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God's Twitter: Wisdom for Words James 3: -8; various Proverbs

Last week 32 of us, mostly Chapel Hill folks, were worshipping in Ephesus, Turkey. Ephesus is one of my favorite places in the world and one of my favorite sites in Ephesus is Mary's Church. As Jesus hung dying on the cross, he told the apostle John to take care of his mother, Mary. The tradition is that Mary traveled with John to Ephesus, one of the leading cities in Asia Minor. They both died there and Mary's church is dedicated to the mother of the Lord.

I love that spot because it is off the beaten path. Very few of the millions of cruise ship tourists make their way through the trees to find this hidden treasure. But we did...and tucked in behind the remains of the altar wall, we ate bread and drank wine and celebrated the risen Christ in the very place that his own mother had once done so. It was one of the high points of our pilgrimage.

We had no sooner landed in Sea-Tac last Sunday night when I received news that Charlene Peyton's house was on fire. Thank God, Charlene was not there at the time. She is fine and you have been doing a great job of being the church to her this week. A bunch of Chapel folks gathered Saturday morning to help her begin to pull together the charred pieces of that part of her life. This tragic experience reminds me once again of how proud I am to be a part of this church. It also happens to be a very vivid illustration of the text that I wanted to use to introduce this morning's Proverbs subject. When Jesus' brother James wrote his letter, he talked about a raging fire, too. Not started by fireworks...but started by something else. Listen: (James 3: 1-8)

Let me begin this message with a question: How many of you have ever said something...and almost before the words were out of your mouth, you were trying to reel them back in. But it was too late. Any of you? I can. If only I had kept my big mouth shut. But it was too late. Without thinking, I opened my pie hole...and out came the words. And there was no retrieving them.

Or how about this? Have you ever said something so stupid...or so arrogant... and you didn't realize how stupid or arrogant it sounded until later? When I was a youth director in Bakersfield I got in an argument with an office assistant about something and finally, I played the trump card: "Listen!" I said, "I am an intern, and you are just a secretary!" I've told this story before...but it is still so embarrassing that it is worth repeating.

Aside from the subject of wisdom itself, Proverbs has more to say about our speech than about any other single topic. The words "mouth," "tongue," "words," "speech," "lips," etc. appear almost 150 times in the book of Proverbs. Remember, the purpose of Proverbs is to help us live skillfully. If you want to live skillfully, Solomon says, there is little you can do that is more important than mastering your tongue. And as James reminds us, if we don't, our mouths can start a fire that burns hot as hell.

Obviously we can't read 150 different passages this morning. So I'd like to gather them into three "tongue" categories: the **Loose Tongue**, the **Sharp Tongue** and the **Forked Tongue**. And as you listen to this wisdom from Solomon ask yourself this hard question: which of these verses describe me? What kind of fires am I starting because I can't put a bridle on my mouth?

First, the Loose Tongue. The Loose Tongue as **careless**. The Loose Tongue isn't so much mean; he is just unguarded. He **doesn't think** before he speaks. Proverbs 12 has a lot to say about Loose Tongue. (Turn, pen in hand) Verse 18: **"Reckless words pierce like a sword..."** When we were in Istanbul, we visited Topkopi Palace, the home of the Ottoman Sultans. We saw a LOT of swords and daggers, many of them covered with unbelievable jewels. (Picture of Topkopi Dagger) But other swords were clearly working models and it didn't take much imagination to appreciate how much damage one of them could do in the hands of an angry sultan.

That's what reckless speech does. A few unthinking words can be like someone driving a sword into your gut. Ever been on the receiving end? Ever been the one who was doing the slashing?

Verse 23: **"A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly."** Or 15:28: **"The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil."** Do you hear the carelessness in those words? The recklessness? "Blurts!" "Gushes." The Loose Tongue speaks before it thinks. It can be piercing and painful. If only you paused ...just a moment... took one more breathbefore you spoke.

