

JANUARY 22, 2023

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON January 15: 'Watch Your Mouth'

This week we are continuing to stack another layer on top of what we've been looking at since the new year. How do we make a solid new year, one better than the one before? The first key we considered is our perspective and attitude. Letting go of offense and bitterness and hanging on to lessons learned and love and good things gained. This way we head into the new year without the weight of the bad and propelled forward by the good. We have greater clarity of mind and spirit to hear the Spirit and make choices that are correct before God. Then we saw how important it is to see one another through God's eyes. All of us are equal and have both the common problem of sin and the common solution of Christ. Any division is made by us, not God. In fact Paul went to great lengths to make this point, uniting us all under the banner of humanity, children of God seeking to be redeemed and find our way home to heaven.

There's yet another key to helping find our best way forward in the new year, which also helps others do the same. It's thoughtfulness and intentionality with the things that we say. To begin understanding the significance of this, let's recap our scriptures from this morning plus a couple more.

Ephesians 4

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Ephesians 5

4 Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.

Colossians 3

8 But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices

James 3

6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Proverbs 6

16 There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: 17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, 18 a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, 19 a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

Proverbs 18

6 The lips of fools bring them strife, and their mouths invite a beating. 7 The mouths of fools are their undoing, and their lips are a snare to their very lives. 8 The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts. 21 The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

Exodus 20

7 "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

First let's unpack the simple reality of the human condition. James puts it very clearly. As much control as we have over every other part of our bodies, over the behavior of wild beasts even, the one thing we have the most trouble controlling is our mouth. It can run freely and thoughtlessly. Too often we take to hear the old saying "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me." A bigger lie has never been told. Physical wounds heal, but the scars that come from harsh and cruel words lodge in the heart and mind and can last a lifetime. They are the things of depression, low esteem, hopelessness, and aloneness. Words are dangerous. As James puts it they can set a life on fire. The one speaking or the one receiving the words. With what we say we are playing with fire. As much as James paints a picture that watching our mouth is nearly impossible, the consequences of not doing our utmost to try are dire.

Look at our recent history. Rhetoric has become more openly vulgar, insulting, divisive, dismissive, and close minded. Relationships and the ability to work together and overcome common obstacles have gotten worse, not better. Aggression has grown. Misinformation has become more widespread. Treating opinion as fact has become commonplace.

Judgmental language has become so common it's almost a norm and unrecognizable as judgmental. Which is troubling given Jesus' own sentiments about the consequences of judging others.

Our own experience bears out James words written thousands of years ago.

Proverbs 18:21 goes further with the consequences of careless words. "Life and death" and "those who love it will eat its fruit." Lives can be made and destroyed with a few words. Literally and figuratively. Careless words have driven people to suicide. Careless and false words have destroyed the work of people's lives and their ability to continue to ply their trade and do good in the world. They have also turned on the speaker and turned their own lives upside down, or in other cases when the language has been correct, honest, and true uplifted and elevated a life. Either way, Proverbs reminds us that words have incredible power and consequence.

The Ten Commandments also give us a stern warning about how we speak. Not using God's name in vain. We've looked at this in a message a couple years ago. This is so much more than a curse when frustrated or stubbing a toe. It's about invoking God's name regarding anything that God does not endorse. I say "well God says thus and so", and I'm wrong. I speak hate from God's mouth when God's character is love. I make some "prophetic word" that isn't from God at all. I talk about God to make myself look hyper spiritual in the eyes of others. All of this is taking God's name in vain. The reason I believe that there is the tag line that no one who does this will be guiltless is because of the often irreparable damage it does. People speaking God's name out of turn in ways that are clearly out of step with reality or any sense of actual love, grace, and compassion do such harm to those who are seeking healing, closeness with God, and the grace to move beyond their own circumstance.

We need to be careful what we say.

The other passages talk about gossip, foul language, jokes that are hurtful, dishonesty and spreading falsehoods about those around us. To be truthful, much of what "God hates" in Proverbs begins with conversation and the words of our mouths, which puts further emphasis on the importance of watching what we say.

The question is how we set up boundaries and quality checks for what comes out of our mouths. Allow me to offer a few suggestions.

Do I have to look around to see who's listening before I make the comment?

If I'm making a comment about any particular group of people, and I know folks that I love in that group, would I say it in their presence?

In keeping with Ephesians, is what I'm saying building up others or tearing them down?

Is what I'm about to say going to deepen the divide and deepen wounds or close the divide and heal?

Am I speaking on assumption or reality?

Is what I'm saying hearsay or validated personally and with honest fact?

Do the words coming out of my mouth reflect the love and grace of Christ?

Will what I'm saying draw people to Jesus or push them away?

If the people around me overhear and know I'm a Christian, will they want to discover or write off the congregation I represent?

If I'm bold enough to say that "this is what God says", am I really sure I'm right? Am I willing to be judged by God for what I speak?

I stopped at ten. Kind of a ten commandments for what comes out of my mouth.

