

**The Power of Words:
Family Words**

James 3:2-12

*Do we help our family members blossom
or cause them to wither?*

A sermon preached by
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One of the big disaster stories in the disaster-rich year of 2020 has been the wildfires on the West Coast. Historic wildfires in Oregon and California have set records for the number of acres burned this early in the fire season, which usually lasts through the fall. Something over 5 million acres have burned, and 35 people have died, last I heard. But it's ongoing. Several communities have been obliterated, and the destruction has just been devastating.

So I found it interesting that we have a timely example of what the letter of James is talking about when it says, "*How great a forest is set ablaze by 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 nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.*"¹ Strong words, but the destructive force of words can be as strong as a California wildfire. We had better use them with caution.

James also compares our tongue to a bit in the mouth of a horse or a rudder on a ship. In either case, a very small thing can determine the course of a much larger entity. A bit that you can hold in your hand can direct the motion of a very large animal. A rudder, which is a tiny part of a ship, relatively speaking, can turn the whole craft one way or another. So taming our tongue makes a big difference in the direction of our lives. It's hard to do; in fact, James says, "*No one can tame the tongue.*"² But we have to try, because speaking with grace is a critical piece of our discipleship.

We started last week, and we will continue for two more weeks to talk about "The Power of Words." Nothing is more powerful than the way we use our words, either for good or evil. Our key verses for the series come from Paul—"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."³—and from the Book of Psalms—"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."⁴ We will keep repeating these Scriptures in our sermons, because these are good verses to have in your mental Bible.

Today we want to focus specifically on how we use our words with our families. How do we speak to our loved ones, those we live with, or those we are connected to by kinship? Of all the subsets of our relationships,

family is the most important. The way we use our words with family members can do tremendous good or great harm.

This spring we put out several new plants in our yard and flowerbeds to make our place look more attractive. Of course, you have to tend to plants, especially when they're new, so we have a sprinkler system that we can set to water the plants on a regular schedule. I thought everything was going well until about the first of July, when I noticed that one of the new plants was dead. Right there in the flowerbed, not two feet from another plant just like it that was thriving, it was wilted and brown and incapable of resuscitation. What was the matter? I then discovered that the automatic sprinkler did not cover all the flowerbed. There was a little space that never got water, and that's where the dead plant was sitting. Two plants, exactly the same, two feet apart—one got water, and one didn't, and that made a life and death difference.

That's how it works with our family words. Does the way we use our words cause our family members to blossom and thrive, or do our words cause them to wither and wilt? James says it can go either way: "*With [our tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.*"⁵ With our words we can bless our families, and with our words we can curse them.

You've seen this happen, or maybe you have experienced it yourself. A child grows up in a family, and he or she (let's say he) naturally looks up to his parents. They provide for him and teach him how the world is supposed to work. If the parents tell the child that he is good and smart and capable, the child develops a healthy sense of self-esteem and grows in his ability to handle the challenges of life. If there's a bully on the playground or a harsh teacher or a hard situation, the child can handle it, because he knows what his parents have told him. He is good and smart and capable.

But if the parents are constantly critical and abusive in their language, if they tell the child he is bad and stupid and worthless, that's the self-image that develops in his little heart. So then when the challenges of life come, he doesn't have enough belief in himself to overcome the challenges. He is defeated before he starts.

This sort of dynamic can happen between children and parents, between spouses, and between siblings. Do our words make them blossom or wilt?

Right now, in the midst of the pandemic, families have had to spend more time together than ever. Parents have been working from home more; kids are doing school online; there is much less travel and going out than there used to be. If you have a healthy family, this is fine. Maybe there are some minor frustrations, but more togetherness is generally a good thing.

But if you're not building one another up, if your words are not giving grace to those around you, it can be a very difficult time. The lockdown has made problems worse for so many families. Police report domestic disturbance calls have increased since the spring. Divorce petitions are up. Counselors at domestic abuse hotlines have described a "tidal wave" of calls flooding their services.⁶ The children and spouses who are enduring these situations are feeling trapped precisely because they can't go out or reach out in ways that they could before the pandemic.

Like the series on the prophets, we planned this sermon series before we knew the pandemic was coming, but now it's clear God was directing us. Because here we are, needing this word right now like we have never needed it before. So I want to share with you this morning two types of language to avoid, and one type of language to promote in your families.

Of course, you want to avoid hateful and abusive language with people you love. We all fail at this from time to time. We get upset; we say stuff we don't mean. The bad words just spew out. It's both a comfort and a warning that James says, "*All of us make many mistakes.*"⁷

Our tendency to be harsh is what's behind our key verse. Again, "*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*" Then Paul goes on to say, "*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*"⁸ Aren't those great words?

You've been around people who can never say anything positive about anyone else, haven't you? They just tear everyone down. When I was a college intern in a church, I accepted an invitation to have dinner in a

couple's home. They were middle-aged (to me as a college student) and had no children. I guessed I was in trouble when I told the church secretary, and she said, "Bless your heart." It turned out to be one of the most uncomfortable evenings of my life. From the time I walked in the door, through dinner, until I escaped as quickly as I could, this couple did nothing but snipe at one another and criticize and make derogatory remarks. I wouldn't talk to my worst enemy the way this husband and wife addressed each other. Then, after the dinner, over the next couple of weeks at church, each one of them thanked me separately for coming to dinner. Each one of them separately told me they didn't get much company, and each one blamed their spouse for being hard to get along with!

