

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When I was young, I would often hear: “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you.” But is that true? Is it *really* true that “words will *never* hurt you”? That is not what we heard in today’s Epistle from James 3! The Holy Spirit inspired St. James to write: “***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***” (James 3:6).

Yes, “sticks and stones” indeed break bones, but words often cause more damage than any stick and any stone. Today, through the Holy Spirit, James calls on us to consider our own life experience and to acknowledge the fiery power of our words, so that our sin-infected tongues would be tamed to be gladly directed to a higher purpose: to glorify God and speak well of our neighbor.

As I said last week, through the Epistle of James, the Lord is imparting His wisdom to Christians in a world that is profoundly un-Christian. Today’s epistle is timeless as it is practical for Christians in every age.

You see, our tongues, though the least and weakest part of us, have big effects. Like the tail that wags the dog, the tongue drives our lives. So, James gives some examples of little things that have big effects:

- **The bits in horses’ mouths.** That little piece of steel in a horse’s mouth, when managed properly, can control a two-thousand-pound animal.
- **The rudder on a ship.** That little shaped plank, mostly invisible beneath the waterline, enables a captain to control the course of an immense ship filled with cargo, crew, and passengers.
- **A spark in a forest.** Under control, a spark can make a small fire to warm cold travelers and cook their food. Out of control, a spark can cause an inferno that can reduce thousands of acres of mighty trees to blackened, smoking stumps.

Likewise, our angry, hurtful words, once spoken, can take on a life of their own and continue to wreak havoc. A word cannot be unsaid. So even if you may have said your words in jest, your hearer may *not* have taken your words as innocent banter. So, what we say to each other could have negative consequences. Like a spark in a dry forest, a single syllable of spite or jest can quickly ignite a chain reaction of offense and anger, pain and guilt, rumor and slander, hostility, deception and shame.

Simple lies are everywhere. They mask our selfishness. They cover our sins. They corrode our relationships. We lie to other people and even lie to ourselves.

But the evil tongue is not just limited to lies – *as we often turn the truth, a self-serving version of the truth* – into a weapon by clipping and snipping words out of context. If you are paying any attention to political ads these days, you will see a crash course in turning the truth into a weapon, an untamed fire. Then those who do such things attempt to explain away the damage they have caused by saying, “It’s just the truth!” as they take the truth out of context.

Bearing false witness, as Martin Luther says in his *Large Catechism*’s explanation of the Eighth Commandment – “*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor*” – is nothing else than a work of the tongue. Luther says, Christians are not supposed to speak evil about other people, by telling lies about our neighbor, betraying him, slandering him, or hurting his reputation, even if what Christians say is true. The only exceptions to that rule are those who are commanded in their God-given vocations as judges, as parents, as called pastors to judge sin and sinners, so that evil does not go unpunished.

But this Eighth Commandment also enjoins to it good works, which show our fruits of faith. To this, Luther says, “*Let no one do any harm to his neighbor with the tongue, whether friend or foe. Do not speak evil of him, no matter whether it is true or false, unless it is done by commandment or for his reformation. Let everyone use his tongue and make it serve for the best of everyone else, to cover up his neighbor’s sins and infirmities, excuse them, conceal and garnish them with his own reputation. The chief reason for this should be the one that Christ declares in the Gospel, where He includes all commandments about our neighbor, ‘whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.’*”¹

¹ Luther, Martin, *The Large Catechism*, paragraph 285-286.

So, Christians show their fruits of faith by defending their neighbor, speaking well of him, and explaining everything in the kindest way.

The problem is that the right use of words is so often difficult and so rare that the abuse and perversion of our speech is so pervasive that Luther concludes that there is nothing around us or in us that can do greater good or greater harm in spiritual and in temporal matters than the tongue, even if it is the least and weakest part of a person.

In today's world, this evil and poisonous work of the tongue can be done even if we don't utter a word. Nowadays, we can destroy reputations through the strike of a key on your keyboard, on your smart phone, or on your tablet. In fact, today's technology seems to give us a license to fling nasty words out into the world that we would be ashamed and embarrassed to say aloud to your neighbor's face.

Every single day, we are invited to libel our neighbor by spreading lies and filth through social media posts or by simply clicking "like" or "share." And once our digital words are out there, they don't go away. Those blog posts, emails, text messages, Facebook posts, X-posts, and TikToks all serve as powerful amplifiers of our flaming poisonous tongues. Or is it rather our flaming poisonous hearts?

In reality, our tongues are not the real root of the problem. To be sure, our words are vicious, but they are only a vicious contagious symptom. You see, this disease that effects our tongues comes from the heart. For Jesus says in Mark 7, ***"For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person"*** (Mark 7:21-23).

From the same tongue, beginning from the heart, come blessing and cursing. From mine and your tongue come blessing and cursing.

But Jesus has restored our tongues and our hearts to His great good by enduring the fire of God's wrath against our sins – *including those sins of the tongue* – in our place. Jesus undoes the chaotic damage arising from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He has undone the damage by fulfilling the Law perfectly, despite suffering the scorn and abuse of the tongues of evil men, while perfectly relying on the word and promise of our Heavenly Father. You see, Christ's death upon the cross has effectively extinguished the fiery danger of God's judgment into hell for all who use their tongues to confess His Name.

Jesus has undone the damage by preaching the healing, life-giving, divine Word that sets all things right where all has gone so terribly wrong. Such preaching – *for our forgiveness, life, and salvation* – continues today through those whom God has called to serve in the pastoral office.

Therefore, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we tame our tongues as we bite back lies, sarcasm, ridicule, gossip, evil suggestions, and praise for evil deeds as our true faith leads us to build up our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, to build up our neighbor, as we speak the truth, compliment, forgive, and comfort. True faith also leads us to know when our tongue must be silent.

Again, talk is never cheap. Words do wound. Words can build up as well as destroy a person's confidence and his good reputation. Words can create and destroy relationships. But words can also serve as a means to rescue your neighbor from hell.

You see, God's Word saves! A sermon, a Bible study or studying the catechism may all appear and sound boring and ineffectual. But it's God's power through His Word that saves people. The triune God – *the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* – uses His Word and Sacraments to create and sustain saving faith.

Through His Word, we learn how to exercise self-control, so that we don't speak with forked tongues, praising God and also cursing one another, while driving our neighbors away from the Savior. With the Holy Spirit's help, He changes our hearts and our minds, so that we train and use our tongues as instruments that accomplish much good, like bits in the mouths of horses and rudders in ships.

He trains our tongues to bless those who persecute us, so that in spite of our sins we would live in continual repentance, absolution, and reconciliation toward one another. He trains our tongues to bless Him in the purity, truth, and righteousness that have been poured out upon us, to His eternal praise and glory!

May the Lord's Means of Grace – *His Word and Sacraments* – continually change our hearts and tame our tongues as we walk as children of God in glorifying Him in speaking well of our neighbor! Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +