

I. Intro.:

A. Summertime is often the wedding season, but we haven't had a Waterford Church wedding here for at least 2 or 3 years ... / wonder what's up with that? Is there something in the water?

1. Anyway, Pastor Cindy or I, or both of us together, are often the pastors officiating weddings here. Premarital counseling is an important part of preparation to get married, and Cindy & I take that seriously with couples
2. We do premarital counseling using a well-tested inventory called PREPARE. In it, we review about a dozen different topics with the couple, and how their responses are similar or different
 - a) We go over topics like handling conflict, family history, relationships with friends, finances, sex and more
 - b) In my experience there is one topic in premarital counseling that we return to again and again ... probably the single most important one for a successful marriage: Can you guess what it is? COMMUNICATION

B. In this series, we have already spent several Sundays focusing on our relationships with other people:

1. We had a Sunday related to peacemaking and Bible School
2. The high school youth led us in a Sunday on service and group dynamics, under the title "beautifully complicated"
3. We even had a Sunday on how technology impacts these relationships

C. This morning I want to dip into what counsel the Bible can give us on communication, which is one of the most important aspects of ALL interpersonal relationships, not just in marriage

1. So I'll start with a caveat: These NT texts on communication were not intended broadly for all interpersonal relationships
2. The context of these Scriptures we heard from James & Ephesians is specifically within the church ... it's about relationships with fellow believers and disciples of Jesus Christ
 - a) I do think much of today's message may be useful for relating to non-Xians or to the general public, but we need to understand the context of these epistles
 - b) For example, as we'll see later, this context will make a difference in how we handle anger

(1) Being angry at institutions or at societal injustice is different from us being angry at our spouse or a fellow church member.

(2) These kinds of anger have different causes and they call for different responses.

II. So let's examine what these Scripture passages have to tell us about communication

A. As I looked at both NT texts I noticed they were full of commands & suggestions to the followers of Jesus

1. So when I was studying them, I made a simple list of each action word ... each verb or participle I found. There were 14 of them

a) For this Sunday dedicated to the subject of communication, I decided just to focus on observable external actions that affect other people

b) After that I condensed that list into 4 main categories of biblical instruction on communication

2. The 1st of these 4 is something we already heard about with Fancheon and the children: that we should be quicker to listen to others than to speak.

3. The 2nd major instruction to us in these texts is about lying and truthfulness.

a) This is the source of that famous phrase "speaking the truth in love".

b) Just as we should do more listening than speaking, it is sound counsel in our relationships to put away falsehood and speak truth with each other

c) But it would take another sermon or 2 to really preach about the godly value of listening, and of truthfulness, and we don't have that time today

B. Now I invite us to explore the other 2 broad biblical instructions about communication with other believers

III. The 1st main instruction for our communications is about the content of our speaking

A. This comes mostly from Eph. 4:29 (*read again*)

1. It's about what comes out of our mouths and how it affects other people

2. There are various English translations about what we shouldn't say: no evil talk ... nothing foul or unwholesome

3. Instead, we are to speak only what is good for building others up, only what benefits or gives grace to the hearer

B. No evil or unwholesome talk coming out of our mouths ...

Wow! Has anyone here succeeded at this ... no unwholesome talk coming out of your mouth for a whole week?

1. I believe this prohibition pertains to slander we speak against others ... to insults we hurl and to poisonous gossip that we spread

2. There's a lot we could say about those unwholesome ways of speaking but today I want to especially name one example: foul language & obscenities

a) Some of you may quickly ask, "What's there to talk about? All vulgar language is evil talk, and all of it is wrong!"

b) Well, almost anyone who has seen any popular TV or films in the past 10 years knows that the societal standards for acceptable language have hugely relaxed in our lifetimes.

c) Whether we like it or not, blue language does not shock our ears today the way it used to some decades ago, becoming ever more casual

C. So what does a text like this mean when it comes to using vulgar language or obscenities?

1. This is not, by the way, the only Bible passage speaking negatively about foul language

a) Just a few verses later, in Eph. 5:4 we hear a prohibition against obscenity and coarse joking (*read aloud NIV*)

b) And in the book of Colossians, chapter 3 verse 8, there's also a warning against using filthy language (*read aloud NIV*)

2. Well first here's my confession:

a) I'm not one to rigidly ban all vulgar language ever, ever. For starters, some words are definitely worse than others

b) I have occasionally been heard to use a word or two that I would not use in church, because people have different sensitivities to such language

3. The reality is I usually avoid such words because of the very real risk that they could harm someone else's faith, or because they would not be uplifting to the hearers.

a) Here's my own rule of thumb: If it's something we can't say without bleeping it out on the air, or substituting asterisks in print, then we Xians also should not use it, unless we absolutely know it will not be offensive or harmful to others

b) I believe most of our daily conversations, when we're tempted to swear, would not meet that standard!

c) Again, even if the listener and you the speaker are not offended or harmed by obscenities, the Bible tells us the words out of our mouths should be for building people up, for strengthening their faith and for thanking God!

