



This morning we conclude the series of messages on the theme *Life Lessons On Faith*. Two weeks from today we ordain two new elders and the message will center on the idea of calling. I will begin a new series, on June 25<sup>th</sup>, tentatively called *Music of the Heart*. In that series I will offer four messages that are based on songs.

I've been thinking about that series for a long time. I spend a good deal of time in my car, driving to meetings, hospitals, and other places, and as I do I listen to a lot of music on the radio. I've long been interested in the amount of spiritual affirmation and longing that is presented in so many songs, of almost every genre. Being the one who is writing the messages, I will take the liberty of selecting songs that are not only favorites of mine, but ones that I believe present important spiritual messages.

From there we will go to a series titled *The Great Commands*, such as Micah 6:8 – *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

As we complete our present series, we turn to the book of James, one of the most straightforwardly practical books in the Bible. It is so practical, and so straightforward, that it can be downright painful at times. James uses plain, every day, blunt, language to make his points. While other writers – most notably Paul – sometimes overwhelm us with deeply theological writing and concepts, James is down to earth and plainspoken. His brief, to the point letter, is one to which I often turn, in my own study and often in my preaching, as James is always worth taking the time to study.

The title of today's message is *Learning the Hard Way*. I don't know about you, but much of what I have learned in life has had to come to me by "the hard way." Sometimes, unfortunately, I am a slow learner. Sometimes, I'm kind of oblivious to certain lessons and truths and need something to get my attention, a process that can be quite painful and difficult in its attention-getting.

And perhaps nowhere is that more true than in the things that we say, or, don't say.

Listen as I read our text for today, from James 3:3-13 –

**3** *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.*

**4** *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.*

**5** *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.*

**6** *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.*

*7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,*

*8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

*9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

*11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

*13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*

I want to say four things briefly this morning – sometimes we say what we shouldn't and sometimes we fail to say what we should say. Sometimes we do what we shouldn't, and sometimes we fail to do what we should do.

I will say first of all, that every one of us is guilty on these four points. There might be variations of guilt, but we are all guilty, so that should, first of all, remind us to not be judgmental about others when they fail on this points.

### *1. Sometimes we say what we shouldn't.*

When I was in college, I was often looking for the easy route, academically speaking. All students were required to take six hours of Humanities for the first two years, and I registered for a specific professor because he had no attendance requirements in his class. Several of my friends registered with professors who had very rigorous attendance requirements I had a grand old time not going to class while my friends were working hard in their Humanities classes. I reminded them often of how foolish they were to miss out on my wise decision to take advantage of a no attendance policy. And then came the first exam (although we had different professors, we all took the same exams). Suddenly, I realized I had no notes or any other helps to prepare me for the exam. I asked my friends if I could use their notes and if they could help me to catch up on what I missed. Understandably, I did not get much sympathy, or help. And guess who's fault it was when I did badly on the exam? Surely not me – it was the professor's fault! After the exam, on which I did very poorly, I was very loudly telling my roommate about the professor and what a disservice he did to our class. We were standing just outside a partially opened door and I was offering a blistering critique of the professor. I did not know that he was standing on the other side of the door, and he obviously heard every word I said. When he walked through the door, and right past me, he gave me a look that I will never forget. I wish I could say I learned my lesson after that moment, but I didn't. It's a lesson I'm still trying to learn!

James uses such strong language in this passage – bit, rudder, spark, out of control, raging fire. We all say things we shouldn't, and then we are left with days, months, years, lifetimes of regret. James is telling us this for good reason, and it makes me wonder, *did James have to learn this lesson the hard way?* Had James said some things he wished he could take back? Or, perhaps, he was thinking of some others in mind when he wrote those words. Perhaps he was thinking of Peter, and his denials.

There is an old fable about a young man who seeks out the wisdom of a much older, and wiser, man. The young man, it seems, had said some harsh words; words he wished he could take back, as they were very hurtful. He asked the older man what he could do. The old man replied, *take a feather pillow and go outside on a windy day. Cut the pillow open and scatter the feathers to the wind. Let the wind blow the feathers far and wide. When the wind stops, go and gather up all of the feathers.* The young man protested, *but that's impossible! There is no way to gather up all those feathers once they have scattered on the wind.* The old man had made his point, but the young man had not yet caught on, so the old man said, *it's the same way with our words. Once they are spoken it is impossible to gather them up*

again. *I wish I could tell you that you could recapture your words, but you cannot. Better to never speak them than to try and recapture them.*

There is no one among us who has not wished – multiple times – that we had not held our tongue. Who among us has not felt the sting of regret for saying something we should not have said? Too often words come across our minds and out our mouths. Let them sit awhile. Let those words linger in our minds before they are spoken.

## 2. *Sometimes we fail to say what we should say.*

While it is true that we often think about the things we wish we had not said, how often do we think about the things we have not said, but should have? *The tongue*, James says, *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.* Strong and truthful words, certainly, but let us also remember that the tongue can be a powerful weapon in speaking about issues and matters that need to be addressed. There is, no doubt, times when we must hold our tongues, but there are times when we must use them as well.

