

JAMES 3:5b, 6 THE DEVIL GOES TO CHURCH

“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.”¹

At 9:00 p.m., Sunday evening, October 8, 1871, the great Chicago Fire began on DeKoven street in a barn owned by Patrick and Catherine O’Leary. The fire would burn for the next two days; before it was finished it would blacken three and one half square miles of the city and destroy over 17,000 buildings before it was checked by gunpowder explosions on the south line of the fire. The fire left over 100,000 people homeless and cost over 300 lives.

But, ironically, that was not the greatest inferno in the American Midwest that year. Historians tell us that on the *same* day that dry autumn a spark ignited a raging fire in the North Woods of Wisconsin which burned for an entire month, taking more lives than the Chicago Fire. A veritable firestorm destroyed billions of cubic yards of precious timber—all from one spark! The tongue has that scope of inflammatory capability. James is saying that those who misuse the tongue are guilty of spiritual arson. A mere spark of an ill-spoken word can produce a firestorm that annihilates everything it touches. It is terrible enough when relationships, ministries or lives are destroyed by a thoughtless word. More terrible still is the destruction that results from deliberate injury resulting from such spiritual arson.

James, confronting early Christians, compels them to think of the impact of their words. Consequently, what he wrote to those ancient believers continues to challenge us to this day—if we listen to what he says. I invite you to join me in exploring the words written by the brother of our Lord as we think through the implications of our tongues being set on fire by hell. Let’s think together of what happens when the devil comes to church because of our words.

ONE SPARK CAN CAUSE A GREAT CATASTROPHE — “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!” Paradise, California is burning today. For three weeks, the people of Paradise and Big Sur have been forced from their homes as wildfires rage, burning thousands of hectares of brush and consuming numerous houses. Lives have been disrupted, and in many instances forever changed—hope is reduced to ashes, memories are destroyed, and joy has been charred. While lightning appears to be the cause of the Big Sur fire, human carelessness appears to be the cause of the Paradise fire. We can be almost certain that relative to the damage inflicted on thousands of people, the cause was small. James marvelled at the insignificance of the cause.

James was undoubtedly familiar with wildfires that periodically raged across the Judean hills. Perhaps a lightning strike, or more probably the careless use of fire, would ignite the dry brush and grasses that covered the hills. The resulting fires would cause great sorrow for many people in that day, just as they do in this day. Thus, as we read James’ words, we can almost hear the astonishment in his voice.

Little things can create great havoc. A little mosquito can create widespread fear when it carries West Nile Virus. A small tick can create untold misery for a family if that tick carries the *Borrelia spirochete*. A tiny Brown Recluse spider causes great pain for anyone it bites.

¹ Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

It has now been almost eighteen years since I was injured in a truck crash. That crash was caused by a tiny spider. The driver of the truck in which I was riding had seen the spider and asked me if it was a tick. I replied that it was a spider and he paid no further attention to the tiny arachnid as it crawled across the roof of the cab. He was startled, however, when the creature unexpectedly dropped into his face. Distracted, he drove off the road, hitting two trees and rolling down a steep embankment. The resultant injuries have plagued me ever since.

James is not focused on the injury that may physically afflict individuals, however; he is addressing the injury that results to the cause of Christ when Christians fail to bridle the tongue. He had undoubtedly witnessed, even in that early day, the harm that an inadvertent word can cause, the spiritual misery that results from angry words spoken by professed believers, or how all progress of the Faith can be halted because one person uses the tongue as a weapon. Though the tongue is such a small member of the body, it has an almost limited capacity for evil.

A wife will remember for the whole of her life a word that made her feel slighted. A child can recall with amazing clarity a parent's condemnation. A father can remember for a lifetime the cutting words of a child who seeks to injure with the tongue. A friendship can be irreparably torn asunder as result of a thoughtless comment. Undoubtedly, relationships can be strained or even destroyed through what is said. This is the power of our words. However, for the remainder of our time together this day, I want to focus on the fact that the tongue is set on fire by hell, seeking to warn us of the danger that ever lurks within the congregation of the Lord.