(1) BTW, I'm not just talking about actually saying the bad words.

(2) We live in a social media world that likes to use abbreviations – Some of you in your messaging use shortcuts like IDK, or IMHO all the time (*I don't know* and *In my humble opinion*)

4. It's also very easy for abbreviations to be a code for hiding the bad words.

a) Just because we don't actually use the obscenity but we abbreviate it instead does not get us off the hook as Christians.

b) Whether or not you think obscenities or their abbreviations are harmless, the next time you hear yourself saying one (or see your fingers making one appear on the screen) ask yourself, "Why did I say that?" Ask yourself ... "Was it ...

(1) To get a cheap laugh? because everyone else does it?

(2) To impress someone? Something that strengthened or weakened my Christian witness?

5. The ultimate test for the appropriateness of language we use with each other is not whether the word is on somebody's no-no list.

a) The test is whether we are building people up & spiritually benefitting others with our words!

b) Sometimes I have regretted occasional colorful language I've used when I was aiming for a cheap laugh. This was because I found out later that I had lost respect as a Xian in someone else's eyes due to what I said.

c) As followers of Jesus I believe that the harm thus done, within the larger body of Christ, is just not worth it! (*repeat Eph. 4:29a*)

D. So the Bible has instructed us about the content of what comes out of our mouths, including evil or foul talk ...

IV. Now let's talk about an emotion that is often in play when obscenities do come out: ANGER

A. Both Eph. 4:26 & our key verse from James 1 mention anger, the 2nd subject of instruction for us on communication

1. We all feel anger from time to time.

a) There are some people who rather enjoy the intensity & adrenaline rush they feel when they're angry.

b) On the other hand, many of us try very hard to avoid or suppress anger. We often feel self-conscious or even ashamed of our anger.

2. I admit that, because of the way I was raised, I'm uncomfortable feeling angry, or even being around angry people.

a) Even after 32 years, one of the growing edges for me as a husband is to honestly but appropriately express when I'm angry with Janette

b) Too often I'm so afraid of saying something hurtful to her in the moment, that I just stuff my feelings inside & try to suppress them

c) In the long run, this leads to unhelpful dynamics between us, like built-up resentment & my unloading stuff on her out of the blue

3. Unconsciously I grew up equating anger with sin ... but a careful reading of today's texts will show that is an incorrect conclusion

a) Ephesians 4:26 is a critical verse in the Bible on the subject of anger.

(1) Part of the verse is a direct quote from the Greek version of Ps. 4:4 ... which says *In your anger, do not sin* ... or in another translation *When you are disturbed, do not sin*.

(2) The NRSV of Eph. 4:26 gives it to us as an imperative: *Be angry but do not sin*. [Did you know there's a place in the Bible that actually tells you to go ahead and be angry?]

b) So right there we see a differentiation that anger and sin are not equivalent ... it is possible to be angry and yet not sin.

c) But the fact that the warning about sin even has to be made, reminds us of how very easy it is to sin when we are angry

B. Now, rather than talking more about anger in the abstract I'm going to try to get you to feel angry! (well, not exactly, but I want to put you in touch with your own anger)

1. At the risk of distracting you from the rest of this sermon, I'd like you to do a quiet exercise, just where you're sitting:

a) So close your eyes, take a deep breath and temporarily remove yourself mentally from being in church.

b) Try to recall the last time you were angry & you expressed that anger in a way that someone else knew you were angry ... I'm not talking about secret anger that you kept to yourself

(1) It could be words that you said or shouted at someone, or it could be actions that you took silently, like slamming a door

(2) Maybe it was a few days ago or maybe it was just this morning before church & you'd rather not be reminded of it

c) Be specific with that situation in your mind for a little: *What provoked your anger? In your anger, what did you say? What did you do?*

(1) I know this memory may not be pleasant but stay with it long enough to move beyond how the memory makes you feel. Try not to obsess about how someone or something did you wrong

(2) Instead, please answer 1 question silently to yourself before we conclude this exercise: In your expression of that anger, did you sin?

