



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

Your Most Potent Blessing

May 31, 2009

Dr. Matthew J. Hook

James 3:1-13

[This is actually a combination of 2 sermons: one preached at 9am worship, and one preached at 10:30 worship, when we confirmed 54 students. Some of the confirmation sermon was spoken directly to the youth being confirmed.]

“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.” James 3:1-13.

Some of you have heard, when I was young, my family had a running joke based on an article my dad brought home from a guns and weapons magazine. Over 100 years ago, it seems there was a Chinese Tribe that would overpower their enemies with their horribly bad breath. Now this wasn’t just morning breath, this was dragon breath! On purpose, these men would eat a terrible combination of peppers and spices such that their breath could knock out their enemies. And on top of that, they exercised their lungs and practiced breath control so that they could impact someone over 10 feet away. “HHHhehhh. (Breathe on the congregation). It seems pretty funny, unless you’re on the receiving end.

You and I may not eat onions, garlic, and peppers enough to physically harm anyone, but you can bet the words that fire off of our tongues can be just as deadly. We like to go easy on ourselves, though. Sometimes we even call it “venting,” or “blowing off steam,” or “just getting my point across.” But it can be vicious. And even though we know it can do damage we still dance with the dragon. We don’t quit. We can’t quit.

Actually for me, there’s a more common way of spreading my dragon breath around. And it’s even more socially acceptable. And that way’s usually *under my breath*. We become masters of it, especially the passive aggressive types among us. We engage in gossip, but we call it “being a good listener,” simply making conversation. I think of when I’ve let just enough of my opinion out about someone that I might as well have knocked them out. And then there’s when I use my words to direct attention to *myself*. The poison is most potent when it comes out just one waft at a time. I also think of when I’ve used the power of my words to cover my tail and cover my sins, with more sin.

Our words can shatter people emotionally (that’s the curse we’re mucked up in because of the reality of sin), or they can shape them positively (that’s the blessing God intended).

A well placed word can knock someone out or even knock someone off God’s path for their lives. And think of the power of our words when we starve people from them! Sometimes we withhold our words of forgiveness. We ignore people. We avoid speaking to them, because it feels *so* good to fuel our bellies with hate and frustration to really get them good. We’re like dragons. The power within our mouths can rule our households, words or no words. We can withhold blessing or friendship. Our words are often the dragon we don’t slay, because we can’t.

Sociologists have statistical evidence that there are twice as many put downs in marriages that end in divorce than those whose marriages survive. When death row inmates were asked what would have been the best

time for prevention to take place, their number one answer was “If they’d have stopped me when I started swearing.” **Bad breath leads to bad things.**

And think about the inferno power you get when you line up a bunch of fire-breathers and all go for the same target! And it *can* happen in church. The breath that our words ride on today is just as powerful, just as potent, and just as poisonous as the dragon breath of that ancient Chinese tribe.

James, the brother of Jesus, knew this. **Words are important to James.** The main point of his entire letter is that Christians need to be doers of the Word, not just hearers only. Those early Jewish Christians were being persecuted. They had lost their jobs, families, and inheritances. They lost all status. They probably thought they had done enough. I’m sure they had plenty to complain about. Yet James challenges them to *prove* that they are living out their faith, passing on God’s blessing, especially in what they say. He says in verse 1:26 “*If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, their religion is worthless.*” Your faith is priceless. But James says all it takes to make the priceless treasure of faith worthless is your tongue. Actually just a few words could do it. Bin Ladin just had to say “Go.” Kwame just had to say “Cover it up.”

Words are so powerful. That’s why one of the biggest rules in youth group is “NO PUT-DOWNS.” Do you know why? Because with your words, you guys can change the world...or not. But you *must* understand the power of your words. For example, some words sound so good, but they can mess you up, because words are powerful:

- **Live for today!** (It sounds SO good. But by itself it’s so empty. Baby Boom & Gen X generations just before you tried it. We borrowed and splurged and lived for today for ourselves, our health, and comfort. What do we have to show for it? Leaving you guys with a pile of bills and deficits and debt, because we “lived for today! And seized the moment!”) Another one...
- **Be true to yourself!** (It seems every TV show, from Disney to Nick, says this in its own way. “Be true to yourself!”) We use it to mean “Take charge!” Follow your dream! It’s our highest belief. Our human creed. Be true to yourself! We think it means *really* living! But there’s one tiny problem. Most oppressive people are true to themselves. Most predators, swindlers, and deviants are true to themselves. I’m sure Bin Ladin was being true to himself when he said “Go for the buildings.” I’m sure Kwame Kirkpatrick was following his dream when he said “Cover it up.” But forget them. Let’s look at ourselves, you and me. In any *one* of us, there are huge untamed places in our hearts and words of rudeness and cowardice, sneaky, and lost. Bad thoughts and nasty impulses, just waiting to be let out. Who decides what my true self is that I should be true to? If I’m true to myself, look out!

But if I want to be true to the Truth (capital T) of God, I have to jettison half of my strongest wishes. I have to learn to deny myself. It’s *not* easy. But it’s good. Because then I’m able to be an instrument in God’s hands. I’d rather try to have Jesus run my life than me have to figure it out on my own.

“Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed. 12 A person who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a person of understanding holds his tongue.” Proverbs 11:11 – 12.

