

Believe it or not, there are some Lutherans who are absolutely indignant when it comes to suggesting that God might have expectations concerning their behavior. They argue that if a Christian ever does something pleasing to God it will only be because the Holy Spirit moved him to do it against his own sinful nature!

But if that’s true, why did James write his letter to the church? Indeed, why did Saints Paul, Peter, John and the others ever write anything besides forgiveness? Probably because God actually expects something more from you and me besides sin. Tonight, we’re going to talk about what James has to say about the tongue and what this has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

JAMES 3:2b-5a

If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.³ Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.

The 2nd reason relationships fail is because of a lack of communication. Unresolved conflict leaves scar tissue in our friendships and marriages. And the result is always the same, which brings us to the 1st reason relationships fail: The tongue-lashing we give each other when that unresolved conflict explodes!

Out of our mouths come things we don’t really mean. We say things we can never take back. And we hurt one another in ways we never would have intended when we had our heads on straight.

I have a pastor-friend who is the most loveable guy imaginable; he has the best bedside manner. If you were dying, you’d want him there. But he’s a terrible driver; he’s easily distracted. He should never have been given a license. One day he was on his way home, and he made a quick lane change to make a turn. A car horn blared behind him. After he and the other car made the turn, the other car

pulled alongside of him. He looked over, and the woman driver gave him the finger. Unfortunately, he recognized her, and she recognized him. He was her pastor.

The next Sunday, the woman didn't come to church. My pastor-friend called her, but she didn't answer. So he visited her at her home. She let him in, and she apologized profusely. He said it was not a big deal, that he understood, that he's a terrible driver and he probably deserved it, and so forth.

But the next Sunday she didn't come to church, nor any of the following Sundays. Her own guilt and shame from what she'd said with that finger of hers had destroyed her relationship with her pastor.

James wrote, **"If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well" (v.2)**. If you've never said anything you ever regretted, you're perfect.

On the other hand, if you're still working on that, James has some advice. He wrote, **"Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires" (vv.3-4)**.

Horses, bridles, and bits; ships, wind, rudders, and pilots. Great images for understanding the awesome power of the tongue. With the tongue, rulers declare war and they promise peace. With the tongue, doctors provide hope or they steal it away. With the tongue, you and I build one another up or we tear one another down.

A church father said, "foolish talk should be foreign for the saints." And yet we break the 8th Commandment all the time, that is, "Thou shall not bear false witness." That is gossip.

Another church father said, "the devil fell because of his tongue." How easy it is to follow in his wake!

But there is hope. St. Augustine said that just as a man tames a horse with a bit and bridle, and just as a sailor tames a boat with a rudder, so too God tames man.

Our Lord Jesus used his tongue to bring sinners—you and me—to repentance, and he used his tongue to assure us that God is on our side. He said, **“Come to me all ye who are weak and heavy laden and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28)**. He said, **“whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14)**. And he said from the Cross, **“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34)**.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have received the Holy Spirit, we have God’s Word at our finger tips, and we receive Christ’s body and blood into our own bodies at this altar: We have received everything we need to be tamed by God who would bridle our tongues.

Perhaps there are times when we just need a better strategy. I’ve found that one of the best ways to diffuse an argument is to keep my mouth shut. Don’t react. A good way to deflect gossip is to not participate. And when I’m tempted to lambaste someone, I ask myself the question, “Is it my responsibility to bring this person to repentance?” The answer is usually no.

Another church father wrote that what James wrote implies that we should go further than merely controlling our tongues, that we should find a “higher use” for them.

Indeed, instead of tearing people down, we can build them up. We can encourage one another, we can pray, and we can be mentors one to another according to the Word of God.

During Lent let us meditate on Jesus’ words to us, those words that are filled with assurance, and love, and peace.

During Lent let us relinquish our tongues, indeed, our whole bodies to the Lord that he would be able to use them to glorify himself.

And during Lent let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.