

At a local restaurant, you've been chatting with a close friend about your relationship with an annoying coworker. Suddenly you notice one of that coworker's closest friends is seated at a nearby table. How much of your gossip did she hear?

During a text conversation with your best friend, you vent about your spouse's shortcomings. A few minutes later, in a moment of panic, you grab your phone to confirm that text indeed was sent to your friend and not your spouse!

While chatting after worship about a recent decision by the church board with which you disagree, you notice another church member who appears to have been listening intently. Immediately you begin reviewing the conversation in your mind, hoping you didn't say anything they might find insulting.

Unlike the embarrassment of a college athlete's reckless flirtation, a pastor's off-the-cuff remark or an off-hand comment by a politician, these situations can do real damage. Friendships are lost, marriages are strained, work environments become uncomfortable and church disputes become heated – all because of a careless word.

Once leaving our lips, our words are out of our control. You can't get toothpaste back in the tube. The bell cannot be un-rung. The train has left the station. Our words may not "go viral," but they may "go virus," infecting more people than we'd care to know.

Like a bit in a horse's mouth, or the rudder of a ship, James teaches us that our tongues can lead us places where we do not want to go. Then he reminds us that the damage can be far more catastrophic. As a tiny fire can grow out of control and destroy everything around it, so, too, can a careless word wreak havoc upon relationships and reputations. James' message in our text, then, is nothing more than a call to choose between words that hurt or words that heal.

Larry David, co-creator of the iconic television show *Seinfeld*, and star and creator of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, once attended a baseball game at Yankee Stadium. When they put his face up on the big screen, the crowd spontaneously stood and cheered for this hometown Brooklyn boy. Later that night, as he and his friends were exiting the stadium, things changed. Someone yelled, “Larry, you s**k!” His friends say that the accolades of 50,000 cheering fans paled in comparison to one loose tongue. The rest of the night, all David could think about was the one who did not like him.

The power of negative words is enormous. We know this all too well. Despite all our accomplishments in adulthood, a parent's careless words spoken 30 years ago still sting. The poor opinion of a teacher still affects your decisions even though you have a successful career. Although others have told you how gifted you are, a bad performance review still echoes years later. Those words are amplified in our hearts without the aid of a microphone.

In an honest moment, we would also confess that we've done the same to others. Maybe it's an out-of-control moment with our children. Or a time we said something we knew would push our spouse right over the edge. Or the mean words we said to a friend under the guise of honesty. Whatever it is, like a viral video of a hot mic moment or a small flame that grows into a raging fire, our words once spoken are out of our control. The damage can be devastating.

Fortunately, our words can also be used to bless. They can be used to bring healing to injured souls. Every word we speak falls into one of three categories: Emotionally hurtful, emotionally neutral or emotionally healing. Because we use language to report or pass on information, much of our speech falls into the "emotionally neutral" category. Where would we place the bulk of the other words we speak? Emotionally hurtful (harmful), or emotionally healing?

Some might try to dismiss James' warnings about the use of our words by noting he directs this admonition specifically to those who instruct others. While we may not consider ourselves teachers, there are times when our words carry that kind of authority. But as a parent, mentor, supervisor or role model, we, too, have a teaching role.

Toward the end of this passage, James shifts metaphors to illustrate that our words tell the world something about our hearts. Like the fruit tells us about the tree, and the water downstream tells us about its source, our words say something about us. When we have assumed a teaching role, our words not only represent us, but our whole group, which sometimes is all other Christians. Before posting, sharing, tweeting or chatting, we need to measure our words to be sure we are representing Christ well.

As our words have power to destroy, they also have the power to strengthen, encourage and affirm those whom we love. While Larry David may have missed the accolades of a faceless crowd of 50,000, the right words from the right person can do amazing things for us. The words of a parent who reminded us we were still loved after getting dumped by our first boyfriend or girlfriend are remembered. The words of a mentor encouraging us to take that next step because they see our talent and ability, still prod us along. The words "I love you" from the lips of our spouse still have the ability to make our day.

As the people of God, we are called to speak those words to someone else. When we come together on a Sunday morning to praise God, unite our voices in prayer and together confess our faith through creeds and affirmations, we are using our tongues in service to God. After worship, when we encourage one another over a cup of coffee in the fellowship hall, tell our story to someone in our small group who can learn from our mistakes, or pause to pray with a friend who is struggling, we are, in the words of James, sharing a blessing. But it doesn't stop there.

When we compliment the work of someone we supervise at the office, when we offer a word of encouragement to someone who is supervising us, when we leave a note of appreciation for our waiter at the restaurant, when we compliment the youth in our church or neighborhood – when we do this, we are living out our calling.

Our tongues are powerful tools. We must use our words wisely. Hot microphones can be awfully embarrassing when they amplify the wrong things, but they are never a problem when we're building others up and blessing God. Let us always speak in such a way that we never fear a hot mic, a nosey neighbor or an errant text. "Watch your mouth!" the apostle James says. That's good advice.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I love you. Many times I do not have the right words to speak. Either I have remained silent when someone needed me to use words of love or I spoke but the words I used were not the words you would want me to use. Please help me do better in the future. I know my heart determines the kind of words I use. Help me change my heart so your words of love can come out of my mouth at the right time and in the right place. Help me turn my heart away from anything ungodly or anything sinful. Help me keep my heart in a state where I only want to say, think, and do what you want me to say, think, and do. Help me turn away from my old life of rebellion. Help me turn away from my old life of darkness. In you I put all my faith, hope, and life. All these things I humbly pray in your Holy name. Amen

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Hot Mic!

Sunday, September 20, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

James 3:1-12

During this spring's NCAA men's college basketball tournament, a player from the University of Wisconsin had an embarrassing moment. Nigel Hayes didn't miss a last second shot or foul out. His faux pas didn't happen in front of millions viewing the game on television. It occurred while chatting with a handful of reporters in a small room during a press conference. Hayes was enamored with one of the female stenographers who wrote down his every word. As Hayes turned and smiled at the stenographers, he whispered to the teammate sitting on his right, "[Gosh], she's beautiful." Hearing the muffled laughter of several reporters, Hayes turned and asked, "Did you hear that?"

Yup. The microphone in front of him had amplified his whisper. Everyone in the room had heard it, including the stenographer. Hayes raised his hands in front of his face, but he couldn't hide. The video of his whisper soon went viral, and millions heard and saw his private moment.

Microphones can be dangerous. Sometimes hot mics can land us in hot water. They amplify everything. Even the things we wish they wouldn't. Microphones don't know good singing from bad. Microphones don't know the difference between what is to be said at a press conference and a private whisper to a teammate. The microphone amplifies everything.

Those who wear microphones can sometimes forget this. Like the day a colleague of mine finished leading her first worship service at her new church, and expressed her relief into a hot mic, saying, "Whew! I'm glad that's over!" When the congregation cracked up laughing, the poor pastor realized what she'd said and turned beet red.

While these examples make us smile, they are the exception. Many of the so-called "hot mic moments" that go viral contain profane, sexist, racist or combative language. The unguarded comments can sink political campaigns, ruin the careers of reporters, and make tense international relations even more strained.

While you may not spend much time near a microphone, all of us have experienced the power of words. What we say can embarrass us, hurt us or others and devastate relationships.