

# WORDS FROM THE WISE

---

Applying the Practices that Lift People Up | James 3:13-18

## *Remarkable Relationships (Part 4)*

### **A Way with Words**

Last week we asked the question: "How is it that some of the relationships we have with others begin so well and yet end so poorly? In the early stages of a relationship, our sense of connection with someone else is lifted up by a set of wonderful desires. But then, over time, we begin to face the fact that we're in relationship with someone who is different than us in dramatic ways, someone who is no more perfect than we are, and the friction of dealing with these realities really begins to test our ability to communicate.

As we explored in depth last week, it is in this stage of the relationship that many of us resort to a pattern of speaking (or not speaking) that involves criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. It got *very* quiet in the room and *very* uncomfortable in my own insides when I talked about these things last week – for an obvious reason. This is where a lot of us have lived. Obviously, no single bad interaction is going to destroy a relationship. But the cumulative effect of a poor way with words is devastating. It makes the kite of our connections plummet far below what we ever expected or, in too many cases, brings the relationship crashing down completely. **"My brothers and sisters,"** writes the apostle James, **"this should not be"** (Jas 7:10).

Think about your own life. Do you want to ascend to the heights of truly remarkable relationships? It is always possible; but it may require developing a wiser way with words than is our pattern to date. In our Bible text for today, James explicitly defines the character of the wisdom that God wants to inform our speaking with one another. James writes: **"The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."** What would it look like for those qualities to mark even the difficult conversations you need to have with others? And how might this transform the relationships we have?

One way of thinking about all this is to imagine purposefully replacing those weighty words we often attach to the kite string of our conversations with four different ways of speaking instead. Think of them as like balloons, each filled with the wise spirit James describes.

### **The Balloon of Encouragement**

Doug McKinley says that in the many couples and families he counsels, the first replacement needed is a fundamental shift from a pattern of criticism to one of ENCOURAGEMENT. As I said last week, every significant relationship requires some conversation about performance – about how each of us is acting in respect to the

expectations we bring into the circle. There has to be a place to file earnest complaints, lodge reasonable requests, offer important feedback. The reality, however, is that we are often chronically critical and judgmental with one another. We think we are being motivated by wisdom in what we say.

But James says that **“the wisdom that comes from heaven is... full of mercy and good fruit.”** To be full of mercy means that you cut people slack. It means you do not slam them at the level they may deserve. To be full of good fruit means that you enter into conversations in a manner that is deliberately patient, kind, good-hearted, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled – because this is what the Bible says is the mark and manner of people really filled with the Spirit of God (Gal 5:22-23). A good rule of thumb is: If I cannot speak my mind filled with that spirit, then I should not speak. I should count to ten or ten million, if necessary, all the while praying: “God, fill me more.” I should raise a complaint only when I am able to do it in that way – unless I don’t really intend to be a follower of Jesus. In that case, I’m free to blast away. But, if so, I’m going to have relationships that aren’t too remarkable.

To be full of good fruit also means to be someone able to feed people with what they need to be their best. People need encouragement to be their best. People who are regularly encouraged tend to raise their performance. By encouragement I do not mean empty praise. Empty compliments are like cotton candy. They taste sweet for a moment and then they melt away and leave you with a headache and a sticky sense that you’ve chewed on nothing. Don’t make up stuff to say to people. James says, **“the wisdom that comes from heaven is... sincere.”**

If you can’t sincerely come up with a much longer list of what the people around you ARE bringing to the party than what they are not, then you haven’t looked hard enough. Your head may be too much into what YOU bring to the party. It is a fundamental truth of human nature that we always receive and respond better to constructive complaint when it comes from people who we *know* are even more conscious of what we DO bring to the party week in and out than what we’ve neglected to bring.

The more you are able to notice and name the value that others are bringing to your home or workplace... the more you’ve helped them take joy in their own accomplishments and gifts... the more ready they will be to listen to you, to change based on your feedback, and to seek to be an even greater blessing.

### **The Balloon of Empathy**

As we explored last week, if people are consistently fed more criticism than encouragement in a relationship, they will eventually develop contempt for the critic. Contempt is a deep, angry sense of hurt and resentment that can be summarized in these words: “You don’t get me and you don’t care to.” This is why some of us really need to work at attaching to our conversations the second kind of word balloon. We have to learn how to speak with greater EMPATHY. A lot of us tend to confuse

sympathy with empathy. Sympathy is when I say: "I'm sorry that you had a bad day, honey," or "I feel badly that you're ticked off at me now." Sympathy seems compassionate, and it's certainly better than apathy but, in the end, sympathy is really about ME. It is about what I feel.

