

Can Anything Stop the Burning?

16th Sun. after Pent. – 09/12/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: James 3:1-12 Pastor Keith Besel

vv 5-6: “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...”

Introduction

- ⊗ How sad it is that the western part of the United States no longer has four seasons of the year, but five. Each year it seems that the “fire season” only increases in length and the severity of the fires and the destruction that they bring.
 - ➔ We all know too well, the truth that James refers to in verse five, “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire”. All it takes is a smoldering cigarette butt or a spark from a campfire, or a seemingly innocent lightning strike and the desert-dry forest in California, Washington, Wyoming or Colorado can turn into a blazing inferno that cannot be stopped; even with all of the fire-fighting resources that mankind can pull together.
 - ➔ Homes are destroyed, entire towns are consumed and hundreds of lives are lost as firefighters can only watch in bewilderment!
- ⊗ James says that the human tongue, controlled by the corrupt will of mankind and started by the devil himself is just as dangerous and consuming as the wildfires that we in the west have now come to know all too well.
 - ➔ Yes, we live in a day and age where it has become “normal” to hear and even join-in on the continual outrage; the seething disgust; the open anger and vitriolic attacks that our tongues direct at the latest issues, events, and people with whom we disagree.
 - ➔ Ours is a “protest” culture that is not only on the upswing, but often gets in the way of those trying to undertake sincere, meaningful action toward beneficial change. Yes, sticks and stones literally do break bones as we see violent mobs roaming the streets, fueled by offensive attitudes that used to just roll off the backs of so many in earlier generations.
 - ➔ One commentator recently suggested that the verbal tools of outrage have reached today a sad state of “hyperinflation”. Just as the value of a dollar has rapidly shrunk in its purchasing power, so the words coming out of our mouths have decreased in value so much that almost every line of verbal reasoning we speak and hear today has lost all of its power.
- ⊗ It is virtually impossible for you or me to say anything anymore that could surprise or shock the other, let alone have any real chance of resolving the plethora of disputes between all of opposing parties in our day. Rather than talking with one another with a sincere goal of coming to agreement, we blast our words past each other with judgmental accusations and hurtful names and labels intended to destroy our opponent.
 - ➔ So it is that the burning blaze our tongues have caused today can rightly bring us to ask, just as we do about all of the wildfires in the western part of our country, “Can anything stop the burning?”
- ⊗ Interestingly, James, the brother of our Lord Jesus, under timeless truth given from the Holy Spirit, begs you and me to carefully consider our own life experience and to acknowledge the fiery power of each of our own words so that our sin-infected tongues might be gladly directed to a higher purpose; that is, to the glory of God and the blessing of Christ’s body.

- Wherever and whenever we fail with our tongues, spouting out destructive words without giving thought to the hurt that they cause, or by withholding words of comfort, healing, and forgiveness, we alter the course of life for the worse.
- ✘ James asks you and me to remember today that the human tongue is capable of inflicting great damage, but Jesus in His redeeming power has restored your tongue and mine to accomplish His good work and will.

I. Our tongues are masters at setting fires (vv. 2-6)

- ✘ In verses 2-6 James speaks to the way that we have all become such highly skilled arsonists with our tongues, able to cast the spark of a lie or a cutting insult or a hurtful accusation into a conversation in just the right way so it will set and stoke an emotional conflict into fire.
 - It is of course our sinful nature, influenced by the devil himself that trains our tongues to speak in self-centered arrogance, even tricking us into using the excuse that we are warranted in saying such murderous things about our neighbor's reputation. James says in verse nine that "with (the tongue) we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God".
 - This is exactly the kind of hypocritical and contradictory speech that God says His people are not to use in the First, Second, and Eighth Commandments.
- ✘ Sometimes we sin knowingly and with full intention, saying for example that this person is flat-out "evil" or against God – not because of something we can actually point to in Scripture – but because we simply want to get our own way, or to convince them that we are right and they are wrong.
 - At times we even blaspheme against God when we tell people that God has said things that He actually has not. A good example is the quote, "God helps those who help themselves". But in fact God has never said anything of the sort.
 - Or if I were to say to you that, "God told me I should buy this car or take this job" or something of the sort, when in fact I never actually heard an audible voice from the Lord on the topic, than I would be guilty of placing words in God's mouth as a lie only to try and align my sinful desires with a made up version of God's will.
- ✘ And of course it's not only words that a person can actually hear from our tongues, that wreak such damage, but the words that we use through the various technologies at our fingertips like texting, e-mail, and all of the online forms of communication and social media. Cyber-bullying is in many ways even more harmful than the old fashioned face to face blazes that we can start with our tongues.
 - So whatever the actual form of spewing out fiery words, we still remain poor, miserable sinners who set and spread wildfires of destruction by our ungodly words.
- ✘ And then there are the times that we don't even realize when or how we've set something or someone ablaze, yet we still do. Think for example of the hurt that might occur when one spouse has worked all afternoon in a hot kitchen, trying to prepare the perfect dinner for his/her family only to have the other spouse or a teenager come barging into the kitchen and thoughtlessly exclaim, "what is it that I smell burning?"
- ✘ James even warns us about the way that we use our tongues to speak in God's name.
 - As those who have been redeemed by the shed blood of God's Son; as His baptized saints, we are to speak God's truth in all things, but we are to do so in love – thinking of how that truth might be received in the kindest way possible. 1 Peter 2:9 says, "But you are a chosen race, a

royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession...”. Why? “...that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

