

Do You Smell That?

James 3:1–12

Every once in a while Darla asks me, “Do you smell that?” She knows ahead of time the answer is likely to be, “No.” My sense of smell is somewhat poor. I am a bit blessed in this though. Most of the things I can’t smell are unpleasant odors like our dog passing gas or something rotting in our garbage can. I don’t seem to have any problem detecting pleasant aromas like freshly baked bread or when Darla puts on some perfume for me.

Something else I was able to smell a few weeks ago was smoke that reached us from the forest fires out West. I was kind of amazed that we could smell here something that was happening so far away.

The fire James mentions in our text is a lot closer to home. We may or may not be able to smell it.

With our tongues, we say a lot of things. Are all of them pleasant? Or do some of them start fires? When our tongue starts a fire, do we smell the smoke?

Ever since the fall into sin, a little arsonist has lived inside all of us. Our little tongues can create some big problems. You heard Jams describe it in this way:

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. Likewise, 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. The tongue

also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

This should not be, ... but it is.

We break the First, Second, and Eighth Commandments regularly.

Sometimes it is on purpose. Our current culture is full of examples of damage the “tongue” causes. The forest fires our tongues set ablaze can be in person as we lash out with angry, acidic attacks. Other times social media is our choice of weapon as we spew out our venom.

Yesterday morning I watched and listened to two speeches on the 20th anniversary of 9-11. In a way, both addressed this same issue. The first man did it in a very Law oriented way. He described the deaths and sacrifices of those in the airplanes, the twin towers, the Pentagon, and of the rescue workers. He then asked if we, as a nation, have honored them in what we have become. Have we honored the fallen in how we treat one another? The answer, obvious to me, was “No.”

Former President Bush took a different approach. He described the America he knows: one in which people –

even with different views – are respected; one in which we use our hands to reach out and help rather than shaking fist in anger and making threats.

But, all too often, it is we who speak with words of anger and sarcasm even to those closest to us.

Those are times when we should smell the stench of our sin.

There are other times we don't even realize when or how we've set something or someone ablaze with our words.

James gives a warning to those who teach to keep an even closer eye on what we say. Pastors, Sunday school teachers, confirmation teachers, parents – we are held to a high standard. We are to pay great attention to what we say, because we represent God.

The truest representation of God in a teacher is Jesus Christ. He is God's Son. He has restored our tongues to His great good by enduring the fire of God's wrath against all our sins.

He has undone the damage by fulfilling the Law perfectly, despite suffering the scorn and abuse of evil men, while perfectly relying on the word and promise of our heavenly Father. Christ's death upon the cross has extinguished the fiery danger of God's judgment of hell for all who use their tongues to confess His name.

He has undone the damage by preaching the healing, life-giving, divine Word that sets all things right. Such preaching—for our forgiveness, life, and salvation—continues today through those whom God has called to serve in the Office of the Holy Ministry.

Pastors speak the words Jesus gave to deliver the gifts of His cross through water and the Word: I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Pastors speak the words of Jesus in Holy Absolution: I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Pastors speak the words of Gospel as they read God's word from the lectern and proclaim it from the pulpit.

When we hear this good news we respond with joy, and make it a goal to train our tongues and use them for good.

We bless those who persecute us, we offer God our praise and thanksgiving. We speak words of repentance and forgiveness to one another, as well as confessing our sins to God and receiving His forgiveness.

I'm going to close this morning with a prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, in the sending of your Son, you utterly quenched the threatening fire of condemnation under the Law for all who believe in Him. By your Means of Grace, continually send your Holy Spirit to tame our tongues, that from them the cleansing pure fountain of the Gospel may continually spring forth. Amen.