

The Power of an Evil Tongue

Lord's Day 43

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We read from Scripture this morning from the book of James 3 and we read the entire chapter in connection with our treatment of the ninth commandment. James 3.

1 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. 2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. 3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. 7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: 8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. 11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? 12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh. 13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. 14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. 15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. 16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. 17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. 18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

That far we read in God's holy inspired word. May God bless that word to our hearts.

Before we turn to the Catechism, we read from Scripture James 3:6.

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

In connection with that passage and other passages of Scripture that we treat the truth of the ninth commandment as it is summarized in Lord's Day 43 Question and Answer 112. I'll read that.

Q. 112. What is required in the ninth commandment?

A. That I bear false witness against no man, nor falsify any man's words; that I be no backbiter, nor slanderer; that I do not judge, nor join in condemning any man rashly, or unheard; but that I avoid all sorts of lies and deceit, as the proper works of the devil, unless I would bring down upon me the heavy wrath of God; likewise, that in judgment and all other dealings I love the truth, speak it uprightly and confess it; also that I defend and promote, as much as I am able, the honor and good character of my neighbor.

Beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ, when we read that description of the requirements of the ninth commandment, we cannot escape the fact that each and every one of us has broken and breaks the ninth commandment because the ninth commandment is not just about lying, although we do that plenty as well, it's not just about being factually correct, the ninth commandment is about what's in the heart when we say the things that we say. The ninth commandment is about a heart that judges rashly and unheard. Did you intend with your words to build up a brother or sister or wife or child? Did your words come from a regenerated heart filled with grace? Or were your words, as the Catechism speaks, were your words the proper work of the devil? The tongue is a powerful member. It can be an instrument of good as God originally created it when the truth is spoken in love, or as James expresses it, it can be a world of iniquity that sets on fire the course of nature and is set on fire of hell. With our tongues we can speak the truth about God and about his works, the truth of Scripture, the truth about our neighbor, or we can speak the lie. The principle of the ninth commandment is that God calls us to speak the truth in love for his name's sake and for his glory as well as out of love for our neighbor, speaking the good of our neighbor. Why do we need the ninth commandment? Well, one reason is because we need to be reminded about the power of the tongue, especially the power it has for evil. So let's look at the ninth commandment, then, as James emphasizes that message from that perspective. "The Power of an Evil Tongue," let's note the great wickedness of which it is capable and which it does commit; secondly, its hellish origin; and it's only cure. The power of an evil tongue.

You and I, beloved, need to be aware of the great wickedness that our tongues are capable of and which we do, in fact, commit so that we may flee from our wickedness, so that we may flee to Christ seeking the grace of forgiveness and the grace to walk in his ways. The ninth commandment speaks particularly of bearing false witness, "Thou shalt," when it tells us about bearing false witness against our neighbor, it speaks of the use of our tongues in one particular instance. A man is called into the court of law and the judge asks that man, "What is your plea?" and he knows perfectly well that he is guilty but he bears false witness and says, "Not guilty." Or the lawyer who for his client lies, "Your Honor, this man is innocent," says the lawyer when he knows otherwise. Or the judge who declares one he knows is guilty yet declares him innocent. The lying tongue damages society. That's one particular instance of bearing false witness against our neighbor but more importantly because we, ourselves, do not find ourselves in the court of law, more importantly we need to be aware of the broader application of that commandment, how much damage our tongue can do in every part of our lives.

One way we sin against the ninth commandment is by backbiting. We speak negatively about our neighbor behind their back. We bite them, as it were, behind their backs in order to hurt them. We say things about them that may very well be true but when it accomplishes no good, when it does not bring good to them, should we not, instead, be speaking to that person instead of about that person? How much better to go to a brother or a sister and speak the truth to them in love, to seek peace with our tongues.

We backbite. That is done secretly but we also slander our neighbor. We do that openly. We lie about them in front of their faces or even speak the truth about them in front of their faces but the thing that we speak is meant to hurt them. Sometimes slander involves leaving out part of the truth. We speak something that is true but we leave off part of the truth that gives the wrong impression. Or we add our own conjectures; we proclaim the truth and then we add the lie. Sometimes all we need to do to slander our neighbor is to roll our eyes to indicate that we do not believe what they say, or sometimes we slander them by keeping silent about them when others are slandering them.

God would have us avoid all lies and deceit in whatever form they take. I deceive the buyer of my car if I do not tell the buyer the defects that my car has when I sell it. I deceived my wife if she asked me and there is something bothering me, she asks me, "What is bothering you?" and I say, "Nothing," then I have uttered a lie.

Inspired James tells us, beloved, that the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. James, of course, isn't speaking about the tongue, per se, as if the tongue were evil in itself, God did not create the tongue evil, but he's talking about the tongue as the chief instrument of human speech and as that instrument is then used in the service of sin. With the tongue, we use our tongue to form words and those words are strung together to form ideas, and then the tongue, when James speaks of the tongue, he's not just talking about the words that we speak, although that is certainly on the forefront, but all kinds of language, the printed page, James is talking about. The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. Any medium of communication that we use in the service of sin is a fire, a world of iniquity.

