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### **James 3:1-12 (CEB)**

My brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers, because we know that we teachers will be judged more strictly. <sup>2</sup>We all make mistakes often, but those who don't make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity. Like a bridled horse, they can control themselves entirely. <sup>3</sup>When we bridle horses and put bits in their mouths to lead them wherever we want, we can control their whole bodies.

<sup>4</sup>Consider ships: They are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder. <sup>5</sup>In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly.

Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. <sup>6</sup>The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell.

<sup>7</sup>People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish. <sup>8</sup>No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup>Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn't be this way!

<sup>11</sup>Both fresh water and salt water don't come from the same spring, do they? <sup>12</sup>My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree produce olives? Can a grapevine produce figs? Of course not, and fresh water doesn't flow from a saltwater spring either.

**LOOSE  
LIPS**



**Sink Ships**

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**“Loose Lips Sink Ships”**  
**James 3:1-12**  
**Rev. Leanne B. Thompson**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Willmar, MN**  
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Does anyone here recognize this? I’m sure many of you have heard the expression before, but do you know where it comes from? It’s propaganda from World War II: a gentle reminder that the enemy might always be listening. It was part of a series of posters, educational materials, and even animated short films that warned of the dangers of letting one’s guard down and saying too much. At the Spy Museum in Washington D.C. there is a display that shows some of these propaganda films. In one of the more humorous ones, a young service man celebrates a brief respite of shore leave with an abundance of alcohol and some pretty ladies. The more he drinks, the more he talks, unwittingly divulging information. He wakes up hungover the next morning. Late. He races to the pier to see his smoking ship sinking into the ocean. That pretty lady was a spy, and his alcohol loosened tongue had said too much. Loose lips sink ships.

The Spy Museum was not the first place I learned this slogan. I heard it for the first time sitting around the table in a church basement. Our youth group was gathered for Bible Study and fellowship and we were studying this passage from James, chapter 3. It was one of our youth leaders who used these words to sum up the passage. I suspect, even if we weren’t very forthcoming with our discussion, all of us around the table understood the message. What teenager hasn’t experienced the power of words to wound? Most of us know, all too well, the potential for biting words to sink the fragile ships of our self-esteem, the consequence of loose and idle gossip shattering a reputation. We learn too early in life that words can do powerful damage. Now, it seems, more easily than ever. A particularly salacious tweet or a few seconds of an embarrassing moment caught on video can go viral in hours.

James may have written it nearly 2000 years ago, but it is still true today: “The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives.” Words are a powerful weapon, and they are being wielded in our culture to deeply damaging ends. Loose lips sink ships, and our propensity, as human beings, to give our tongues free reign unravels the fabric

of community, sews mistrust, perpetuates fear, and burns the bridges that essentially connect us to one another.

But take heart, friends. Our greatest weapon is also our greatest tool for healing and restoring what is broken. James writes, “<sup>9</sup>with [our tongues] we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. <sup>10</sup>Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way!”

It doesn’t have to be this way. If our words have the potential to both tear down and build up, we can choose how we will use our words. We can choose to use our words to speak blessings instead of curses. Sin is in us, yes. But so is the grace and love of Christ. There is a wonderful Cherokee legend of a grandfather teaching his grandson about life.<sup>1</sup> “A fight is going on inside of me,” he tells his grandson, “between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, self-pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “which wolf will win?” His grandfather replied, “the one you feed.”

Learning to tame our tongues is no easy task. We have developed deeply ingrained habits of speaking without thinking, saying whatever we please with out thought to the consequences, wielding words as weapons to protect our fragile egos. But we can learn another way. We can feed the good in us, and starve the sin. It takes a lot of practice. And it begins, by immersing ourselves in the living Word of Jesus Christ. We can’t learn to undo the evil we do, until we learn what it means to do good, and we learn what good truly is, by studying the One who is good incarnate. We learn from scripture that God used words to speak creation into existence, that Jesus used words to teach, heal and inspire, that the Holy Spirit continues to speak encouragement and direction into our lives.

That’s why we give our kids Bibles. We are endeavoring to put them on a path of lifelong learning that will give them the tools to live lives of faith, hope, and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Legends/TwoWolves-Cherokee.html>

love. We are giving them the word that teaches them to hear the voice of Jesus speaking to them in the midst of shame or doubt: you are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased. I have redeemed you; you are mine. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone. We give our kids Bibles because we want them to find their place in God's story, and we want to feed the good in them.

Every day that we choose to set aside 5 minutes, or hour, to read to God's word, we are feeding the good. Every time that we pause to think before we speak and weigh the consequences of our words, we are feeding the good. The more we allow our lives to be shaped by the living Word of God, the more potential we have to use our words in a way that contribute to the healing of our relationships, our community, our world.

Are you committed to feeding the good in you? Being here is worship is a good first step. Worship is a regular opportunity to begin your week grounded in God's word. But it takes more than weekly worship attendance to reshape our lives and habits. But I invite you to consider going a step further and inviting more of God's powerful, life-giving word into the pattern of your days. Consider joining one of the Bible Studies and classes that are beginning this fall. They are great opportunities to learn God's word, ask questions and discuss together, wrestle with what God's word means for your life. If there isn't a Bible Study or class that works for you to attend, talk to Scott and I about how to get one started! Our let us help you learn how to incorporate daily personal study and devotional time into your life. We would love to help feed the good in you so that Christ's grace and mercy can grow among us. If you are a parent, grandparent, friend, Sunday School teacher, of a child who has received a Bible and you aren't sure how to help that child establish a pattern of feeding the good because you don't have one yourself, its not too late to learn.

And its essential that we learn. Loose lips sink ships, but carefully wielded words can mend the fabric of community, rebuild trust, perpetuate hope, and build the bridges that essentially connect us to one another. And our world needs that now more than ever.

"The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8)."

Alleluia! Amen.