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Proper 19 • James 3:1–12

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Proper 19 ^{Schumacher: Proper 19} • **James 3:1-12** • **September 13, 2015**

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.

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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).

“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).