

# FROM THE SAME MOUTH

James 3:1-12

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Epistle of James*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 12. In this epistle lesson, James describes the paradox that is the human tongue. At one moment our tongues may bless our Lord and Father. The next moment they set our world on fire. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From James 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup> For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. <sup>3</sup> If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. <sup>4</sup> Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup> So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup> And 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. <sup>7</sup> For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup> From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Well, if that doesn't prick your conscience, you might not have one. I recall a wise person comparing our mouths to a tube of toothpaste. Once you squeeze it out, you can't stuff it back in. And we all know what that's like. Sometimes, upon further reflection or gentle correction from a friend, we realize that what we said was wrong. But we can't undo it. The damage is done. Sometimes we realize it's wrong as we hear the words roll off our tongues. Sometimes we know it's wrong before we even say it, but we say it anyway. We sin with our words because it's so easy, and sometimes we just want to let it fly. Words are like bullets. They're cheap, especially when compared to how much damage they can do. And you can fire them off so quickly, that you don't have time to consider the cost. If all you think about is what it costs you, you have little hesitancy in pulling the trigger. But if you stop to consider the cost for your target, you take your finger off the trigger. You shut your mouth.

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Let's play a game. In order to play along, you should open your hymnal to page 95. And that's *page* 95, not *hymn* 95, although that's good too. The name of the game is "Which Commandment?" It's a catechism game. All you have to do is identify which commandment or commandments apply to what James is teaching in this passage. In other words, which commandments govern our tongues or the words that we speak? So take a moment to browse through the commandments. The commandments themselves are in italics, and the regular print beneath them is Luther's explanation. Which of God's Ten Commandments govern our speech? James says that "we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man." (3:2). His point is that there are no perfect men, except of course for Jesus. The rest of us have all sinned with our words. In what ways have we sinned? Which commandments have we broken? I'll give you a few hints if you haven't come up with any answers yet. There are at least three commandments that apply to our words. There is one commandment that applies to every sin. There is also a commandment that specifically deals with our words about the LORD, and there is another commandment that deals with our words about our neighbors. Okay. Are you ready?

The first correct answer is the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me." Now I know that doesn't even mention our words, but this commandment applies to everything. Every sin is an act of rebellion against the one true God. The LORD our God has commanded what is right and what is wrong. Every sin we commit is, therefore, rebellion against him and seeking after something else as our god. So even though the First Commandment does not mention our words, it applies to everything, including our words. So if one of your answers was the First Commandment, you get ten points.

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The second correct answer is the Second Commandment, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain." This governs our words about God. The meaning of this is much broader than just saying, "OMG," when you see something funny or, "Jesus Christ," when you step on a Lego in the dark. Those are simple examples of taking the LORD's name in vain. We should avoid them, and we should repent of them. But we also use the LORD's name in a vain manner whenever we speak wrongly about him. Instead, we should honor God's name in all our words. That means that we speak truthfully about him and we "call upon him in every time of need, and worship him with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving."

Teaching false doctrine is a sin against the Second Commandment. This is what James speaks of in the first part of this passage. "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (3:1). As a pastor I don't really like this verse. It's kind of scary. It might be kind of scary for Sunday school teachers too. I've never seen anyone pick this as their theme verse, but we should think of it just as often. There is a deep seriousness to teaching God's Word. We should handle it with great care. Notice, though, that James does not say, "*None* of you should become teachers," but, "*Not many* of you ..." The Church must have teachers. So I would ask that you pray for me, pray for other pastors, and pray for our Sunday school teachers. Pray that we would carefully handle God's Word. Pray that we would speak correctly, and pray that the Holy Spirit would guard us from willfully or accidentally speaking falsely. And if you notice that we speak falsely, please correct us. If we speak wrongly, and you know better, but you continue to let us speak wrongly, you are also guilty.

James compares this positive and careful use of God's Word to a bit in the mouth of a horse or a small rudder on a big ship. These are small instruments with great power. So is the tongue.

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The tongue, when it speaks God's Word truthfully, steers Christ's Church in the right direction. Think of a great ship on the sea. In the ancient world they were powered by strong winds. Now they have massive diesel engines. James' illustration still applies. A relatively small rudder steers the entire ship. If a ship has no pilot, it will crash and sink. If the pilot is careless, it may also crash. But if a careful pilot steers correctly, the ship will safely reach its destination. This is like a tongue that teaches God's Word rightly.

