

Sermon – 09/12/21

Text – James 3:1-12

Theme – “The Tongue”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we continue our look at the epistle of St. James. And as we read through it, we find that it is an eminently practical book. It is true that you will not find the lofty language and philosophical arguing of St. Paul in it. You will not find the depth and profundity of St. John either. Nor will you find every aspect of Christian doctrine examined and discussed there. It not a book written by an ivory-tower seminary professor, or some scholar who wants to come up with the newest and latest religious fad.

No, what you WILL find there is a lot of discussion about how to *live* the Christian faith. How to put into practice what we preach. How to show Christ in the way we interact with others. It is a very concrete and simple book that helps us in producing those fruits of faith the Lord desires to see in us as Christians. (pause)

Today’s text is one of the greatest examples of that. What James writes about “the tongue” – that is, the words that come out of our mouths – are some of the most practical words ever written about the subject. Listen again to what he says:

If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. 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! 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. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Really quite vivid, quite wonderful, quite true, isn't it? The tongue is not the biggest organ of our bodies, and yet it surely seems to be the one that gets us into the most trouble. I know how true that is for me, anyway. How many times have I popped off with something I later regretted saying? From back-talk to teachers; to snide comments made to my brothers and sister; to complaints against my parents; to angry words spoken to co-workers; to coarse and crude jokes made to friends; to thoughtless and hurtful things I have said to Lisa. The list goes on and on. Things I said that I shouldn't have uttered. Things I said without thinking. Things I said, fully intending to cause hurt. Things spoken to get my way. Things I said that showed my sinful and idolatrous heart. And I am not alone in all that, am I?

It is true, as St. James indicates with his comparison of tongues to the rudder of a ship, that our tongues and words really show where our hearts and minds are. That is, we say wrong and hurtful and wicked and sinful things because WE are wrong, hurtful, wicked, sinful people. That is who and what we are by nature. Oh, we can try to do a better job of keeping watch on our language, of not saying things likely to hurt others or get us into trouble. We might even find that we can (to some extent) succeed. But that doesn't really change our sinful hearts, does it? No, those evil thoughts and desires are still there – even if we do not act on them, or voice them. James is quite correct when he says “*no human being can tame the tongue*” – but that is so only because no human being can tame his sinful **heart**.

The sinful things our tongues utter are the same sinful things our depraved minds think, that our impure hearts desire, that our fallen nature craves. You are sinful and unclean – and every day your very

lips prove it. Your *words* prove it. And it is the same with me, and all people. Well, all people except for One as St. John tells us in his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...For from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; but the only God -- who is at the Father's side -- *He* has made Him known.

Jesus as the **Word** of God – that’s an interesting contradiction from OUR sinful words, isn’t it? Where our words are sinful and unclean — betraying our sinful and unclean nature — Jesus (as the Word of God) is holy and righteous and pure, showing His nature. Where our words so often hurt and kill, Jesus as the Word of God comes to heal and give life. Where our words are frequently dark and evil, Jesus brings pure Light to us, the Light that the darkness (and its prince) can never, ever extinguish or overcome.

The words that the tongue utters only echo the heart and mind of the speaker. That is painfully true with us — but it is also true in regards to God. And thankfully so! If left without that revelation, that Word, that Truth — which comes only in Jesus — we would never rightly know God at all. We might know some things *about* Him: His power and might; His creative work; His Law. But Jesus has come to reveal God’s true face, God’s true heart, God’s true essence to us.

“*God is love,*” St. John writes elsewhere. That is His essence: love. All that He does is done in love, and for the good and blessing of His beloved. So it was that He created. Not so that He could something and someone to “boss around”, or to bow and scrape before Him, or to sing His praises and stroke His almighty ego. No, God created because He loves. He loves His creation: the plants and animals, the mountains and stars, the earth and ocean, the angels. But above all else, He loves mankind. He made the whole universe for man. He gave Eden to Adam. He gave Eve to Adam, and Adam to Eve.

He placed the holy angels as servants and ministers to us. He came and walked and talked with Adam and Eve, as a Father with His children, delighting in their presence.