ONE WORD CAN DESTROY A CHURCH— “The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.” So far, James has used simile to describe the tongue—the tongue is *like* the bit in a horse's mouth, it is *like* the rudder on a ship, it is *like* the spark that ignites a fire. Now, however, he abandons the indirect in favour of using straightforward metaphor: “the tongue is a fire.” In light of James' words, we realise that the tongue is more destructive than the hydrogen bomb. The blast of a hydrogen bomb's is physical, and ultimately, the effects, though terrible, are temporary. However, the tongue's power is spiritual and eternal.

Our words can start fires, and the church is frequently comparable to dry tinder. Outsiders often accuse Christians of being hypocrites. The charge too often gains traction through our actions. And even were our actions not liable to the indictment, anyone hanging around us for long would be quickly convinced of our hypocrisy because of our speech. Though such statements should not need to be made, they are nevertheless tragically accurate.

Because the church is family, tensions are always present. Newcomers to the congregation question why things are done as they are; they seek change. Old-times resist change because change makes them uncomfortable. Almost always there are some within the assembly who imagine themselves to be so spiritual that they need not tolerate anyone questioning their wisdom. Many, if not most, of the congregants willingly compromise for the sake of momentary peace. All these dynamics create opportunity for misunderstanding and tension. As misunderstanding multiplies, distrust grows. Rising tension creates a fertile field for the growth of grumbling. Grumbling leads to charges and counter-charges. Before long, a word—a little spark, will ignite the dry undergrowth and wildfire will consume the work of God.

When the fire has started, so long as there is fuel, the fire grows. Heat intensifies and the smoke stains the structure and integrity of the assembly is destroyed. Just as fire burns and hurts, so our words can hurt and destroy. And just as smoke stains and mars all it engulfs, so harsh words that are spoken in anger stain the lives of those who hear them. So long as there is fuel, the fire will spread. Long years ago, Solomon wrote:

“For lack of wood the fire goes out,
and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases.
As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.
The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels;
they go down into the inner parts of the body.”

[PROVERBS 26:20-22]

You will not have been married long until you learn how tension can create a situation that only awaits one final word to cause an explosion within the marriage. Tension at work creates a volatile condition that only awaits a perceived slight or a misinterpreted tone that results in sharp words that precipitate war. Failure to rule our tongue leads us to say things that we know should never be spoken. However, once spoken, our words become weapons to injure and harm as we verbally slash those we should never hurt.

Something similar happens within the Body of Christ. There are too many churches members who cannot restrain their tongues, and the result is destructive. Church officers who are incautious in their speech will destroy the work of God. Likewise, there are often church members who seek to destroy with the tongue as they castigate others or through gossip. Slander seems to be accepted within far too many faith communities. Even denominational leaders are guilty of slanderous speech because they forget they are servants, not bosses. The friendship of a few takes precedence over the health of the congregation, and slander, innuendo and gossip become weapons to injure and destroy.

We saw in previous messages that James is concerned that his readers accept responsibility for what they say, especially within the Body of Christ. He has cautioned against presuming to be teachers, for the words of the teacher expose him to greater scrutiny and ultimately he is held to a higher standard because he is a teacher. It is a noble thing to aspire to be an elder, but know that as an elder you accept greater responsibility to be a man of integrity.

Religious leaders, when confronted by Jeremiah, plotted against God’s servant, saying, “Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words” [JEREMIAH 18:18]. Remember, these were God’s people. They prided themselves on their relationship to God, but their words revealed that they knew nothing of His character. They were confident that in speaking as they did they were serving God, but they were actually destroying His work and His workman.

Perhaps you recall the stunning rebuke Jesus delivered to the Pharisees on one occasion. “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” [MATTHEW 12:33-37].

David used poetic language that exposed professed followers of the Lord who,

“whet their tongues like swords,
[and] aim bitter words like arrows.”