It's the same as the reins on a horse. When a rider uses the reins correctly, she harnesses great power. James uses these as positive illustrations of how the tongue, when it teaches God's Word truthfully, controls the body in a positive way.

And this all has to do with the Second Commandment, so if the second commandment was one of your answers, give yourself a gold star.

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The third correct answer is the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." If you got that right, you get a bullseye. If you got all three, you win a hamburger.

The Eighth Commandment covers more than just bearing false witness. At first it kind of sounds like lying under oath is the only thing God forbids. But the commandment summarizes everything God has to say about how we speak of our neighbor. Luther explains it this way: "We should fear and love God so that we do not deceitfully lie about, betray, backbite, nor slander our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the most charitable construction on all that he does."

In the second part of this passage, James shifts from the words of teachers, to the words of all of us. And he shifts from the illustrations of horses and ships, to a fire. The words of a teacher, when spoken wisely, control great forces. But the words of any of us, when spoken foolishly, spark an uncontrollable chaos. That's the illustration of the fire. James says, "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" (3:6).

When he says that the tongue is set on fire by hell, it recalls the first lie, spoken by the serpent in the garden, "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). And in John 8, Jesus calls the devil "the father of lies" (John 8:44). Every lie and every destructive word has its source in the devil. That does not mean we can use the excuse, "The devil made me do it." Rather, the point is that when we lie or destroy with our tongues, we are doing the devil's work. Please don't do the devil's work.

But we can't help it, right? James acknowledges this. He says, "The tongue *is* a fire, a world of unrighteousness" (3:6). And he goes on to talk about all the animals of the world, and how man can capture and tame any animal we want. Zoos are monuments of man's dominion over creation. And it's not a modern thing either. Thousands of years ago, the Assyrians were capturing and taming lions, just to prove that they could. It's a marvel of human dominion that we can tame anything we want ... except our own tongues. "No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." (3:8).

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So clearly, we're not talking about any kind of works-righteousness here. James makes very clear that we cannot save ourselves. This is strong evidence for the bondage of the will. It proves that we will remain sinners until the day we die. But that doesn't mean there's no point in trying. On the contrary. For the sake of our families, our congregation, our workplaces, and all of our neighbors, we should fight to restrain our evil tongues. When we talk about righteousness before

God, perfection is the only thing that matters, and we only obtain it through Jesus. But when we talk about righteousness before our neighbors, every little bit counts, because every harsh word does damage. You can bite your tongue a little more. You can be patient to consider someone else's viewpoint. And this will have a positive impact.

So I want to examine the way we communicate with one another. And I especially want to think about how we handle disagreements. So this will apply to marriage and your relationships with your family, but also to your friends, coworkers, fellow church members, and everyone you encounter, even anonymous people on the internet. When you disagree with someone, what's your goal? What are you trying to accomplish? Usually, when debates go bad—and it's okay to have debates; that doesn't have to be a bad word—but when debates go bad, it's usually because we have selfish motives instead of loving motives. So think about this: Do you want to defeat the other person, or do you want to persuade them?

This is something we really need to think about, because our world is filled with terrible examples of debate. The more I think about this, the more convinced I am that no Christian should watch cable news. I'm talking about CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and I know there are more that are probably even worse. And it's not just cable news, but you get the same thing in many newspapers, websites, podcasts, talk radio, Facebook, Twitter, and pretty much any form of communication. You know what I'm talking about. I know you do. It's barely even news anymore. The charitable thing to call it is "news commentary." The less charitable, but more descriptive term for it is "fear porn." And, yes; you heard me correctly. It's like pornography. It's addictive. The difference is that instead of sowing lust in our minds, it sows fear and hatred. And that fear and hatred colors the way you see the whole world, not just the stuff in Washington, but it gets into your closest relationships. And I often see this in people. Those who admit to me that they consume this kind of news commentary, they're worried and fearful and angry. On the other side, I talk with people who avoid it or have even given it up, and I see much more happiness and contentment. And I'm not saying that we just ignore the news completely. Maybe give it up completely for a few weeks as a sort of detox. And then look for just one or maybe two sources of just news without commentary or debate. You probably won't find an unbiased source. I'm not sure there is one. But find something that at least tries to be news. And avoid anything that treats the other side unfairly. And that includes the sources you agree with. If you're reading something you agree with, but they treat the other side unfairly, cut it out. Unfair arguments aren't even effective.

