Book 4

Sunday June 16, 1974

"WATCH YOUR MOUTH!" Matthew 5:33-37, 12:33-37, James 3:6-10

Last week in the sermon we noted that we can tell a great deal about ourselves and about others by looking at a person's hands and what we do with our hands. But our hands and the way we use them or don't use them are not the only things that give us clues about ourselves and others.

We can look at a person's face or at our own face in a mirror and tell quite a bit about ourselves or others. For example, the lines on a person's face often give an indication as to whether one smiles a lot and is basically a happy person, or frowns a lot and is unhappy and angry most of the time.

In recent years we've heard a lot about body language, the concept that the way we hold our bodies, the way we walk, the way we stand, the way we fold our arms or not fold our arms, or clench our fists or whether we smile or frown, the look in our eyes and much more all indicate what we are feeling or thinking as much as the words we may be saying.

I once heard a person who was giving a speech about love. However the mannerisms of his body and face that went along with his words gave other signals. His body was talking of hate while his words were talking about love.

So it is that our body language and particularly the expression on our faces can often tell others our deepest feelings. We can express fear, joy, sadness, delight, ignorance, knowledge, and many other feelings and emotions just by the look on our faces and without saying a word.

The Bible has quite a lot to say about one part of our face and what it expresses and that is our mouth. Our mouths can smile or frown and we all know how contagious either one can be, but a genuine smile is particularly so. Such cliches as "Smile and the whole world smiles with you," tell us how important our smiles are. So we need to be aware of how we are using our mouths. I find, for example, that often just the act of causing myself to smile will begin to change my mood for the better. A smile affects much more than just the muscles in our face. It affects our mood, our spirit, and also the mood and spirit of others around us.

Some of the young people in our church remind me from time to time that when I'm leading worship or preaching, I'm too grim and serious. "Smile more," is their advice and it's good advice. Smiling is a part of being human. We all know how excited we are the first time a baby smiles.

I think Jesus must've often smiled as he told some of the parables and as he enjoyed the company of others. At one point in his ministry, Jesus severely criticized the religious people of his day who always looked so dismal and glum while they were practicing their religion. He was saying--"Smile more. If your religion is something painful all the time, then it's the wrong kind of religion!" So watch your mouth. Do you use it to smile a lot or to frown a lot?

Secondly,
2. According to the Bible, we are also to watch our mouths very carefully so that the words that come out of our mouths bring help and healing instead of causing evil and destruction.

We all remember the childhood saying, "Sticks and stone can break my bones, but words will never hurt me." We say that to reassure ourselves when we are receiving some words that hurt us very much, but deep down we know it's not really true. Words can and do hurt us very much and words can also be healing. We all know how words can sting us or reassure us.

Jesus knew this and that's why in a number of places in the Bible he reminds us that we will have to render account for every careless word we utter, for by our words we are justified and by our words we will be condemned. That's not only a warning for politicians, but for all of us.

Think of the careless words that are spoken all the time not only by politicians but by all of us. And the problem is that once words are spoken they live on to kill or betray or to heal and to help. A word that has been spoken cannot be called back. Especially it seems we live in a time of careless words. And they have a spreading effect just as a pebble makes ripples in a lake. We've all said words which we wish we could've reached and grabbed and put back in our mouths and swallowed, but it has been too late.

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A German folk story tells of a boy who was talking unkindly about other people. His father had him take a bag of goose feathers and fling them out of a second story window. The wind swirled them into the corridors and alleys. Then he said to the boy, "That is the way your words go out into society. Now go out and pick up all the goose feathers." The boy cried, "That's impossible!" "So it is impossible to take back the words you have uttered," said the father.

Maybe we all ought to imagine that we are all the time speaking into a big tape recorder and that our words will be heard and remembered. Then we would more carefully watch our mouths and what they say. There would be fewer careless words.

