

James 3:1-12

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Words Redeemed

The Word of the Lord from James 3: "No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

James is talking about the tongue. "The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell." Serious words. If you don't sin with your tongue, in fact, you're perfect.

We could make a list of the sins of the tongue, though it would take a while. Obviously, the list would include cursing, swearing, disrespect of authority, name-calling, lies, slander, gossip, words carefully calculated to rip someone to shreds, and words that are true but don't have to be said. This is really about the use of words, not just the tongue: so beyond the spoken word, there's all sorts of opportunities for sinful speech on blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other forums – often with complete and cowardly anonymity.

There are also all the rash words we say, where we often apologize later with statements like, "I wasn't thinking" or "I spoke before I thought." So here's a question: how come when we speak before we think, it's never something brilliant and kind? The tongue exposes that sinful nature inside of you, who you are apart from Christ and His grace. Think about the worst thing you've ever said, and you get a glimpse of who you are apart from your Savior.

This leads us to the real problem. You don't need James to talk about the niceties of civil discourse: for that, you have the words of Thumper the rabbit when he says, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." No, James is speaking about sin and spiritual warfare. He doesn't say "the tongue is misled by societal influences;" he says, the tongue "is set on fire by hell."

This is true because of what a sinful tongue does with words. Words are a powerful gift of God: remember that He exercises His power by speaking. He created everything by speaking and healed many by words in the Gospels. He still uses words to reveal His will, His Law and Gospel, to you in Scripture. He uses words to deliver forgiveness, to transform simple water into Holy Baptism, to add His body and blood to bread and wine for your salvation. Furthermore, the Lord gives the use of words only to human beings, not to any other creature: He entrusts to you the privilege of using words to communicate and to speak to others. Other creatures can only praise God by being what God has made them to be and doing what God has made them to do, but the Lord gives you the privilege of speaking and singing His praises. Words and speech are great and precious gifts of God.

The greater the gift from God, the more the devil wants to misuse it, so it should come as no surprise that Satan wants to use words and speech as weapons against the Lord's grace and blessings. Where the Lord would have you bless others, you are tempted to curse them. Where the Lord would have you fulfill the promises you speak, you're tempted to swear sinfully. Where the Lord would have you use words to speak truth, you're tempted to use them for lies. Where He would have you use words to confess your sins, you're tempted to use them to excuse yourself. Where the Lord would have you speak words to encourage and edify, you're tempted to undermine, slander and spread rumors. Meanwhile, the devil also tickles your ears to yearn far more for gossip and garbage than for the Lord's words of Law and

Gospel for you. And when you fill your mind with all sorts of ungodly speech, it's no surprise that it is reflected in the words you say. Garbage in, garbage out.

The worst abuse of all with words is to use them to teach false doctrine in God's name, because that is exactly the opposite of what God intends words to be used for. That is why James begins our text with the warning that not all should be teachers – and that those who are called to teach the faith should take their teaching and preaching very seriously indeed.

Do you see? This is not about being polite. This is a profound spiritual battle. A sinful tongue is set on fire by hell. To speak evil is a terrible sin and the devil's delight.

But while you fall prey to the devil's temptations and misuse God's gift of words to say all sorts of things, you are still one redeemed by the blood of Christ. Therefore, the Lord does not remain silent. He still uses words for your good.

Jesus has heard plenty of evil words directed at Him, but He endured the lies, the accusations, the slander and the evil words on the cross. More than that, on the cross He also endured God's judgment for those lies, those accusations, that slander and those evil words. He endured God's judgment for your words set on fire by hell, too; in doing so, He endured hell for you. Risen again, He is not silent toward you. By His holy Gospel, He declares, "Behold, your salvation comes," and He comes by means of His Word to give you salvation. His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. He forgives you for your sins. He speaks grace to you. And because you are forgiven, these are words He uses to describe you: "Holy People." "The Redeemed of the LORD." "Sought out." "Not Forsaken."

The Lord still uses His words to declare grace and mercy. He calls you all sorts of wonderful things, like "beloved" and "forgiven." By the power of Absolution, He speaks you free from sin and death. Set free from sin, you are set free to use His gift of words as He would have you do. Even your tongue, that little spark that can set whole forests ablaze, is now redeemed and sanctified for Jesus' sake.

So are your ears, and that is a good place to begin. Remember that your words come from your thoughts, and it is no wonder that St. Paul tells us in Colossians, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth;" or in Philippians 4:8 to think on whatever is pure and holy and lovely. Fill your mind with the words of God, and they will be reflected in your own words. Nuts-and-bolts-wise, this means setting aside time each day to read your Bible and meditate upon it. It means consistent, weekly worship – not just to learn more, but because the Lord still works and heals through His Word to strengthen your faith, not just your knowledge. The Lord has spoken His Word in words to you so that you might grow in faith and the knowledge of His grace.

As you are free to hear, so you are now free to speak. You are free to speak the blessings of God to others; and as you do so, you convey those blessings to them. Normally when we speak of worship, we speak primarily about how you come here to receive the Lord's grace by His Word and sacraments – and rightly so! However, as you respond by singing and speaking in the service, you and your tongue do a service to those around you: for as you sing and speak the praises of God, you put the Lord's words into the ears of those around you. Where His Word is, Jesus is. As part of the Church here, you deliver Christ to your neighbor.

It is the same elsewhere: James notes that though we do curse with our tongues, we are set free to bless with our tongues as well. To tell them the Gospel is to bless them with forgiveness. To say to someone, "The Lord be with you" is to speak God's Word; and by that Word, the Lord is with them. To say, "The peace of the Lord be with you" is to deliver God's peace to them.

Each Wednesday morning when we begin the order of matins here, the service begins with Psalm 51:15: "O Lord, open my lips; and my mouth will declare Your praise." It was written at a difficult

time in David's life. He'd used his words to seduce his neighbor's wife; he'd used his tongue to command that her husband be killed in battle to cover it up. But through the mouth of the prophet Nathan, the Lord called David to repentance. Absolved, he wrote Psalm 51, and declared that God had forgiven him his evil words, then opened his lips to sing praises again. That is what the Lord has done for you. By His work of grace, He has forgiven your sins. Your tongue, along with the rest of you, is set free. It is no longer for you to use it for evil, set on fire by hell itself. That flame has been doused by your Baptism. Now, by the grace of God, you use the words He entrusts to you to speak truth, to sing praises, to bless: all because He has first spoken to you, to declare that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen