

James 3:1-12 – September 15, 2024

I remember, I was in high school at the time. The end of my sophomore year, I believe. And it was after school and I had gone over to hang out with the chess club while they were practicing. Yes, I was that big a dork. I was not actually in chess club. But I considered it fun to hang out with them.

So there I am with the chess club, talking to a friend of mine. And the subject of our junior year schedules comes up. What classes we're going to be taking, what teachers we are going to have, and so on.

And normally during junior year, we would take American History. But there are two American History classes, a normal one and an honors one, for students with a good GPA. And I had the grades to take honors American History. So my friend asks whether or not I'm going to do so.

And I tell him, no, I'm not. I just really don't like the guy who teaching it. He's old and he's boring and he seems kinda grouchy and I just really don't like him at all. And while I'm saying all this, my friend is growing more and more nervous. And more and more quiet. And right about the time that I finish this little review of a teacher I've never actually spoken to or had in class, he discretely points a finger behind me.

And there, of course, is the honors American History teacher himself. And he's not angry or offended. In fact, it appears he's doing his best to look like he didn't hear me at all. And so, with my face growing redder and redder by the moment, I do my best to pretend like I didn't actually say what I just said and make a hasty exit out of the room.

It was embarrassing. And it would continue to be embarrassing. Because, from that point on, every time I saw that teacher in the hallways, I couldn't bear to look him in the eye. For two years, I avoided him like the plague. And the really ironic thing was that although I had said all of that because I didn't like him, I was now avoiding him because I thought for sure he hated me. But that was probably because I hated myself for saying it.

In our Epistle lesson, St James warns us of this very danger. Our words can get us into trouble. What we say has a huge impact on our lives. Because those words can follow us. Changing us. Changing the people around us. Changing how we relate to God himself. Our words are important. And they deserve our attention.

And James illustrates this concept in a series of short metaphors or, you might even say, parables about the harm that words can do. He says that our tongue is like the bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder on a ship. Both are relatively small parts of a larger whole. Both are really quite useless apart from the whole. And yet, both have a huge impact on the whole.

I'm not an equestrian. As far as I can remember, I've never even been on a horse. But I know it's hard to ride a horse without a bit. Without a bit, you can't have reins. Without reins, you can't easily tell a horse where to go.

The same holds true for ships. A ship without a rudder is useless. Even dangerous. So although you *can* ride a horse without a bit and you *can* sail on a ship without a rudder, in both cases, it's really the bit and the rudder that's making sure you get from point A to point B.

But that's an interesting way of picturing our tongues and the words that we say. Because I think we normally think about our actions steering our words. Something happens to us and we respond to it. We do something and then we talk about it. Words are the commentary on the action of our lives.

But according to James, it's the other way around. Our words steer our actions. Particularly when we're relating to other people. What you say to a person and about a person will define how you act around them. What you say to a person and about a person will define how they act around you.

So unless you intend to spend your life as a hermit, never interacting with another human being, your words will define the action of your life. What you say not only matters, but it matters more than any other decision you make in a day. It is the bit that directs your horse. It is the rudder that steers your ship.

Which is why it's not terribly surprising that it can also be the fire that burns your forest. Just as a single spark from a campfire can set thousands of acres on fire, one word spoken at the wrong time to the wrong person can ruin a person's life. It can ruin your own life. But more likely, it can ruin somebody else's.

Why? Well, because, when it comes to our words, our tongue is a wild animal. An animal that cannot be tamed. No matter how hard you try to control your speech, you cannot stop it 100% of the time.

In fact, St James says at the beginning of this passage that a man who is never at fault in what he says must be perfect. Our tongue is the hardest part of our body to control and the part most prone to sin. And if you were theoretically able to stop sinning in what you say, then it would show a level of self-control such that you could stop sinning in any and every area of your life.

The tongue is an untamable, restless evil. And like a deadly snake or a venomous spider, it is full of poison. And it wants to strike. As I said, it's a wild animal. Searching for prey. Searching for something or someone to attack.

You've felt it, haven't you? That rush you get when you just lay into someone with a verbal attack. Or maybe you're more passive. Maybe it's not the person himself who feels the sting of your words. Maybe you attack him behind his back.

You don't say it to his face where he might strike back. No, like a coward, you say it to someone else. To husband or wife. To your best-friend. To your coworker. And you give it an innocuous euphemism like "venting." Oh, I'm just venting. I'm just letting off steam.

No, you're not just venting. You're not just letting off steam. You're sinning. You're letting your tongue run wild. You're indulging in the evil and poison of bitterness and hatred. And, in the process, you are starting a fire that you can't put out. A fire that has the potential to consume you and the person you're talking to and the person you're talking about. And you don't even realize how dangerous that fire has become because it feels amazing. It feels good to speak evil about someone.

There's just one problem. Not only is it a sin, but it's a sin that turns us away from God. As James said, the tongue is our bit and our rudder. What we say is where we go. So if you say things that are unrighteous and ungodly, then you turn the entire course of your life in an unrighteous and ungodly direction. If you say things that hurt and slander your brothers and sisters in Christ, then you turn the entire course of your life away from Christ and His Church. If you spread rumors and gossip and back-biting and insults, then you turn the entire course of your life away from sharing the love of Jesus Christ.

You've only got one mouth. And it is either going to be a spring of fresh water or a spring of salt water. It is either going to be a source of praise to our God and Father or a source of curses against your neighbor. It cannot do both at the same time. And, in fact, the more it practices the one, the less able it is to do the other.

Which means that there is no simple cure for rumor, gossip, and slander. The only cure is the hard road of thinking before you speak. And keeping your mouth shut when you want to open it. And, as Luther tells us in the 8th commandment, putting the best construction on everything, no matter how much you want to criticize.

No, it's a hard road we follow. But the road is there. Because, as James points out, the man who can control His tongue is a perfect man, able to be self-controlled over any sin. We've seen that man in the flesh. His name is Jesus Christ. And He has lived that perfect life for us.

He's lived it specifically because of how hard it is for us to live it. He's lived it because he knows that we're not able to live it. He's lived it so that we might still find forgiveness when we can't live it. And so that we might learn to forgive even when others sin against us with their words.

Learn from Christ. And know that you are forgiven. Learn from Christ. And know that the brother or sister who has spoken against you is also forgiven. Learn from Christ. And learn to forgive.

You know I once heard a story. It was a reporter talking to a former CIA agent. And the agent was talking about the incredible lengths to which the agency went to make sure that their programs were completely secret. And the reporter asked the agent, "Isn't it hard to do a job that you can't talk about? That you'll never get any recognition for? That you can't even talk to your own family about?"

And the agent looked at him and said, "No, you just have to think about your job in different terms. My job was to keep my mouth shut. So the less people knew about what I did, the more proud I was of the work I was doing."

As Christians, that's sometimes our role. I don't mean that we should be keeping secrets or bottling up our anger. If there's something important to say, then say it. And if a brother or sister has sinned against you, then talk to them about it.

But when it comes to rumor and gossip and slander and insults, our job is to keep our mouths shut. And our joy and delight is not in bitterness and "venting." It's in making peace with our neighbors just as God has made peace with us through His Son. Amen.