



Calvin Presbyterian Church

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What You Say May Be Held Against You

Matthew 12:2-28 & 33-37

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When a suspect is arrested for a crime, he is informed of his rights. One of those rights is to remain silent. He may be guilty or innocent, but what he says under the initial shock of legal charges, could be quite damaging one way or another. He is told in effect, “What you say may be held against you.”

It was something like that which Jesus laid out to the Pharisees long before the Supreme Court rendered the “Miranda Decision.” The scribes and Pharisees had just made some terrible remarks about the most godly person who ever lived. What they said about Jesus told more about themselves than it did about him.

Jesus had just healed a man who could neither see nor speak. The people were amazed! This pathetic individual was now able to see and to bring words out of his mouth. Was the Healer God’s anointed one, promised as a blessing to God’s people? They said, “Can this be the Son of David?”

“Never!” said the Pharisees. This is not a good man from God. He’s in bed with the devil. He uses the black magic of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. But Jesus jumped on that ridiculous accusation. How and why would an evil man use evil powers to destroy evil only to produce good? Later on I want to come back to that question again. How and why would an evil man use evil powers to destroy evil only to have it come out good? Nonsense!

“No!” said Jesus. Evil comes out of an evil heart and good comes out of a good heart. And words that speak evil of good deeds condemn the speaker and no one else. What you say tells what’s in your heart. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks,” says Jesus. (Mt 12:34)

There’s a part of Jesus’ teaching that says in effect, “watch your words.” And that’s worth some study. There’s also a part of his teaching that says, “watch your heart” and that too demands some serious consideration. Words are one of the most distinctive characteristics of human beings. Words set us apart from all other living creatures.

For better or worse, we use a lot of words. And some of our word habits could bring a smile if we think about it.

The author of Word Watch in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette told of growing up in Canonsburg in the 50s where he frequented the community library. The librarian was an elderly retired English teacher. One day she asked a young girl if she needed help. “No.” Sally said, “I’m waiting on Jane.”

Drawing herself up to her full height of about 4 -10, the librarian peered over the circulation desk and said, “Where is Jane, I don’t see her.” Then she said, “Sally, you’re not waiting ON Jane. You’re waiting FOR Jane.” The writer said that’s one mistake he doesn’t make after the librarian’s polite but pointed correction.

Words are tools of incredible power. I’m sure we don’t think about it much, but as Christians, we have a rather terrifying responsibility of words. Jesus said, “I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account of every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Wow! Some politicians are finding out that while people may forget what they said, recorders and videotapes don’t forget. And we preachers trip over our tongue sometimes too, if we don’t walk our talk.

What I think Jesus was really concerned about was the kind of “cheap shot” the Pharisees took at him in the context of this passage. They had no justification for what they said. They really didn’t care about the truth. Their charges were simply irresponsible jealousy and bitterness. “Careless” is probably too mild a term for their handling of truth. It was a much more pointed and deliberate distortion of truth. They were out to discredit Jesus any way they could.

But Jesus warned them – and us – that words, our words, call us into judgment, or they may commend us for the virtue behind them. Anyone can compose his words carefully, and some rather skillfully, to conceal the real purposes of his mind. Someone has said, “The carefully spoken word may be a calculated hypocrisy.”

In public a person may sound fine and noble, carefully choosing every word. But as soon as he is off guard, the truth of character begins to reveal itself. You will remember a President we had, whose private conversations on tape in the Oval Office were scandalous, scatological beyond excuse, as well as devious and untruthful. His day of judgment came a lot earlier, and more

disastrously than he could imagine. What would your “private tapes” tell about you?

Wm Barclay tells us that the Greek word translated as the “careless” word or “idle” word that judges us, means something that’s not meant to produce anything. It’s a word that doesn’t add but subtracts. It’s a word doesn’t contribute but takes away. Now I don’t think Jesus had anything against so-called idle conversation just for the sake of being courteous and friendly. On the contrary, there’s an art in conversation that enlarges life, enhances self-esteem, gives meaning to time and fills the void of loneliness.

It seems to me that Jesus is saying those careless, casual words that come naturally without some contrived purpose, reveal the **real** you. And they can be a blessing or a curse – and we’re judged accordingly.

There are people we know who rarely have a bad word about anyone. As the saying goes, if they can’t say a good word, they don’t say anything. On the other hand, there are some people who find no good in anyone. They are always complaining, griping, cutting and contentious about **everyone** and **everything**. They seem to delight in digging for dirt and burying reputations.

Do you remember the childhood defense against verbal bullies? “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” It wasn’t very effective because it isn’t true. The letter of James reminds us that “the tongue is a fire,” (3:6) something that must be contained and controlled. The experience of the world with Hitler and other demagogues like him, remind us of how terribly destructive inflammatory orators can be. But small-scale slander and slurs can annihilate the spirit of a person just as cruelly. And the judgment of God must be just as as sure.

