

SERMON TITLE- "Babel"

TEXT- Genesis 11:1-8

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There was a game we used to play when I was in elementary school. Someone would make a statement and whisper it into the ear of the person at the front desk. That person would whisper it to the next person and so through the class until the last person would stand up repeat what they had heard. The final statement would have nothing in common with what began. The game was the source of great hilarity.

That is the challenge of communication- and that childhood game illustrates one simple part of a very big, complicated, and serious problem. The problem is that of misunderstanding each other. It is probably a pretty safe bet that virtually every war, family feud or even argument has some level of misunderstanding fueling or starting it.

In our journey through Genesis we are studying the Biblical principles behind the most basic aspects of human life on earth. They are the axioms needed to understand how life is supposed to work both in the very practical issues of our relationships to each other and also as beings created by God.

The motivation behind this series is the belief that if you don't understand or if you misunderstand the axioms of creation described in Genesis you are going through life with a faulty understanding of basic principles. This will necessarily be very problematic.

For example- we live in a world that is driven by electricity, but if we don't understand some basic facts about electricity 2 problems will take place. First we will not be able to use it [ie- we need to ensure that we are connected to a power source]. Second, we could be injured or killed by that same power source we would like to use to do things.

If this metaphor is accurate then understanding the basic elements of how God designed us will make life a whole lot more effective and even safe.

Today's story from Genesis puts forward an explanation of the problem of communication. The story takes place after the Great

Flood- after God gave humanity a completely new beginning- a fresh start.

As in the story of creation, problems came quickly and as in Genesis 3 the problems overwhelmed the family. As an aside- one of the deep messages of Genesis is the importance of the family and in reflecting on that we, as a church must be constantly thinking about what we can do to bring strength and healing to families.

But in Genesis 11 another dimension to how human relations work has been added- and this involved the matter of communication.

The story begins-

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." Genesis 11:1-4

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." Genesis 11:7-5

So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. Genesis 11:8-9

Like many of the Genesis stories this one is quite well known even beyond Judeo/Christian circles.

What does the story tell us?

Communication Is A Serious Human Problem

This is probably one of the least controversial statements a person could ever make. The variations of the cry "You don't understand me!" reflect a world of pain and sadness.

How often we hear stories of people describing their childhoods and the story is that of being misunderstood by parents, friends, teachers etc.

And of course the pain does not stop with childhood- it extends through our whole lives. Probably the reason why childhood stories are so easy to tell is because we can often look back on them with what looks like more clarity while the stories of ongoing misunderstanding are just harder to grasp.

Bad communication is a massive problem. In fact it is so massive that as I was working my way through this sermon I was almost prepared to say that misunderstanding is THE root of all the grief in the world. And what stopped me from saying that?

The story of Cain and Abel. The sequence of events in Genesis is part of the story and because the very first family tragedy took place before language was confused.

What does this imply? Even when people completely understand each other- they can still fight and cause immense pain. It is a sobering thought.

Having said this- bad communication still remains a massive problem- a problem that Genesis 11 gives us a Biblical framework for.

It begins with-

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. Genesis 11:1

#1. Communications Is A Multidimensional Problem

The Biblical clue for that is in the simple distinction of language and speech. This is a clue because the rest of Scripture and basic observation of life around us fill in the details.

If understanding communication is somewhat parallel to understanding electricity then some communications mechanics need to be laid out. The most elementary aspect of communication involves 2 parts. I don't know if the distinction in vs 1 of language and speech refers to this but- the 2 parts are-

1. The speaker. Is the speaker accurately speaking what is on their hearts?

2. The listener. Is the listener understanding what is being said?

Understanding that communication is multidimensional is critical to going forward. The normal way that we have of

overcoming a communications hurdle is to speak more loudly and with greater emphasis. That works only if the problem to begin with was just unclear transmission of sound waves. That is obviously a problem that is part of the modern world of cell phone but on the scale of human communication it is relatively easily identified and solved.

But the other 2 dimensions pose a very big challenge.

As a person who has the privilege of listening to all kinds of questions the first thing I learned was how hard it is to articulate what is going on inside of us.

In preparation for this sermon I read through a couple of commentaries on Genesis 11. One of them gave an example of what the confusion at Babel could have looked like.

A builder asks for more bricks but the labourer doesn't understand the command and brings wood instead. The example is easy to imagine but misses the point- that is exactly the kind of confusion that a bit of yelling and gesturing can probably sort out.

No the problem wasn't that the words "brick" and "wood" sounded the same now. The problem was that a far deeper mechanism in the human heart had become clogged up at both ends.

Life is not as simple as my needs being "give me a brick." What I want from people around me are things like, appreciation and encouragement- and somehow asking for them in simple terms- even if we knew how to do that- rarely happens easily.

And then there is the hearer- who even if they actually hear me say the words- "I just need you to say nice things to me" really interprets that as "you are always mean to me" and immediately tries to explain why criticism is often- if not always- more than justified. And even if they don't say these words, the message is clear- "If you weren't such a jerk it wouldn't be so difficult to come up with nice things to say."

And, by the way, the problem is throughout all of humanity. In the early days of the explorers one of the things that was being looked for was a truly peaceful society uncorrupted by civilization. It went under the label of "the noble savage." That society was never found because it doesn't exist. The problem of confused language covers the whole earth.

The Genesis story tells us another Biblical principle that might seem obvious but needs to be stated plainly. It is contained in Genesis 11.

