

# And the Tongue Is a Fire...

*“And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell” (James 3:6).*

As we have heard many times in church when the minister preaches on the Heidelberg Catechism, we are to use our tongue in love for the neighbor for the sake of God. If we love God, then we will love the neighbor. So a test whether or not we love God is to ask ourselves whether we use our tongue in love to the neighbor. The tongue is just a small member of our body, but it can do great things. Let us see.

James compares the tongue, a little member, to several things. First, to a bit in the mouth of a horse. A horse is a rather large animal, but we can turn it in whatever direction we want because of that bit in its mouth. Second, to a helm on a ship which is a very large vessel sailing upon the water. One can turn this very large ship with the helm. A helm is the wheel which the captain turns just like the steering wheel in a car. Thirdly, to a spark which is a tiny bit of fire. This little spark can start a whole forest or prairie on fire.

So it is with the tongue. It certainly is not very large when compared to other members in the body. We use the tongue for speaking. But the idea of the tongue includes more than just our speech of the mouth. It refers to all ways in which we communicate with others. It would also include what we write in books and letters and the songs that we sing. Let us not forget that this would also include the newer forms of communication such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the like.

God created the tongue good. When God made man he made man perfect, which included the tongue of man. Man could use his tongue to speak to God and praise him. Man could also use his tongue to speak to other men. Man was able to see all that God had made and then glorify God with his speech. We read that God and man were able to walk and talk in the garden of Eden. What a wonderful gift God had given to man.

Man, however, fell into sin. The devil used his tongue to lie to Eve about God. She listened, gave to her husband, he did eat, and all mankind was plunged into sin. Now instead of praising God man curses God and uses his name in vain. He does the same thing to his neighbor.

In vs. 7 & 8 James writes, “For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” That is quite an

indictment against the tongue; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. As we see in our text the tongue is like a fire, set on fire of hell. In other words, the devil sets it on fire. One uses his tongue in the service of Satan. God created it to be used in his service, to praise him, but now man uses it to sin.

Think of all the trouble that one can start with the tongue. That is why it is likened to a spark starting a great big fire, a conflagration. The tongue does that too. Using our tongue in an evil way shows that we are friends of the devil. We were created to have fellowship with God and to be friends with God. But after the fall we are under the continual influence of the devil.

The first target of our tongue is God himself. We curse and swear, thus taking God's name in vain, and pray in a thoughtless way. Then we direct our tongue against our neighbor. We tell a lie about someone. You can imagine how hurt someone is when you tell a lie about him. People then will think badly about that person. We lie when we make things worse than they really are, by stretching the truth. We must always speak the truth. Backbiting is another sinful use of the tongue. Here we can actually tell the truth, but still sin. If someone has sinned, we must not spread that fact to others. We hurt them by doing that. One can also speak hateful words to each other by calling names, mocking or poking fun of others, or laughing behind someone's back.

That is why it is so important to be careful in how one uses Facebook and the like. As long as we are not face to face with someone it seems so easy to just type those hurtful words and then push the "send" button. That is the spark which starts the wildfire which spreads far and wide very quickly. So prevalent is this evil that I have learned that in some churches the elders have begun to monitor Facebook in order to curb this evil. It is a shame that this has to be the case. It blackens the name of our churches and the name of Jesus Christ. If one can not speak well and unto the welfare of his neighbor, he should not speak at all about him.

A further evil is talking back to our parents and to our teachers. You are to respect them, for they have been given authority over you by God himself. To use your tongue against them is to use it against God and for the devil. As long as the tongue is on fire it will continue to spread fire. The tongue under sin can not be tamed. So it will go here and there starting and spreading fire wherever it goes, just as the foxes which Samson set fire to and released in the grain fields of the Philistines.

What can be done to put out this fire from hell? The cures of the world simply will not work. None of the world's cures work because they do not touch the cause. The source must be cut off. Behind the tongue lies the heart filled with evil. Behind the heart lies hell and spiritual communion with the devil. Therefore, the supply from hell must be cut off. So how can this possibly be done?

Christ is the One who cuts the connection to hell. He did that by paying the price of redemption, saving us from our sins. He delivers us from the power of the devil by the power of his grace. He establishes a new connection. He is the truth and the life. He connects and unites us to himself. For this grace we need to partake of the means of God's grace as provided in the preaching of the Word both in church and in the catechism room.

An evil tongue is a bad sign. It suggests that you have fellowship with the devil. So we must fight against this sin of which we are all guilty. An evil tongue must not walk among us. We must speak the truth in love. We must walk in faith. James tells us that we can show our faith by our works. A good tongue will show that we have faith. If we love God and each other, then we will keep God's commandments which tell us that we may not bear false witness against our neighbor, but will always speak to his good.