Words are creative. They can heal and strengthen. They can bring comfort in grief or assurance in illness and anxiety. A gentle word lessens another’s fear, or makes life new by forgiveness. One happy reconciliation of marital infidelity I remember in counseling came when one spouse said to the other in my hearing, “I forgive you.” It was an awesome moment. It created a new future for two people.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt had an uncanny sense of the power of words. His war message to Congress a day after Japan attacked Pearl

Harbor, began, “On December 7, 1941, a day which will live in infamy...” and with that speech he not only led Congress to its formal declaration but also made “infamy” and Pearl Harbor synonymous. With that speech he galvanized the American people into a unified, determined nation, dedicated to defeat the enemy and to restore the prestige of a stricken people.

Words are creative. The words of war are particularly powerful. Emotions run high. Reason often slides. The words of war can strengthen resolve. They can also weaken fundamental human values and corrupt the soul of society. They can be accepted as necessary and be glossed over as benign.

There are many words floating around the term “war on terror” that are like the “careless” words Jesus warned against. Again, in this context, “careless” is probably too mild a term for handling of truth. It’s more like a calculated soft euphemism for a harsh reality. I have two words in mind that are used carelessly intentionally. One is “terrorist” and the other is “rendition.”

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, keynote speaker at the World Mission Initiative Conference at Pittsburgh Seminary last month, was ordained by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1955 and spent the last 40 years teaching in seminaries and institutes in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem and Cyprus. He said our government has adopted a practice we used once before. This time we brand anyone we choose, for whatever reasons we choose, as a terrorist, an unlawful enemy combatant. Branded as with a big T on his forehead, we don’t need a trial. As such, we say that individual has no rights, not even the right of habeas corpus which is the right to challenge the lawfulness of his imprisonment. Thus a person branded even as a suspected terrorist becomes nonhuman and it doesn’t matter what happens to him, and we can keep him at Guantanamo Bay prison for five years or indefinitely without ever any charges of a crime.

A similar practice ensued he said, when Indians, Native Americans were branded as savages. As “savages” they became less than human and could be chased, hunted or eliminated without major troubling of conscience.

The other word used carelessly or calculatingly, is “rendition.” I’ve always heard that word in connection with a performance of music or the production a play or a painting of artwork. Or in the verb form to render thanks or to render aid or give a service. It carried a positive connotation. “Rendition.” Now what have we come to?

What happens now when the government uses that word? I submit to you that the answer to that question is not only a political concern but also a theological concern. What happens is terrorist suspects are exported without trial, to prisons run by foreign totalitarian regimes for interrogation, where torture is known to be used. Don't ask what we THINK will happen or what we EXPECT to happen. And don't ask what MORAL PRICE we will pay for what will happen.

Rendition – the new context of the word doesn't conjure up images of a performance of music, maybe instead, cries of agony. Is torture becoming the American way? A commentator remarks, "We can only marvel at the self-deception that makes a reliance on torture an American virtue." Back to the Jesus and Beelzebub question: How and why would an evil man use evil powers to destroy evil only to have it come out good? Conversely, if he really is a good man, would he stoop to do the evil he wants to destroy?

Presbyterian minister and poet J. Barrie Shepherd speaks of "Rendition" in connection with Jesus' words "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mk12:17) He says, "Unfortunately Caesar's share has a way of reaching further than you thought it might, of catching people unawares so that they find themselves, before they know it, twisting the thumbscrews, ratcheting the creaking rack, and pumping at the bellows to heat the brazier of coals. Persuaded, nonetheless, that all they do is absolutely necessary in pursuit of evil."

As God's people created in God's image, should our words reflect and multiply that image? We speak – and cause things to happen. Do our words bring about more of God's creation? Do they generate a larger kingdom for him? Do they create a society that he can bless and multiply? Words may bring peace or start a war. They may conciliate an enemy or alienate a friend. "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned," says Jesus.

Suppose we shift gears to a lighter cultural concern. Suppose we examine our unrestrained, spontaneous and off-the-cuff language to see what it shows. Now with an opening like that, we can quickly find ourselves into the subject of profanity. Words are creative, and in some sense we might admit that they could be creative therapy. A person no less distinguished than the Christian psychiatrist Karl Menninger suggests, "Swearing is a

tension-reliving device.” Most of us would probably agree that it serves a purpose – sometimes!

But a constant stream of profanity defeats any such purpose, debases the language, diminishes the speaker, and discloses a moral and spiritual problem in reflecting an image other than God’s image in us. I’ve been around the block. I’m not an uncontaminated well of sanitized words. I do have my moments of “tension relief.” I play a little frustrating golf. My frustration isn’t really profane, but the grass doesn’t grow where I spit! I do get tired of TV pushing the envelope and movies that are over the top with a barrage of gratuitous foul language. I wonder what kind of a world we are making if words are actually creative?

It isn’t simply a matter of “watch your words.” We ought to do that. But it’s more a matter of “watch your heart,” for as Jesus says, that’s where our words come from. The remedy is not Toastmaster’s Club - nor a classroom course on effective speech.

The ultimate problem is how to make human nature good so that its fruit will be good. That power is not in us. It is in God. That’s part of the good news, the gospel. God’s Word is creative. His living Word is transforming. “In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” That’s where our life gets cleaned up. That’s where our speech gets constructive. That’s where our words become life and strength and comfort and joy among the people with whom we speak. Remember whose image you bear, and give life to that Word in your flesh. Amen Amen.