

If You Can't Say Something Nice.....

Sirach 5:9-12; James 1:19-26

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Introduction to scripture:

I have been preaching through the Hebrew Scriptures and the historical periods of the Jewish people, and before we turn to the New Testament next week, I want to look briefly at a genre of biblical writings that don't fit easily into a historical category and that is the genre of Wisdom writings. The biblical wisdom writings are those writings that are less concerned about sweeping theological arguments or historical events and more about daily living. These are the books that often include short pithy statements that can be rendered in needlepoint and hung on your wall to help guide your daily behavior, statements like "A slack hand causes poverty but the hand of the diligent makes rich." (Proverbs 10:4) The book of Proverbs is the best example of wisdom writing because though it is generally dated to the time of the Israelite monarchy, is a timeless book of wisdom applicable to all periods of human history whenever people are trying to figure out the best way to live peacefully with one another and live upright decent lives.

In the New Testament, the book of James is considered an example of wisdom writing. James was written sometime during the life of the early Christian church and it has some parallels with another book called Sirach which had been around for about 150 years before James wrote his book. If you open a Bible in a Catholic Church, you will find the book of Sirach but you won't find it here in our pew Bibles because Martin Luther removed it from the Protestant Bible saying that while he found it edifying, he didn't think it was theological enough to keep in the sacred canon. Luther would have removed the book of James as well but it had the name of Jesus' brother attached to it, which stayed his hand. Scholars today admit that they have no idea if it was really written by the same James who was the brother of Jesus since James was a popular name among first century Jews but I for one am glad for the tradition because it kept Luther from eliminating one of my favorite books of the Bible.

The readings today, then, are from the book of Sirach and the book of James.

Sirach 5:9-12

Do not winnow in every wind or follow every path.

Stand firm for what you know, and let your speech be consistent.

Be quick to hear, but deliberate in answering.

If you know what to say, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand over your mouth.

James 1:19-26

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will

be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

My parents had a rule; a rule common in many families and unfortunately followed by too few. The rule was: if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. Most often we were reminded of this rule only after we had violated it: there were five children in my family, with two years between each of us, and though we for the most part got along, inevitably our frustrations with each other would boil over and we would vent our spleens by slinging nasty names and harsh judgments upon each other. While my parents also reminded us that while sticks and stones may break our bones, words can never hurt us, they knew that that particular proverb was more wishful thinking than anything else. Words *can* hurt. They can cut and sting, and fester in our hearts long after the speaker has left the room. Consequently, my parents tried to be proactive by telling us that holding our tongues, no matter how difficult it might be, would leave everyone safe from the potential harm of thoughtless unkind words.

Although almost all of us probably grew up with the same rule it seems that upon reaching adulthood, way too often we leave the rule behind. Sure, few of us are apt to taunt our colleagues in the workplace with a ringing, "Noodle head! Noodle head!" or yell across the street at our neighbor, "Hey, bean pole! Where'd you get those scarecrow pants?!" but just because we have become more subtle doesn't mean we have learned how to hold our tongues. Instead of nasty names, we now cast "well intentioned criticism" or hollow opinion or unasked for advice. And of course, Facebook and Twitter have become the 21st century equivalent of the junior high locker room where taunts, mockery, and criticisms are standard fare. Cyril Garbett, who was the Archbishop of York in the early 20th century once said, "Any fool can criticize and many of them do."

"If you know what to say, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand over your mouth," Sirach said.

"Be quick to listen, slow to speak," said James.

"If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," said my parent.

The wisdom writers knew that the tongue has the power to wound and fracture relationships. While as Christians, we spend a lot of time talking about pursuing social justice and relieving the needs of the poor, of loving our enemies and caring for our neighbors as ourselves, these large projects of discipleship can be undone by a simple neglect of our daily interactions. We speak without thinking and then excuse our sharp words with "I just like to tell it like it is," or we give our opinions when no one has asked for them felling others with our criticisms couched as "advice." Our Christian character isn't demonstrated just in the big things — in how much we give to the Mission of the Month or how many times we work at the food pantry or how many hours we volunteer in our community — our Christian character is also revealed in the small interactions, in the way we speak to our spouse, to our neighbor, to our friends, and to our children. Unasked for criticisms, constant little sarcasms, spiteful words, and words that demean do as much to fracture the peace that God desires as a neglect of social justice. Several years ago, a clergy friend went through a difficult time in her church after the congregation voted to remodel the church kitchen. The members of the building committee spent months meeting with architects and contractors on the new design, and were diligent in their tasks, yet when the building began, the committee became quite discouraged.

