

# “This Epistle of Straw: 2) The Power of the Tongue”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

June 11, 2006

**Text: “So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire” (James 3:5).**

Words matter! I was reminded of that this past week when I saw the reports of the remarks that a conservative political writer, Ann Coulter, made concerning some of the widows of men killed in the events of September 11, 2001. She called them “harpies,” “witches of Brunswick,” and accused them of using their status as widows of such a tragedy for political and personal reasons. Her remarks created a firestorm of protest. Senator Hillary Clinton called her remarks “mean spirited.” Some defended her. Others questioned whether she had not crossed the line of public and responsible behavior in such a vicious attack.

## I.

During the Sundays of June we are looking again at the Book of James, one of the small but important books in the New Testament. As I noted this past week, the Book of James has received its share of criticism throughout the history of the church. The struggle with the book of James began early in the life of the church. Both Eusebius, in the ancient Greek Church, and Jerome, in the Latin Church, accepted it as authentic. But the Syrian Church, led by Theodore Mopsuestia, excluded it from the New Testament canon. The real blow came during the Sixteenth Century when the great Protestant Reformer called the Book of James “an Epistle of straw” and threatened to throw it into the fire.

Others have reached a very different conclusion. James Adamson, a Presbyterian minister in California, finds in it “an ageless appeal” that addresses some of the most important questions of our time: the importance of faith and works, the enormous power of words, as well as the ethical dilemma that is presented in the Christian community concerning wealth.

## II.

This morning we speak of the “Power of the Tongue.” The writer of the Book of James is the only author I know in Scripture that devotes himself to this subject in such detail. He understands the power of words. The tongue, notes James, is a small member of the body, but it has the power to set forests on fire. “The tongue,” says James, “is a fire.” We can tame beasts, he observes, but we cannot contain the tongue.

In speaking of the power of words, James draws on two metaphors from common life. The first is the “bit” that is in the mouth of the horse. It too is small, but it controls the direction of the horse. The second metaphor is the rudder of a ship. Like the tongue it is small, but it has the power to determine the direction of a great ship.

James goes on to say that the tongue has a dual power. It has the power to bless and it has the power to curse.

## III.

To be sure, words have the power to bring great blessing. In his biography, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, Heiko Oberman points to the power of Luther’s words to change the course of Western history. At the small town of Worms in Germany this obscure Augustinian monk stood in the presence of the German Emperor. The Catholic Church had excommunicated Luther. He was now being told that he must recant his writings. Those who observed him saw that he was frightened and under enormous pressure. He asked for an additional day to prepare his thoughts. Luther knew that he was poorly prepared for the role that had been thrust upon him. He did not have the eloquence or scholarly skills of someone as accomplished as the humanist Erasmus.

His only comfort was in his conscience and in the power of the Word of God. So Luther responded to the German Emperor, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, for going against my conscience is neither safe nor salutary. I can do no other, here I stand, God help me. Amen.”

No one understood the power of words better than Jesus. One of the great legacies that he has bestowed on us is the power of his teachings, which today are as equally powerful as they were two thousand years ago.

This past Sunday I mentioned a book that I had recently come across by Harvey Cox, who for a long time has taught at Harvard Divinity and at Harvard College. The title of Cox’s book is *When Jesus Came to Harvard* and in it he chronicles a remarkable experiment in which

he was engaged for fifteen years. In the early 1980's Cox and some of his colleagues observed that while many graduates of Harvard were distinguishing themselves in the fields of business, law, and medicine, there was a severe vacuum in the teaching of ethics. Cox's research pointed out that the last professor at Harvard who had taught a subject with Jesus as the subject retired in 1912. The result of these reflections prompted Cox to teach a course that he entitled "Jesus and the Moral Life." The course became so popular that eventually it drew over 800 students each year and had to be moved to one of the larger venues at the University.

In one of his classes Cox spoke of the power of Jesus' words, particularly, "The Sermon on the Mount." For the most part Jesus did not delve in politics. He did call King Herod a "fox" on one occasion, but for the most part Jesus did not try to advise King Herod or Pontius Pilate, a practice that I wish a lot more ministers today followed.

Jesus spoke in a different way. He told his followers that they were to become "the light of the world" and the "salt of the earth." Now, to some degree Jesus was poking fun at the Roman Empire. Cicero once described Rome as "the light of the world," but Jesus saw a different kind of light. He believed that if his followers would provide warmth and illumination they could change the world, and they did.

But toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said something that, to the amazement of many people, has informed the practice of some of the most admirable political figures of our time. He spoke of "not resisting those who wrong you, of turning the other cheek, of going the second mile."

For almost two thousand years no one paid much attention to these words. To be sure, there were individuals who tried to live by these words, but for the most part this aspect of Jesus' teaching was ignored. In the early part of the twentieth century someone did take the core insight of Jesus' teaching and translate it into a strategy of a powerful social movement. That person was Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy of nonviolence brought the British Empire to its knees and freedom to the nation of India. Gandhi was not a Christian, but he admired Jesus not only as a teacher who taught, but also as one who put his teachings into practice. When Gandhi's biographer Louis Fisher visited him in his tiny cottage in 1942, he found only one picture on the wall. It was a picture of Jesus with the words "He is our Peace" underneath.

This same philosophy of nonviolence had a powerful effect on a young African-American minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. who adopted the principles of Jesus and Gandhi to the Civil Rights Movement. King's example of nonviolent resistance also inspired liberation movements in East Germany and in Czechoslovakia.

#### IV.

But as the Book of James so eloquently points out, words have not only the power to bless; they have the power to curse as well.

Words spoken in anger and in haste can do immeasurable damage. Children's lives can be terribly harmed by the verbal abuse that is sometimes heaped upon them by adults. The same is true for adults as well. They too know the hurt that can sometimes be afflicted by husbands on wives, wives on husbands, by parents on children, and children on parents.

Nowhere is the misuse of words more dangerous than in the life of the church. Gossip, slander, and the spreading of malicious attacks on people in the church have often done far more damage in the church than overt acts of sexual immorality.

Recently, a friend of mine who is a minister of a church told me of an experience that took place at a Session meeting. It was a contentious meeting and there was a lot of discussion on many important questions and some of the discussion was quite sharp. There was, she said, one elder who could not hold his tongue. He was constantly arguing, berating other Session members, and chastising the minister. On and on it went. Finally, as the meeting was winding down and everyone was getting more and more impatient with this one elder, he made one final attempt to dominate the conversation. "Can I just say one more thing?," he asked. My friend Cathy, who before she attended seminary had graduated from Georgetown Law School, looked at him with a stern face and said, "NO!" The session immediately stood up and applauded.

In Shakespeare's great play *King Lear* there is a line that says, "the weight of these sad times we must obey." Surely, we are living in a time where there are great divisions in our society. As a nation, we are divided about the War in Iraq. We are divided about the proper response to the wave of immigration that is coming into this country from Mexico and Latin America. As the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) prepares to meet this week in Birmingham, Alabama, the church will again be struggling with very difficult and often divisive issues.

As a church, we are called to stand for truth. We are called to live under the authority of Christ, the head of the church, and the authority of Scripture as the Word of God.

But as Christians, we are also called to "speak the truth in love."

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days!

Amen!