Moving into a new year, if we truly want to see it go for the better of all, one of the greatest tools we have to make that happen is our language. Above everything and anything, if we are the people of God, what we say should reflect that in powerful, pure, and passionate form. We do well to remember that Christ's harshest words weren't for the sinners but for those who thought themselves above the sinners and were gravely mistaken.

God is a God of truth, love, grace, compassion, kindness, and invitation and welcome. Yes, also a God of judgement, but judgement only for those who haven't opened themselves to God and given themselves over to God's purposes and more importantly, heart. Our job is to live and speak in such a way that those who don't know God feel inspired and welcomed to be introduced to God. Once that happens it's out of our hands and we trust God to work the rest out. But of what I'm saying is driving someone away from a relationship with God, that's a "me problem". One that I need to sort out because scripture is quite clear as we've seen that I'm accountable from what flies out of my mouth.

Back to James, I'm accountable because what comes out of my mouth comes from my heart. Can good and bitter water come from the same well? No. If bitter speech comes from my mouth, it's coming from a bitter heart that's out of touch with God. No matter how spiritually I couch my words. And oddly, if good, uplifting speech comes from my mouth it's coming from a heart bent towards God, even if the words aren't the most eloquent.

We need to watch what we say. It matters. It's life and death if not here and now, certainly eternally. We are the people of life. We are the people of eternity. We are the people of Christ, love, and grace. Let our words reflect that and may it build a world that more closely resembles the Kingdom of God that we hope and pray will be our eternal home.

## BIBLE STUDY: ROMANS 7

In this chapter, Paul is continuing his assessment of the Torah, the Law. We must consider what he's already said, and realize as well that each chapter is inextricably linked to both those that came before it and those that came after it. So we can be assured that Paul is going to continue to flesh this idea out as he moves forward. At first here he talks about living and dying, and where authority reigns. Authority only dominates us so long as we are alive for it to do so. If we die, the authority dies with it. He uses the image of marriage and that so long as the husband lives the wife is bound to him, but should he die she is released to do as she will. So it is with us.. If we die to the Law, we are then freed to pursue another authority to bind to.

Something worth noting here is that there is no sense that we will wander stray. If we die to the Law, we still need to be bound to God. Something needs to connect us and inspire us to do what is right in the sight of God. We die to the Law so that we can be bound to God through Christ and the Spirit. The marriage image is solid as the church is often referred to as the "bride of Christ." The church is married to Him. As the ones who make up the body that is the church, we are to be married to Him as well.

Paul's statement that we die to the Law to be servants through Christ and led by the Spirit as opposed to some "written code" are significant. When he uses the term "flesh", it's not so much reference to the physical body. What he refers to is that we are corruptible or rebellious. Flesh=corruption. If we are looking for life, and the Kingdom of Heaven, there is a double meaning here in terms of corruption and death. First, corruption can't enter heaven. As such we need something to make up the difference since we are corruptible creatures. This is the grace we receive through Christ. Through Jesus we can enter the eternity of heaven when we pass because He cleans the corruption and helps us put on those "immortal" and "imperishable" bodies referred to in Corinthians. Second is more here and now. What keeps us from experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven in this world is that we give in to our corruptible nature. The more we are able to let the Spirit help us overcome that nature, the more we experience and build the Kingdom of Heaven here in this world. There is also the sense of the difference between the covenant of the Law and the covenant of grace. The Law was given on stone tablets. It was external, something to be seen, memorized, and obeyed. It was broad and as we'll see each law was an anchor for temptation. The covenant of grace is written on the heart. It is internal and moving.

The heart piece is incredibly important. The continuation of the chapter points to the problem of the Law, or kind of the problem of the Law. As previously shared, the Law while it can't defeat sin, it points out what is and is not sin. The sin Paul lands on is coveting. The thing about coveting is that it is the one sin that is entirely internal. It is entirely of the heart. The rest can be seen. They can be witnessed. Yet I could be coveting anything around me and no one would know because it's all desire. Certainly coveting can lead to other sin in order to obtain what is coveted. But the sin itself is purely of the heart.

As Paul starts speaking about sin as a kind of living entity inside us he is changing the conceptual playing field. The Law and sin were all external. Dealing with it was external. Forgiving it was external through sacrifice. Under Christ, however, it is in the heart. The idea of sin has been dialed in specifically and narrowly to an inward condition of the heart. This condition can be dealt with in the heart, which is God's domain. Yes, we must respond, but there is no time or place that God can and will not be trying to enter our hearts for the sake of transformation.

His notion is that the sin inside of us, our nature, our temptation, actually found a way to twist the commandments to its own advantage. Paul speaks of a time apart from sin, when sin was "dead" and then a time when sin "sprung to life". He is using images to help us understand a reality. Time apart from sin was time before the Law. Before the Law there was nothing to point out what was and was not sin. It didn't mean that wrongdoing(sin) didn't exist. Remember, we read earlier that the fact that death existed was the sign that sin existed as well. People just weren't aware it was sinful. How does this make sin "dead"? It's not so much dead as diminished in power and influence.