Literally when James calls it a world of iniquity, the Greek has a cosmos of unrighteousness. A cosmos of unrighteousness, that's expressive. People sometimes talk about a cosmopolitan city. The city, they say, is a microcosm of the world, that is, it has all the features of the world concentrated in one place, all different kinds of cultural elements, everything is there in one place and that's the way the tongue is, it's a world of iniquity, all kinds of evil that there are in the world are concentrated in the tongue and exhibited in miniature by the tongue.

With all the good that the tongue might do, who can measure the evil that the tongue does commit? Who can measure the evil that comes from slander and from backbiting and from false testimony and from lies and deceit? Who can measure the strife and the contentions and the consequences of the words that we speak with our tongues? Who can calculate the damage done by seducing words or words that promote error?

All kinds of evil are connected, are concentrated in the tongue. With the tongue we express hatred to God and our love for idols. With the tongue we misrepresent the truth about God. With the tongue we take God's name in vain. With the tongue we speak our own words on the Sabbath instead of words that glorify God. With the tongue we disobey and dishonor those in authority over us. We wound our neighbor with our tongues. We seduce our neighbor's spouse with our tongues. We use our tongues to steal from others and to deceive others and to express our lust. All kinds of evils are in the tongue. It is a world of iniquity.

The tongue has such great potential for wickedness because of its universal influence. James says that the tongue setteth on fire the course of nature. Literally, the tongue sets on fire the wheel of birth. The wheel of birth, James seems to be referring to the wheel that is figuratively set in motion at the time of birth and which wheel rolls on throughout our lives. The tongue sets on fire the whole course of life, all the affairs of life. When the tongue comes into contact with those affairs of life, it sets them on fire. They burst into flames when they are touched by an evil tongue.

The tongue causes all sorts of trouble, corrupting human society morally and spiritually whether we're talking about our personal lives or our marriages or our families or the workplace or the church, wherever the tongue, the evil tongue comes, it sets a fire. Take away the sins of the tongue and we would be amazed. If that's the only thing we could take away, the sins of the tongue, we would be amazed at how much evil and trouble would disappear. Proverbs 26:20 says, "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth." Oh, the strife caused by that little member of our bodies.

Oh, the damage caused by the tongue in all sorts of circumstances. When a minister speaks error from the pulpit or when he fails to preach the whole truth of God's word, the damage that a minister can cause with his tongue. When a professor in a so-called Christian college or Christian school teaches his students error when he teaches that Genesis 1 through 11 is not to be taken literally, his tongue sets a fire and that error

spreads out from there. When the television and the radio spread wickedness and propaganda, they kindle fires.

The lying tongue has consequences. It lets the wicked go free, it condemns the righteous. The lying tongue freed Barabbas and called for Christ to be crucified. The lying tongue takes away the good name and reputation of a brother. "The lying tongue that repeateth a matter separateth very friends," Proverbs 17:9.

A lying tongue causes contention, hatred, wars, revolution. A lying tongue, look at the commotion caused in the United States because of the tongue inflaming different segments of society. A lying tongue divides nations and ruins churches too. Just one little spark and a whole house can go up in flames. How great a matter a little fire kindleth. Just a little fire can kindle a great matter.

Where does the lying tongue get its evil from? How did it come to be such an instrument of evil? It didn't used to be this way in the beginning. God didn't create Adam and Eve with evil tongues, he created them very good in the garden. Also, their tongues were very good. With their tongues they could fellowship with one another, they could speak of God and his great works, they could glorify their Maker, they could speak with God in fellowship in the cool of the day. They used their tongues to speak the truth in love and to sing God's praises but then the devil tempted Adam and Eve with his forked tongue, "Hath God said ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" His words were lies and he tempted Adam and Eve, he seduced them. That's why he's called the devil, the slanderer, he slandered God. He slanders God's people. There is no truth in him. "When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own," Jesus says speaking of the devil, "for he is a liar and the father of it."

Mankind believed the devil's lies. Mankind rejected God's truth and then by nature became because he plunged the whole human race into that depravity, from then on man became a liar by nature. That's the default. His tongue was set on fire of hell and became a world of iniquity.

Mankind has become the friend of the devil. Mankind has a covenant relationship with the devil and that's why Jesus says to the Pharisees, "Ye are of your father the devil and the lust of your father ye will do." Now we have a continual influence from the father of lies and the result because of that influence, because of the old man that each and every one of us has, the tongue is continually set on fire by hell. James doesn't say it was set on fire once upon a time in the past, but James says it is set on fire. It is continually set on fire and that being the case, we express hatred to God and our neighbor, we express envy when someone else has what we want; we express malice, desiring for someone else to be hurt in some way or to experience evil; we express our own evil desires. The flame is always there. As long as we have the old man of sin, our tongues are set on fire of hell and the tendency is for flames to spread. What a great evil a little fire kindleth and a great evil is that tongue.

