

Study Guide
Series: The Power of Words
“Religion and Politics”

Monday - Matthew 5:21-22. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus widened the sixth commandment’s reach. He says that contempt or anger, leading to words that tear down and destroy others, is as morally destructive as the physical act of murder. Scholar William Barclay showed how Jesus condemned, first, *“the anger over which a person broods, and which he will not allow to die;”* then the Aramaic word *“raca”*, which he said is *“almost untranslatable, because it describes a tone of voice... It’s the whole accent of contempt;”* and finally the Greek word *“mōros”*, which is the most deadly offense. *“To call a man mōros was not to criticize his mental ability; it was to cast aspersions on his moral character; to take his name and reputation from him.”* Reflect on how Jesus’ words apply to the political speech of candidates and ad campaigns, and your personal speech about candidates, office-holders, or political issues. Ask God to help you to focus more on the things that connect us than on what divides us, and to help you to exercise a generous, unifying spirit.

Tuesday - Matthew 7:1-5. Jesus noted that we are quick to judge others, while overlooking or excusing any tendency on our part to do similar (or even worse) things. That is destructive and hurtful enough in families and workplaces. Taken into the realm of politics, it seems to go on steroids. Think about it: when was the last time a political figure you disagree with came under fire, and you said, *“That’s not good, but our side does the same thing, or even worse?”* Jesus’ words applied, of course, to family relationships. Two people can care deeply about a family and its well-being, and come to different conclusions about the best way to address certain problems. Yet, can they disagree without impugning each other’s honesty or motives? In what ways do you believe Jesus’ words also apply to our local, state or national political “family”? Can you recall a campaign in which two candidates disagreed about the best approaches to issues, yet did so with respect and without claiming that the other person is a dishonest, unpatriotic slimeball? If candidates did that, do you believe their supporters (including you) might follow suit? Pray for a change in heart, both in those of politics and your own.

Wednesday - James 3:4-12. The Apostle James found a painful irony in the way people speak. *“With [our tongue] we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth,”* he wrote. Reflecting on this passage, do you think the Lord give us an exemption from practicing the Scriptures when it comes to our political leaders? Sociologists note that in war, soldiers start using dehumanizing nicknames for people on the other side. It seems to become easier to kill other people if we stop thinking of them as people, as human. In what ways have you seen similar patterns in political “combat,” when the “bullets” are words? Have you ever become friends with a person, later found that you hold different political opinions, and realized that the degrading labels you’ve used for “those people” may not be true? In his book, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, Adam Hamilton wrote, *“Part of the healing of our nation must come from the church modeling for our society how we are to love those with whom we disagree.”* Do you, like James, find it sad to bless God and then curse people that God loves and for whom Jesus died? What can you change in your own speech to contribute to the healing of our nation?

Thursday - James 4:1-6. James reflected on outward behaviors, but also on their inner sources. He saw Romans, Jews and Samaritans fight each other, sometimes with weapons, but even more often with bitter words. He challenged his readers to look inward. Conflict, he said, was (and still is) often rooted, not in the noble motives we try to claim for it, but in selfish wishes for more power or wealth than others have. When you find yourself harboring negative feelings about a political candidate, do you ever look inside yourself and ask, *“What is there in me that this candidate threatens, annoys or frightens?”* In what ways can James’ wisdom, encouraging us to recognize the inner sources of conflict, help us to relate in more Christ-like ways in politics as well as other areas of life? Ask God to help you to tame your tongue, and the inner fears and insecurities that so often set you’re your tongue off.

Friday - James 4:11-12. Earlier this week, we read Jesus’ words about the peril of setting ourselves up as judge of other peoples’ hearts and motives (Matthew 7:1-5). The Apostle Paul wrote forcefully that we need to trust God to set right what is wrong, rather than trying to do it ourselves (Romans 12:18-21). James put it bluntly and succinctly: *“There is only one lawgiver and judge... you who judge your neighbor, who are you?”* In Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White, Adam Hamilton wrote, *“James’ counsel does not mean we are not to practice discernment. Nor does it mean that we should remain silent in the face of wrongdoing. Yet we can make known our disagreements with others while doing so in love and with respect for the other.”* When have you seen disagreement handled in love and with respect? When have you been able to do that yourself? As you discuss political candidates, are you ever tempted to use words like “crook,” “weakling,” “drunk,” “womanizer” or “fool” about a candidate, when all you really know for sure is that you disagree with one or more of that person’s positions? If you find such on the tip of your tongue this fall, remember James’ pointed question: *“You who judge your neighbor, who are you?”*