

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

09/12/21

“Tongues of Fire”

James 3:1-12

ILC/FELC/ZLC

Pastor Tim Huber

*“Let the words of my MOUTH and the meditation of my HEART be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and My Redeemer.” Amen!*

The text for this morning is our Epistle Lesson from James 3:1-12.

Let’s start out with a riddle! “What TASTES better than it SMELLS?” (As an avid wine drinker, a tasty Pinot Noir from Burgundy with that earthy barnyard smell comes to mind...but that’s not the answer.) What is it then? “What tastes better than it smells?” Yes! It’s your TONGUE! Get it?

The tongue’s 4,000 taste buds with each up to 150 taste receptors is actually EIGHT muscles intertwined like an elephant’s trunk, so it can move in any direction! And in fact, the direction in which God’s people choose to use our tongues comes up a lot in James’ teaching. In every chapter of his epistle, he tells us something about the tongue, but it’s here in this morning’s epistle that he gives us the most detail about how it’s often the tongue that’s used to BLESS and yet perhaps even more often to CURSE—as in instrument to ENHANCE another person’s life or as a weapon to DESTROY another’s life. If memory serves me correctly, in the Hebrew Talmud the Rabbis often compared the tongue to a sharpened arrow, a lethal weapon that can fatally wound others even at a long distance. But James also comes up with some other choice comparisons or metaphors in these verses.

The apostle James compares the tongue to small bit in the mouth that can control a huge 2,000 lb. horse! Or a tiny rudder that controls the direction of an entire ship! Or something seemingly small that nevertheless, can deliver grand speeches! But he saves his most DEADLY description of the tongue for v. 6 that hits us where we literally LIVE (at least, for us up in the Sierra foothills!). Listen to what he says: *“But the tongue is a tiny SPARK that can set a great FOREST on fire. And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a FLAME of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.”*

Now there's an analogy we can relate to, isn't it? Even our own Dixie and Caldor fires pale in comparison to that wildfire in Australia a year and a half ago that consumed 46 MILLION acres, yet the Apostle James claims that the conflagration of a fiery TONGUE is worse, spewing just a few inappropriate words that have the potential of altering your "cosmos", meaning your entire "world" or "universe"! Just one person speaking with an unchecked fiery tongue can destroy a friendship, devastate a family, and discredit the leaders of a whole church before you know it! And if you get pulled into it— whether you mean to or not—the tainted smell from just the smoke damage of that firestorm may never leave you.

And so, vss. 5 & 6 compare the tongue to a tiny spark of fire riding the wind like a burning ember, creating spot fires wherever they land—a conflagration of hellfire capable of consuming every living thing in its path. And like many of our brave California fire fighters will tell you, at times all we're able to do is just stand there and watch the trees burn. You see—on our own—we sinners with our limited human abilities and resources have to admit that we can only do so much to control our fiery tongues. Why? Because they're stoked by hell itself...and to be honest, we sinners all too often kind of enjoy watching the pretty flames!

James Gleick wrote a best-selling book explaining "Chaos Theory" that included a mathematical concept that comes out of it called, "The Butterfly Effect". A butterfly flapping its wings in China will affect the air currents around it. Then, those tiny air currents will affect the air currents around them. Little by little, the small air currents created by the butterfly will grow to affect the weather for US also! One little fiery word can do the same, impacting more people than we know...literally! That's why a wise sage once observed, *"As you go through life, you'll have many opportunities to keep your mouth shut. Take advantage of ALL of them!"*

It's difficult to outline this section, but we can organize it under four truths we need to recognize in order to at least TRY to tame our terrible tongues.

#1 To tame the tongue, we must first recognize that we will be held ACCOUNTABLE for whatever we say (3:1-2).

James starts out by saying, *"Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."* It truly IS a privilege to teach God's Word, BUT with great privilege comes great responsibility! In James' church, evidently there were some self-appointed teachers who were cut from the same cloth as the Scribes and

Pharisees during Jesus' ministry, or even MORE likely, the kind of Judaizers and Gentile pseudo-prophets St. Paul had to confront. They only were in it for the prestige (after all, the word for "rabbi" literally means "the great one"!) But they also were teaching false doctrines! Scripture makes it clear ALL of us will be judged for every word that rolls off our tongues, but we who teach will be judged by an even GREATER standard. Why? Because we've been entrusted with the words of eternal LIFE—and if what we speak ISN'T life—then we're complicit in leading people to eternal DEATH instead!

I can't help but think of the great MARK TWAIN. As he grew up, he knew ministers and elders who owned slaves and abused them, and he saw them practice dishonesty during the week after speaking piously in church on Sunday. And so, he became bitter toward the things of God throughout his life. So also today, there are far too many of those smiling, self-appointed, TV evangelists proclaiming false gospels while basking in their fame and fortune and leading people down the primrose path with their eloquent but slippery tongues. In this politically-correct, cancel culture society, the whole world is watching God's church—but especially God Himself is watching, holding spiritual leaders accountable for what they TEACH or DON'T teach according to God's inerrant and inspired Word.

#2 To tame the tongue, we must recognize its double-edged power for GOOD, as well as for EVIL. Look again at vs. 3-5a.