“No one ever tells us how much they appreciate our work,” they told my friend, their pastor. “All we hear are criticisms.”

Every person in the congregation felt that he or she knew best how the kitchen should be designed and they all freely offered their opinions without thought for the feelings of the exhausted committee: the paint was the wrong color, the windows should have been larger, why did they put the island there and not here? that tile will be hard to clean, and on and on.

“It is threatening to tear our church apart,” my friend admitted.

Ironically, the day after she told me about her frustration, I had a chance to visit the remodeled basement and as I walked into the kitchen, I almost said, “That’s a strange place for a refrigerator.” Fortunately I bit my tongue in time and managed to avoid contributing to the steady debilitating drip of criticism yet in that moment, I realized how easy it is to sling our opinions and our judgments with little fear about where those stones are falling. No wonder Sirach said, “If you know what to say, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand over your mouth.”

“Be quick to listen, slow to speak.”

“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”

Why are we so quick to throw out careless judgments and so slow to realize the sting those judgments may cause? I think a lot of our behavior stems from an insecurity about ourselves. Each of us faces many choices in our lives and we like to think that the choices we have made are the right ones. We need to feel that we are intelligent people — experienced, wise, knowledgeable — and that our wisdom has led us to make good and right decisions. In order to bolster confidence in that self-identity as smart people, we criticize anyone whose choices are different from our own. If we think that black cars are the only color a car should be, that opinion is questioned whenever anyone purchases a white car, and so instead of saying, “Congratulations on your new car. It looks fun,” we say without thinking, “Boy, that white car is going to be a pain to keep clean.” Perhaps our ideas about the color of cars can be held more lightly but other choices — moral choices, decisions about lifestyle, career, and family decisions — are more personally revealing choices, and in order to feel more confident in our own choices, we take to social media to tear down those who chose differently. The most vocal opponents of certain moral choices may have unconfessed doubts about their own choices. Self doubt leads to self righteousness and self righteousness leads to alienation.

When I was in college, my sisters and I sang a song in which the lyrics said, “They don’t use turn signals, too much fuss; they don’t say thanks or vote like us; they all talk too loud, too fast, and too much; what does old world needs is more folks like us.”

The chorus then goes on to show the results of this onslaught of judgment: “We all hate the people who hate us too, and they hate us because we hate you. We all hate the people who hate like you; we hate people who hate people like me and you.”

After a flight of criticism on everything from the way people drink coffee to the way they sing in church, we hear the irony in the last stanza: “Now you may think that this song’s absurd, I don’t deny it I hate every word; but you know those people to whom we referred, they wrote this song... Those spiteful nerds.”

Our small criticisms and casual judgments of one another has terrible consequences, breaking down our relationships with others and casting us far from the peace that God desires. Criticism leads to alienation and the breakdown of relationships. The peace that God desires becomes impossible.

And so the Bible warns, "If you know what to say, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand over your mouth."

"Be quick to listen, slow to speak."

"If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

Or there is another way. If you have problems keeping your mouth shut, maybe you need to move your feet. Rather than standing across from others, step across the gap and stand with them: try to see the world as they see it, try to feel what they are feeling. Stop worrying about bolstering your own ego and self-certainty but think only of what it is like to be them. This is the way in which God chose to bring us salvation. God chose to cross the gap between heaven and earth and stand with us in the person of Christ so that God's love for us would not be cast like a judgment across the cosmos but would be experienced as we walked this road together. Jesus didn't condemn the tax collectors but sat down with them and shared a meal with them. He didn't cast stones at the adulterous but took her hand and listened to her story. He helped the outcast because he became as an outcast with them. He raised the poor because he himself walked in poverty. And Christ continues to stand not across from us but with us, becoming one with our sorrows, our gladness, our troubles, and our questions. And we are made whole by Christ's presence with us in all things: when you seek his guidance, you do so because you trust that he will first listen, that he will know your pain and will not judge your fears. We, as the followers of Christ, are called to be the makers of peace. Sometimes this will mean standing up for social justice and seeking an end to war and violence but most of the time it will mean watching our tongues, putting our hands over our mouths, and moving our feet before we speak to stand with others in understanding and mercy. It will mean loving others as Christ has first loved us.