Empathy is identifying with what *somebody else* feels. Empathy is when I say: "You're right. I don't understand what you've been through today, but I want to. What did you have to deal with? What does that feel like? Help me get into your shoes." How many of you have heard the term, *Emotional Intelligence*? Daniel Goleman, the Harvard psychologist who coined the term, says that "empathy is the fundamental people skill."<sup>4</sup> The most remarkable leaders, parents, spouses, and friends, are almost always marked by it. People around them feel: "This person gets me."

The Bible's word for empathy is "consideration." To consider something is to really work at getting it. In his letter to the church at Philippi, the apostle Paul says: **"Consider others better than yourselves."** People have misread this text as if Paul was saying, "think of other people as better than you." But what he is really saying is: "Don't just look at life from the point of view of your own interests. That's selfish and vain. Spend more time considering what it's like to walk in other people's shoes." Paul goes on to say, **"your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,"** who went to such lengths to come and walk in our sandals.

If anyone was in a position to demand that others try to see life from his point of view, it was God. But Jesus shows us the God who nonetheless chooses to come and get inside of our point of view. If He could cross eternity to do this, do you think it's possible that we might cross the kitchen, the office, the school room or street in order to empathize a bit more with other people? **"The wisdom that comes from heaven,"** writes James, **"is considerate."** It stretches and stoops and sacrifices to get into the shoes of others. The next time we're all bound up with contempt for how somebody else doesn't get me, what if we could stop and say instead: "I'm so sorry. There I go again, all wrapped up in myself. Please help me understand better what YOU are feeling and thinking. I want to get you."

### **The Balloon of Forgiveness**

It is never easy to say "I was wrong." As we explored last week, most of the time we prefer to get defensive instead. We give all kinds of reasons for why we did what we did or didn't do what we didn't do. We go on the attack, trying to shift the blame to someone else. I feel like I'm a master at this. But that way with words has to change. If we want our connections with other people to rise higher, we have to bend lower. If we want better relationships, we have to replace defensiveness with FORGIVENESS, and forgiveness almost always starts with someone confessing how badly they've blown it.

The Apostle Paul was remarkably able to do this. In his letter to the Romans, Paul confesses: **"I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For**

**what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing"** (Rom 7:18-19). When was the last time you said something like this to somebody close to you? "I'm so sorry I hurt you or let you down I was insensitive, I was unkind, I was lazy, I was selfish, I was irresponsible. You asked me not to do this and I did it. You were counting on me to do that and I didn't. You deserve better from me." When was the last time you let go of defensiveness and instead sought forgiveness?

James says that **"the wisdom that comes from heaven is peace-loving."** It speaks words aimed at ending the attack and defend pattern in order to reconcile a relationship. But for peace to be established, it takes action from the other side too. It takes a **"submissive"** spirit. It requires a willingness to surrender our right to condemn or get even. Let me make this clear: We don't *have* to forgive each other. People mess up so consistently that it is perfectly understandable if we choose to say: "There's too much wrong here. There's not enough change. You're not getting a break from me. I'm trading you in for a better model." But, if you've ever done that, then you know the truth. Everybody's a sinner. We are stuck with living and working and going to school and church with sinners. But guess what? They are stuck with us too. And if we can't find a way to forgive people, it's not just our relationships with people that are at stake. It's the condition of our own heart and our relationship with God that is in jeopardy.

Jesus said: **"With the measure [of forgiveness] you use [with others], it will be measured to you"** (Luke 6:37-38). So, here are the questions it is wise for us to sit with: "Do I want to cling to resentments that are consuming my own heart? How big a measuring cup do I want God and others to use with me? To whom do I need to say today, 'You are forgiven,' so that when I need it, those will be the words that are spoken to me?"

### **The Balloon of Listening**

We're almost out of time this morning, so let me just touch on one last verbal balloon it makes sense to attach to the kite-string of our relationships. Our relationships can become much better if we can start to replace criticism with encouragement, contempt with empathy, defensiveness with forgiveness, and – finally – if we can substitute the pattern of stonewalling with a new commitment to really LISTENING. And it will be that absolutely fascinating and liberating topic to which we'll be returning next week. I hope you'll join us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995)