

ME AND MY BIG MOUTH - James 1:19-21

Andrew Jackson - The 7th President of the United States, This is a man who **fought** in the Revolutionary War AND War of 1812, and lived to tell about it. He also had a habit of challenging people he disagreed with to **duels** on a dime. Some putting the number of people he challenged to duels in the dozens.

But with two wars and all of these duels under his belt – he lived to tell about it. In fact, he managed live until he died in bed at the ripe old age of **78**. And when he died his funeral was well attended. And among the many guests - **his pet parrot**.

Yes, it was a parrot that talked and repeated words that were said around it by its owner Andrew Jackson. And yes, you can imagine based on what we just learned about him – it didn't end well.

Before the sermon could even get rolling, heads snapped backwards as this parrot started unleashing a volley of words you don't say in church. It was a chorus of cuss words that quickly stopped the funeral to take the parrot out of the service!

I share all of that for a couple reasons, but first to ask the question...
If all your words you utter in the privacy of your home were uttered at your funeral, would you be at peace or horrified? If all your words were broadcast publicly, would you blush?

Because this may be a VERY unique story. But it points to a universal truth.

In **Matthew 12:36** Jesus says:
I tell you this, you must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak.

Our private, present words will have future consequences.
There will be a day of reckoning for every word we've spoken in our lifetime.

And the reason I believe this series is in season...
Where do we let our guard down and take our mouth off safety?
When we step into the privacy of our home.
And we've all been largely staying at home, sheltered in place.

I'm also not sure there's one more universally relevant.
We all struggle with this. We all can do better. You aren't alone.
And that's not false humility to make us all feel better. That's Bible...

James 3:7 - *All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.*

The tongue isn't easily domesticated trained. It's more akin to a wild animal that would do damage if it ever got out of its cage. It has the power to do damage, so the tongue is enclosed in the cage called your mouth, sitting behind bars of teeth.

God doesn't just want to be LORD over our **heart**.
He wants to be LORD over our **lips**.
He doesn't want to transform my **heart**.
He wants to transform my **mouth**.

James 1:19-21

Don't settle for BEING right. Seek to MAKE things right.

This is key because we all have some Andrew Jackson in us. He was a duel addict. We may not go around looking to fire on or kill people, but in light of everything we just talked about with the power of words, we can do significant damage.

But Spirit filled, Jesus following disciples don't **love to fight** people. They **fight to love** people. Sure, they may fight for truth when necessary, but they value winning people over winning an argument.

We should be willing to fight when it's necessary,
But too many are itching to fight no matter what.

1917 is about a man given the task of telling the men at the frontlines to stand down, calling off an attack that would save thousands of lives. And at the outset the general feels the need to warn him: *"make sure there are witnesses... some men just like to fight."*

His concern was that some men would have been willing to ignore the step to save lives out of an itch to fight.

My concern is that many in the church have the same attitude when it comes to waging war with words. Too many of us are more concerned with winning arguments than winning people.

We should be **willing to fight** for truth when it's **necessary**,
But too many are **itching to fight no matter what**

And the Bible calls us ministers of reconciliation...

That means we aren't just reconciled vertically to God.

It means we're to be reconciled horizontally with those around us.

The job description means we should be fighting for reconciliation, not resolved to fight.

And this has implications throughout life...

How do I give up our need to BE right- with my spouse, coworker, friend, neighbor, teammate- so we can MAKE things right?

James gives us his recipe in the passage from chapter 1 we just read:

Quick to listen. Slow to speak.

Everyone should be quick to listen.

We all have an itch to be God's **mouthpiece**.

We've got a scripture or platitude or wisdom locked and loaded for every situation.

But do you know what's just as important as the mouth that far fewer people run to be?
God's ears.

Psalm 116:2 says - *Because he bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath!*
The revelation of God's goodness that sparked faith in David wasn't God's voice or truth spoken ...it was simply the reality that God hears. And he doesn't just hear – he listens.

The question is then ...Do you?

In the 60+ conversations that Jesus is involved in in the book of Mark, he asks no fewer than 50 questions! If anyone could have led with the answers and confronted people with truth it was Jesus. He didn't even need the answers to the questions- he was all knowing!
But what is Jesus modeling for us? Be quick to listen.

Slow to speak

There are very few areas in life where it should be your goal to be late.

But one place you should definitely be late?

When you're in a discussion and you're ready to push back.

You're itching to respond in kind to your wife.

You're ready to counter...

...be late.

Proverbs 29:20 - *“Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”*

And this verse is bigger than the old advice to think before you speak.
It's about making sure people actually care when you speak.

People will care about what you have to say when you've shown that you care.
An easy way to do that? Be quick to listen and slow to speak.

So far the focus is on being measured in our speech and studious in our listening.
Because if you're faithful in that, the next part that initially seems hard becomes easier:
“slow to become angry”

Ecclesiastes 7:9 - *“Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.”*

Now will you feel anger in life? Absolutely. Is that a sin? No. Is righteous anger a thing? Yes.
But Ecclesiastes 7:9 says anger shouldn't take up residence in us.
And Ecclesiastes 7:9 also echoes the words of James – we shouldn't be quick to get angry, with a short fuse and thin skin like Andrew Jackson.

