

September 15, 2024
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

James 3:1–12)

ONLY ONE PERFECT MAN.

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

The apostle James wrote his epistle letter to Christians. Eleven times in his short letter he refers to those to whom he writes as “*my brothers,*” a phrase to illustrate the close connection of those belonging to the family of Christ. They’re no different from you and me. They trust that they’re saved by faith alone in Christ Jesus alone. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, James offers wisdom and practical counsel in response to a question that has faced Christians living in every age: “*How are we to live and act as Christians in a rebellious, unloving, and faithless world?*” His answer in a nutshell is: “*Remain steadfast under trial, clinging to faith in Christ Jesus, bearing fruits of repentance, faith, and good works.*”

Baptized believers are different from the world, and we should live like it. You’ve died to sin so you should live as a new creation in Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:17) Don’t allow yourself to conform to the world with its depraved and immoral ways in which you used to live. (cf: Romans 12:2) Stop your arrogant pride and practice humility. Draw near to God, cleansing your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (cf: James 4:8)

In last week’s epistle text James exhorted us to not show favoritism to others based on their appearance, wealth, or what they can do for you in return. (cf: James 2:1–10, 14–18) He exhorted all Christians to bear fruits of faith, the good works and deeds that flow in response to the love of the One who first loved you to death on Calvary’s cross. Faith without works is dead faith, which is no faith at all.

In today’s epistle reading, James points to another sinful struggle that all mankind has wrestled with since the fall in the Garden of Eden. Controlling the human tongue. Taming the tongue is such a deadly struggle, James first warns that not too many should become teachers, because of words that flow from the tongue. Does the teacher correctly teach true doctrine or unwittingly teach doctrine contaminated with small bits of toxin which could poison the student’s faith? James cautions that those who teach will be judged with greater strictness on the Last Day. (cf: James 3:1)

Words are important and powerful; however, we live at a time in history when it has become acceptable to spew vulgar verbal outrage, dripping with seething disgust, as individuals make bitter attacks on issues, events, and other people that they believe have offended them. This protest culture we live in seems to get worse by the year and often derails or gets in the way of those trying to undertake sincere, meaningful actions toward beneficial change.

As a child, you probably heard it said: *“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.”* It’s a rebuke used when being bullied with verbal attacks and name calling. Yes, sticks and stones can break bones – but words **can also cause** irreparable harm. A broken bone usually heals in six to eight weeks. But ears offended or a heart broken by harsh or untrue words mends much slower, taking months or even years to heal, if they ever heal at all. James uses the analogy of a forest set ablaze by a small fire. The charred remains of a forest will take years or even decades to return to its pre-fire state. We reap what our words sow, for good or for ill, whether they are spoken aloud or posted on social media. Unfortunately, social media has emboldened loose and vile tongues to pour out hateful insults without ever having to look at their victim in the eye as if bombing their enemy from 30,000 feet.

James says:

“⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue...”

(James 3:7–8)

With the exception of Christ Jesus, no one on the face of the earth since the fall in the Garden, has been able to control his whole body, not even the least of which is the human tongue. You can put bits in the mouths of thousand-pound horses and make them obey. (cf: James 3:3) Just pull on the reins and direct their huge bodies. Great ships are driven by the wind and tossed about on the sea. Yet they’re guided through the waves by a very small rudder, turning to and fro at the will of the pilot. (cf: James 3:4)

And then there’s the human tongue. It can boast of great things if it’s properly controlled. But if left uncontrolled, it’ll only be able to boast of evil things. Through His apostle James, God makes it abundantly clear the enormous power of the human tongue and the destruction it leave in its wake, saying:

“... How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness... set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.” ⁸ ...It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” (James 3:5–6, 8)