[PSALM 64:3]

Though the language is poetic, we know what the Psalmist means. He identifies people whose words are sharp, and with razor thrusts they destroy others. At another point, David says of callused individuals who assault God's servant with their tongues,

“They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's,
and under their lips is the venom of asps.”

[PSALM 140:3]

Their speech is poisonous, their toxic words destroying all who fall under their sway.

Asaph was another of the Psalmists who waxed poetic in describing wicked speech. He wrote of individuals who boast of their own prowess, “their tongue struts through the earth” [PSALM 73:9]. How apt is his description! Jeremiah appropriately described those who opposed righteousness in his day. He said,

“They bend their tongue like a bow;
falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land;
for they proceed from evil to evil,
and they do not know me, declares the LORD.”

[JEREMIAH 9:3]

I have no doubt that those whom Jeremiah described would have argued that they were concerned for the welfare of the nation. For them, the ends justified the means. However, God did not approve of their speech. I am confident in this assertion because I have heard it so often from individuals purporting to be concerned for the welfare of a congregation or for the welfare of a denomination. Tragically, these individuals almost always justify wicked speech by saying, “I had to say this.” God, however, never justifies nattering, or carping, or arrogance, or slander, or gossip, or malicious speech,.

In yet another place, Jeremiah describes those who opposed his ministry:

“Their tongue is a deadly arrow;
it speaks deceitfully;
with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbour,
but in his heart he plans an ambush for him.”

[JEREMIAH 9: 8]

Throughout the course of his ministry, Jeremiah faced opposition from religious people. When he was called to his ministry, God told him that it would be thus. The LORD declared,

“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

[JEREMIAH 1:9b, 10]

It is as though God said to His servant, “You will never be acceptable to religious people, for I have appointed you to speak *My* words. My words in your mouth will tear down the structures that religious people have erected. You will destroy opinions and oppose arguments. All this is necessary in order to build what I desire and to plant what I wish to grow.”

After calling Jeremiah to His service, God said, “Dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you” [JEREMIAH 1:17-19]. Imagine that! Though he would speak the truth broken-hearted over the wayward nation, Jeremiah would face constant opposition and attack.

Opposition to God’s Word continues to this day. Paul, writing a wayward congregation, explained to them, “Though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 10:3-5]. The servant of God must be prepared to stand against the spirit of the age—a spirit that rejects anything that is not pleasant and easy. However, the one who follows the Master must be prepared to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching” [2 TIMOTHY 4:2].

Later, as Jeremiah carried out his ministry which the Lord had assigned, he received a stern message to deliver to Israel. God said, “Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, ‘declares the LORD.’ Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them” [JEREMIAH 23:30-32].

In this instance, Jeremiah received a message from God that used biting sarcasm to expose the reprehensible behaviour of those who promoted themselves as leaders of His people. These self-appointed prophets had no word from the Living God, but instead they were feeding on one another’s words. Bereft of integrity and without a message, they dreamed up and mouthed ethical/moral platitudes, imagining that they were therefore pleasing God. The Hebrew makes it clear that though their tongue declares, it is not the Lord’s mouth that speaks.

Dishonesty in the pulpit destroys a church. **Cynicism** from those who profess the Name of the Lord destroys a church. Failure to halt **slandorous accusations** destroys a church. **Criticism of healthy doctrine** destroys a church. Permitting **gossip** to continue unchecked destroys a church. **Lying, innuendo, and flattery** all alike will prove destructive to a church if left tolerated. When James speaks of a fire spreading, it is easy to imagine that he has in mind gossip, slander, grumbling and criticism within the community of faith. Such evil speech contaminates all that it touches, and spreads so rapidly that soon it cannot be halted.

When such evil has become entrenched in a congregation—when it is tolerated by those who are called by God’s Name, nothing less than divine intervention can suffice to eradicate the contamination. Almost always, the current generation must pass from the scene before the evil can hope to be eradicated and the damage repaired; for the evil will tarnish the reputation of those who have been attacked, and call into question the integrity of those spreading the wickedness. God cannot bless the church that has permitted such wickedness to continue, and the cause of Christ is injured as sinners are turned from the truth and godliness is mocked.