And when Adam threw it all away by his sin, when he chose evil rather than good, when he enslaved himself and all his descendants to Satan, still God loved. But who knew? Adam hid from God, sure that God's heart now was as full of hatred toward them as it had been full of love before. It was only in God's words of a Savior that Adam learned —again — of God's true essence and being. Sadly, though, all people have inherited that fear and blindness about God because we have inherited that sin.

So it is that by nature no one – not one – can understand God as He really is. Instead of trusting God's love and mercy and grace – His forgiveness – man wants to try to appease God on his own. We bring our imagined and pretended good works and deeds to Him, as payment for our sin. As if *we* could ever undo, or overcome, or outweigh the burden of our sin! But Jesus has come to relieve us of that foolish notion; He has come to set us straight; He has come to teach us and free us and save us.

He does that by His perfect life, His atoning death, His glorious resurrection. Where you and I sin daily, where we break commandment after commandment, where we can't even get our tongues to speak without dripping poison, Jesus takes our place. Every commandment He has kept. He has perfectly loved God and man. He has done everything God expects and demands – and He has done so *for* us. God reckons and accounts Christ's righteousness and holiness to us, as Christians. Whereas in Adam we all have sinned, in Christ we have all been perfect!

Then He went to the cross and carried that tremendous burden of our sin – all of it, for all people, of all time – and He paid the full price it demands. He has suffered the hell that ought to be yours and mine. He has endured the Law's condemnations; He has taken your place in death, as well as in life. And He proves that by rising from the dead on the third day, as Victor over all our enemies: sin,

death, and the devil. Just as He is risen, just as He has ascended into heaven, so will we. And all this simply and solely because He loves us. (pause)

But you already know all of that, don't you? We come here to church, week after week, and we hear the same message preached and taught: Christ crucified for us and our salvation. It becomes almost too familiar, too well-known. Years ago, one of our vicars here handed me a sermon to read and approve before he preached it. After I had finished reading it, I brought it back to him and said: "What you have written here is true, Vicar. But there is no Gospel – it is all Law; it is all about what we are to do rather than about what Christ has done FOR us." And then came his startling response: "Yeah, but they already know that."

"They already know that." I suppose that's perhaps true – in our heads we "know" the Gospel; we perhaps even "believe" it in our hearts. But all too often we do not LIVE it, as our tongues so frequently prove. Writing to Christians, mind you, St. James said:

With (the tongue) we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we also curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes both blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be!

We are here this morning to bless and praise God, but how many of our mouths and tongues have already today done the cursing that St. James mentions? How many of us will, before the day is through, say sinful and unclean and hurtful things? And no matter how hard we try, no matter how good our intentions, it will be so simply because our old sinful nature still clings to us.

You see, we still need the Gospel, don't we? We still need to hear the Good News that, despite our sins – our continued sins! – God loves us and forgives us, for Jesus' sake. **That** is really why we are here, week after week: to receive that forgiveness anew because we NEED it, over and over and over again, every day of our lives. We NEVER get past that in this lifetime. We need God's grace, we need Christ's sacrifice, we need the Spirit's application of Jesus' shed blood to us again and again.

And it is only when we have received that forgiveness, that grace, that Word of life, only then can we begin to be the people God would have us be. Only when we constantly live in that interplay between our confession and God's absolution – the Law's accusations and the Gospel's forgiveness in Christ – only *then* do we produce the fruit — the good works — that St. James encourages.

When we are awed and overcome by God's goodness and mercy and love, we WILL speak of it. When we recall the depth of our sin, we will NOT be so quick to condemn and defame and criticize others. When we live *always* in the shadow of the tree of the cross, then we WILL produce its true fruit of love. Then — and only then. (pause)

In Psalm 19, King David prays: "*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.*" The pastor who confirmed me many years ago always used those words to open his sermons. Good words, wise words, true words. When our eyes are fixed on Jesus, our hearts and our tongues cannot help but speak words acceptable to God, for they will be about His love in our Savior — and that will lead us to lives of love and service toward our neighbor. Grant us such a tongue, Lord, for Jesus' sake! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS – Offertory/Offering (p. 192)

FE – Nicene Creed (p. 166)