

*James 1: 17-27 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.<sup>[a]</sup> 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger,<sup>20</sup> for human anger does not produce God's righteousness.<sup>[b]</sup> 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves<sup>[c]</sup> in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

Words matter.

Now I know, that's maybe the most obvious statement you've ever heard a preacher use to open a sermon. I mean, it's sort of stating the obvious for someone like me where the most visible part of my job is to say words to you every week to claim that words matter.

And it's not just me or my profession. We recently lived through the RNC and DNC conventions where those seeking elected office gave speeches. Or if you think about some of the most seminal moments in our nation's history, a lot of them are remembered by speeches. Think of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech," or Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address."

And it's not just public speaking that reveals the power of words. Think about those times when a loved one said something to us that just seemed to be the exact right thing we needed to hear. Or those times when someone said something to us that ripped our heart out.

Words are profoundly powerful.

Mary Page spent some time researching the power of words for a TED talk she gave back in 2015 called "Words Create Worlds." You can find it on Youtube if you'd like to watch it. In that talk, she told about an experiment that Stanford University did about the power of words. They had two groups of people and each group was given a story about a fictional town that was dealing with a crime epidemic. And each group was asked to come up with policy solutions to the epidemic.

But here's the thing, both groups were told about the same town with the same problem – crime. But how the problem was described was different. For one group, they used public health language, so, for example, "Crime is a virus infecting our city." For the other group, they used oppositional language, so, for example, "Violent thugs are terrorizing us."

Do you see the difference?

In this experiment, they were describing the same problem but the words they used to describe the problem were very different. And guess what happened.

The group that read the story with the public health language came up with solutions that were more focused on prevention. They suggested things like increase funding for mental health, addiction treatment, and adolescent intervention programs.

But the group that read the story with the oppositional language came up with solutions more focused on punishment. They recommended things like mandatory incarceration and three strikes laws.

And here's the most surprising thing of all – it didn't really matter what someone's stated political and ideological worldviews were going into the experiment. The words they read were a better predictor of their proposed solutions than their stated political views.

[And just as an aside – in a time that's so divided where political allegiances and division seem so locked in, maybe those allegiances aren't as locked in as we assume. Maybe words can still inspire and transform us. And, I don't know about you, but that gives me hope.]

But that's not the sermon I'm preaching today.

Words matter...a lot. And that means words can bring about incredible hope and literally change the world. And words are also dangerous. Words can do immense harm. Words can change the world in destructive ways.

My profession is a strange one in many ways and one is that I usually get almost immediate feedback after I do my job – or at least the sermon part of my job. Now, I know sometimes the "Good sermon today" comments are more of just a respectful greeting. But there are times when I can tell the words I used really stirred something within you.

But the feedback I remember the most is when my words hurt.

I once preached a sermon about not making our kids into idols and afterward, a person experiencing infertility pulled me aside and, with more grace than I could have summoned, explained to me that she understood I didn't mean to be hurtful but the way I talked about how we shouldn't put all our hopes in having kids was the most painful thing she could have heard.

Or the person with severe anxiety who told me that the way I talked about Jesus' healing stories made her feel like something was wrong with her unless she had her anxiety taken away.

And I could give other examples. These comments pierced me because they weren't just someone complaining because I said something they disagreed with or because I preached too long or something like that. They pierced me because the words I used hurt them. I didn't mean to do that. But even with the best of intentions, words can still cause harm.

Words matter. And words are powerful. And that means taking great care with how we use our words is maybe one of our most important responsibilities we have as humans. Certainly that's true for people like me who speak as a job and all who speak to an audience. But I actually think it's true for all of us – not only in public speaking forums but in the words we use in speaking to our family members, to our friends, to our colleagues, and even to strangers. The writer of James certainly thinks so.

Not only in the passage we read today, but throughout the letter, James urges his readers to take great care with their words. He even compares the tongue to a small spark that can start a forest fire. And James certainly means the cruel, unkind, manipulative things we can say to each other. But there's one particular way of speaking that James is especially concerned with. He really just cannot stand it when religious people talk a big game about God but don't follow their talk with action – especially in caring for those in need.

Listen again to these words:

*If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

This is the same sentiment expressed in the famous quote by St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel all the time. When necessary, use words.”

And it's the same sentiment expressed by Jesus in his farewell address to the disciples in the gospel of John, “They will know you are my followers by how you love each other.”

I don't think it's that the biblical writers are denying the importance of words. They certainly believed in the power of words or they wouldn't have written these sacred texts we have. Rather, it's that they believed that if our words don't align with our actions, then they're worthless at best or they do harm at worst.

And I know it's easy for us to think of judgmental forms of Christianity that use words to harm, that use words to judge and condemn. And that is certainly painful and something we should resist and if you've been hurt by that form of religion, I'm so very sorry and I want to say to you as clearly as I can that God loves you, God accepts you just as you are.

But I think it's important for us to take James' words to heart also. We are part of a progressive mainline Protestant denomination. And I think the temptation for people like us, for congregations like us is to sort of offer empty rhetoric that can be more performative than anything else. I don't mean this is something we do intentionally, but rather, it's so much a part of society, that it's easy to slip into without realizing it.

Here's what I mean.

How easy is it to write the edgy social media post or to hang the right flag or banner in our yards, or our church front lawn without actively working to make those messages a reality.

That's one reason I'm so proud of the work we did hosting Haitian refugees and why I think we have to figure out how we can continue doing that because it's one thing to have a "Black Lives Matter" banner hanging out front but it doesn't mean a whole lot if we're not trying to figure out how to make life better for black refugees.

And I think this is true – not just for our church as a whole – but for each of us as individuals. How can we make sure our actions line up with our words. Or, to say it differently, how can we make sure that our words carry the weight of action behind it. Because if we truly believe what we are saying and if we truly believe that what we're saying is important, then we'll want to do more than talk about it, we'll want to do something about it.

Friends, I believe we are a community that is doing something and wants to do more. We are a community that wants to align our actions with our words. And I'm so proud of who we are and of who we are becoming. But let's remember we never get to a place where we can just say, "Yep, we've got this whole action thing figured out." It's a constant journey...maybe THE journey of our faith.

So friends, let's take great care with the words we use. And let's do all we can to back up our words with our action, and let's trust that even when we don't know exactly what to do, we never stop trying. Amen.