

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 19
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
What shall we talk about today?

—James 4:7-12

What shall we talk about today? I'm not asking the question because I didn't prepare a sermon for this morning, and I'm suggesting we just kind of meander around from topic to topic for the next 20 minutes or so. No, when I ask the question, "What shall we talk about today?" I'm asking the question for all of us: What words will fall from our lips in conversation today? How will we speak about other people today? How will we use our lips and our tongues constructively today? Will we use our tongues for evil—to cut, to hurt, to destroy, to rip other people apart and tear them down? Or will we use our lips and tongues to pray to God, to encourage others, and to build people up? What shall we talk about today?

In the world not everyone can be a leader; some people need to be good followers. In the Christian Church there is only one leader, our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. We hear his voice, we follow him, and we want to serve him. We serve him by loving our neighbor as ourselves. We show love for God and for our fellow human beings by the way we use our tongue.

Sadly, all around us we hear terrible things coming from people's lips. We hear cursing, swearing, slandering, blaspheming. We hear it on the television and in movies and in songs—people's lips spewing the most vile filth. That way of speaking gets into our heads and finds its way onto our lips. We start to feel like it's natural to talk this way because, we think that's just how people talk. But the filthy language we hear in the media or even in conversations with non-Christian friends is trash that simply doesn't belong on the lips of Christians. As followers of Jesus Christ who love our Savior, we don't want to talk that way.

Things like gossip and slander might seem like minor sins compared to other things. After all, it's not murder or adultery or stealing, right? But that's not the way God looks at sins of the tongue. Jesus teaches us, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:21,22). In James 3, the apostle writes, "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 person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. No man 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 men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be" (James 3:5-10, excerpts).

As Christians we gather in God's house, and we praise God. Then we get in the car to leave, and an argument breaks out among family members, and words are said that hurt and tear down. We sing songs in church that glorify God, then we go home and curse at the television because our team messed up. We pray to God in the silence of our hearts, and we know God hears us, but somehow we think he's not listening when we get drawn into workplace politics and gossipy sidebar conversations about our boss or fellow employees. We'll memorize our memory work and say it to our teacher, and then we'll turn around and say mean things about a classmate who's not popular. We'll use God's name to praise and call upon, but then we'll turn around and misuse his name as an expletive. It's so easy to say, "Oh, my god!" or to text OMG. "Oh, my gosh!" is no better; it's still a misuse of God's holy name. Jesus says, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one (Matthew 5:37). Think this is no big deal? God thinks differently. He says, "The LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name" (Exodus 20:7). The Apostle Paul puts sins of the tongue in the same category with murder, homosexual behavior, and pedophilia, and he says, "Slanderers . . . will [not] inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:10). It's a damnable sin!

Why is slander so serious? Slander puts me on a pedestal vs. my neighbor. *Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.* When I say something to cut someone else down, it's coming from a heart that thinks I'm better. And that "I'm better" attitude is exactly the opposite of the broken, contrite, penitent heart that sees myself as the worst of sinners and so deeply in need of God's forgiveness. Cutting on someone else is an example of spiritual pride, and a heart that is full of self has no place in it for Jesus. *There is only one lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?* James reminds us that when we speak ill of others we are playing God. When we question other people's motives, we are playing God, playing the judge, trying to knock God off his throne and sit in God's seat.

Look how serious James is: *Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.* James wants us to understand just how serious sins of the tongue really are.

This is a big problem for us human beings: We find that it is hard for us to be convicted. We find it hard to see clearly just how wretched and despicable our sinful human heart is and how evil our tongue is. We find it hard to grasp how utterly hopeless and helpless we are in the face of God's judgment. And a lot of times we just don't care about how dire our situation is. After all, the stock market has been doing pretty well lately. The D-Backs are above 0.500 and could make a wild-card run for the pennant. My health is fine. Who cares about spiritual things? Who cares about matters of eternal life and death? But regardless of how well my life is going, I'm still going to have to answer for my sins. I have to appear before the judgment seat. And when it comes to the sins of my tongue, God has me dead to rights; there is no pleading ignorance, no excuse, no "but I tried."

Did you notice something about this Scripture reading from James? There's no Jesus here! There's nothing in here about the good news of forgiveness. Some sections of Scripture are like this. They instruct us, and in the process, they powerfully convict us—and that's what they are supposed to do. But they do not give us comfort and healing by pointing us to Jesus. So we're going to bring Jesus into the conversation here. When James has finished instructing us, he leaves us hungry for some good news, and the good news is this: These are the very laws that Jesus came to keep for us perfectly as our substitute. He never slandered. He never spoke an unkind word. He never blasphemed his Father in heaven. He never cut down his playmates. He never gossiped. He never betrayed secrets. He is our perfect substitute, because he was tempted in every way yet remained without sin. So today we're going to run to Jesus for forgiveness and healing, and we see Jesus, our perfect substitute, offering himself as the payment for our sins on the cross. We see Jesus' perfect lips, that never spoke a malicious word about anyone, crying out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And we know the answer: God condemned his own Son Jesus Christ in our place by laying our evil speech and hurtful words on him, so that our sins can no longer condemn us. And then Jesus said something else from the cross; he said, "It is finished." Paid in full! Our sin is covered. Our debt is canceled. Our slander, our cursing and swearing, all of it covered by Jesus' blood and righteousness.

So, what shall we talk about today? We can start by thanking God, God who has been so merciful and kind to us that he gave his own Son to cleanse our lips and purify our tongues and take the guilt of our slander away. We can sing to God a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. We can pray to God. We can approach him as our Father and our Friend, and we know that he listens to our prayers. We can use our lips and our tongues to build one another up, to encourage, to support, to uplift, and we can run away from conversation that rips apart and tears down. We can speak well of our neighbor and our coworker and do everything possible to defend them, speak well of them, and take their words and actions in the kindest possible way.

You've heard the saying, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." How true! When my children were little their first-grade teacher taught them to be very careful about what came out of their mouths. The first question she taught them to ask was, "Is it true?" If it's a lie, if it's a rumor, then don't say it or repeat it. But just because something is true doesn't mean we should go around repeating it. Proverbs says, "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret" (Proverbs 11:13), and Scripture instructs us not only to speak the truth but to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). So the next question to ask is, "Is it kind?" If it's going to be hurtful or destructive, then don't say anything. And the third question is, "Is it necessary?" Does this information need to be shared to help someone or to protect someone? Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary? Keep those thoughts in mind, as you guard your tongue.

So we pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. In the name of Jesus, Amen.