If I am doing wrong things, the wrong that I do dies when I do. Certainly I may have inspired others to follow along, but the overall impact is not necessarily widespread. On the other hand once we write down a formal set of things that are considered sin, and spread it to everyone, now everyone is aware of every sin. They are thinking about it and even drawn to it. To go back to coveting, no matter how many people pass away who are covetous, every person that has the Law is now aware of it and tempted by it. As Paul references elsewhere, we shouldn't be dwelling on the things we shouldn't do, but rather what we should. Because what we think about we are more apt to actually commit in action. So in a perverse twisting, the sin nature inside of us sees the Law as an opportunity to tempt and persuade us that the more we're not supposed to do something the more we should want to do it. Sin "springs to life" under the Law.

Paul is now separating two things, our nature to sin and the Law itself. Before Paul says the Law is of no real effect, but this is in regards to salvation or making someone better than another. Here he corrects any misconception that the Law is bad. It is not. It is what the sin living in us does with it that is bad.

The first issue of temptation came with the Garden and Adam and Eve. The serpent tempted and immediately they gave in. But temptation didn't necessarily have a formal guideline to what we are allowed to give in to. Through Moses and the Law now the guideline exists and temptation increases exponentially. And as Moses was getting this next level of

rules to inspire temptation what did the people do? They made an idol and engaged in “riotous” parties. Just like in the garden, immediate giving in. The consequence was that Moses ground the golden idol into powder and put in water that he made the people drink. This metaphor is so apt for what Paul is getting at here. They ingested their sin. Sin became a part of them in their innermost parts. Paul’s further argument is precisely this. Sin and temptation are not external forces acting on us. They are internal forces already there using what is external as focal points of temptation.

The Law then is good, holy, and righteous. The purpose behind it is noble and divine. It is our sin nature that is the culprit. It literally takes what was intended for life and uses it to bring about death. This is why he tells us it makes sin UTTERLY sinful. There is no question, there is no excuse it is fully wicked. Think about it some other terms.

Imagine something is created specifically for the purpose of doing evil. Then someone uses it to do evil. That’s not a stretch. Yes, it’s still evil and bad, but it’s a logical line to draw that what is created for evil will be used for evil. That takes no creativity. It takes nothing more than following the operating instructions.

On the other hand what about something created for the purpose of doing only good? We’ve had an example of this recently. There was an HIV drug that was effective and initially at a cost of about \$13.50 per pill to \$750. The motive of this is pure and simple, greed. Something created purely for good twisted for a wicked purpose. This is a different sort of evil. There is malice and cruelty there. It is taking advantage of desperation for the intention of padding the wallet. This takes creativity. It takes a willingness to uproot the goodness of something and turn it to hardship and wickedness. It is UTTERLY sinful.

Then comes the don’t do what I should and do what I shouldn’t passages. This should be relatable to all of us, particularly if we have ever tried to kick a bad habit. We know what’s right and that temptation is just so strong. We give in and give in until one day hopefully we don’t. This isn’t something unique to any individual. All of us experience it. The frustration is quite real. In fact we may even feel like Paul here if the frustration is deep enough. No matter what we do we feel like it’s not good enough because we keep dwelling on our inability to overcome that habit. We can grow to feel worthless. But there’s something to keep in mind...

Paul is speaking in exaggeration here. Look at your own last day or couple days. Have you done anything good? I’m willing to bet you have. You’ve probably done many good things. Just like even a small sin counts so does a “small” good thing. It’s impossible for us to be all bad. If God is love and we are made in God’s image, then we are made in the image of love. Something good resides in us, and experience bears out that all of us have the capacity to good and right. We’re not perfect. But we’re also not wholly without goodness. This idea of worthlessness is one of Christianity’s great Achilles’ heels. We give lip service to “I’m worthless” but those around us see something different and realize we’re just parroting what someone else told us is spiritual to say. It rings disingenuous.

The point made here is that we all struggle with sin, and struggle hard sometimes. Because it’s something that is deep inside us pulling us away from God’s way. Paul puts it as a struggle between two laws, God’s and sin’s. Both are present. He’s also setting us up for something. He gives us the antidote for this sin affliction we have, Jesus. “Thanks be to God!” He’s recognizing that despite what sin works in him there’s an answer and escape, Christ. So this sense of sin being the culprit isn’t the end of it all. It’s not even an excuse. We might be tempted to read this as being able to blame sin on sin nature and exonerate ourselves but this is not where he’s headed. Let’s head back to the golden calf.

The idea here is that they ingested their sin and we now have sin living inside of us. But is that the only thing that lives within us? The Spirit also lives within us. If sin is indwelt so is the Spirit. And we have our ability to choose. There may be a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other but we still get to decide which one to follow. What is Paul’s message here? The Law is good, sin dwells inside all of us, but thanks be to God we have the answer in Jesus Christ!