- ✘ And as James alludes to it in verse one, those who have been called to teach and preach publicly in Christ’s Church have a special burden of warning both believers and unbelievers against the prevailing false teachings in our world. But we are to do so in a manner that will calm the harmful blazes around us instead of fanning them into a larger fire.

→ The best way to do so is to stick with God’s own word of truth whenever possible, as Romans 10:17 says, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”. Therefore it is always my prayer and purpose as a pastor and a Christian to speak and apply God’s truths Scripturally whenever possible; that is to use God’s own Words in the Bible to confront us all of our sin and to comfort us all with the assurance of forgiveness and grace in Jesus and Jesus alone.

→ To do otherwise is to preach and spread what Paul calls a false gospel; something that sounds godly and good on the surface, but in reality deceives hearts and souls so that they are led away into eternal damnation. In Galatians 1:6-9 Paul warns, “...there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But... If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed”.

II. Jesus has restored our tongues

- ✘ You see, there is only one Gospel; only one word of “good news” that comes from Jesus and directs hearts and souls to believe only in Jesus; only in His saving work in our place for salvation.

→ So Jesus is the only one who can tame the untamable human tongue. Only Jesus is able to put a stop to the burning blaze of “evil” and “poison” that our sinful mouths and hearts so naturally enjoy spreading.

→ He is the one who endured the fire of God’s wrath against all of our sins – including the sins of our tongues – in our place. And in doing so, Jesus has now redeemed and restored our tongues to be used for His greater good.

- ✘ Where James calls the tongue “a fire; a world of unrighteousness” that “stains the whole body” and enflames “the entire course of life” in verse seven, Jesus is only One who undoes that all-consuming and chaotic damage by paying the penalty and conquering the source of the blaze on the cross and in His resurrection.

→ Yes, only Jesus is able to stomp out the effects of sin, death, and the devil as only He is the One who is the very righteousness of God in human flesh. He did what only He could do. He fulfilled God’s Law to perfection, despite the abusive and torturing blows lashed out upon Him by evil men.

→ He effectively extinguished the fiery wrath of God’s judgment on the cross and through His powerful and watery gift of grace in baptism He filled us with the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit, so that now we desire to use our tongues to confess His name as our Savior.

- ✘ He inspires faithful preaching for forgiveness, life, and salvation today just as He has since the day of Pentecost, whenever He calls men to serve in His Church as pastors in the public office of the Holy Ministry.

→ But look – it’s not only Pastors whose tongues have been trained as instruments to put out the fires of falsehood and to spread instead the Good News that brings and nourishes eternal life. Jesus has washed and purified every believer’s tongue in baptism to serve its Lord in spreading encouragement and comfort and love in Jesus’ name.

- ✘ Paul speaks to this redeemed tongue that Christ has given to us as His people. In Ephesians 4:29, he says, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear”.
 - ➔ Notice friends that he did not have any qualifiers in there like, “when you’re in public” or “outside of your own house” or “except for when you think no one is listening”. No, he says, “let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths”. That means ever! Just as Jesus has cleansed us fully in heart, mind and soul, by His redeeming blood, so He has cleansed and restored our mouths and the words that come out of them completely.
- ✘ So a true Christ-follower; a believer in Christ will sound different from the rest of those around him/her who are not Christian, whether it is at work or school or in the neighborhood or standing alone in front of the mirror at home.
 - ➔ So it is that your prayer and mine should be the same as David’s prayer in Psalm 19:14, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer”.

Conclusion

- ✘ I remember my Mom and Dad saying to me often that I needed to “engage my brain, before opening my mouth”. I didn’t really understand that saying until I had children of my own I guess. But as Christians, James is telling us all here today, that before we open our mouths, we should engage our faith in Christ and ask, “Are the words I am about to speak, words that come from Jesus in love or from some other source that might start a fire of hurt or gossip or something else that is against God’s will?”
- ✘ So please pray with me: “Lord God, heavenly Father, in the sending of Your Son, You utterly quenched the threatening fire of condemnation under the Law for all who believe in Him. By your Means of Grace, continually send your Holy Spirit to tame our tongues with Your grace and truth, that from them the cleansing pure fountain of the Gospel might continually spring forth for all to hear”. In the name of Jesus. Amen.