How can we ever put away our lying tongues and speak the truth? God commands us to avoid all sorts of lies and deceits as the proper work of the devil. The Catechism explains that the evil use of our tongues brings down upon us the heavy wrath of God.

How shall we plead the lying use of our tongues? God calls us to speak the truth and love the truth and confess the truth. He calls us to defend and promote as much as we are able the honor and good name of our neighbor.

How can we tame the tongue? The world has all sorts of ideas and they may agree that it is a good thing to speak the truth, that's a good thing, but they can't offer any cures for our evil tongue. They may agree that lies are detrimental and so they might teach about the evils of plagiarism, pointing out the plagiarism of others. They might point out to businesses that the best practice is to be honest with your customers. And they might talk about how inflammatory speech divides nations and cultures but all that instruction doesn't address the heart of the matter. All that instruction doesn't address the cause of the lying tongue. You might as well try to clean up a dirty well by painting the faucet that comes from that well, painting the tap, making the tap look nice and clean but that's not going to make the water clean.

How can we tame the lying tongue? Well, the only cure is to cut off the source of its evil because in back of the lying tongue is the fire of hell; in back of the evil tongue is the evil heart that is still connected to hell. The evil heart has its connection in hell, its fellowship with the devil, our natural father, and if you want to cure the lying tongue, you have to break that connection and so it's not surprising James says all kinds of animals, wild animals, mankind has been able to tame but the tongue can no man tame, verse 8 of James 3, "But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." It's untamable by man.

Can we tame the tongue? Well, for that, beloved, we must look to Jesus Christ. He cut that covenant connection that we had through our father, the devil. He did that by suffering the curse that we deserved on the cross. He suffered for our sins. He paid the ransom so that now we do not belong to the devil body and soul but we belong to our faithful Savior body and soul, heart and tongue, and now by the power of the Holy Spirit, God actually delivers us from the corruption of sin. The tongue, James says, can no man tame, and the implication is that only God can tame the tongue.

God covers the guilt of our tongue with the shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. God gives to us the motivation in our heart to speak the truth in love out of thankfulness for his great salvation, and then the Spirit working in our hearts, infusing new qualities into our hearts which were dead, the Spirit works to tame the tongue, to begin to bring it under control. The tongue can be tamed by God's mighty work. The tongue is tamed by God's mighty work.

The child of God who struggles with the use of his tongue, the child of God who struggles with his temper, must know that God is able to tame the tongue. He must not throw up his hands and give up and say, "What's the use? I'll never tame the tongue!" The

child of God knows that God can tame the tongue. He must know that he's not forced by the devil anymore to use his tongue in a lying way whether with the neighbor or his family. The one who gossips or backbites with his tongue needs to know that the tongue can be tamed by God. The child who makes fun of his brothers or sisters must pray that God would tame the tongue.

The man or woman who is prone to lie to themselves about their circumstances may be making things look worse than they are, must know that the tongue can be tamed. That's indicated by James as well when he speaks in verse 16 of this chapter, James says, "For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy." James is talking about a wisdom that is imparted from above. He's still talking about the use of the tongue and that wisdom is not something that everyone has. He contrasts that envying and strife with the manifestation of wisdom. The wisdom that we need to govern our tongues is from above.

God gives that wisdom to his children. God tames the tongue by working in us that which is pleasing to him, and when he tames our tongues, then we begin and it is only a beginning, beloved, for we see our failures day by day, but we begin to speak the truth in love; we begin to rightly use our tongues; we speak the truth uprightly; we confess the truth; we begin to make peace with others; we begin to be gentle with our words to show mercy and kindness towards others in our words; we begin to put on impartiality, James speaks of, not hesitating to speak that which is right; we begin to speak sincere words without hypocrisy.

Oh, for a tongue that would speak the truth to our neighbor in love. Is that your desire, beloved, to have your tongue tamed? Is that my desire? God alone could place that desire in our hearts. The sincere desire to have our tongues tamed is a desire that God places there and when we see even that desire, we ought to give thanks to God and then pray to him that he would give the grace to use our tongues for the praise and honor of his name. Pray for wisdom that is from above, James says in the same book, James 1:5, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord."

Ask in faith, by God's grace our unruly member is being tamed and one day when we are brought to glory and we ought to look forward to that, one day our tongues will be tamed completely when we are brought into the presence of God. Grant, O Lord, that we may govern our tongues to the praise of thy name. Amen.

Our Father which art in heaven, we thank thee for thy grace. We pray, O Lord, that thou wouldst tame our tongues that thy name might be praised in every part of our lives. Forgive us, O Lord, where we have fallen short and lead and guide us all the days of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.