The Message version says it like this: “*When right-living people bless the city, it flourishes; evil talk turns it into a ghost town in no time.* (How cool is that? If you want your life, your school, your town to flourish, begin blessing it by living for God!) You’ll actually change it. Or rather, God will change it through you! If you’ve got the courage.

But it starts with words, for good or bad. Why are spoken words so powerful? Because God’s chosen method of communication is not in symbols, nor signs, nor dreams, nor silent pictures, but by speech, by Word, *logos*. **Because God speaks His blessing, words are important.** “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1). “*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made*” (Ps. 33:6). John would write “*The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:14). The eternal truth of God is by his Word. It is by the word of God that God makes himself known. “*Then God said, ‘Let there be light...’*” Gen. 1:3. By the word of God he brought about creation, the flood, judgment (Ex 9:20-21), his blessing, and the 10 Commandments. You and I can know God *personally* through his word. In Genesis,

words came before the blessing, and they were nothing but blessing, until the curse of sin entered the universe. Our speech is important not only because we use it all the time, but more importantly because God has spoken to *us*. Do you see? **James is upset with the church, not because words are so bad, but because they are so good!** Because God's Word is good, and the source of blessing! Touch, Words, and proclaiming Future are the elements of the blessing.

Your words literally guide your life. Why is that a good guide for Christian maturity? Because "*Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is...able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.*" (3:2) James uses some great illustrations here. The bit goes in the horse's mouth and you can turn the whole animal! Ships also have huge and powerful engines, but it's a relatively small rudder by which the pilot steers it in the direction he or she desires. And the tongue is no different. It's a small part of our body (.2% of our body weight), but our tongue makes huge, unsupported claims! Learn the lesson of Smokey the Bear: "it only takes a spark..." to get a massive forest fire going.

Our words contradict. Look at the beginning of verse 9: "*With the tongue we bless God our Father, and with it we curse people.*" We can't do anything better with our tongues than use them to call Jesus Lord. Nor can we do worse than curse other people. We are so loosey-goosey on how we watch our mouths, we slip into all kinds of trouble. Some of us break the third commandment every day when we take God's name in vain. One word can destroy a person, or a ministry, or a witness. Whoever said that about "words can never harm me" had it wrong. Sticks and stones ain't nothin' compared to the curse of dragon breath! That's what they can be, even though God designed them for blessing.

So, what to do? Watch what you eat. Remember, your breath is affected by what you eat. The old saying is true: garbage in, garbage out. Some of us have never fed ourselves with the Bible, God's word, prayer, and Christian accountability. Put away the hot peppers of sin and the curse of garbage of the ungodly world. You don't have to leave the TV or computer on. Watch what you eat.

Breathe love into the situation. Where ever you are, look for ways to bless those around you. Love unexpressed is not love at all. Satan says "Your life is not good enough for you to speak about God." But that's an old lie. Let's decide that we are going to use our tongues to make God famous and lift others up. Remember James' truism: our words guide us – for bad *or good*.

Spread God's blessing by talking with one another of the things of God. Practice blessing by saying "How's your walk?" "What's God showing you?" "How can I pray for you?" "How's your dragon breath?"

Remember James: Every day that you and I have the power to change lives by blessing with our words. John Trent shares a powerful story to illustrate: Mary had grown up in the 1950's knowing that she was different from other kids, and she hated it. She was born with a cleft palate and had to bear the jokes and stares and dragon breath of cruel children who teased her non-stop about her misshaped lip, flattened nose, and unusual speech.

With all the teasing, Mary grew up hating the fact that she was different. She was convinced that no one, outside her family, could ever love her...Until she entered Mrs. Leonard's class. Mrs. Leonard had a warm smile, round face, and shiny brown hair. While all the other students liked her, Mary came to love Mrs. Leonard.

In the 1950's, it was common for teachers to give their children an annual hearing test. However, in Mary's case, in addition to her cleft palate, she was barely able to hear out of one ear. She didn't think anyone besides her family could love her. Determined not to let the other children have another "difference" to point out, she would cheat on the test each year. The "whisper test" was given by having a child walk to the classroom door, turn sideways, close one ear with a finger, and then repeat something which the teacher whispered. Mary turned her bad ear towards her teacher and pretended to cover her good ear. She knew that teachers would often say things like "The sky is blue," or "What color are your shoes?" But not on that day. Surely, God put seven words in her teacher's mouth that changed Mary's life forever. When the "whisper test" came, Mary heard the words: "I wish you were my little girl."

"I wish you were my little girl." **With our words, we can set the course of a life.** And God has given us his

Word today. Not to keep to ourselves, but to bless others. How badly the world needs to hear a new word! A different word. A word of blessing to chart their course of life. By sending his Son Jesus, God bends over and whispers in your ear “*You are my child, and I’m crazy about you, and I’ve loved you this much.* (Hold out arms like a cross).” From now on, may we be known as a church that share’s God’s blessing exponentially, as we let His Word set the course for our lives.

Let us pray: *Oh Lord, you’ve spoken it. You long for us to hear. Lord, we need to hear it. We must hear your words of truth and love and blessing. Lord, we know those around us need to hear it. Let us join our words with yours. But Lord it’s not easy. So even as we have offered our hearts for you to cleanse and purify and use for your glory, we must offer equally our tongues – our words: that they may be cleansed by you, pure, glorifying your name. May they do nothing but make you famous! In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.*