

Ben Libby

Sermon

August 30th, the 13th Sunday after Pentecost

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, AMEN. Our sermon text for this morning comes from James chapter 3, the first 12 verses:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 To be sure, we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a fully mature man, able to bridle his whole body as well. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they will obey us, we also guide the whole animal. 4 And consider ships: Although they are very big and are driven by fierce winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder, wherever the pilot wants to go. 5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, yet it also boasts great things. Consider how a little flame can set a large forest on fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire. It is set among the parts of our body as a world of unrighteousness that stains the whole body, sets the whole course of life on fire, and is set on fire by hell. 7 Indeed, every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and sea creature is being tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no one is able to tame the human tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, who are made in the likeness of God. 10 Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers, these things should not be this way. 11 A spring does not pour out both fresh and bitter water from the same opening, does it? 12 Can a fig tree bear olives, my brothers, or can a grapevine produce figs? A salt spring cannot produce fresh water either.

This is the Word of The LORD!!! The congregation may be seated...Mercy, Grace, and Peace ARE YOURS from your God and Father and your Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow Redeemed...

There is a disease going around. It is extremely contagious. It often wreaks havoc in small spaces and with people bunched together. If you get it, the casualty rate is incredibly high. And what is worse, you can pass it on to nearly anyone you interact with!

I am not talking about the Coronavirus. What am I talking about? It is small, yet it can do unseen amounts of damage.

If you heard the sermon text that was just read, you know where I am going with this. I am of course talking about what James is talking about. The TONGUE!!! Even though it is not the biggest part of our body, nor plays a vital role, it is extremely powerful. As he says here: **So also the tongue is a small part of the body, yet it also boasts great things.**

It doesn't matter who you are, we all have untamed tongues. We all have loose lips. The tongue and lips that we have are often a great blessing. They allow us to communicate with each other. Without them, society would fall apart (see the tower of Babel). Yes, our words can accomplish and communicate great things. But they can also do damage. We can hurt and harm our neighbors and even ourselves if we don't check our words at the door. That is why they are such powerful weapons. Firearms have safeties and swords have sheaths. Our tongues naturally do not.

Thankfully, we have someone who is able to tame both our tongues and our souls: Jesus Christ the righteous. With His life and death, He paid for our many sins. This includes all the terrible things that our tongues have uttered. Because of this, our wild and unruly sinful natures have been domesticated. Now,

we can serve others with our words instead of just doing damage. - MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATIONS OF OUR HEARTS BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT O LORD, OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER, AMEN!!!-

The book of James is an interesting read. It reads perhaps like no other book of the Bible. That doesn't mean that it in any way disagrees with the rest of Holy Scripture, it doesn't. But it does have some hard things to say. In this Book, he stresses: **But be doers of the word, and not hearers only (Jam 1:22 NKJ)**

The topic that this book focuses on is Sanctification. That is, now that we have been saved by the work of Christ, how are we to live? James emphasizes that our faith cannot be passive. Enemies of Lutheranism like to take certain things that Martin Luther said about James out of context. But I think this quote attributed to Luther really gets to the crux of James' point. Luther said, "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone."

When it comes to Scripture, or even just words in general, context is important. Some like to point to James 2:24 and criticize our doctrine of justification by faith. **You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.** Doesn't that support justification by works? Isn't that anti-Christian? But again, context is important! Many like to point to the teachings of Paul in Romans, Galatians, or Ephesians and say they are contrary to the teachings of James. But that is not true. You have to marry the two together. Paul was a missionary who was often speaking to newer Christians. James here, is writing his epistle to more mature Christians. We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. Naturally, good works will follow. That is why James says **Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (Jam 2:17-18 NKJ)**

The whole point of this letter is that it matters how we live our lives. It is one of the main ways in which we show our faith. If we believe that Jesus has saved

us from our sins, but we act and live like everyone else in the world, that is not letting the light of love shine. Good works naturally flow out of a heart that believes that their sins are forgiven. A faith that doesn't produce works isn't really a faith at all. Faith without works is dead. A Faith that produces works is easily identifiable as alive.

