

James 3:1-12    Gospel Values  
Mark 8:27-38

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer,” is the way the 19th Psalm ends. They are familiar words, sometimes used as a phrase on religious art, like on a bulletin cover. In these words is revealed a characteristic of the faithful life that is distinct from the larger human context from which they came, and in which we still live.

In the larger human culture, there are undisciplined habits, of speech before thought, words without reflection, talk without purpose, or with the wrong purpose in mind, and certainly not the end of pleasing a righteous God. And though these words have been around for a very long time and have had a great affect upon us all, they are needed still.

We know the dangers of speech. There is a common expressions to help us;

“If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.”

The Bible is full of exhortations to better speaking habits, and it tells us not to gossip, to speak ill of others, to be careful not to tear down but to build up. Yet because of sin it is common among people of every time and place to complain, to insult, to use

words to harm, to be angry in tone and in substance, to injure.

And so we find the biblical conviction that words and thoughts ought to be pleasing to God?

James

In our epistle reading for today, from James, there is an at length discussion about speech. It suggests that not many should make it a point to be teachers, because teachers must speak, use words, and the use of words is dangerous. He speaks of the tongue as a small thing that controls big things; a bit in the mouth of a horse or the rudder of a ship. He mixes in another metaphor of a small spark that can ignite a large fire.

James is not optimistic about “the tongue.” He says it is restless and full of deadly poison. Mostly he sees the inherent contradiction that from the same mouth comes blessing and cursing.

He says that this should not be, and he is not the only one. We remember from Ephesians 4:29 that Paul has instructed people, “let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up, that it may benefit those who listen.

Yet we live in a trash talk world, a world that regularly uses words to tear down and destroy. It is fascinating that human life has changed so much since James

wrote his letter and Paul traveled the Mediterranean, and since Jesus strolled the shores of the Galilean Sea and Pilate made his fateful decision.

Everything is different; cell phones and TVs, automobiles and HVAC, air travel and satellite technology; one can go on, but the control of one's speech and the issues that arise from it are the same. Nothing has changed in 2,000 years. With the internet we can communicate with more people more quickly, instantaneously, but we can still bless and curse with our words.

### Other Values

And it isn't just speech. There is a whole system of values that we might call gospel values, that have always stood in distinction with "ordinary" values. I call them "ordinary" because they come not necessarily from other religions or philosophies but are common among people whenever they get together and interact.

They are common even among Christians to be honest. They proceed from human nature and can only be overcome with thoughtful effort and divine help.

There may be several ways to distinguish between gospel values and ordinary values, one of the simplest is to distinguish between the unselfish and the selfish.

### Peter's Declaration and the Teaching of Jesus

We can see it clearly in the gospel reading for today. It is the confession of Peter at Caesaria Philippi, of course. Jesus has asked his followers what they think about him, and Peter, speaking for all of them, has confirmed him as the Messiah. Immediately Jesus begins to teach them about what this means.

He tells them that he will be arrested, beaten and killed. After predicting his own doom he gives them these timeless and provocative words;

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whomever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it."

This denial of self, the loss of the self in Christ, this is the way to life, to fulfillment, to meaning and purpose, joy and peace, it is the way to heaven. And it goes against everything we know about how to get along in the world.

In the world we must look out for ourselves, we must see to our own well-being, we must contend for our own place. And there is really no arguing the point. Just how it is that we can hold these two contradictions together?

## Gospel Values

Let me say that I am not advocating the irresponsible refusal to take care of one's own basic human needs, quite the opposite. The taking care of one's own basic needs is another way of saying that one makes an effort to be healthy in a wholistic sort of way; mind body, spirit, relationships.

Why? To what end?

We do it by embracing the gospel values. Let our two examples shine; control of the tongue and the voluntary loss of one's life for Christ. These examples stand for a comprehensive set of values that I have called, "gospel," values.

Words like greed, envy, lust, desire, covetousness, gluttony, anger, fear; they speak of a life centered around the pursuit of health for selfish ends. Jesus says that those who seek their lives in this way will lose it.

Words like honor, integrity, generosity, honesty, compassion, faith, love, and the like, speak of a life spent pursuing health for the sake of Christ, that is, to God's purposes, service to others, and Jesus says that those who lose themselves in this way, find themselves, and save their own lives.

This cross mentality is an attitude of the heart and mind and it will be reflected in our thought and speech and actions and will affect our over-all well-being. It will make us better, humans beings, better friends, family members, citizens, better witnesses for Christ; and it will lead to a deeper peace and a greater joy.

And so the prayer, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

[Back](#)

[Home](#)