ONE WORD CAN DESTROY A LIFE — “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.” The thoughts of spiritual individuals reading these words James wrote will turn naturally to the destruction of God’s work as result of ungodly speech, especially ungodly words that are spoken by those who imagine themselves to be appointed by God as leaders. Indeed, during the previous weeks we have examined ways in which such wickedness can injure and destroy God’s work.

Someone has calculated that for every word in Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf*, 125 lives were lost in World War II.² Perhaps our words will not cause wars or wreck cities, but what we say can break the heart of loved ones, ruin reputations and destroy friendships. Worse still is the knowledge that our words can destroy souls, sending them into eternity without Christ. How many people have been turned away from following Christ because of intemperate words of God’s professed people! Such evil must surely return upon the head of the speaker. We may confess our sins of speech, but the fire we ignited keeps on spreading long after we have admitted the wrong we did.

However, there is a cautionary note that should give us pause. James writes that the tongue stains the whole body and sets on fire “the entire course of life.” When James states that the tongue is capable of “setting on fire the entire course of life,” he uses an idiom that translated literally states that “the wheel of life” is ignited. His choice of words suggests that all of life is interconnected, so that even as evil words are destroying the work of God, the life of the one speaking is likewise being destroyed. Hateful speech leads inevitably to hateful acts; every aspect of behaviour is ultimately affected by our speech. It is an axiom of the Faith that if we do not discipline and purify our speech, neither will we discipline or purify the remainder of our lives. James is saying that the destruction of one embracing impure speech is certain. You understand how this might be. Those who gossip are not trusted by those who hear them speak. Use insulting speech and derision, and people will not follow you.

Disastrous as ungodly speech is for a church, and harmful as unrestrained speech proves for relationships, ultimately, it is the individual himself or herself who is consumed by the conflagration they ignite. If you wish to destroy your life, do not restrain your speech. However, if you wish to glorify God, guard your lips and accept responsibility for what you say.

The Wise Man has contrasted these two paths in the Proverbs.

“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

[PROVERBS 12:18]

“The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge,
but the mouths of fools feed on folly.”

[PROVERBS 15:14]

Thus, if we will please God we must rule the tongue. This is an impossible task if we rely on our own strength. However, if we look to Him who created the tongue, He is able to empower us to reign in our speech. Only a regenerate tongue in a redeemed body—a tongue that God has tamed—can be used for Him. The unruly tongue testifies that Christ is not in control of that life. Christians are to control the tongue, building and strengthening one another with their lips.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary* (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL 1989, 1996)

James is not specific about what constitutes destructive speech, but the spiritual mind recognises and eschews evil speech. We are prone to imagine that the Bible speaks only against lying, but there are a surprising number of cautions opposing a variety of sins of speech. James does not elaborate the ways in which the destructive power of the tongue can make itself felt. Schooled as he was in the words of the Old Testament, he undoubtedly thought of babbling speech [PROVERBS 10:8], rash words [PROVERBS 12:18; 29:20], arrogance [PROVERBS 18:12], or gossip and slander [PROVERBS 10:18]. Meanness, criticism and sarcastic humour are each also condemned in the Word of God. At the root of all such speech is blasphemy.

Concerning the uncontrolled tongue, James builds on each wickedness as it is revealed. The tongue is “a world of unrighteousness.” It is a vast system of evil that stains “the whole body.” Earlier, James had insisted that the child of God is responsible to keep himself or herself unstained from the world. However, when an uncontrolled tongue is present, this injunction is impossible to keep. Moreover, the unruly tongue sets on fire “the entire course of life.” Not only does the wicked tongue stain one’s life, but it sets fires throughout the entirety of life. Repeatedly, the uncontrolled tongue destroys and contaminates.