The tongue has a long-sorted history with the fallen world. The serpent in the Garden used his tongue in an attractive and enticing way with deceptive words to tempt Eve to disobey God. (cf: Genesis 3:1, 4–5) Sampson and Delila played a game of lies and deceit with their words until Samson’s weakness for women proved to be his doom when Delilah coaxed from him the secret of his strength. (cf: Judges 16:1–22) Ananias and his wife Sapphira were a wealthy couple who had every right to retain their own property, but they sinned grievously when they sold a portion of property and pretended to turn over the entire proceeds to the newly born Christian Church, while secretly holding a portion back, which cost them both their lives. (cf: Acts 5:1–11)

No one is innocent. Not you, not me, no not even one. You and I can participate in the Divine Service, praising our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus, and then leave this place cursing God’s most precious creations, the other people made in His image. You praise God one moment, and then the very next, with the very same tongue, you utter filth about others and even to others. Speaking sinful self-centered arrogance, there are times that your intent is revenge and to do

murderous harm to our neighbor's reputation. (cf: James 3:9–12) Or even those times when you accidentally set something or someone on fire with your tongue and you didn't even know it.

But the tongue itself is not the real root of the problem. The words that flow from our tongues are just a symptom... a vicious and hurtful symptom that flow from the deadly disease of a sinful heart. As we heard a few weeks ago, Jesus says:

"²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." (Mark 7:21–23)

Words come out of the heart and are broadcast by the tongue.

At the beginning of our text James said:

"... if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body." (James 3:2)

Go to the zoo. Look around the world. Every kind of beast and bird and creature has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. Well... no human being except for the God/man Christ Jesus. He is the **only** perfect man. He is the **only** one who bridled not just His tongue, but also bridled His whole body.

From the foundation of the world God looked on your sinful and diseased heart and your restless evil tongue, full of deadly poison, and had compassion on you. (cf: James 3:8) Even though your tongue and mine rage with the fire of hell, they will not condemn the baptized believer. For God the Father sent His own Son into the world to live the perfect life you and I cannot not – and die the perfect sacrificial death so that you and I would not. Through His prophet Isaiah our Lord God says:

"⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7)

He is one who deserved none of what He received at the hands of sinful men who hung him on the cross, but suffered every moment as He bore the burden of your sinful tongue. He is the one who lived and died and rose from the dead because your tongue is *"a fire, a world of unrighteousness."* (cf: James 3:6) He bridled his tongue even in the face of death so that you might receive His forgiveness of sins and His righteousness as He now lives in you. He forgives you for your unbridled tongue and all the hurtful and deadly words you have uttered. Take heart dear Christian. There is no reason to live in guilt or despair. Instead, live as a child of your heavenly Father. Live as one given the inheritance of forgiveness of sins and eternal life from the only Son of God, who was silent on your behalf.

In the waters of Holy Baptism, that fire that burns from your tongue was extinguished. The Word of God that you hear fills your heart and mind with the pure truth from God. God's Word replaces all of the other worldly words and gives your tongue something righteous to speak to others. As you receive the body and blood of Christ, in, with, and under the bread and the wine, the wounds inflicted on you by the things you say are healed. God's grace is a saving flood that

not even the fires of hell can stand against. And whatever you are helpless against on your own, you conquer in Christ Jesus. Live in your baptismal grace.

There is no one perfect except Jesus. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't attempt to bridle your tongue and your body and your mind. Of course you'll fail. But that doesn't mean that you should give up trying. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, live and try as a child of Christ. Your trying must be in Christ – giving up on yourself and trusting in Him. As Jesus says:

“All things are possible for one who believes.” (Mark 9:23)

What's truly impossible for you and me is perfection. But perfection and righteousness are yours in Christ. In your Baptism and the forgiveness of sins, God makes you perfect and righteous – creating within you clean heart, renewing and strengthening your faith, and guiding you according to his will. Until the Resurrection on the Last Day when Christ will usher in a new heaven and new earth, making all things new, along with the apostle Paul, you and I cry out for mercy saying:

***“²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*** (Romans 7:24–25)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.