You do not persuade a person by destroying them. But that's what we're tempted to do. And I think you know what I'm talking about. You look for that one thing that will really crush the other person, that one thing that will prove them wrong. And it might prove them wrong, but it won't persuade them. They won't even care that they're wrong; they'll just be angry at you. You can be right in the wrong way.

If you ever want to persuade a person, the first thing you have to do is understand them. You do this by asking them questions. Listen to them. Show them some respect. Sometimes this is all you have to do. If a person has no basis for something they believe, and you ask, "Why do you think that?" they might realize that they don't have a reason. But if they do have a reason, then you learn what it is. It might be a bad reason, but then you learn how you can help them. Or it might be a good reason, in which case they might persuade you. We should never be so arrogant as to think that another person cannot teach us something.

But we don't like being wrong, so we get defensive and angry when we feel like we're losing. I've learned this, mostly by observing my own emotions. Sometimes I know what I'm

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talking about. And in those cases, I don't feel threatened, and I don't lose my composure. But sometimes I get into a debate where I really don't know what I'm talking about. Or sometimes I thought I knew, but I realize I'm overmatched. I don't know the facts as well as I should. Then I get defensive. I start exaggerating. Or I even feel rage toward the other person. I want to destroy him, so I resort to insults. It's ironic that the less we know about something and the less confidence we have, the more strongly we argue. It's because we're compensating for our ignorance. Pay attention to this the next time you witness a debate. The calmer person, and maybe even the person who talks less, probably knows more than the other person, because they don't feel threatened. And especially pay attention to it the next time you find yourself in a debate or an argument. If you start to feel threatened or angry, it probably means that you don't know what you're talking about. So stop arguing. Ask some questions. If they make a good point, tell them so. Figure out where the other person is coming from. And say, "I need to think about this for a little while."

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This is hard to do. And you know this. It's much easier to throw flames with our tongues and burn everything down. Even if you recognize that your tongue is a fire, and even if you resolve to change and be charitable with your words, your tongue is still a fire. It will be until we die. And that fire is going to force its way out. When James says, "No human being can tame the tongue," he leaves us all without excuse. And this is good, because it shows us our desperate need for forgiveness.

I gave you some moral teaching today. And morality is good, but we don't want to be moralistic. What I mean is this: We should not expect that we can justify ourselves before God. We should not even be concerned with justifying ourselves before other people. That's part of the problem here. But especially before God, we stand before him only by the blood of Jesus. Your words do not make you any more or any less acceptable to him.

Repentance does not mean that we clean ourselves up. It does not mean that we just quit sinning. It does not extinguish the fire in our tongues. Repentance consists of two parts: First, that we feel contrition over our sin. And second, that we trust Jesus for our forgiveness. That's it. It means that we confess our sins, and we receive Jesus' promise that he has paid for all of them. That's repentance, and it's not even a one-time thing. This is the daily life of a Christian, because "we sin daily and deserve nothing but punishment" (Small Catechism, III, 5). We can even say that this is the hourly or minute-by-minute experience of a Christian. We are constantly in need of forgiveness, and Jesus' blood stands, always, as the atonement for our sins.

There is a great contrast between our words and Christ's words. Our tongues are a world of unrighteousness. But we can turn that around and say about Jesus that his tongue is a world of righteousness. He speaks, and demons flee. He says, "I forgive you," and sins are forgiven. Whenever our words condemn us, and they often do, consider the power of Jesus' words. He is the Word through which this entire universe was created. Our words spark chaos. His words bring order and healing and restoration and life. His words are never false. And the forgiving power of his words far exceeds the destructive power of ours.

So watch your words. Confess when your tongue has been a fire. Confess it to God. Confess it to those you burn. And know this: The forgiving power of Jesus' words is far more powerful than the fire of your tongue. He will forgive, and you are forgiven. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.