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Proper 19 • James 3:1–12

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of good works. Much of popular preaching, especially what our people hear on TV, is filled with the urgency of doing more works. “Stop doing that and do more of this” is often the advice given. But doing more works is not the remedy for dead faith. That’s confusing law and gospel. Those who have been convicted by the law and are aware of their sin, perhaps even to the point of questioning their salvation, need the comfort of the gospel of Jesus Christ, lest they be left in turmoil and despair. More law preaching will produce not more works, but terror.

Here, we as Lutherans, have the opportunity to clarify the biblical teaching of faith and good works with the proper distinction of law and gospel. Stanza five of “Salvation unto Us Has Come” summarizes it well:

Faith clings to Jesus’ cross alone
And rests in Him unceasing;
And by its fruit true faith is known,
With love and hope increasing.
For faith alone can justify;
Works serve our neighbor and supply
The proof that faith is living.

Good works are certainly a result, a fruit of faith to serve our neighbor. As James says, they even give evidence of faith. However, we don’t increase faith by doing more good works. Faith clings to the cross of Jesus Christ alone! Only the Holy Spirit can create and strengthen faith—heart faith—by the gospel. Christians need a solid connection to Jesus, the Vine (Jn 15), to receive the fruits of his cross and to bear much fruit. God shows no partiality. He offers his Son to the whole world, to all sinners.

We have been gifted with a rock-solid connection to Jesus through his promise to be present for us in his word and in the sacraments. This wonderful connection was begun in your baptism and continues in absolution and Holy Communion. Faith filled with Christ himself can’t help but be active in love toward others. In the liturgy following our reception of the sacrament of the altar we even pray, “Strengthen us through the same in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another.” It is no wonder then that we also pray in the Collect of the Day: “O God, without whose blessing we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and govern our hearts; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. . . . Amen.”

Joel P. Fritsche

The text of this passage from the Epistle of James is interesting both grammatically and lexically. The passage is rich in imagery, and the vocabulary is rather unusual. The preacher is invited to echo the colorful, creative language in a sermon that does not reduce the message to simplistic platitudes and customary theological jargon.
The Tswana people in Botswana will sometimes quote a wise traditional proverb, which translates: “A pointing finger may turn back, but a word does not return.” The meaning is that an angry gesture (shaking your finger at someone) can be forgotten as tempers cool, but our angry, hurtful words, once spoken, take on a life of their own and continue to cause damage. Words cannot be called back or unsaid. Like a lit match in a dry forest, a hurtful word quickly ignites a chain reaction of offense, anger, pain, guilt, rumor, slander, deception, and hostility. That cultural insight among the Tswana resonates with the text from James, because our common human experience confirms the piercing diagnosis of the word of God.

Important preparation for a sermon on this text is a review of Luther’s discussion of the Eighth Commandment in the Large Catechism (Kolb-Wengert, 420ff). “‘Bearing false witness’ is nothing but a work of the tongue.” As Luther explains the commandment, Christians are absolutely forbidden to speak evil of other people—even if what they say is technically “true.” The only exceptions are those who are commanded, in their God-given vocations (as magistrates, preachers, and parents), to judge others so that evil does not go unpunished. But the commandment also enjoins a number of positive good works of love and service to others. “We should use our tongue,” says Luther, “to speak only the best of all people, to cover the sins and infirmities of our neighbors, to justify their actions, and to cloak and veil them with our own honor.” The right use of words is so difficult (and rare!), and the abuse and perversion so pervasive, that Luther concludes, “There is nothing around us or in us that can do greater good or greater harm in temporal or spiritual matters than the tongue, although it is the smallest and weakest member.”

It is not hard to multiply examples of this destructive power unleashed so often through our words and speech. Simple lies are everywhere; they mask our selfishness, cover our sins, and corrode our relationships. We lie to other people and we even lie to ourselves. But the evil of the tongue is not limited to lies: we often enough turn even the truth (at least partial truth) into a weapon and an untamed fire. And then we excuse the loveless damage and the cascading pain we cause by saying, “It’s just the truth!” Spiritually, we lie even when we tell the truth, and the tendency is at least as conspicuous in the way we talk about each other in the church as it is “out there” in the unbelieving world. If anything, we might be tempted more strongly to excuse and justify our slander and backbiting and lies by claiming that we are defending the Truth. (The peril of such a temptation may help explain the connection between James 3:1 and the following verses: we should not be too eager to set ourselves up as the spiritual judges of others!)

It should be obvious (though perhaps it should be pointed out) that what is called a sin of the “tongue” by James (and Luther) is now performed and extended on a shocking scale with the help of technology, even if we don’t utter a word out loud. Text messages, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, email, and who knows what else all serve as powerful amplifiers for our flaming, poisonous tongues—or rather, our flaming, poisonous hearts. In fact, technology seems to give us license to fling nasty words out into the world that we might be ashamed or embarrassed to say aloud, to someone’s face. Every day we are invited to slander people and spread lies and filth by simply clicking “like” or “share.”
For the “tongue” itself is not the real root of the problem. Our words are a vicious, contagious symptom, but the disease is one of the heart. “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” (Mk 7:21–23).

“For from the same mouth”—our mouth—“come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.” Indeed, they should not, but they are. This text from James offers scant explicit gospel, but it does remind us who (and whose) we are. In spite of the restless evil of our tongues (and hearts), we have been harnessed by a new Master and turned to a different kind of speech: “blessing our Lord and Father.” That, in fact, is the miracle of faith and salvation in Christ. The evil power of our words is common human experience; but our Creator has done something new and wonderfully surprising: he has “worded our mouths” with praise and prayers and blessing. He makes a fig tree bear olives, and a brackish pool spring forth fresh water. In short, he makes Christians out of us. “A pointing finger may turn back, but a word does not return.” And God’s word of mercy does not turn back, either, and it does wonderful things—for us, in us, and through us—with a power that comes from God (cf. Is 55:10–11).

James 3 and 4 stand among the harshest condemnations found in the NT. To be called “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” is certainly not the life to which the saints have been called. But it is nevertheless evident among us: bitter jealousy (3:14), strife (3:14, 16), disorder (3:16), foul deeds (3:16), quarrels, fights, (4:1–2), and covetousness (4:2) are all present in our world, in our congregations, in our families, on our blogs, and, most troubling, in our hearts (3:14, 4:1). Preaching the law to our congregations—and to ourselves—will not be difficult from this text.

In fact, the law may be all that we see in this text. But what is the purpose of this preaching of the law by James? It is to call to repentance, with the result that the Lord “lifts us up.” James 4:8–10 is, in fact, the heart of the book. Far from teaching “works righteousness,” James drives his hearers to the realization that they have abandoned their Lord, sought to live for themselves alone, and as a result have nothing but death. They are, using the language of the Old Testament, “adulterous people” (cf. Jer 3, esp. 3:20) who have become “friends of the world.” They are “double-minded” (Jas 1:8), people who claim to be God’s people yet live as people of the world. The final condemnation comes in 4:5 best rendered as a pair of condemning questions: “Or do you suppose that the Scripture speaks uselessly? Does the Spirit that he causes to dwell in us crave jealously?” These rebukes expose the self-delusion of thinking that God allows us to get away with living double-minded lives.