That is why we Christians are held to a higher standard. And that is why we need to be able to control our tongues. Yet, sometimes that is easier said than done.

Society has always primarily focused on action and less on words. For instance, if someone is a murderer they are quickly condemned. If someone is a sex offender, they are quickly condemned. If someone is a blatant thief, they are also quickly condemned. Everyone sees these things as naturally evil. Even the unchurched or the Atheist will agree on this. And certainly, these things are sinful and deserving of punishment.

But what gets less often looked on as evil are the sins of the tongue. The second table of the Law really picks up steam. Many things in it can be agreed upon and have consensus of common sense. Honor your father and mother, yep. You shall not murder, absolutely. You shall commit adultery, sure. You shall not steal, sure everyone knows that. But, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor? Ahhh... we can fudge that one a bit. Lies can be seen as small and little. It's just a "white lie" that's not really hurting anyone. It's just a small fib. There is no such thing as small murder. But we as a society don't care as much about what the tongue does.

And yet, the sins against the 8th commandment are probably the most frequently committed. They are also potentially some of the most dangerous and damaging sins out there! **5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, yet it also boasts great things. Consider how a little flame can set a large forest on fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire. It is set among the parts of our body as a world of unrighteousness that stains the whole body, sets**

the whole course of life on fire, and is set on fire by hell.

They say that the pen is mightier than the sword. But in our day and age, it is not just the pen. It is the tongue. It is the smartphone. It is the keyboard. These innovations make it easier to say things than ever. They also make the things we say more widespread than ever.

The thing that makes sins of the tongue so difficult and damaging is the ease in which they occur. It is so easy to say anything. It is so easy to gossip and ruin a neighbor's or brother's reputation. It is so easy to post something unloving. It is so easy to step around the truth. But the damage these things can do can at times be unrepairable.

James points out here things, like the tongue, that are small that do great things. It only takes a small cigarette butt to start a huge and devastating forest fire, as we well know in our state. Or look at the propeller of a boat. It's about the size of a hand, but it can get a boat up to incredible speeds and distances. Our words can have a similar effect. They may be small and insignificant to us, but they can cause people to do things that have serious consequences. The tongue can be, as he says here, **a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**

I also like the first example he uses. **3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they will obey us, we also guide the whole animal.**

When you think about freedom, what image comes to mind? I don't know why, but I often think about horses in the wild. Untamed and wild, they run wherever they want to and do what they want to. They have no saddles, they haul no passengers. They answer to no one but themselves. They are wild and free. What would you rather be? A wild, unbroken Stallion running freely in the wild? Or, a workhorse, saddle on your back, blinders around your eyes, reign in your mouth and pulling an extremely heavy cart for the majority of your life?

But, the thing is, that wild Stallion serves no purpose. The workhorse does. He makes life better for his owner and his owner's community. He also gets

cared for. He is guaranteed food and water. The wild horse is not.

It is good to be broken. It is good to be tamed. It is good to be controlled. These truths go against almost every instinct we have. It is better to be ruled and controlled by the LORD than to be the freedom of sin. As one Psalm puts it, **I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness. (Psa 84:10 NKJ)**

Many people would opt to be free. But free tongues can do the most damage. It is said, "loose lips sink ships". And isn't it true. When a reputation is damaged, even if that person isn't really guilty, they can be forever tarnished. Or, how much damage does fraud cause in this country? It is so easy for our tongues to run away from us. How many forest fires has your tongue started?

And that is James' whole sanctified point. We have been saved by Jesus. Thus we shouldn't speak like everyone else. We shouldn't let the wild horses of our nature run freely. We should keep our tongue tamed...

9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, who are made in the likeness of God. 10 Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers, these things should not be this way. 11 A spring does not pour out both fresh and bitter water from the same opening, does it? 12 Can a fig tree bear olives, my brothers, or can a grapevine produce figs? A salt spring cannot produce fresh water either.