As I mentioned earlier, the analogy here is of the tongue being like a tiny bit that can control the direction of a huge horse or a small rudder that can guide a large sailing vessel. However, if we abuse that BIT or misdirect that RUDDER, things can go south quickly! Prov.12:18 states, *"One who speaks rashly is like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."* Cutting remarks are a CURSE in and of themselves. However, words of encouragement and comfort are a BLESSING in and of themselves. Did you know that the Jewish people would pray eighteen benedictions, three times a day out loud? And each one ended, not with a CURSE, but with a BLESSING! This morning, James is playing doctor and asking us followers of Christ to stick out our tongue to see what rolls off of it. Is it a blessing or a curse, a word meant to heal or to harm?

#3 To tame the tongue, we also must recognize that it's a HUMANLY untamable source of terrible evil. Look at vs. 5b-8.

Verses 5 & 6 compare the tongue to a tiny spark of fire that rides like an ember in the wind, creating a conflagration of hellfire capable of consuming every living thing in its path. And like many of our brave California

firefighters will tell you, sometimes all you can do is stand there and just watch the trees burn. You see—on our own—we sinners with our limited human abilities and resources have to admit that we can only do so much to control our fiery tongues. Why? Because they're stoked by hell itself...and it's only by continuing to prayerfully seek the Holy Spirit's power and presence that we'll be able to quench the flames that would consume us, as well!

James says James in vs. 7 & 8 that we humans can domesticate certain critters and can often tame the wild beast, but not so with the tongue, because it's attached to our sinful human nature and saturated with snake venom! St. Paul spoke to the same issue in Rom. 3:13-14 where he said that, *"No one is righteous...Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. And their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."* The bottom line is that if you or I assume we can throttle our tongues on our own power, think again. But JESUS CAN. And if He is strong enough to carry a CROSS, He's strong enough to carry YOU. If even His parched tongue was strong enough to ask the Father to forgive His ENEMIES, then it's certainly strong enough to forgive His followers. Which brings us to the Apostle James' final point...

#4 To tame the tongue, we must also recognize that its INCONSISTENCIES are rooted in its SOURCE. Look at vs. 9-12.

In vs. 9 & 10 James now points out an ironic and troubling inconsistency in the life of us believers: *"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."* For example, Christians say, *"Praise the Lord!"* in one breath, but in the next they say evil things about another person made in the image of God. They sit in church singing hymns of praise to God and no sooner get out the door than they whisper, *"Did you see so-and-so? She's such a hypocrite. Do you know what she did?"* James gets very direct: *"My brethren, these things ought not to be!"* Why? Because it's INCONSISTANT with the SOURCE of the new spiritual nature the Holy Spirit created within us at our Baptism! Yet sources don't lie, says James. In nature, *"What you see is what you get."* A spring will either produce fresh water or bitter water, but not both. A fig tree produces figs, not olives, and a vine doesn't produce figs. But sadly, the human tongue is different.

It allows us to often speak out of BOTH sides of our mouth! Even St. Peter suffered from this foot-in-mouth disease when he first declared to Jesus, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"* and then only minutes later,

when Jesus revealed His messianic plan to suffer and die, Peter says, “*God forbid!*” and tries to stop Him, and Jesus has to call him out as a stumbling block and spokesman for Satan!

Jesus said in Matt. 15:18, “*...the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart.*” There’s our true source! Our tongues are tied to our heart! But ever since Adam and Eve’s fall into sin, our hearts have been “singled with sin”, along with our tongues. However, in our baptism, the Holy Spirit has given us a NEW heart AND spirit that can control our tongue and use it to glorify GOD and to tell others about Him.

While we still walk this earth, we can't fully tame the tongue—like we were domesticating a wild animal—but by the power of the Holy Spirit we CAN learn to control it by doing three basic things.

**FIRST**, “Don't say everything you KNOW.”

Just because you know something about someone doesn't mean you have to share it. And just because it's TRUE, still doesn't mean you have the right to say it! Solomon said in Prov. 17:27, “*A man of knowledge uses words with restraint.*” If what you say doesn’t build up others and bring glory to the Name of Christ, then you're better off keeping your mouth shut and your tongue at rest.

**SECOND**, “Don't say everything you THINK.”

Remember the character on *Cheers* named Cliff Claven? No matter what subject came up in conversation, he always had something he thought ought to be said about it as a self-proclaimed authority on anything and everything. Somebody said that in just about every group of friends there’s someone like Cliff Claven. By the way, if you look at your group of friends and don't see someone like him, maybe you should take a long hard look at yourself...or at least at Proverbs 17:28 where it says, “*Even a fool is thought to be wise if he keeps silent!*”

And **THIRD**, “Don't REPEAT everything you HEAR.”

It’s been said that every fiery tongue sizzles with GOSSIP. But the problem with repeating gossip is that there’s a better than even chance that what you heard isn't completely true ANYWAY. Gossip tends to get embellished as it’s passed from person to person. The subject of gossip is one that we don’t take seriously enough as Christians. We say things like, “*I'm going to go visit 'so and so' and catch up on the latest gossip.*” It’s just a figure of speech, so we act like there's nothing wrong with doing that. But Solomon says in Solomon said in Proverbs 17:9, “*He who covers an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter, separates close friends.*” You don't have

to repeat everything you hear.

“Don't say everything you KNOW.” “Don't say everything you THINK.”  
And “Don't REPEAT everything you HEAR.” Your tongue may not thank you  
for it, but your neighbors WILL!

May God the Holy Spirit sanctify and consecrate our tongues, so that we  
use them to praise our God AND to serve each other with words of truth that  
encourage, help, heal, and inspire!

In Jesus' Name, Amen!