

# Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA September 30, 2012

James 3:13-18

## Wisdom Stops the Fire!

1. **Sparking a Forest Fire!**
2. **Wisdom Strives for Peace**
3. **This is True Wisdom!**

Hymns: 227 – 490 –  
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All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

## Wisdom from Above

*<sup>13</sup> Who among you is wise and understands? Let that one show from a good life by the things he does that he is wise and gentle. <sup>14</sup> If you have jealousy in your heart and fight to have many things, do not be proud of it. Do not lie against the truth. <sup>15</sup> This is not the kind of wisdom that comes from God. But this wisdom comes from the world and from that which is not Christian and from the devil. <sup>16</sup> Wherever you find jealousy and fighting, there will be trouble and every other kind of wrong-doing. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure. Then it gives peace. It is gentle and willing to obey. It is full of loving-kindness and of doing good. It has no doubts and does not pretend to be something it is not. <sup>18</sup> Those who plant seeds of peace will gather what is right and good.*

Though the dry summer months have been fantastic for the normally rain-soaked residents of Western Washington, they have not been nearly as kind to many on the other side of the Cascades. Since early July, the nightly news has seemed to have a continuous story to report on. Fires have swept through many areas in Central Washington and they have caused millions of dollars of damage and heartache for many who have lost land, crops, animals and homes. Forest fires are a devastating force. Once they start, they are almost always impossible to contain. Their movement is swift and the effects are far-reaching. Forest fires burn a path of disaster, leaving torched evidence for years to come.

For those reasons, no one typically wants to see a forest fire burning wildly out of control. Typically, no one goes out into the woods with the intention of

starting one of these destructive blazes. Yet, typically, how do most forest fires start? Most often, they start from man-made causes. It might be a camper who thinks that their leftover smoldering ashes are harmless. It might be a driver who casually throws a cigarette out the window like they have done hundreds of times before. It might be a welder who is just thinking about getting his job done and repairing a bridge. Not one of those people thinks that their actions are going to start the blaze. Not one of those people wants to start a blaze. Yet in spite of what those people want, each one plays with a spark in a place where they should not. Though so much should tell them that they are dealing with danger, they carelessly think, "This won't be the thing that starts a fire. It won't be me!"

All the forest fires that have started from those seemingly innocent sources tell us that it is a foolish thought to think that you can control even a smoldering pile of ash or a tiny, flying ember. Wisdom would tell each and every one of us that if we are surrounded by dry kindle, the best bet is to stay away from anything that might spark it into flames. Wisdom says, "Snuff out each and every spark. Don't test what fire can do!"

In the first 11 verses of James chapter 3, the words right before the text we heard a few moments ago, James speaks about the tongue and the way that we speak toward one another and about one another. In one of the most familiar sections of James' letter to NT Christians, James compares the tongue to a fire that can scorch a great forest with just a small spark; he says that the tongue is a world of evil that has the potential to set the whole course of a person's life on fire.

With that thought burning in the reader's mind, James then transitions to a section in which he speaks about wisdom. And as he speaks to us today, he asks a simple question, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" And that question is striking as it comes right after James speaks about the use of our tongues.

After all, not a single one of us wants to start the fire that ignites the forest in flames. Not a single one of us wants to start the arguments that lead to bitter feelings and frayed relationships. Not a single one of us wants to speak the words that result in testy tiffs that have a tendency to linger around and cause lasting problems. Who of us would ever read that section about the dangers of the tongue and say, "It doesn't matter how I speak?" As we look at James' words and as we think about the dangerous power of words, the message is clear: "It is wise to watch how we use our tongues."

However, after being shown so clearly how wisdom can be practiced, James drops the hammer with that question that all of us can really answer in one way. "You know what is wise when it comes to

the way that you speak about others, (wise when it comes to the way that you treat others), so... who among you shows that wisdom? Who among you puts that wisdom into action by living according to that wisdom in your lives?

See, we all say that we don't want to be the ones that start those destructive fires, yet what do we do? So often, in each of our lives, we play with fire. We use our tongues in ugly and destructive ways. We use our tongues to verbalize the envy, bitterness, and selfishness that live in our sinful hearts. And we can find clever ways to try to hide what is burning inside us. We hide in the shadows of gossip as we whisper venomously about what others are doing. We make snide and sarcastic comments which poorly mask our true feelings. We complain in the most subtle ways. We know just the person to talk to so that an issue will cause dissension, but it won't be us that gets blamed for stirring things up. We often know exactly what to say, and how to say it in order to light the fuse.

We can be so very "wise" in the way that we use our tongues, and those cunning and deceitful tactics show where this type of wisdom truly comes from. James says, **"Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil."** Such evil wisdom has its source in the unholy three: the devil, the world, and the sinful nature that continues to try to take over each of our lives.

And when we allow those spiritual enemies to be the source of "wisdom" in our lives, we are throwing away what Jesus came into this world to rid from our lives. Jesus came down to this earth to snuff out the devil, he came to win a victory that would make sure that the fires of hell would not destroy us. And he accomplished what he came to do when he lived his perfect life and died his sacrificial death on the cross. And though that great victory has been accomplished for us, so often we return to this "wisdom" that comes from the devil and which feeds our selfish sinful nature. You don't have to look very hard, even in the church, to find the scorched remains where the tongue has sparked destructive flames. You don't have to listen very closely to hear God's people foolishly continuing to play with fire. You all know the evil which you can accomplish with your tongues, and how you often push the limit with your words.

Dear friends, stop turning back to the source of wisdom that Christ came to destroy; stop playing with fire and put into action true wisdom. And that true wisdom comes down to us from heaven. It comes down from heaven just as Jesus Christ did and it changes our lives just as Jesus Christ does. James describes this wisdom as he says, **"The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure** (as all things from God are); **then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."** Imagine if those were the qualities that

characterized our thoughts, our words, and our actions! Those are characteristics that would snuff out any spark before it could ever burst into flames and cause destruction. They are characteristics that are selfless; they are characteristics that look out for the good of others.

And here is the beautiful part, those are characteristics that define the children of God. Each of you has this wisdom in you. Each of you possesses those wonderful qualities. They are given by the Holy Spirit. And as you spend time in God's Word, that wisdom from heaven will increase in you. As you spend time in God's Word, you will more easily be able to disregard the false wisdom of the devil. As you spend time in God's Word, putting this wisdom from heaven into practice will be easier and easier.

And when true wisdom is put into practice, it produces results. James says that **"Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."** It is a very simple formula. When we are wise, when we are considerate, when we are peace-loving with our tongues, our lives will be filled with peace. There will be no fires to put out. Time will not need to be spent repairing burned bridges and rebuilding burned down lives. Instead that time can be spent on what Christ has called us to do with our tongues: Preach the Word. We can take the Word out to the world so that a harvest of righteousness can come, so that more and more people can know their Savior.

Our tongues are a powerful tool. Yes, they have great destructive power. But they also possess the ability to accomplish so much good. Let us wake up each morning asking God to fill our hearts with the wisdom that comes from above and to fill our minds with the discernment that is given only by his Spirit, so that we may live as peacemakers who enjoy peace in our lives and who spread peace to those around us. Amen.