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*Watch Your Mouth: Dealing with Toxic Words*  
Matthew 15:10-20  
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Earlier this month, we launched a sermon series about the power of words. The first week, we set the foundation by pointing out that ultimately, our words never truly go away. Even if nobody hears or sees them, speaking or posting them shapes US. We also established that there are no NEUTRAL words. Our words are either seeds or bullets, using an analogy made popular by author Gary Chapman. And Jesus taught that we will be held accountable.

The following week, Pat addressed the blessings and dangers of social media. We are living in an age where we are bombarded with other people's comments and opinions on a scale that the world has never seen before. Pat shared the familiar but woefully underused acronym, THINK, T-H-I-N-K. Before speaking, and especially before you post anything online, ask: Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? And is it kind? If we cannot answer yes to all five of those questions, why would we add to all the verbal clutter out there? As an ex-husband once gently said to me, "Sweetie, you don't have to say every thought you have out loud."

I especially appreciated Pat's story about how he came to shift his perspective on people who are LBGTQ. It wasn't through a clever, irrefutable argument he saw on Facebook, but a conversation with a dear friend who shared that he was gay. I still have yet to meet anyone who has changed their mind about something because of a clever, irrefutable argument they saw on Facebook.

Today we're going to take a closer look at toxic words. In our reading from Matthew 15, the context is: Jesus has had yet another run-in with the Pharisees and scribes. On this occasion,

they question his faithfulness by asking, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.”

Now, the Pharisees and scribes aren’t thinking about hygiene and the spread of bacteria, which hadn’t been discovered yet, but about ritual purity. It was a symbolic handwashing, not a vigorous scrubbing with soap and warm water. Jesus responds, essentially: “Are you kidding me?” And calls them hypocrites, because they are calling him out for a minor thing, while they themselves find loopholes to avoid providing for their parents, which breaks God’s command to honor our father and our mother. It would be like us scolding someone for not taking off their ballcap in a restaurant, while we ourselves order dinner and drinks for twelve, and leave without paying.

In today’s text, Jesus senses a teachable moment: “Listen and understand,” he says. It’s what comes OUT of people’s mouths that makes them unclean. It’s their WORDS, not the failure to observe a ceremonial handwashing before putting food in one’s mouth. This is a strong statement for Jesus to make in a culture where purity was everything.

There’s a lot to unpack here. The idea that our words can defile us drives home the point that what we say really reveals who we are to the world. In our culture, it’s appearances, not purity, that’s everything. No matter how nice our clothes, hair, home, and car may look, no matter how expensive we smell, if our words are crude and critical, we reveal our true inner poverty and ugliness. Whatever we may say to, or about, or AT someone—we’re really telling you about ourselves.

You’re probably familiar with the story of Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to integrate an all-white child in the South. In 1960, six-year-old Ruby was escorted by four U.S. marshals into the school as a mob of white people shouted terrible, vile things at her. The

school was empty because all the parents kept their kids at home, and only one teacher was willing to teach Ruby. On the second day of school, a woman threatened to poison her, so the marshals would only let Ruby eat food from home, and another day, she was greeted by a woman holding a coffin with a black doll in it. It was pretty clear what was in their hearts. The mob saw the presence of a little African American girl as defiling their school, yet we look back on those scenes today, and it's pretty clear where the real defilement is.

There are several things to take away from this. First, no matter how justified and we may feel in attacking someone, be warned: it only reflects on US. It doesn't mean there is not a place for constructive criticism of behavior, ideas, policies, speeches. The prophets of the Old Testament, out of passionate love for God and God's people, regularly raked the nation of Israel over the coals for their greed, idolatry, and unjust treatment of people. I regularly pick on the Presbyterian Church. Loyal Americans often protest the things America is doing, not because they hate America, but because they want to see her be the best she can be. It is sometimes necessary to speak the truth in love. But again, our speech is telling the world about who WE are.

Second, words defile when they turn against people. Back in the 1990's, I was having lunch with a friend I hadn't seen in a while, and she said, "I think Bill Clinton is the Antichrist." She is still my friend, but her comment told me more about her than it did about Bill Clinton.

Words defile when they label someone. One way we know we're labeling someone is when we use adjectives as nouns. If we call someone "an illegal," for example, instead of "someone who is here illegally," or better, an undocumented person. Illegal used to be only an adjective.

Words are toxic when they cut off or dismiss other people. The other day, my husband was feeling good about all that he had accomplished around the house and the yard. He started sharing some more plans and dreams he has for our place, and I looked up at a stain in the ceiling and said, “That ceiling tile is really getting bad—you’ve got to replace that.” Totally discounting all the good things he’d done. Focusing on something wrong, instead of all the things that were right. When Rod helped me realize what I’d done, I felt a lot more stained than that ceiling tile.

Third, toxic words defile the one who speaks them, but the good news is, toxic words defile the one who speaks them. When Ruby Bridges was escorted past the hateful mob each day by those four marshals, her mother coached her to be strong and to pray, and Ruby discovered that this made a difference. Books have been written about Ruby’s courage, her custom of praying for the people who protested her very presence in their school, and how this seemed provided a layer of protection against taking their hatred personally. [We’ve talked many times now, about the power of praying for those who persecute us. It helps us as much or more than the ones for whom we pray.]

When we are on the receiving end of toxic words, we have a choice. We do not have to take them personally. We might taste the poison, but we do not have to swallow it. There’s a little book, The Four Agreements, which teaches this: “Nothing others do is because of you. What others say and do is a projection of their own reality. When you are immune to the opinions and actions of others, you won’t be the victim of needless suffering.” Yes, it is good to pay attention to constructive feedback that’s hard to hear, like my husband explaining the impact of my words on him, but that’s a conscious choice we make. Wisdom is keeping the words that have value, and discarding the junk. (Wisdom is also forgiving well-meaning people who slip and say the wrong thing from time to time, because language changes faster and faster,

and words that hurt our ears now were perfectly acceptable twenty-five years ago. For example, I could choose to be annoyed when somebody refers to me a lady pastor. I mean, hey—we don't call a male pastor a "gentleman pastor"—we just call them a pastor—but what a waste of my emotional energy) .

Fifth, we have an opportunity. In a world where words seem to divide and defile more than at any previous point in human history, the church has an opportunity to shine. Couldn't church be the community where people can come and count on gracious words of welcome . . . encouragement . . . instruction. . . forgiveness . . . acceptance? Who else excels at that right now? Maybe 12-step programs . . . and maybe we have something to learn from them. This is something the world desperately needs, and something we can give. Our words are a witness. Our words can heal. Our words can build people up, and show them a new vision of themselves and who they can be. That's what we'll talk about next week.