

Bible Study: The Tongue as Fire

By William Gavin

Leader Notes:

Focus: The power of words – for good and for bad. The passage that will be our main focus is the Epistle (or Letter) of St. James from the New Testament. The letter of Saint James is unique in its language and presentation. He uses a wide array of words and language – in fact, there are a number of words used that are unique to his letter. The apostolic tradition is that St. James was the first Bishop of Jerusalem who was eventually martyred (or killed) for the faith. The tradition is that the letter was written around the year 47 A.D.

Instruction: Anything written italics is a direction or suggestion for the leader. Whatever is written regular text should be read aloud. When possible, have the young people in your group do these readings.

Preparation: Read through the study ahead of time, familiarizing yourself with its content. Pray with the readings from Sacred Scripture. Have Bibles ready to go (or print out the passages below). Ask your teens to bring their own and have extras available, if possible. We recommend actual Bibles to be used as putting the Bible in the hands of young people is always preferable.

Let us begin in prayer:

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A reading from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians:

“Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry. Because of these the wrath of God is coming [upon the disobedient]. By these you too once conducted yourselves, when you lived in that way. But now you must put them all away: anger, fury, malice, slander, and obscene language out of your mouths. Stop lying to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator.”
Colossians 3:5-10

Lord, we thank for tonight and the blessing of our minds and the gift of language. Help us to see through your eyes and to hear what You want us to hear tonight. Everything is through your power and every good and perfect gift is from You, the Father of lights. Open our lips so that they will proclaim your praise. Open our minds that they will see your truth. Open our hearts so that your Word may dwell within us and give us Your strength that we will do your will.

We ask all this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Bible Study: The Tongue as Fire – James 3

Some interesting facts about fires and forest fires:

- Wildfires in the United States typically burn between 4 million and 9 million acres each year. In 2020, 8.2 million acres of forests were burned by fires – mostly out west.
- There are two major causes of forest fires – anyone want to guess? (*Answer: humans and lightning.*)
- Sometimes the winds around a fire can begin to spin causing a fire tornado to form.
- Forest fires burn faster uphill
- Trees can actually explode during a forest fire if there is enough moisture trapped inside a tree.
- About 100 cloud-to-ground lightning bolts touch the Earth every single second, and about 24,600 fires are started by lightning each year.

Questions:

- 1) Has anyone ever seen a forest fire? Has anyone almost started a large fire accidentally, either outside or inside? Care to share your story?
- 2) How do you start a fire? What are the steps? What is the very first step? No matter how you start it, a huge fire begins with a single spark or flame.

St. James focuses on the power of language – what he calls the tongue – in chapter 3 of his Epistle. This chapter uses rich imagery and figurative language as you will see. Before reading the passage let us take a moment to silently ask God to open our minds and heart to hear His word.

Silence for 20-30 seconds.

A reading from the Letter of Saint James:

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you realize that we will be judged more strictly, for we all fall short in many respects. If anyone does not fall short in speech, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body also. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we also guide their whole bodies.

It is the same with ships: even though they are so large and driven by fierce winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot’s inclination wishes. In the same way the tongue is a small member and yet has great pretensions. The tongue is also a fire. It exists among our members as a world of malice, defiling the whole body and setting the entire course of our lives on fire, itself set on fire by Gehenna. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. This need not be so, my brothers. Does a spring gush forth from the same opening both pure and brackish water?” James 3:1-11

We will read this now a second time. Try to focus on a word or image that jumps out at you.

(Read the passage a second time.)

Questions:

1. What stood out to you from the passage?
2. Do you think what St. James says is true? Why or how so?
3. There is an old saying that you've probably heard: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Do you think this saying is true? Why?
4. There is an old saying that says, "bite your tongue" – the earliest known reference to this goes back to Shakespeare and his play Henry VI. What does the saying mean? Why is it important to learn to 'bite' one's tongue?
5. What are some specific examples of the power of words – in both the positive and the negative sense. What are ways that the written and spoken word can 'set a whole forest ablaze'? What are some specific examples of the power of the written or spoken word that you see as young people today?

The word 'profanity' comes from the root word 'profane' – which is the opposite of the word sacred. Profane comes from the Latin root 'out in front of' (pro) the temple (fanum) – or that which is outside of the sacred place (or temple). Thus, to use profanity is to use language that does not belong to God. Ancient Jews would, of course, only use words that were sacred in worship. A key point for us as Christians is that our whole lives should be a form of worship. In other words, the language we use should not just be sacred inside a Church, but also at home, on the street, online and anywhere we go. Using language that is pleasing to God is, in a way, a form of worship.

1. Share a real-life example of when you used 'sacred' (or good) words to help better a situation.
2. Share a time when someone's words really helped you get through a difficult time.

St. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians:

"Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not leave room for the devil. The thief must no longer steal, but rather labor, doing honest work with his [own] hands, so that he may have something to share with one in need. No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the holy Spirit of God, with which you were sealed for the day of redemption. All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. [And] be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ." Ephesians 4:25-32

Think quietly for a moment how you are doing in the following areas:

Bible Study: The Tongue as Fire – James 3

- Speaking the truth at all times and in all situations.
- Not giving in to angry talk, shouting and reviling of other people.
- Not using profanity in speech or writing.
- Using your words to ask for forgiveness and offering forgiveness to others who have wronged you.
- Not saying hurtful or inappropriate things through text and social media.

St. Paul and St. James both articulate a vision for what humans can be – what St. Paul likes to call the ‘new self’ (versus the old self). St. Paul will elsewhere say we are to ‘put on Christ’ (Galatians 3:27) – namely, everything we are to say and do should be a reflection of our Father in Heaven. St. Patrick in one of his famous prayer writes:

Let’s go back to a key piece of that reading from James 3:

“No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. This need not be so, my brothers.”

“...no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God. 10From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. This need not be so, my brothers.”

The world says to us: “This is just the way it is. People are mean, harsh, rude, etc. and so should you be.”

But, what does St. James remind us in the final line? (*wait for an answer*). That it ‘need not be so’ – in other words, through God’s grace we can be different than the world. We can speak differently than the world and we can be known as someone who talks differently than most people around us.

Final questions:

1. How can we support each other in the call to have our words and language be more sacred and less profane?
2. How do we make each other stumble and fall?
3. What does it mean to be my brother’s keeper in this case?
4. What is one thing you want to hold onto from tonight or one thing that stood out to you from what we focused on?

Let us close in prayer:

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, keep us safe from all pride and arrogance. Help us to accept ourselves as your creature – created by You for an eternal purpose. Keep us humble in your service and never let us be parted from you. Forgive us for the times we have used our words to hurt or to harm in any way. Help us, too, not to despair when we have fallen; but to trust always

Bible Study: The Tongue as Fire – James 3

in You and Your son who is the inexhaustible font of mercy. May all those who think of us, think of Christ; may all those who hear us, think of Christ; may all those who see us, see Christ in us and may all those who hear us, hear Your word working through us.

We pray all this as we pray together in the words that you taught us. Our Father...