But even if Old Loose Tongue **doesn't** hurt someone with his words, he is still not going to be effective or persuasive if he doesn't learn to control his tongue. Proverbs also has something to say about engaging your tongue before your brain is in gear: 18:2 **"A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions."** Do you someone like that? are you someone like that? (We have a few in this church!) You couldn't care less about what other people think or say. You just can't wait to dominate the conversation and prove how brilliant you are. Loose Tongue

Drop down to 13: **"He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame!"** And 17: **"The first to present his case seems right...till another comes forward and questions him."** This is something I've learned over the years. Early on, I was always among the first to share my opinion. But over the years I've watched others who sit...and listen...and digest...and then, after everyone is done, speak up. It is amazing how persuasive they can be. Because they pause before they speak.

Having the discipline to stop...to listen...to wait...to mull...to carefully form your response before you speak...is one of the greatest skills you can develop for successful living and successful leading.

And even if you aren't a particularly wise person, Proverbs has a suggestion for you, too. Want to hear it? 17: 28: **"Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps**

silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue!" You want to appear really smart? Don't say anything!

Any Loose Tongues here? Anyone want to confess? "Yep, that's me. That's the mouth issue I need God's help with." Now, if you **didn't** confess to that one, the next two will be harder to admit.

Sharp Tongue. If Loose Tongue is sloppy and careless...Sharp Tongue is **heartless**. Sharp Tongue is harsh, critical, negative. **Sharp Tongue is a nag.** 17:1 has something to say about Sharp Tongue. **"Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting with strife."** You get that, right? All the wealth and luxury in the world...if the price you have to pay is living in a house full of critical, negative putdowns... it isn't worth it, is it? There is nothing that sucks life out of you like a constant criticism. **27: 15-16: "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand."**

One rainy night I was lying in bed and couldn't sleep because of the gutter right outside our window. "Drip....drip...drip...drip." It was driving me crazy. Finally, I got up, grabbed a hand towel, went upstairs to my study, opened the window and ...sitting on the bookshelf and holding on to the window frame for dear life, I leaned out into the rain to stuff that towel into the gutter. It must have been quite a sight, me in my underwear hanging half way out a second story window, pushing a piece of cloth down the gutter with a yardstick. But that drip was killing me!

That's what Solomon says a nagging wife is like. Of course, Solomon had 1000 wives so you begin to notice a theme. **21:9: "Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife."** Or **21:19: "Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife."**

Now ladies, you might find this a little one-sided. And you'd be right. Solomon was the one with the pen. But we all know, don't we, that Sharp Tongue comes in both sexes. I know plenty of men who are so negative, so critical, so corrosive in your comments that you just tear down those around you...especially your wife and kids. You think you are helping them. You think you are being a disciplinarian... a strong leader in your family. What you are really doing is breaking their spirits and sewing bitterness in them.

And the bumper is...Sharp Tongue...whether a man or a woman...never perceives themselves in that way. But everyone else does. And if you could only turn on a tape recorder and listen to the dripping barrage of negativism... you would be shocked and ashamed for the damage you are doing to those closest to you.

So...any Sharp Tongues here this morning? Anyone want to admit that this is their mouth issue that needs God's help to control?

Loose Tongue is careless, Sharp Tongue is heartless...and **Forked Tongue is poisonous**. Forked Tongue is the most dangerous of the three. She's the one who does the most damage in the church, in the office, among friends. Forked Tongue is the slanderer, the twister of the truth. The one who can't wait to pass on the latest juicy piece of gossip; who relishes the look of shock on someone's face when

he springs the news about the latest affair or someone's financial problems. And the Christian Forked Tongue is even more malevolent...because she tries to disguise her slander in religious clothing. It goes something like this: "We really need to pray for Mary...did you hear what her husband is doing behind her back?" **"Prayer requests"** are one of the slimiest ways of gossiping that the Devil ever created.

