

Communication From the Heart

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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The third in the Lenten sermon series on Love.

Text: Matthew 12:34b “From out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.” ~Jesus

How many married couples are there who have forgotten how to talk? That is, they talk about logistics, groceries, children’s sports events and schedules, but over time each stops talking about what really matters. After a while they grow apart. I have heard couples married for twenty-five years say, “I don’t really know him anymore.” Communication is vital in a loving relationship. Jesus knew this—Jesus practiced this. Tom Holladay summarized in his book *The Relationship Principles of Jesus* four pieces of the Lord’s advice for better communication and, hence, more loving relationships:

- First, communication must be straight forward. “*Let you yes be yes,*” Jesus said.¹ Keep it simple. When we ornament our speech, we tend to self justify, obscure, flatter and make excuses.
- Second, as a foundation for solid communication, we must develop trust in our relationships.² Without it, it is difficult to listen or take seriously what the other says.
- Third, what is really vital always comes from the heart.³ It may be something wonderful or something terrible, but what is in the heart is always what comes out of our mouth, so we must take great care to tend the good things inside ourselves.
- Fourth, the basis of everything is truth and honesty. Without these, you *will* grow apart.⁴

Both Rick Warren and Tom Holladay must have spilled a lot of coffee on themselves in their cars. They both like the image of driving with a full coffee mug. They remind you, “What spills out is always coffee.” That is obvious, but why are we surprised when in a relationship anger spills out in our communication, or impatience, or unkindness? What is inside us is what comes out. Holladay says some of us try to keep enlarging the cup to keep it from sloshing out. Instead we need to tend to what is inside. They both point out Jesus’ teaching about the link between the heart and mouth: “*From out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.*”⁵

¹ Matthew 5:37.

² Holladay, Tom. *The Relationship Principles of Jesus*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), p. 145ff.

³ *Ibid.*, 153ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 159ff.

⁵ Matthew 12:34b.

The connection between the mouth and heart is actually a *two-way* connection. My heart affects the words that come out of my mouth, *and* the words that come out of my mouth affect my heart.⁶

Vicious, angry words spoken will, over time, rot your inner life. No matter how you try to control them, they will affect your relationship negatively. We have to discipline ourselves to take words seriously and above all, we have to learn to speak the truth in love.⁷ When we speak lovingly, that will have a profound impact on the heart. Too many use the truth as a weapon, but employed correctly and lovingly, it brings people closer and changes the heart from a muscle of malice to an instrument of kindness. It is impossible to build a relationship of love without the truth. That leads to disaster.⁸

I know of only three ways things get into the heart. Some of it is God-given. Much of it is put in by culture and other people. Some of it is put into we heart by us. To be a more loving disciple of Jesus, we need to tend the good things in our hearts and we need to get rid of the nasty stuff: selfishness, bitterness, and anger. And we need to keep them out. Again, Jesus: *“From out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.”*⁹

I mentioned last week the importance of seeking power from the love of God so that we can love like Jesus. In that context I reminded you about Jesus’ prayer life and how central that was to his ability to love others and accept the will of God. Now there is an interesting thing about human love and prayer. In my experience my prayers for people in my life—family and friends—always mirror my true feelings for them. Prayer is one way we discipline our inner lives and thus, over time, improve our ability to love. Sometimes as we mutter, complain, whine about the ones we try to love, we think we are talking to ourselves. But often we murmur loud enough to be heard by others and certainly by God. Such internal communication either builds trust and love in our hearts or it doesn’t. How we talk in private to God and to ourselves about others is a mirror into either our honesty or deception.¹⁰ If we want to change our relationships we have to communicate. If we want to change them for the better we have to work on the way we think about others and prayer is always a place to start.

Our small group this week talked about the way negativity breeds more negativity. Once we go down that path, it is like the water spout in the bathtub: it sucks everything down with it. Once it starts it is difficult to stop the momentum. The opposite is also true. When we look for the best in others and praise their goodness that draws us closer, too. It shapes the feelings in our heart and gives us a perspective to see even better things in them. If we wallow in whining and moaning, we rarely see any good in another person. Shelly Stackhouse told a story at the end of

⁶ Holladay, *op cit.*, 154.

⁷ Ephesians 4:15.

⁸ Holladay, *op cit.*, 162.

⁹ Matthew 12:34b.

¹⁰ Holladay, *op cit.*, 167.

her ministry among us. She was called down to Integrity after a young woman from the *Bread for the Journey* was murdered. The young woman formerly led a life of prostitution to support her drug habit. At Integrity she had gotten off drugs, put her life back together, and began to see light at the end of the long, dark tunnel. One day, she was given permission to take a furlough and go back home to her family. During the weekend, her former pimp approached her to entice her back into the old life and into his control. When she said no, he killed her. The murder not only grieved the other women in the program, it also scared the life out of them. They asked for Pastor Shelly to come talk. They set up chairs at Integrity in a circle, as they do at *Bread for the Journey*. One after another, they went around the room talking about Charlene's death and their fears. One said, "If this happened to her, what is the use for the rest of us? We can't escape. We're fine here but when we go back, look what happens!" They talked like this and then one of them said, "Charlene wouldn't like to hear us talking like this. She always believed a new life was possible. She always pushed us to have the courage to lead new lives, to hope, to trust." This went on, back and forth, all morning. One woman would talk pity and everyone would go down with her. Then someone would say "Stop it!" and remind them of Charlene and something she used to say to help others. Then they came up again. Back and forth, Shelly said, they kept remembering her and her example. "We kept quoting her and reminding ourselves of her courage, until finally we believed it and found the answer to our fears."

So much of what Jesus taught about communication concerned having the nerve to be honest. Yet, so many of us fear honesty. I wonder why? How many times have you seen a spouse afraid to speak what was inside the heart because they feared the darkness in their own souls? Everyone has old, buried bugaboos and anxieties. We fear to face them and are afraid if we face them with someone else, they will spill out and devour us. It is always easier to be cranky about something shallow and meaningless, to avoid the real issue, to neglect to deal with our mutual fears buried deep inside, hidden from all. Hidden from God, too, we like to think. The apostle John wrote, "*Perfect love casts out fear.*"¹¹ Fear must be the opposite of love. Certainly when we are afraid it is difficult to know the confidence and freedom in love. Like the recovering addicts at Integrity, we need to speak our fears among those who listen and not condemn us, to let our fears out into the light of grace and forgiveness. As we do, we rediscover both the love of God and other people. Warren asks what is it that makes a person rush into a burning building to save a child? His love is greater than his fear. If you want to love, you have to do something about your fears.

If we are serious about loving we must set our hearts on *communicating lovingly*. For Jesus that means speaking without ornamentation, simple talk. It means building trust in our relationships. It means speaking from the heart. It means speaking with honesty. Love is inconvenient. It takes work to talk about what is truly important, but when we do we grow with one another and with God.

¹¹ 1John 4:18.

Is there someone with whom you need to take a risk to have an honest conversation this week? What can you do to work on what is inside your heart, to dust out the cobwebs, and to fill it with good stuff, so that when you speak to someone, only love spills out?

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