

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: James 3:1–12**

**Sermon: “Words Have Power”**

James’ Epistle offers the Spirit’s wisdom and practical counsel in response to a question that has faced Christians and Christ’s congregations in every age:

“How are we to live?” Answer: with perseverance in the faith (a genuine faith that is unsurprisingly accompanied by good works, submission to God’s will, patience, selflessness, and forbearance toward others.

It is as if James were saying: “Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are very different now. Be no longer conformed to the world’s manner of behaving, as formerly you were. Stop arrogant pride in its tracks and practice humility. Be cleansed and purified from self-sufficiency. Open your eyes and see that God’s grace has enlivened you who were formerly dead!”

Today’s Epistle lesson brings in another crucial necessity for our life together: a keen awareness of and determined mastery over the power of the human tongue.

What a pertinent passage to address the current culture of narcissistic or self-absorbed rants and unrestrained assaults on others, spurred by our sinful nature and facilitated by the reach and velocity of twenty-first-century communications technologies!

We live in an age from which there has emerged an accepted norm of continual outrage, seething disgust, open anger, and vicious attacks directed at issues, events, and other people. A “protest” culture surrounds us, oftentimes getting way ahead and in the way of those trying to undertake sincere, meaningful actions toward beneficial change.

Sticks and stones indeed break bones a violent mob roaming the streets gives hard evidence of that but in these gray and latter days, it often seems that words, especially those spoken with ill will, have lost even more of whatever little value they had left as a means of influencing our fellow human beings.

One commentator recently suggested that the verbal tools of outrage have now reached a sad state of “hyperinflation.” Like a dollar that shrinks to nothing in its purchasing power, our words seemingly have devalued to the point that almost every line of verbal reasoning irrational, or irrational have lost their power. One can no longer say anything surprising enough, shocking enough that it will really grab anyone’s attention or make a difference much less contribute to the resolution of disputes between opposing parties. Rather than talking with one another, we disingenuously talk past or militantly talk at our neighbors. One might rightly ask, “How did we arrive here?!” “How we get to this point?”

Interestingly, James, under timeless truth given from the Holy Spirit, firmly takes issue with the notion that human speech has somehow “lost its mojo.” Quite the opposite. The brother of our Lord Jesus begs us carefully to consider our own life experience and to acknowledge once again the fiery power of our words, harmful and beneficial so that our sin-infected tongues would be gladly directed to a higher purpose: the glory of God and the blessing of Christ’s body.

Wherever and whenever we fail with our tongues in destructive words that thoughtlessly emerge or in words of comfort, healing, and reconciliation that are intentionally withheld altering the course of life for the worse, James asks us to remember that the human tongue is capable of inflicting great damage, but Christ has restored our tongues to accomplish His good.

Our tongues have achieved master status at setting “fires” (vs 2–6).

Damaged ever since the fall, as devilish arsonists, our tongues speak in sinful, self-centered arrogance and/or with intent to do murderous harm to our neighbor’s reputation (vs 7–10). Just look at the world around us, families have stopped communicating because of hateful words spoken. All these kinds of wicked speaking are especially contra the First, Second, and Eighth Commandments. The tongue is to be used to praise and thank God and lovingly build each other up. It is one of the most powerful tools in our arsenal to be used for good but instead it is used for evil.

In some instances, this is willful iniquity. Holy Scripture sets forth numerous examples of blasphemy against God and false witness against neighbor.

God tells us in the Eighth Commandment; ***“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” And remember we are all each other’s neighbor.”*** In the explanation for the Eight Commandment, we learn; ***“We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.”***

Wow, what a different world we would have if everyone practiced this. Our contemporary culture is screaming with painful examples of damage the “tongue” wreaks. James’s lament about the harmful capacity of the tongue applies not just to face-to-face conversations and confrontations.

We poor, miserable sinners have become quite adept at making use of the plethora of communications technologies currently at our fingertips. At other times, we don’t even realize when or how we have set something or someone ablaze to their great harm! Simple comments about someone for our own entertainment, gossip, post on the internet, yes, we have become very proficient at causing harm to one another.

And sometimes we do it with a self-righteous attitude.

James warns us even as regards our tongues speaking in God's name. Redeemed by the shed blood of God's Son, as baptized saints, we speak God's truth in love to everyone, in full testimony to the source, content, and glory of the Gospel: Jesus Christ. All who are in Christ, as members of the priesthood of all believers, have been called to such speaking.

***“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*** (1 Peter 2:9)

But those who have been called to teach (that is, preach) in the church are confronted with the special burden of warning against teaching falsehood in the place of genuine Gospel (v 1), for this can quickly destroy saving faith in those who hear it.

The Word proclaimed in its truth and purity gives rise to saving faith in those who speak and hear it (Romans 10:17). A false gospel (as if it were even possible that such a thing could be “gospel”) gives rise to the damnation of the souls infected by such teaching.

***“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”*** (Galatians 1:6–9) We hear a lot of false teaching and even preaching in our world.

But Jesus has restored our tongues to his great good by enduring the fire of God’s wrath against all our sins including sins of the tongue in our place. He undoes the chaotic damage arising from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He has undone the damage by fulfilling the Law perfectly, despite suffering the scorn and abuse of evil men, while perfectly relying on the word and promise of our heavenly Father (Isaiah 50:4–10).

Christ's death upon the cross has effectively extinguished the fiery danger of God's judgment into hell for all who use their tongues to confess his name. He has undone the damage by preaching the healing, life-giving, divine Word that sets all things right where all has gone so terribly wrong (Mark 9:17–27). Such preaching for our forgiveness, life, and salvation continues today through those whom God has called to serve in the Office of the Holy Ministry.

Therefore, we continue to train and use our tongues as instruments that are able to accomplish so much good (vs 3–5). To bless those who persecute us (Romans 12:14), so that in spite of our sins we would live in the spirited freedom of continual repentance, absolution, and reconciliation toward one another. To bless God in the purity, truth, and righteousness that have been poured out upon us, to his eternal praise and glory.



We pray, 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, that from them the cleansing pure fountain of the Gospel may continually spring forth.

Amen