Listen to what Solomon has to say about this stuff: **16:27: "A scoundrel plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends."** Or 18:8: **"The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts."** Forked Tongue is like a pusher. He serves up tempting tidbits that we can hardly resist! We want to hear the latest gossip. And when we nibble on them...they are like potato chips. Once we get started, we can't stop. And those choice morsels go down deep inside us...and stay with us. Gossip doesn't just go in one ear and out the other. It goes right into your soul. It affects the way you look at the person. It makes you unfair and critical and judgmental. It is like eating mercury-tainted tuna ...it is poison that stays in your system for a long, long time.

By the way, in these days of Twitter and Facebook, you don't have to speak to have a Forked Tongue. You can post your latest morsel of gossip right there on your homepage...and multiply the poisonous effect of your sin through the power of the World Wide Web. I've have seen the damage that is done to a high school girl when a nasty and malicious text has spread like wildfire from cell phone to cell phone.

Of all three, Forked Tongue is the most damaging to the Church. Instead of stepping in to love and support a brother or sister who is struggling with a season of sin or shame...instead of helping a fellow sinner to their feet and standing with them through the consequences of their failure...we whisper and titter and gasp ...and pour acid on their bleeding hearts.

Anyone want to admit that this is their greatest mouth-sin? That gossip and slander and falsehood is the speech sin from which God needs to deliver you?

The bitter irony of this is...that the tongue, which is capable of such mischief and evil, is ALSO capable of incredible, divine goodness! Listen: 25:11 **A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.** Or this: 18:21 **The tongue has the power of life and death...**

I started this message talking about Charlene's house fire. I want to end by talking about Charlene's words. One of the things that impressed me most about this tragedy was how Charlene has spoken of it. She is not bitter; she is not eager to find out "whose fault it was." She is obviously in shock and trying to sort out what next steps to take. But when I spoke to her the day after the fire, she was saying this: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. I don't know what I'm going to do; all I have left is what I am wearing right now. But God is good, all the time, and I know he will take care of me."

Obviously, those words spoken in a moment of crisis are a witness to Charlene's deep faith in Jesus. Anyone who hears her speak in this way will be drawn towards her Lord. But Charlene is also pastoring herself with her words! When she speaks

words of trust and hope and forgiveness, she speaks them first of all to herself. She reminds herself of all the things she has learned and believed about God over the years.

You don't just stumble onto that kind of speech in times of crisis. That is the product of decades of right speaking; decades of speaking words of hope and faith and trust and love. Words that heal instead of hurt. So here is the question for this morning...as you think back over this weekend...over these last few days...as you think back about the words you most often speak, are they mostly words that heal? Or mostly words that harm and crush? Your tongue has the power of life and death. What are you doing with that power?

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read James 3: 1-8. James has harsh things to say about the tongue. Is he being overly dramatic? Why or why not? He uses several images to describe the power, the sometimes destructive power, of the tongue. Which one captures you and why?
2. Pastor Mark spoke of three types of tongues. Can you remember what they were and roughly describe what each of them meant? (Loose, Sharp and Forked.)
3. Proverbs 12 has a lot to say about Loose Tongue. Read 13, 18, 23. Reflect on the wisdom of these verses. Also, look at 18:2; 13 and 17. This is a different kind of "looseness." How? Do an honest assessment: which in your group struggle with the sin of Loose Tongue? What could you do to be less reckless?
4. What does Pastor Mark mean by "Sharp Tongue?" Look at 17:1. What does the last part of 21: 15-16 mean? Why is Sharp Tongue particularly destructive to children and grandchildren? So...is THIS your area of mouth weakness?
5. Why is Forked Tongue most dangerous? What kinds of sins fall under this category? How do Christians "spiritualize" these sins? Why do you think we are so tempted to gossip about and slander others, especially fellow Christians? Confess...is this YOUR area of speech sin? What must you do to get this under control?
6. Proverbs 18:21 says, "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit." 13: 3 says, "He who guards his tongue, guards his life..." What could you, as a group, do to insure that you were speaking words of life, blessing and encouragement to those around you? How can you hold each other accountable to this end?

