciate the Trustees. They have the responsibility of maintaining this building with very little funds. They have the responsibility of acting as landlord for our two tenants, the Mahoning Valley District office, and the daycare, the Children's Academy of Ohio. Somewhere near the end of the meeting, someone brought up daycare. Some opinions were expressed. Some questions were raised. That is fine. This is the truth. The only time we have had trouble with daycare is when we tell them how to run their business. I looked at the Trustees and said, "In the life of the church, we are better at talking about people than we are talking to people. Go and talk to them. They will tell you the truth. If you don't trust them, then they shouldn't be here at all." I think we should talk to daycare annually. I think we should talk to the district office annually. I think the Staff-Parish committee should talk to the staff regularly. How can talking to people be a bad thing? The problem is, we are much better at talking about people than we are at talking to people. How many examples do you need?

When I was in the Cleveland area, I served the Hathaway United Methodist Church. It pains me to say it, but it is now closed. I had a wonderful experience with that parish. I had a good relationship with the choir, because I wasn't my predecessor. They hated her for one reason. She couldn't talk to them. Every Thursday evening, they would gather for practice. They would walk in with a cup of coffee, a bottle of pop or a bag of chips. They should have known better, but they left their waste behind.

Every Friday morning, the custodian would come in and clean up the mess. He complained to the Trustees, who couldn't talk to the choir. They assigned the job to my predecessor. She couldn't talk to the choir either, so she sent them a letter. Every choir member received a letter in the mail about a week before Christmas. The letter was read, copied and passed around the church. Soon, it was passed around the community. It wasn't pretty. That letter was a spark that torched that whole ministry. The whole situation could have been eliminated if someone could have talked to the choir. We are better at talking about each other than we are talking to each other.

It was on Wednesday I received a text from my daughter Sarah. She is the Christian Education director at the Hudson United Methodist Church. She texted, "A lady in my church has been mad at me for seven years, and the secretary just told me why." I called her and asked, "What is the story?" Sarah said the upset woman came into the church office to complain about the ice on the sidewalk. Sarah walked into the office, and the woman gave Sarah an icy stare. When Sarah left, the woman told the secretary she didn't like Sarah. This is the story. When her son was in the sixth grade, Sarah wouldn't let him be in the high school Sunday school class. The mother's rationale was that her son was more advanced than the other "apes" in the Middle School class. He was a "special child". Sarah just needed to talk, and was frustrated the woman hadn't been able to talk to her in seven years. We are better at talking about each other than we are to each other.

I had a woman come up to me recently who was concerned about the ice on our sidewalks. She told me that at her daughter's church, the youth shovel the sidewalks. She told me to tell our kids to shovel the sidewalks. That way, the snow would be gone, we can save money, and we can teach them some responsibility. She said, "Do you think they will do it?" I said, "I don't know, they may. They are a great group of people." Then, I said, "Why don't you come on Wednesday at 7:00 and ask them?" She said, "I can't come on Wednesday night at 7:00. I will miss Wheel of Fortune." We are better at talking about each other than we are to each other.

Several weeks ago, I went to a chili cook-off in one of the community churches. Their youth were raising money to go on their mission trip. I went because I wanted to support them and I like chili. I sat there alone eating my chili. It was nice not being responsible. A woman came up to me and asked how I liked it? I said, "It is great", because it was. She asked, "Aren't you a preacher?" I said yes, and identified myself. She said, "Can I ask you for a favor? Can you tell the cooks the chili is too spicy? My gastroenterologist says I shouldn't eat spicy food. You are a minister and they will listen to you." I thought, why would you go to a chili dinner if you can't eat spicy food? I said, "I am just a visitor. Why don't you tell them?" She walked away frustrated. We are better at talking about each other than we are to each other. Do I have to go on? Do I really have to go on? You know it is true; we are better at talking about each other than we are to each other.

Our inability to talk to one another is not a lack of self-discipline. It is a matter of spiritual immaturity. Do you remember Galatians 5:22-26? It says:

**<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.**

Our inability to talk to another is not a lack of self-discipline. It is a matter of spiritual immaturity. How many of words that you speak about others are spoken in arrogance? We want things our way! How many of the words that you have spoken lately benefit the fellowship? How many people feel included because of what you say to them? Mother Teresa once said, "*Words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness.*" If that quotes make you think, say, "**Amen!**"

When I was in the eighth grade, my home church received a new minister. He moved to Warren from Huntington, West Virginia. He was a tall man with a large Adam's apple that stuck out over the knot of his tie. His name was Dr. Cox. On his first Sunday, the church was full of life. At the close of the service, he stood at the back of the sanctuary and met his new flock. One by one, the people walked by and introduced themselves to Dr. Cox. When my parents walked by, they welcomed him and said, "We are Ron and Ruth Adams. This is our son Russell." He smiled and went on to the next family. One week later, I was in that same line. Dr. Cox looked at my parents and said, "Ron and Ruth, good to see you." Then Dr. Cox did something that changed my life. He looked at me and said, "Russ, how are you?" For years, I had walked through that line and the various preachers never bothered to learn my name. I can't blame them. I was nothing special. I was just another kid. Dr. Cox did something in one week that none of his predecessors had ever done. He spoke me into existence and made me feel included with one word, Russ. To this day, I consider him the finest pastor I have ever known because he simply spoke my name. He made me feel included. I do my best to speak to every young person in this church for one reason - Dr. Cox spoke to me. Don't tell me words aren't important.

Are your words benefitting the fellowship or damaging the fellowship? Proverbs 21:23 says, "*He who guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from trouble.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"