

Mature Speech

James 3:1–12

Our reading compares the danger of the tongue to that of a spark of flame. One word can spread and destroy like a forest fire!

So, it is disappointing to me that most translations of verse 2 use the word “perfect,” as in “Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is *perfect*.” I think it’s safe to assume that the idea of perfection means making no mistakes. Yet James has just said that “all of us make many mistakes.” The translation makes it seem like James is confused or contradictory.

Even worse, “Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor,” says Anne Lamott. Brene Brown has written a book about the gifts of imperfections in which she makes it clear that healthy striving to be your best is inwardly driven, while perfection is externally driven, namely seeking the approval of others. In Brown’s words, self-focus asks, “How can I improve?” Perfectionism asks, “What will they think?” Only one mindset allows for curiosity and builds resilience after making mistakes; the other views mistakes as resulting in shame and blame.

Thankfully, James did not intend to support the oppression of perfectionism! A better translation of the Greek word *telos* is “maturity.” The ancient letter is calling us to be mature speakers.

I mentioned this translation issue during the men’s fellowship, and Tim noted that this word *telos* is related to telescope. A telescope allows a viewer to see something far away up close. We might say that a healthy maturity allows us to view our experiences with the larger picture in mind.

Viewing the stars also makes me think of another story of Abram. At yet another difficult point in his life, God directed his attention to the night sky and promised that his descendants would be more numerous than all the stars above (see Genesis 15). God later made the same starry promise to Isaac (see Genesis 26).

James gives us a theological picture that is inwardly focused: we are all created in the likeness of God (Jas 3:9). That is claim is written in the first creation story (Genesis 1:26-27). This gift of the divine image does not mean that we make no mistakes. It is not to be perfect, but to enable us to shine our light, that is, to bless and be a blessing to others.

I’ve been reading Sydney Lea, former poet laureate of Vermont. He is now in his eighties, and he goes to a lot of funerals. After one dear friend’s death, the ceremony was held in a church. But no preachers were invited to speak. The town’s blacksmith gave the eulogy, even though he confessed that he had to look up what the heck “eulogy” meant. Lea reports that, during that eulogy, there were words said that likely had never been heard before in that church! Yet the speech about the dead man was tough yet tender, just like he had been. So, the words were right and true.

This makes me think that mature speech is really about the intention behind what is said rather than the words themselves. Therefore, we should exercise discernment before we speak, which James calls “bridling the tongue.”

During our Wednesday evening Bible study, Elizabeth mentioned the Sufi mystic Rumi's teaching on the three gates of speech. The idea is that, before words escape one's mouth, they should be interrogated by three questions: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? Remember, the goal here is not perfection but rather maturity.

James is right; a lie starts a fire that spreads destruction far beyond the original speaker. We need the truth. Yet, as I have matured, I increasingly appreciate truth claims that are flavored with humility, that is, prefaced with phrases like "I think..." or "It seems to me..." I want to speak the truth, and I also want to be open to other perspectives.

As far as the second gate or question (Is it necessary?), one might think that, if James tells us the truth that the tongue is a restless evil and deadly poison, we might not speak at all. But last week, we reflected on Jesus's teaching, "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its saltiness, what good is it?" If people of faith are not seeking the truth and speaking in mature ways, then we are actually part of the problem.

In his letter from a Birmingham jail, MLK claimed that the so-called white moderates, the ones who just wanted to keep the peace, were causing more harm to the cause of justice for Black Americans than the Klansmen. There are times when it is indeed necessary to speak.

So, in this letter, which was critical of white pastors, was Dr. King kind? Not if we limit kindness to a feeling of warm fuzzies. But like maturity, I think kindness is more about the intention behind the words. Dr. King cared about the plight of Black and White Americans. He spoke of the Beloved Community, where everyone is equal because all are created in the image of God. Jim Crow segregation fell far short of that reality, and it was in the best interests of everyone to enact change, as difficult as it was. King's words were tough yet tender; they were right and true.

On a more personal level, Ginny and I have witnessed how all of our children have internalized this seemingly positive message of "being kind" as a need to say "yes" to others, both adults and peers. "No" can also be true. "No" can also be necessary. I think maturity teaches us to be kind as we are kind to ourselves—we also must believe that we are created in the divine image and so worthy of respect and love.

I hope we all consider our words and the importance of speech because our children are listening. Words create worlds, and we hope to create a safer, kinder, more just, more inclusive world. Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

I think I've said enough; so, I'll send with the prayer of the psalmist, hoping that we all take these words to heart: "May the words of my mouth, O Lord, be acceptable to you, my rock and redeemer" (Psalm 19:14). Amen.

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