(a) Remember, the angry feeling itself was not sinful, but were your words or actions from that anger sinful?

(b) Or did you perhaps find some way to appropriately & righteously express that anger?

(c) Let's take another moment with our eyes closed just to ponder, "Did you sin?" (20 second pause)

2. OK please open your eyes and thanks for humoring me in a sermon that might have felt more like a therapy session to you

C. I'm curious what this exercise did to you. I recognize there are several possible responses that it may have prompted in you:

1. 1st of all, maybe the memory of your anger response is so upsetting, so immediate that you can't focus on the rest of my words.

a) If so, I'll accept that blame & I apologize for burdening you.

b) If you need to leave or just tune me out, I accept that. And if you want to later tell me how much it upset you, I'll hear you out

c) I do encourage anyone disturbed by this memory to do what it says in the Bible: Don't let the sun go down on your anger ... Find a way to apologize to someone you hurt, or to soften whatever you did in anger.

2. But maybe you're not upset right now ... maybe that angry memory no longer makes you boil over inside

a) If you can let that angry feeling come and just let it go, then I invite you to reflect more on the sin question

b) If you recognize that you sinned, accept God's loving forgiveness, if you haven't already. Just receive it!

c) Ponder how you might avoid sinning in the future when you're angry

3. A third possible response to this exercise is that you actually were angry but didn't sin!

a) Maybe you carefully and honestly shared how you were feeling with the person you were angry with, and together the 2 of you worked it out ...

If so, praise God!

b) Or maybe you were incredibly angry at some injustice in the world today ... maybe your friend allowed you just to vent without judging you. & then maybe that friend helped you find a way to positively channel that anger, like writing a passionate letter to a government official

c) If the Spirit of God guided you through your anger without committing sin against God or someone else, then say a big "hallelujah" and give thanks to God! I would love to hear about that experience as well, so I could rejoice with you!

D. My friends, what the Bible tells us in Eph. 4:26 is a very tall order indeed! "Don't let the sun go down on your anger!" it says.

1. In other words, take action to remedy the situation ... don't let your anger fester ... don't nurse that grudge, feeling sorry for yourself as you plan your revenge. I know I've struggled sometimes to obey that command!

2. When anger gets control over us & we give in to it, sin is usually the result, but praise God that Christ Jesus forgives us ... even when we've been guilty of holding grudges way beyond sundown!

V. Conclusion: It's time to wind this down

A. I realize for some of you, this may simply be remembered as the sermon Neil challenged you about cussing and made you feel bad about getting angry

B. But if there's one other thing I hope you remember today about godly communication, it's this: when it comes to what you say and don't say ... It's not about you!

1. Being silent or speaking ... lying or truthfulness ... cutting out foul language ... not sinning in our anger: What do these four communication instructions all have in common?

a) What they have in common is who benefits from them: other people and the church as a whole

b) Underlying all of these instructions within church life is the aim to build others up and to strengthen the unity of the church, not to result in personal gain

2. If we're honest too often in conversations we are basically self-absorbed and looking out for ourselves:

a) we're trying to prove our points, deciding whether to bend the truth, deciding whether to use some choice words, and giving free rein to anger

- b) It's basically doing the unhelpful communication behaviors that Jim named at the beginning of the service
- c) The natural instinctive motivation for most of our conversations, even in the church, is "What's in it for me?" ... In other words:

(1) What will protect my interests? How can I prove I'm right?

(2) What will make me look good? How can I avoid losing face with this group of people?

And as the conversation progresses, no matter how lofty or interesting the topic, the bottom line for what we say and how we say it is often "What's in it for me?"

3. But the powerful message from Ephesians about how we communicate in the church does NOT assume self-interest. Instead whatever we say or don't say is for the purpose of benefitting others!

- a) If our words aren't aimed at building others up in the body of Christ, then maybe we shouldn't be saying them!
- b) When we Christians are talking (in our churches, in our families), the operative question is not "What's in it for me?" but rather "How will this affect all of us?"

C. Brothers and sisters, let us live and relate and communicate with one another in grace, in truth, and in speech that builds up the body of Christ

D. Let us go out today, living by our key verse from James 1:19 – Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Amen