Put away all angry, bitter, hateful talk, and be kind to one another. But also, we need to avoid neutral language, words that do not convey any emotion or feeling, positive or negative. Even if your words are not hateful, they can be so neutral that they don't build others up. There can be an absence of kindness and grace, a deficit of praise and affection. Do you praise your kids when they get a good grade or perform well at an activity, or do you always point out how they could have done better? Do you compliment your spouse because he or she looks good or because you just enjoyed a wonderful meal he or she prepared or because he or she did something great at work? Neutral language doesn't kill, but it doesn't grow a relationship either. It's like that plant sitting just outside of the water zone, for all practical purposes consumed by drought.

Avoid negative hurtful language, and avoid indifferent and non-committal language. But here are four phrases that I think you should practice over and over with your family. These words build up and give grace and help your loved ones thrive. (And none of these should be a surprise.)

Say "I love you." These are the three most basic words for any relationship. But you would be surprised—or maybe you wouldn't—at how hard it is for some people to say them. I'm surprised at myself sometimes, how I don't say "I love you" even when I feel it.

Sometimes these words are harder for the male members of the species. My father grew up in the Great Depression and fought in World War II. He

was part of a generation of men who were not always very verbal with their feelings. Usually the way he expressed it was to tell us he was proud of us, and that was pretty good. But seldom did he say, “I love you.” I didn’t go into therapy over it, but I didn’t understand it. It was obvious he did love us; why didn’t he say so? The summer before he died in the fall, he was in the hospital in Little Rock, and I went to see him. He had just been told that his cancer was terminal. Before I left that day, he sat on the side of his hospital bed and said, “I know I haven’t always expressed my feelings very well, but just because I didn’t say them doesn’t mean I didn’t feel them. I love you all very much.” Even with the sad news about his cancer, I left the hospital that day feeling like I was blossoming.

The second phrase you need to say often to your family is, “I’m sorry.” We’ve already covered the part about making many mistakes. You’re going to make some. Admit them. Tell your family you realize when you are wrong. As a parent, it will build more trust with your child if you will apologize than for them to know you’re wrong and you not to admit it. That works for spouses, too. “I’m sorry” is often the first step toward healing in a relationship.

You’re going to hurt those you love, but they are also going to hurt you. You are not perfect, but fortunately neither is your spouse, your child, or your parent. When you get hurt, the best phrase to use is, “I forgive you.” The word from Paul to the Ephesians is, “*be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*”⁹ You have already been forgiven by God for all your sins. Can’t you extend that forgiveness to others? Just say it: “I forgive you.”

Adam Hamilton has a great illustration he does with a backpack full of rocks. Bearing a grudge, failing to forgive, is like filling a backpack full of rocks. It’s heavy to carry around, and it makes every step of progress in a relationship hard to achieve. But if you can take off your backpack full of rocks, let go of your bitterness and hostility toward someone who has hurt you, then you will feel light and energetic, like a great burden has been lifted. Because it has.

The final phrase you need to use often with your family is “Thank you.” Don’t just tell them you love them, tell them why you love them. Tell them

what you appreciate about them. It may be something they have done for you, or it may not have anything to do with you, but it's just something outstanding about your loved one. The Scriptures are full of words about giving thanks, living with gratitude, seeing good in people. I guarantee, when someone in your family knows that you value them and you appreciate them for who they are, they will bloom like a well-watered plant.

In 1997, Rev. Fred Rogers, known to the world as Mister Rogers, was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Emmy Award for his work on "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," the iconic children's television show that began airing in 1968 and ran until 2000—895 episodes. As the standing ovation died down, he began his acceptance speech: "So many people have helped me to come to this night. Some of you are here. Some are far away. Some are even in heaven. All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, 10 seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are? Those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life. 10 seconds of silence. I'll watch the time."

While Fred Rogers looked at his watch, the camera panned the audience and caught dozens of TV stars and network bigwigs with heads bowed, eyes glistening, tears running down their cheeks. After just 10 seconds, Mister Rogers said, "Whomever you've been thinking about, how pleased they must be to know the difference you feel they've made."¹⁰

That's how I want to end today. Let's take a few seconds of silence to think of those people in your family who have helped you get to where you are today. Some of them are there with you. Some are far away. Some are even in heaven. Each of us have special people who have loved us into being, incredible people who have cared for us and wanted the best for our lives. Take ten seconds and think of them.

Then I want to ask you to take the hand of the family members who are worshipping with you today. If you are alone, just imagine their presence across the gaps of miles and time, and pray with me: God, forgive me for the many mistakes I've made, times when my words have been harsh and times when I have failed to love my family the way I should. Thank you for those whose hands I hold, for those who are not here with me, and for

those that came to my mind in the silence. Help me to build up my family with my words, to give grace to all who hear, to help them blossom into your image, as they were created to be. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

¹ James 3:5-6.

² James 3:8.

³ Ephesians 4:29.

⁴ Psalm 19:14.

⁵ James 3:9.

⁶ Laura McDaid, "Coronavirus: Pandemic has 'catastrophic' impact on families," *BBC News*, July 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-53327738>.

⁷ James 3:2.

⁸ Ephesians 4:29,31.

⁹ Ephesians 4:32.

¹⁰ "Fred Rogers' Unforgettable Emmy Award Speech—1997," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upm9LnuCBUM>.