Last week, we talked about the importance of laying our hands to a constructive task. One thing all of us can do that's constructive particularly in our time is to "watch our mouths," -- watch the words that we form with our mouths. One sure way that each one of us can begin a new spiritual and healing life is by the proper us of our mouths, by our speech, our words, our tongue. Every idle and careless word we speak can hurt someone and ourselves. There are very few neutral words. Most of them are either hurting or healing.

Thus the Book of Proverbs in the Bible says, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." (Proverbs 25:11) Your ministry and mine is to so watch our mouths and control our tongues so that we speak better and more kindly words.

When Jesus was on trial before his crucifixion, the Apostle Peter was confronted in the courtyard outside the trial by a woman who said, "Your speech betrays you, surely you are one of his followers." Peter swore, "I don't even know the man." The expletive is deleted. But the woman insisted--"Your speech gives you away."

And our speech does often give us away, it betrays us. It tells more about us than we might want known. That's what makes the Watergate transcripts so damaging and why some people have said--"those are not the men I knew." But now their speech has betrayed them and we know them more than we might like to know them.

So also our speech, the use of our mouths can betray us or it can help us. People who meet us every day in our work,

in our leisure or wherever should be able to recognize us as gentle, loving, Christian persons because of the quality of our speech, because our mouths do not utter careless words, because we watch our mouths.

3. Thirdly, Jesus reminds us that we are to watch our mouths so that our words are honest and easily understood.

There is a peculiar saying in our time that goes --"Don't mind the rhetoric." By that is usually meant, "Don't pay too much attention to the words of that speaker; he or she is only speaking for effect, for an impression, and is not to be totally believed." This is a devastating practice. We are all to be held accountable for every word we say.

Jesus warned us against the practice of thinking we can convince people because of the way in which we use our words, or the kind of words or the number of words we use.

He said, "You have heard that it was said of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn. But I say to you, 'Do not swear at all. . . . Let what you say be simply, yes or no; anything more than this comes from evil."

Jesus was saying that an excess of words, or by saying, "I swear this is so," should be unnecessary. A simple "yes" or "no" should be all that's needed. Your words should be true and good whether or not you are under oath to tell the truth. Saying that you swear by God that is is true doesn't make it any more the truth than a simple yes or no. We are to be as faithful as our word.

We've all heard it said of some person--"That person is as good as his word, that is, if he gives his word, if he says yes or no, that's what he will do. Most of us remember a time when in some business transactions there were no written contracts--a person would say, "I'm going to do this or that,"and the other person would agree and they would shake hands and the contract was made. They were as good as their word. Such is not often the case anymore. Now we often ask--Who can you believe anymore?

As Christians, we need to hold each other responsible for the use of our mouths. If we hear someone say something we know not to be true or to be stretching the truth, we need to say--"That's not what I know to be the truth."

Too often we let untruthful statements or even gossip slide by without a challenge.

Sometime ago I was at a luncheon where most of the people present were making unchallenged statements which were mostly untrue concerning racial justice. Finally, one Christian woman blew the whistle on that trivia that we all find so easy to mouth, by declaring her own integrity of belief in racial justice. For a moment she stood alone, but she won the respect and admiration of every person at the table.

That is part of the ministry of each one of us in the use of our mouths. Our speech is to be true and good and beautiful and the words so chosen to turn on the light in other people. We need to hold every persons responsible in or out of the church for whatever he or she says or repeats. You are responsible even if you only pass it along.

On the positive side in the use of our mouths, just as in the use of our hands, we can do good. How often the right word of comfort has helped someone, or a compliment paid honestly has given another courage.

Watch your mouth. Words can be powerful. Hitler used words to lead a nation to destruction and in the same period of history, it was the words, the speeches by Winston Churchill that rallied England to keep its faith and hold on.

Our words can hurt or heal. WE can start a new life by watching our mouths. Try that truth this week. Put aside all bitterness, wrath and clamor. Blow the whistle on deceit and untruthfulness and false image building. Blow the whistle on idle gossip and slander. Dedicate your mouth to the true, the good and the beautiful. Seek to contribute some insight instead of trivia spoken merely to fill a social void.

Watch your mouth! Maybe we need to smile more and talk less. Amen.