

At the beginning of the year, we started a new sermon series titled “Control: Can’s and Can’t’s.” Each sermon in this series explores different aspects of control: our thoughts, actions, speech, goals, and responses to challenges.

Today, I want to discuss an often-overlooked aspect of personal growth and relationship building: the power of our words, specifically the art of controlling our tongues. It is fascinating, yet alarming, how the uncontrolled words we speak, whether in anger, frustration, or even in jest, can significantly impede our progress in life and strain the very fabric of our relationships.

Have you experienced this? Have you been set back in life for things you said in a moment of anger? Have you lost relationships, a promotion, or a job because of things you said? When we say hurtful things to put people down, argue, or gossip, we may not realize it, but the manner in which we speak keeps us from fulfillment and God’s blessings, including the people we love.

One of the most significant lessons I have learned through my life and ministry is that God will not bless you if you don’t have the character to back it up. This is not about being perfect or not making mistakes but about the nature of our hearts because what is in our hearts is revealed in our words.

So, do our words have power? Yes, they do. There is an old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” If this was true, we could affirm that our words have no or little power. It will not affect their lives no matter what we say to or about others. Yet, in reality, we know this to be untrue. Words can cause enduring pain, create emotional scars, and damage relationships, sometimes irreparably.

Here is a question for us today: How often have we found ourselves speaking harsh, sarcastic, or condescending words? Do you remember when someone said something to you or about you and hurt you in ways you may still be affected? Words can nourish the spirit but also inflict wounds deeper than any physical injury.

To speak to this subject, we draw from James 3: 5-10, where the apostle James compellingly explains this,

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of life, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

In this text, James tells us that our words have tremendous directive power in our lives and relationships, meaning they determine how we experience life today and the destination where we will end. For this, James likens our tongue to a tiny flame that has the potential to ignite forests into a raging inferno. What may start as a harmless spark can soon escalate into an

unmanageable blaze. Think of it this way: Harshly critical words can reduce a child's confidence to ashes, cynical words can torch a person's ability to trust others, and friendships can go up in flames from a few words of gossip.

For some people, their mouth is the only thing holding them back from a healthy marriage, good relationships, and a job promotion. They are talented and skillful but have nasty mouths, and it would seem they find pleasure in stirring up strife.

The truth is that our words have a significant role in shaping and directing our life's trajectory and our relationships. If we are discontent with where we are, we should reflect on how our words may have influenced our circumstances by asking ourselves: Am I excessively critical, condescending, or sarcastic? Do I have a tendency to express myself harshly when I am upset? Do I dismiss people when they attempt to share their thoughts and feelings? Do I arrogantly presume I am correct and pontificate at people?

I recently learned about a study that showed that many women feel depressed because they don't feel loved and valued by their husbands. I am sure it goes both ways and that the same thing goes for their children.

In reality, some men and women are nicer to strangers than to their own family, kind to others, but harsh at home. Ask yourself: Are my loved ones growing happier and more fulfilled because of me? If not, it is time for a change. We are called to enrich, not diminish, the lives given into our care. For example, as a husband, after being married for almost 20 years, I would not want to say my wife is less happy than when we met. If that were true, it would be my fault. As her husband, I want to keep her happy, confident, and fulfilled.

Now, think about last year (2023). How often did your speech nurture love and understanding to those around you? How many times did it, perhaps unintentionally, create distances or wounds in your relationships? Sometimes, we might have said things that hurt others or made situations worse without meaning to—still, we did it, and it is on us. But this new year, a great New Year's resolution can be to speak better words. We can try to be more careful with what we say and make a positive difference every time we talk.

Consider this: Jesus said in Matthew that we will be held accountable for every harmful word we say, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter." He states that at the end of life, God will ask us how we treated other people with our words, and we will be held accountable for it. Now imagine that when you are before Jesus, and he says to you, "Your words were kind and generous; you encouraged and blessed so many people with the way you talked to them. Well done."

So, how do we do this? How do we control our tongues? Consider King David's approach during tough times. In Psalm 141, he prayed not for the removal of challenges but for self-control over his words, asking God to guard his speech and heart against negativity, "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Do not turn my heart to any evil..."

This prayer is a great example for us. Every morning, we should ask God to help us avoid saying things that could cause trouble, be unkind, or even lead us into evil. This is really important when we are stressed, like in bad traffic or dealing with difficult people. We should decide to be careful with our words in these situations because they set us up for the rest of the day and possibly the rest of our lives. If what you are going to say isn't helpful or kind, it is better not to say it at all. Being negative can hold you back in life and rob the people you love of your best self. If we are mean, complain angrily, or put others down, we spoil everything and have to learn the same lessons over and over—if we ever get them.

“But what about when I am rightfully upset? Should I stay quiet?” you may ask. Disagreements happen, but it is how we respond that matters. Choose understanding over retaliation, especially when emotions run high. Remember, letting go of minor conflicts can save relationships. Sometimes, the best response is to walk away.

So, when you feel like saying something mean or sarcastic, try to stop yourself. Don't use your words to hurt others. Instead, use them to make people feel better, uplifted, and supported. Just as words can hurt, they can also heal. Words of affirmation, encouragement, and love can strengthen our spirits, embolden our hearts, and spark hope in our souls. They can rebuild self-esteem, mend broken relationships, and serve as the catalyst for forgiveness and reconciliation. So, “speak to others as you would have them speak to you.” If we do this, our lives will be happier, our relationships stronger, and we will become who God meant us to be.

Here is the good news and invitation: We have the power to transform our lives and the lives of those around us with our speech. The journey of controlling our tongues is not just a challenge but an opportunity to bless, build, and bring out the best in ourselves and others. Words don't just harm; they also have a remarkable capacity to heal and uplift. A compliment can brighten someone's day, and words of encouragement can boost confidence and inspire change. When we tell our spouses they are loved and assure our children they are capable of greatness, we are not just speaking but shaping their reality by building their self-esteem and ours in return, too.

And so, I extend an invitation to each one of you: Let's commit to a life of mindful speech where every word we speak is a step towards a more loving, peaceful, and fulfilling life. Together, we can transform our world, one word at a time.

In Jesus' name, may our words be a reflection of the love and grace that fills our lives.  
Amen.