Alfred Noble invented **dynamite** with the vision that it would be used to clear terrain for roads and bridges. But in a matter of a few years, his invention had been weaponized and militarized. His invention created with a vision for construction was being used for destruction – even death. He lamented this reality and so mourned it that he founded the Nobel Peace Prize. He wanted his legacy to be attached to something positive, not destructive.

Why do I share this?

You have TNT in your tongue. And like dynamite your words can be a constructive part of building, or a destructive tool for wounding.

And when your words are given to anger, they are weaponized. It's why James tells us to be SLOW to become angry when addressing our words.

The Talking Stick

In Native American culture when the atmosphere would become tense and conflict was in the air, they'd meet and break out the talking stick.

In this meeting, only the person with the stick could talk. They would share- maybe sharing the stick with somebody who could help voice their concern- until they felt people fully understood their perspective. Only then would they pass the stick, and somebody else could speak, until all had their turn.

This practice was so effective in disarming situations because it understood what's at the heart of James 1:19-21. The more you listen, and the more you learn. The more you listen, and the more you empathize with the another person's situation, feelings, and *humanity*.

Notice: Understanding someone else's perspective comes before making MY point. Because the goal isn't to change minds, it's not about me BEING right and you being wrong, it's about MAKING things right.

And what James says carries increased weight when we understand what he was addressing. The church had become divided over numerous issues. Racial divisions between Jews and Gentiles. Socioeconomic divisions between the privileged and the poor.

And God's Church is STILL divided today on many issues. Some doctrinal. Many cultural. Political. Socioeconomic. And racial. And if the church is ever going to overcome division with diversity and walking in the unity that God desires it's going to take people of the who are slow to speak and quick to listen. It's going to take the people of one culture, but *especially* the predominant culture, giving away the talking stick and humbly saying... *what else don't I know?*

Just think about how you think of those who vote different, behave different, or are just plain different than you... *"How could they say that."*

"I don't know how you would be OK with that..."

"I don't understand how you could [fill in the blank] and call yourself a Christian"

We don't so much present these as genuine questions. They are declarations we make, and then we all too often return to our echo chamber and hall of mirrors...

But the fact they are in the form of a question is telling. It means you don't know the answer. *If you don't know something, that should spark earnest questions... not angry declarations.*

We are often grossly overestimate how much we know about other people and other situations that we haven't walked in.

Proverbs 18:17 - *The first to speak in court sounds right— until the cross-examination begins.* I share that because in the court of Justin White, you know who always gets the first hearing? You know whose perspective gets shared first? Me.

I'm always the first to speak in my own court. Which means I can have my closing statement locked and loaded before I ever even broach the subject with someone else.

That's why the concept of the talking stick is so useful. And it's why James tells us we can avoid anger by being slow to speak and quick to listen.

Anger doesn't produce *the righteousness that God desires...*

When the focus isn't reconciliation, but about being right, what's at the root?

Self-righteousness

I know I'm right. I want you to know I'm right. I want everyone to know I'm right.

But James would say that's not the right, right. We're concerned with looking right. God wants us to be concerned with loving right.

And that means our focus isn't being right AT one another. God wants you to be right WITH one another.

We aren't called to duel.
We're called to reconcile.

So questions that flow from this:

In disagreements, am I more focused on being right AT someone, or being right WITH them?

In conversations with my spouse, am I more concerned with being right, or being reconciled?

In conversations within the bride of Christ, am I more concerned with being right, or making things right?

In political disagreements, do I do like the 7th President of the United States and impulsively duel, or am I slow to speak and quick to listen?

Our words matter. There's TNT on your tongue.
Anger weaponizes our words.
But righteousness can use it to construct.
To build roads and bridges that can pave a path to reconciliation.

CLOSE

Verse 21 says: *Therefore get rid of all moral filth, and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*

This is noteworthy, because in our itch to duel and BE right, it's because we see so much wrong with the world. The immorality is out there, and rarely do we recognize our own. But when we remember that God has **MADE** things right with us even when we were in sin, we can let go of **BEING** right and our self righteousness and focus on **MAKING** things right.

You see when James says get rid of "evil" the Greek speaks of malice, a desire to get back or pay back, which was so prevalent in our tit for tat culture.

James is saying, when you find yourself itching to win an exchange.
Itching to BE right out of self righteousness.
Shut it down. Get rid of it.

We're no longer called to win or lose on those terms.
We're no longer playing that game.
Jesus removed the board entirely.

Jesus has given us a completely new way to live,
One that's not as concerned with being right as it is concerned with being reconciled.
One that's not isn't as concerned with winning arguments as it is about winning people.

Relinquish the right to being right and instead focus on reconciliation.
It's not about conflict avoidance or cowardice.
But relinquishing my right to be right and prove others wrong is often the first step toward reconciliation and healthy relationship.

And it's not just about horizontal reconciliation.
It's also about vertical reconciliation with me and that person with God.
And to DO that we have to put away malice and the need to pay back and be right.

The last part of our passage tonight says that "**His word planted in us, saves us.**"
The implication for us?
May **OUR** words usher people toward **THE** Word that saves.

There's TNT in your tongue.

May we not let the enemy weaponize our words. May the dynamite in our words make way for the roads and bridges that the Holy Spirit can walk over.