The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." Genesis 11:6

#2. Good Communication Can Solve Massive Problems

The background to the story of Babel is that of people tackling a massive and overwhelming problem. It is the building of a city and tower that reached to the heavens. Now an idea like that gives all kinds of room for the human imagination to run wild. What was this tower?

Why was this tower a threat to God?

It is at times like this that an important rule of Biblical interpretation needs to be applied. "Don't read more or less into the text than it provides."

What the text does indicate, however, is that there was something in the motivation behind the tower that was opposing God's direction to the descendants of Noah. The context seems to lead us to conclude that God wanted the people to spread out around the earth while the tower and city represented a drive against that.

So what don't we know? We don't know how on earth a tower can reach the heavens- or even what that is supposed to mean.

It is also possible that the people were trying to build a Plan B- in case God changed His mind about sending another Great Flood on the earth. Maybe were thinking that if they built a high enough tower- they would have a safe haven for the next flood even if God had promised not to send another one. We don't know very much about what was behind this great tower.

We do know that something anti God's instructions was going on here- even if we don't exactly know what it is. I would conclude that beyond that- it doesn't matter. It is not part of the purpose of this story.

What else do we know? We do know that the people were doing something truly incredible.

And this leads to the important principle that needs stating- "Good communication can solve massive problems." Getting this right is worth it many times over. While just getting good

communication principles at work doesn't solve every problem it is hard to imagine must good that can come without it.

You can design the most amazing solutions to all kinds of problems- you can design the most amazing tower humanity has ever seen- but if you can't communicate within the team- the work will quickly grind to a halt.

Getting the communication puzzle figured out is vitally important.

Some years ago we did the Purpose Drive Church program, as a church. Of all the things I remember from that experience were 3 words- "Communicate, communicate, communicate!" The greatest ideas, programs and dream are nothing if we fail at the communication end.

So what's next? As with the other lessons we learn from Genesis, Genesis 11 lays the foundation that the rest of Scripture builds upon and so we have to look forward and in doing so we will go directly to a text virtually at the other end of the Bible- James 3:3-12

What Does Scripture Teach Us About Good Communication?

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. James 3:3-5

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3:6-8

The Book of James is a Care Group favourite and for good reason- you don't have to read between the lines to understand what is being said. You rarely have to clarify what James is saying. He knows the story of Genesis 11 and has observed a world of toxic

communication in his own experience and from world history. He is clear on his points. Among others they are-

#1. Know The Challenge

James begins with a statement of the magnitude of the problem. As human beings we are capable of actually building a tower to reach the heavens [at least in a very small scale] but we still have not mastered the biggest problem of all- words that spew from our lips and wreak havoc around us.

The problem is huge and the challenge overwhelming “no one can tame the tongue”! Minimizing the problem is not the way to go.

But having said that- James moves quickly on and is again characteristically blunt-

#2. Bring That Instrument Into Check

This solution is repeated over and over again in Scripture and its principles go back to the anatomy of sin. We are fully responsible both for what we put into our mouths [as in the case of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit] and then further what comes out of our mouth.

We will be held to account for what we do and are bluntly warned that excuses like “The woman and me do it” or “The snake made me do it” or some variation on that them- simply doesn’t cut it.

The law of creation- laid out in Genesis is clear- we are fully accountable for our actions and words.

From creation until now- that law remains unchanged. These are the facts of life.

But there still is a problem- just knowing all this hasn’t made life better- because the problem is so deep.

But this solution begs a deeper issue. The problem is not actually the tongue at all- the problem is the heart of the person owning that tongue.

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a

grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. James 3:9-12

And here James opens up an issue that is very important and could be overlooked. As tough as the problem of communication is- and as essential as it is- there is a deeper problem. After all the mouth is just an instrument of our words and the words are an instrument of our hearts, and the source of the problem from the very beginning was the heart.

After all- even in Genesis 11- the reason that God confused the language of humanity was not to create more problems on earth- but rather to limit the power of sinfulness on earth.

Human beings with evil intentions who also have enormous power are a terrible combination. And so God, by confusing speech, put natural limits on how destructive humanity can become.

So what is the fundamental solution? Heart examination and repair. The real solution is- **Restoring The Health Of The Source.**

It goes back to the root of the problem- the ongoing challenge of how we respond to our Creator and the huge problem of language and communication that we live with.

In some ways- today’s sermon, like Genesis 11 and James 3 lays out the problem more than it directs us to the answer.

As I was preparing the sermon I quickly realized I was running out of time- so I did what preachers can do- decided that it needs a Babel-B. The problem of communication is so big and the hurdles so overwhelming- and the Bible is so direct that we not minimize these- that it took the whole sermon.

But the Bible doesn’t spell out disasters just to drive us into despair- it does so because God has a plan for us.

But the plan like the problem is also multi-dimensional.

However closing a sermon off by simply stating the problem and telling people to come back next week is also right. Why wait a week for God healing plan to be laid out.

So my conclusion today will be the launch to next week’s sermon- so we’ll end with that today and I hope you take it with you- and next week we’ll spend more time on God’s answer to the Babel problem.

So I want you to leave here with one of the most comforting statements I could ever imagine- a statement given in the shadow of Babel. It is-

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:26-28

Notice a couple of critically important points-

1. It recognizes our inability to communicate.
2. It recognizes the heart problem at the root of everything.
3. God offers the Holy Spirit, as Communicator, for those who accept Him.
4. The end is ultimate blessing.