Again, his point is clear. A spring is either a fresh water spring or a salt water one. It cannot be both. A fig tree only produces figs. An olive tree only produces olives. Likewise, a saint's tongue does not speak like a sinner does. When blessings to the LORD come out of the same mouth that curses one's neighbor, that is not right! You can't have it both ways!

So, since we can't have it both ways, what are you? Are you a fresh spring which pours out sweet pure water? Or are you a salt water spring, which spews forth bitter salt water?

The truth in this case is a bitter pill to swallow. Anyone claiming to have a perfectly guarded tongue is

not looking in the mirror hard enough. As easy as it is to say something foolish or harmful, it is equally as hard to recognize our responsibility and culpability. The more we go back through our past, the more sins of the tongue we can see. Indeed, the arson of our tongues has been frequent and consistent.

So...what? What's the next step? I could now say "You need to be better at guarding your tongue!" and of course that would be true. It would be extremely hypocritical for this preacher of sinful lips, but it would be true. But, that is where mixing Law/Sanctification with the Gospel becomes so dangerous. The point isn't "I need to be better in the future". The point is "I have sinned".

Even a small lie is enough to damn us. Those sins of action is what society considers to be heinous. But look at what James says a chapter prior to our text: **For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. (Jam 2:10 NKJ)** Yes, sins of the tongue are common, and I especially have transgressed with my tongue. I am one salty spring!

It's a bit hard to see the gospel in this text. It can be easily missed at times in James. But we see it's outline in verse 2: **2 To be sure, we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a fully mature man, able to bridle his whole body as well.**

Who can claim that they have never stumbled in what he says? Our Savior Jesus was such a man. To me, this is one of the most mind blowing truths about Jesus. Think of how many times our lips have muttered something false, or muttered some kind of complaint? There is no way we could even calculate it! But Jesus never said ONE sinful word! The Apostle Peter describes Him like this: **"Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"; 23 who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness-- by whose stripes you were healed. (1Pe 2:22-24 NKJ)**

Just think about that day when we were healed by those holy stripes... How many opportunities did Jesus have to stand up and defend Himself? How great would it have felt to poke holes in the ridiculous case that were brought against Him? Yet, Jesus never said a Word in His own defense.

Why didn't He give a defense? Because He was made to be defenseless. He was made to be guilty. That was the price it took to pay for our sins. God tells us "Be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy". That is truly easier said than done. But not for Christ. He did it. He accomplished Holy Perfection. Then He sacrificed His own life so that we could have that righteousness and a hope of heaven. Yes, Jesus is our example on how to live life. But even more than that, He is our substitute when we fail to! **My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. (1Jo 2:1 NKJ)**

Dear Christians, this is the point. Jesus died to tame our tongues and souls. Like Isaiah before the throne of the LORD, our unclean lips have been purged! Since they have been purged, now we can also respond like Isaiah did, "Here am I, send me!"

By the cross of Christ, our sinful and wild natures have been broken and domesticated. Now we can serve our neighbors and reflect His love. James says a lot about what sinful tongues and lips do. But he also goes on to say what redeemed lips and tongues do: **Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (Jam 5:13-16 NKJ)**

Yes, our lips can do a lot of damage. But they can also accomplish tremendous things with and through the LORD. When James wrote verse 5 he was talking about how much damage our tongues can do. But the inverse is also true. **5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, yet it also boasts great things.**

The tongue can boast of the great things God has done for it. Where it once lied, now it can make confession. Where it once blasphemed, now it can praise the LORD of heaven and earth. Where it once brought down the neighbor, now it can pray for the neighbor's benefit instead. Where it once sinned, now it can proclaim forgiveness of sins to others!

It may seem nice to be wild and free. But it is not very helpful, to your self or anyone else. By our sinful nature, we truly were born to be wild. But, it is better to be tamed. Jesus Christ has tamed our tongues and souls with His Gospel. We cannot bridle our own tongues. As James says here, no one can. But there was one who also did, and it is by Him that we are able to control our tongues out of love. It is also through Him that we are able to use those tongues for the benefit of others. Let our tongues and lips always be speaking His praise, praying for others, and proclaiming the Gospel message of forgiveness. AMEN!!!