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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“TONGUE FIRE”
James 3:1-12

☑ {LA Times, “Ten minutes of terror over radio”} Dateline: Napa County, California, Sunday, October 8 –

The terror that swept ... over those living on Atlas Peak is evident in the chaos that erupted over less than 10 minutes over the ... sheriff’s dispatch radio late

“Parents trapped in garage,” one officer radioed ... “The fire is moving quickly through here.”

Two minutes later, the dispatcher sent someone ... to a second house on the [same] road: “Two people trapped,” they said.

Barely a minute later ... [another] call ... “An elderly lady trapped.”

At the same time the dispatcher sent out an all-points request “Is anybody able to go to 2232 for two people trapped in a house on fire?”

Moments later, propane tanks began to explode.

☑ {Houdini} That was last Sunday night. Since then, the conflagrations have gotten fiercer. Whipped into a frenzy by Diablo winds, fed by tons of parched vegetation and thousands of buildings, the fires have consumed over 300

square miles and killed at least 38 people. **“Fire [is, indeed,] ... the most terrible of the elements.”**

- ☐ Please turn with me to James 3:1-12.
- We will start with verses 5-6:

the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.⁶ The tongue is also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

📖 From verse 6 forward **“The tongue”** does not refer merely to the muscular organ in our mouths; it represents the whole speech apparatus: our heart that feels emotion, our mind that conceives words, our will that chooses to utter them (or not), and our lungs, vocal chords, throat, mouth, and tongue with which we articulate them. (By extension, it can also signify the digits and limbs we use for written language.)

“The tongue is also a fire.” The fact that this is a metaphor does not soften the truth.

? Doesn’t an evil tongue further corrupt **“the whole [speaker],”** body, mind, and spirit?

? Doesn’t an evil tongue **“set... one’s life on fire,”** leading to a kind of self-immolation?

? Isn’t an evil tongue demonic in its origin and impact, and therefore **“set on fire by hell”**?

In Romans chapter one, the apostle Paul famously reviles sexual depravity. What too many

Christians ignore is that in the same passage he condemns other offenses with equal force, including sins of speech.

In Romans 1:29-30 he states that the wicked **“are full of envy, murder, strife”** (usually a war of words), **“deceit”** (which generally entails speech), **“and malice. They are gossips”** (they sin with their mouths), **“slanderers”** (another mouth-sin), **“God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful”** (yet another mouth-sin).

? The tongue is also used for good, sometimes to great effect. But is that our default setting?

Consider how politicians abuse language to curate their image, distract voters, intimidate opponents, and fan the flames of pride and fear and hatred.

Consider how media organizations abuse language to pander to their audiences and to propagandize.

Consider how advertisers abuse language to provoke false need, envy, materialism, and gluttony.

Consider how people at large abuse language to control, wound, and dehumanize each other.

Consider how people in the Church abuse tongue, pen, and social media in all the same ways.

{Is 6:5} No one is immune. Isaiah was a faithful priest in the Jerusalem temple. What did he cry when Holy God showed him a vision of his throne room? **“Woe to me! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...”**

Lord, have mercy! We, too, have **“unclean lips, and [we] live among a people of unclean lips.”**

Am I laying it on too thick?

○ Not according to James. In 1:26, he cautions: **“Those who consider themselves religious”** (we might rephrase this as ‘spiritual’ or ‘devout’) **“yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.”**

📖 Not the Greek κενός [kenós], which simply means *worthless*; ματαιός [mátaios], which is *worthless* with the added connotation of *deceptive and/or ineffective*. So, if we think we are religious **“yet do not keep a tight rein on [our] tongues”** our faith is utterly vain, a pointless, futile self-deception.

This has eternal consequences. Hear the word of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 12:36-37: **“I tell you that people will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”**

■ This has particular resonance for me and certain others. 3:1: **“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”**

☑ {Moo} Fellow preachers, Sunday school teachers, and Bible study leaders, pay heed: because our ministries

[involve] **speech**, [which is] **the hardest** [of all human actions] **to control**, [we] **expose** [ourselves] **to greater danger of judgement.**

[Our] **constant use of the tongue means [we] can sin very easily, leading others astray at the same time.**

[And since] [we] **bear... much responsibility for the spiritual welfare of those to whom [we] minister, [we] will be scrutinized by the Lord more carefully than others.**

■ You might never step into a pulpit or teach a class. Still, your words make a difference. Verses 3-4: **“When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.”**

{Pr 18:21} Finally, a bright spot! With a bit we can guide a horse to pasture instead of the glue factory. With a rudder we can steer a vessel to safety instead of onto rocky shoals – and the tongue, which has inflicted so much death, also “[holds] **the power of life.**”

☑ *Your* tongues certainly do. With words and silences you have taught and corrected me, spurred me on to good works, soothed and encouraged me. I pray that Messiah has used my words to channel his life-giving love and truth to you, as well.

Regardless, we must not rest on our laurels. The tongue might be the first organ we used in service to the Father, but it will be the last to be closely conformed to image of his Son.

■ Verse 2: **“We all stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.”** They are entirely capable of unblemished conduct in every relationship and every aspect of their life.

■ But who is **“never at fault in what they say”**? No wonder some believers indulge in filthy language, boasting, gossip, abusive talk, half-truths, and hate speech. Verses 3:9-10: **“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”**

☠ This is a big deal! Such speech blasphemes the Creator. It defies his Law of Love. It also corrodes our identity in Christ Jesus.

■ James 3:11-12: **“Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”**

☠ Deceit and bragging and name-calling don’t just damage our witness. Sins like these actually disfigure the new creation developing inside us.

? Lord, have mercy! Woe to us! What will we do?

✍ Action Step 1: when we fall down, we will get up.

{Mt 19:26} For us, perfect speech is impossible. Yet **“with God all things are possible.”**

Sometimes I will fail. So will you. But when we do, the Word made flesh will help us to repent our sin and take greater control of our tongues.

✎ Action Step 2: we will nourish our souls.

{Lk 6:45; Php 4:8} It is **“Out of the overflow of the heart”** that **“the mouth speaks.”** Thus, it is essential that we work from the inside out. If it **“is true... noble ... right... pure... lovely... admirable... excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”**

There is more to it than that, of course. Yet that is a great place to start.

✎ Action Step 3: we will speak as Jesus would.

How can we discern whether we are doing that? We ask three probing questions about what we want to say, in this sequence: First, is it true? Second, is it necessary? Third, is it helpful?

If any one of the answers is “No,” I shouldn’t say it. If I’m not sure, I should hold off. If it is fully true, and really necessary, and helpful in spirit and phrasing, then I am free to say it with confidence.

✎ Action Step 4: we will improve the odds.

Quantity of words matters. The more words, the more likely a slip-up; but as my words diminish, so does the probability of mouth-sin.

(I am speaking from experience here. Lots and lots of experience!)

○ No wonder James counsels: **“Everyone should be quick to listen, [and] slow to speak ...”** (1:19).

☑ The Creator has equipped us for this. How many ears do each of us have? How many tongues?
Note to self: Talk less! Listen more!

The California fires are taking lives, destroying property, and devastating the environment.

The damage inflicted by tongue fire is much worse. **“It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”**

{1 Pet 2:9} God forbid that this ever describe us! In Christ, we **“are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light.”**

James 3:1-12 is the word of the Lord.