Ultimately, the tongue is “set on fire by hell.” The word translated “hell” is not the Greek word *Hádēs*, but it is rather *géenna*, commonly transliterated into modern English Bibles as *Gehenna*. The word *géenna* occurs twelve times in the New Testament, and this is the only time it is used outside of the Synoptic Gospels. Eleven times, Jesus is recorded as speaking of *géenna*, and James alone, of all the New Testament writers, uses the term. At last, the origin of the tongue’s destructive power is revealed.

The destructive power of the unruly tongue thus builds in a terrifying crescendo. The first phrase points to the multitude of evils contained within and prompted by impure speech. The second phrase warns that the whole person becomes corrupted by the uncontrolled tongue. The third erects on the corruption the picture of destruction, extending it to the whole course of the person’s life. The fourth phrase provides the climax by exposing the tongue’s source of evil—hell itself. Left unchecked, the tongue that is not submitted to the Risen Lord destroys not only the work of God, but destroys the very person that employed the devilish terror weapon.

This is not the only place in the Word of God that suggests the devilish origin of speech sins. Paul, in his final missive, warns Timothy of a day when people will be “lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” [2 TIMOTHY 3:2-5].

The Greek word translated “slanderous,” is *diábolos*. This is the word that is normally translated “devil.” In other words, slander is devilish. Older women are to avoid becoming “slanderers,” engaging in devilish talk [TITUS 2:3]. Deacons’ wives are not to be “slanderers” engaging in devilish talk [1 TIMOTHY 3:11]. To engage in slander and gossip is to do the work of the devil. Those who engage in this despicable act are themselves devilish.

In the Letter to Colossian Christians, Paul writes, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” [COLOSSIANS 3:5-10]. Shun evil speech, because you are a Christian.

The devil cannot join the church, but he does wield great power among the people of God whenever the church members fail to exercise control over the tongue. Whenever a congregation tolerates evil, and especially whenever a church permits destructive speech among the membership, the work of the devil takes precedence over the work of the Master. Wherever dishonesty, or cynicism, or slanderous accusations, or criticism, or gossip, or grumbling, or lying, or innuendo or flattery are found and tolerated, the cause of Christ is hindered. In such an environment, the work of the devil holds sway.

The result for such a group of people must be death. As a church, the congregation has sacrificed the blessing of God and is drifting rapidly toward death. Tragically, those individuals who tolerate such a condition will themselves be contaminated and grow increasingly impure in their thoughts and in their actions, to say nothing of becoming increasingly contaminated in their speech. Those individuals who are surrendered to such wicked speech will themselves become ever more impure and ever more distant from the Lord. It cannot be otherwise.

There is no possibility that a church tolerating uncontrolled speech can please God. Neither is there any possibility that an unregenerate individual can please the Master. Born from above and into the Family of God, individuals are given the Holy Spirit who ever after lives within their lives. Dwelling within, He is jealous for them, urging them and empowering them to please the Father. Though the child of God may occasionally slip into sin with his or her tongue, that child cannot persist in such sin without triggering divine correction. Those individuals who continue in such sinful habits without divine discipline demonstrate that they have no relationship to the Living God. Such people are mere pretenders to grace, and the lack of correction exposes them as illegitimate.

I trust that such a description does not apply to any of you. Should you be one who is given to gossip or slander, I urge you to examine yourself, to see whether you are in the Faith. Does your faith rest in the Living Son of God? Why has His grace failed to transform you? If you have a cynical tongue or if you are characterised by critical speech, or should you be given to flattery or dishonesty, you must determine whether you are in the Faith. Have you received the new life offered by Christ the Lord? How is it that His grace failed to change you? Understand that your speech reveals your heart, even as the Master has said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” [MARK 7:20-23].

If somehow you have failed to receive the grace of God, if somehow the evidence testifies that you are lost, I urge you to hear this final word from the Bible. The Lord has instructed His Apostle to declare, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Then, citing the prophet Joel, we are promised, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. That is my prayer for each one who hears this message. With the Apostle, I urge you, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, [so that] you will be saved” [ACTS 16:30]. Amen.