The prophets of the Old Testament are powerful examples of this truth, as they often railed against the powers of their day and their unjust and unfair treatment of people. I admire the Old Testament prophets for several reasons, one being that they had the right word for the right moment. The prophets were not always railing against the injustices of society. Sometimes they were very pastoral and very comforting. But when the moment called for a forceful word, they were ready with it.

Jesus, very often, spoke out forcefully about issues that needed to be addressed. Jesus did not pull punches in much of what he had to say, as he spoke powerfully and bluntly and that is why he had some enemies. You don't call people a *brood of vipers* (Matthew 23:33), as he did the Pharisees, and not get people upset. You don't tell people they are like whitewashed tombs, *which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean* (Matthew 23:27) and not have pushback. I'll be honest and say, when it comes to knowing the right word for the right time, knowing when to speak prophetically and when to speak pastorally, knowing when to speak and when not to speak, I'm certainly not Jesus or one of the prophets.

If you've ever thought to yourself that preaching seems easy, let me assure you – it is certainly not. And one of the most difficult parts of preaching is to know not what to say, but when to say it. Some people want to hear more about particular issues and some want less. Some want more preaching about politics, some less. The refrain we ministers sometimes hear is *say this, don't say that*, which can make it more difficult to know not only what to say, but when to say it.

I often struggle with the question of how we, as a congregation can or ought to speak to issues in our community and world. In my preaching I often wonder how specific to get. One of the reasons why I agreed to write a column in the *Sentinel-News* is because you don't have to read it if you don't want to hear it. But the larger question remains – how do we, as very diverse people in our congregation, come to any agreement about the issues to which we should speak? Is it possible to come to any agreement? Should we be speaking to particular issues that are taking place in our community and world?

They are important questions to consider, especially in light of the truth that sometimes we do need to speak, and speak very plainly and forcefully.

## 3. *Sometimes we do what we shouldn't do.*

I did not include other passages from James in our Scripture reading for this morning, but I would encourage you to take a few minutes today or sometime this week and read through his letter. It doesn't take very long, but do not mistake his brevity for a lack of punch in what he has to say.

In 2:1-7 James writes this –

**1** *My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.*

**2** *Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy*

*old clothes also comes in.*

*3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet,"*

*4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

*5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?*

*6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?*

*7 Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?*

James sounds a lot like an Old Testament prophet there, doesn't he? Now that's some preaching! James uses very simple, plain, down to earth language to say there are some things we should not do, and one of those is to make distinctions between people.

When I traveled with Tanya several weeks ago to Boston we visited some of the old churches there, such as the Old North Church, where Paul Revere placed the lanterns in the steeple as a warning that the British were marching on the city. If you have visited some of the oldest churches in our country – especially in the northeast – you have noticed that the pews are often boxed in, and on the outside of the box there are names, signifying who has the privilege of sitting in those boxes. This was a common practice early in our nation's history, as a person's social status could be measured by which box they occupied in church. Incidentally, those boxes were secured for a price, and the boxes closest to the front were the most expensive. The seats in the back and the balcony were cheaper, so if you are sitting in the back, you are sitting in what were, years ago, quite literally *the cheap seats* (not that I'm insinuating anything about those of you on the back rows!).

I wonder what James would make of such seating arrangements? Clearly, social status and differences between people are brought into church worship services, where they obviously should not exist. We too quickly and too easily buy into the social standards of wealth and status as the basis for the value we place upon people. Rich? You're more valuable as a person than someone who is poor. Have a high social standing? You're more valuable as a person than someone who is on the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

The distinctions that are too easily made between people – even in church – are one of the reasons why we need the corrective of the Scriptures and worship (even though we sometimes hurt worship by bringing in social distinctions). We need a corporate reminder that sometimes we do what we shouldn't do, and worship is the place where we receive this reminder.

*4. Sometimes we fail to do what we should do.*

You are probably familiar with the terms *sins of omission and commission*. We don't talk about them much these days, but sins of omission and commission remind us that sometimes we deliberately fail to do what we should do, while at other times we do the wrong thing or fail to do what we should simply as an oversight, without any intended malice.

It is not the sins of commission (the deliberate sins) that worry me as much as the sins of omission (the ones we commit without realizing we have committed them). Sins of omission reveal the painful truth of our true character, such as the fact that we might make a distinction between people without realizing it because we feel entitled to our privilege. We might, for instance, look at our society and react negatively to what goes on in some communities because we don't understand what it's like to live in those communities. We can often – and do often – criticize poor communities for what happens there, such as crime, because we don't understand what it is like to live in those communities. Poverty does, after all, give birth to crime because of the desperation that comes with living in a poor community.

This is why it is important for us not just to speak out *against* some things, but why we should speak *out* for some things. We shouldn't simply speak out against crime; we should speak up for solutions that

seek to rectify the root causes of that crime. For churches, this means that we need to be seen and heard. We can't just talk about the evils of the world; we need to get out of our buildings and work to help those who are oppressed by the evils of the world and who suffer because of those evils. We can't just say we are to love our enemies; we need to go out and love our enemies.

It is not easy to do what is right. Sometimes we say the wrong thing and sometimes we do the wrong things. At other times, we don't say anything and don't do anything. All of this is proof, I believe, of why we need to be working together as brothers in sisters in faith, challenging and encouraging one another. It sure beats *Learning the Hard Way*.