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Esther 7:1-10; Isaiah 53:7-9; Matthew 27:11-14
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A Time to Speak and Remain Silent

Who is ready for this election season to be over? Me! I am so tired of listening to the political advertisements on TV. Just watching the news at night is SO painful. Like the teacher in Charlie Brown, all I hear is a bunch of nonsense! Wah. Wah. Wah!

What a time for today's topic! Right?

The Wisdom teacher of Ecclesiastes says, "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven. A time to be speak and a time to be silent."

What does that mean?

There are several scriptures that came time mind. So hopefully this morning, I aim to weave them together into a logical patchwork, and not be just another talking head. Wah. Wah. Wah!

The first comes from the Book of Esther in the Old Testament.

Esther is the story of a Jewish woman who becomes Queen of Persia. Long story short, Esther discovers an evil plot by Haman to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom, including her. Mordecai, Esther's uncle, persuades her to take their case before the king and save the Jewish people. The problem was that no one could do this without first being invited by the king. Lest they die. And Esther wasn't invited.

So Esther bravely puts her life on the line saying, "I will go to the king even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

That is where we pick up the story today. Feel free to join me as we read from Esther 7:1-10 on page 448 and we listen for the Word of the Lord.

1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 2 On the second
day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your
petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to
half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." 3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I
have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—
that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. 4 For we have
been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If
we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace,
but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." 5 Then King
Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed

to do this?" 6 Esther said, "A foe and an enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. 7 The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. 8 When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining, and the king said, "Will he even violate the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. 9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very pole that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." 10 So they hung Haman on the pole that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

There is a time to speak and a time to be silent.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer."[1]

One of my watch stations in the Navy was as Conning Officer. On the bridge, or place from which you drive the ship, there were several people. The Officer of the Deck was responsible for the safe operation of the entire ship. The Navigator made sure we kept the ship out of harms way. The Conning Officer gave commands to the Helmsman to change direction of the ship. And the Helmsman actually controlled the ship's rudder.

Clear and concise communication was key to make sure we didn't go aground or collide with another vessel. Often times the communication would go something like this.

Conning officer would keep watch on the shipping traffic. To change course, he or she might say, "Right 15 degrees rudder. Steer course 340."

The Helmsman would echo back, "Right 15 degrees rudder, Aye. Steer course 340."

And follow up with, "Rudder is at right 15 degrees. Steering course 340."

The Conning Officer would then say, "Maintain course 340."

The Helmsman would echo back, "Maintain course 340, Aye. Maintaining course 340."

You see the actions of the ship needed to match the words coming from my mouth. That way everyone knew the intentions and there was no guess work.

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[1] Psalm 19:14

The same is true in Church when we change direction or course. Whether adding staffing, starting new initiatives, or embarking on new missions, it's crucial that everyone be on the same page. Sometimes we do this well. Sometimes we don't. That's where grace and forgiveness are needed.

The Bible says a lot about the words from our mouths and the impacts they can have. They can build up or tear down. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me"sure sounded legit as children. But as adults we know that it is actually a lie. Words wound and those wounds can stay with us a long time.

In America, we live for our rights. One of those rights is free speech. It's ok and encouraged to speak our mind. We can say whatever we want. Until we offend someone and get canceled because it was so upsetting. So knowing what to say, what not to say, when to say it or not has become so confusing.

James, Jesus' brother, wrote to Christians throughout the Roman world about making sure that words from their mouths matched the Gospel they professed. He likened them to rudders that can turn ships.

James writes, "**3** If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey, we guide their whole bodies. **4** Or look at ships: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. **5** So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits."[2]

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."[3]

And to the Colossians he said, "Let your conversations be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."[4]

Finally Jesus said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things stored up in them, the evil person brings evil things stored up in them. But I tell you that people will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."[5]

So we can see whether from Esther's story, Wisdom literature, The Apostles, or Jesus, that there are times when we must speak out. And the words we use can words can save or convict. They can build up or tear down.

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[2] James 3:3-5a

[3] Ephesians 4:29

[4] Colossians 4:6

[5] Matthew 12:34b-37

Imagine a workplace or school setting where one person is constantly being mocked. Maybe it's the way they speak, their appearance, or a mistake they made. Everyone hears the comments. A few people laugh, while others look away because they don't want to make things uncomfortable.

Then one day, someone finally says, "That's enough. We don't treat people that way here."

It may not sound like much, but that one sentence can change the atmosphere in the room. It lets the person being targeted know that someone sees what is happening and cares enough to speak up. And it tells the mocker to stop.

That is what Esther did. She could have remained silent and protected herself, but she recognized that the lives of her people were at stake. Sometimes silence protects our comfort, while speaking up protects our neighbor. There is a time when faith requires us to find our voice.

Proverbs says, "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit."[6]

But what about the other side of the coin. When might it be best to say nothing? Scripture actually addresses that too.

The Wisdom teacher of Proverbs guides, "When words are many, sin is not absent, but they who hold their tongue is wise."[7]

In the heat of anger, James says, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for a person's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."[8]

Whenever I do premarital or marital counseling, most of what we do is learn how to communicate openly, honestly, assertively, and healthily. I teach the importance of taking a time out. So that when they find themselves in the heat of an argument, if they feel tense, flush, overcome with anger, to take a time out. To go for a walk. To workout. Or to give each other space, so that when both parties calm down, they can come back together and work through the conflict at hand.

Have you ever been in an argument with someone and suddenly realized that you were no longer trying to solve the problem? You were simply trying to win.

Come on! You know the feeling. You have your response ready before the other person has even finished speaking. And if they bring up something from five years ago, you are more than happy to bring up something from ten years ago!

Before long, you are no longer talking about the original problem. You are building a case against each other.

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[6] Proverbs 18:121

[7] Proverbs 10:19

[8] James 1:19

Sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is stop and say, “I’m getting upset, and I don't want to say something I’ll regret. Can we take a break and come back to this?”

That isn't avoiding the problem. It's making room to address it more wisely.

James reminds us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Sometimes a few minutes of silence can prevent hours—or even years—of hurt.

The Bible doesn’t say, “Do not conflict or become angry.” It says, “Do not sin when you are angry.”[9]

Jesus encouraged us to keep our words few when dealing with fools or when the truth has already been rejected. He taught, “Do not cast pearls before pigs.” This means that we are not obligated to keep arguing with someone who has already heard, understood, and stubbornly refuses to listen.

We are also encouraged to keep our words few before we hear a matter fully or if we are talking too much. God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. We should be listening twice as much as we are talking.

We should keep our words few when we are prone to gossip or slander. Again Proverbs states, “With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape. A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue. A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.”[10]

And finally Jesus told his disciples to keep their words few when they were misunderstood, mistreated, or even accused of all kinds of false wrong doings.

He said, “**9** “As for yourselves, beware, for they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. **10** And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. **11** When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit.”[11]

In fact on the night Jesus was betrayed he was accused of all kinds of falsities. And yet, though he had done nothing wrong, “He did not open his mouth.”[12] He remained silent.[13] He trusted the Holy Spirit to intercede on his behalf.

So how do we know when to speak and when to remain silent?

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[9] Ephesians 4:26

[10] Proverbs 11:9, 12-13

[11] Mark 13:9-11

[12] Isaiah 53:7-9

[13] Matthew 27:11-14

We listen. We pray. We consider the impact our words will have. We ask whether our words will bring truth, healing, and hope—or whether they will cause unnecessary harm.

Imagine visiting a friend who has just lost a loved one. We want to help. We want to say something that will make the pain a little easier.

So we search for the right words. Perhaps we say, “Everything happens for a reason,” or “At least they aren't suffering anymore.” We mean well, but those words may not bring the comfort we hoped they would.

Sometimes the best thing we can say is simply, “I'm so sorry. I love you, and I'm here for you.” And then we sit with them. We listen. We let them cry. We don't rush to explain their grief or try to fix something that cannot be fixed with words.

Our presence becomes a gift.

There is a time to speak, but there is also a time to be quiet and let another person know they do not have to face their pain alone.

Sometimes love speaks through words. Sometimes love speaks through silence.

But if we end the sermon here, we might think that being a faithful Christian is simply a matter of learning better communication skills. And that would miss the heart of the Gospel entirely.

The truth is that even when we know what we should say, we don't always say it. We speak too quickly. We stay silent when someone needs us to speak up. We gossip, lash out in anger, and sometimes use words to protect ourselves rather than help others. We cannot always get it right, no matter how hard we try. We need more than good advice. We need a Savior.

Isaiah reminds us that we have all gone astray and that the Lord has laid upon Jesus the iniquity of us all.[14] Paul tells us that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory, and yet we are justified freely by God's grace or undeserved favor through the redemption that comes through Jesus Christ.[15]

Jesus went to the cross for our sin, including the sins of our mouths. Through his death and resurrection, he restores our relationship with God. And through the Holy Spirit planted in those who believe in Jesus, he continues to shape our hearts, our thoughts, and our words.

That doesn't mean we will never make mistakes. It means that when we do, we can confess our failures, receive forgiveness, and try again.

So, my friends, there is indeed a time to speak and a time to remain silent. Speak when someone needs defending. Speak when encouragement is needed. Speak the truth with love, even when it is difficult. Remain silent when anger

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[14] Isaiah 53:6

[15] Romans 3:23-24

threatens to control us, when we are tempted to gossip, or when listening would be wiser than responding. And through it all, remember that our goal is not simply to say the right thing. It is to become people whose words reflect the grace and character of our Lord Jesus Christ to a watching world.

May the prayer of the Psalmist become our prayer: "Set a guard over [our] mouths, O Lord; keep watch over the door of [our] lips."[16] May God give us the wisdom to know when to speak, the humility to know when to listen, and the grace to use our words to build others up. And when we get it wrong, may we trust in Jesus who forgives us and helps us begin again. Amen.

[16] Psalm 141:3