

## ***The Fiery Tongue and the Sustaining Tongue***

**(James 3:6 and Isaiah 50:4)**

**(Rev. Dr. Alfonso O. Espinosa)**

### **Introduction: The Proper Relationship Between Faith and Works**

**A. True faith necessarily produces good works.**

**B. Our Confessions say, “Good works are necessary.”**

**AC VI (Latin translation): “Our churches also teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God.” (Tappert, 31)**

**C. More importantly, Scripture:**

**Ephesians 2:10: “For we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.”**

**D. What do we mean by “necessary”?**

- 1. Not as a condition for salvation.**
- 2. But as evidence of saving faith already there!**

**E. Analogy: the existence of the sun *necessarily* produces heat and light.**

- 1. Heat and light are *necessary* by-products of the fact that the sun exists.**
- 2. Because God created the sun, then it is necessary that heat and light also exist.**

**F. In an analogous sense, the same is true of faith.**

- 1. God has CREATED your faith by the power of His Word and the Holy Spirit working through that Word.**
- 2. Now that God has created your faith, “heat” and “light” (good works) necessarily flow forth!**

**G. What we must keep in mind also is that “clouds” and other obstacles interfere with heat and light.**

- 1. As analogous to our spiritual concerns, our sinful nature partially “blocks” the heat and light of our faith. Our sinful nature is a formidable “cloud cover.”**
- 2. Our sin interferes with the signs of faith; the good works which flow from our faith.**
- 3. This is why our good works – while truly coming from faith – are never on this side of heaven perfect, but always marred.**
- 4. And yet, insofar as they come from faith, these good works are truly considered good in the sight of God. Not only do these help our**

neighbor, but God knows them as true evidence of a living, saving faith in Christ!

- H. But in order to make us more aware of the fleshly, sinful clouds that try to block the good works of faith, the LORD teaches us about practical matters. So here we are once again in James. This time in chapter 3...

## **Part I: Words are important!**

- A. In fact, this may be the understatement of the year!

- B. From Matthew 12:

*"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment, people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."* (vss 33-37)

- C. But do you see the relationship to faith here?

- D. Words are just an overflow of what is in the "treasury"...whether good or evil; whether faith or unbelief.

- E. Words are forms of works...they evidence whether there is faith or unbelief.

- F. But this is precisely where and when we experience great concern (at least I hope you do)...this is where we despair of ourselves (at least I hope you do)...this is the healthy response and by the way, the LORD's intended response from us Christians!

- G. How often have we experienced both good and evil words coming from our mouths?!

1. We have seen the evil stored up within us.

2. Our words have proven it.

3. In Colossians 3, the Lord warns us about words of slander and filthy language...how often have we utterly failed?!

4. And again, hopefully, these facts lead us to the terrors of conscience. Note these words from the Lutheran Confessions:

**Solid Declaration, VII, Lord's Supper (Tappert, 582):**

**"True and worthy communicants, on the other hand, are those timid, perturbed Christians, weak in faith, who are heartily terrified because of their many and great sins, who consider themselves unworthy of this noble treasure and the benefits of Christ because of their great impurity, and who perceive their weakness in faith, deplore it, and heartily wish that they might serve God with a stronger and more cheerful faith and a purer obedience."**

**H. And our sinful words have not only hurt ourselves, but they have hurt others; see the progression from self-destruction to the harm of others:**

***James 3:6: "And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell."***

***James 3:8b: "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."***

***James 3:9-10: "With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so."***

- I. "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me!" was devised from someone living in a state of denial. Words can cut and slice deeper than any knife; they can cause a soul to bleed with pain, sadness, and depression; and they can crush a person's hopes...devastating words can impact the psyche to the extent that a person begins to believe that these negative words are true. Words can be devastating.**
- J. We have hurt ourselves and we have hurt others...and based on Christ's warning, we have reason to fear eternal condemnation.**

**Part II and Conclusion: This is exactly why our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 50, verse 4, is so important!**

- A. You know when I first saw our bulletin cover without reading the words, I thought of Pentecost and the tongues of fire over the heads of the apostles (Acts 2:3).**
- B. Fire has both a negative and a positive connotation in Scripture.**

- C. The positive connotation is that when the Lord comes to you in grace, He refines you with a holy fire (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:7 teaches that your faith is tested like gold is tested or refined by fire).
- D. But in the case of Isaiah, the blessing comes with words, not sinful words, not slanderous words, not cursing words, but with words of teaching; words of preaching; words of God.
- E. These words from the God of all grace -- known in Jesus Christ -- are as Isaiah puts it, words that "sustain."
- F. Think of that word, it means "to help"...very simple and yet it is profound. God speaks to you helpful words.
- G. These words (God's Word) are words of grace that help you...they do not hurt you, but they sustain you; they edify you; and they make you stronger. Jesus spoke these words all of the time and still does for that matter!

***"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."  
(Matthew 11:28)***

- H. Right now our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade confirmands have been memorizing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm...talk about sustaining words!
- I. These words mean among other things that all of those other words which if left unaddressed and unattended by Christ would lead to your condemnation, but NOW, they are covered by His blood.
- J. The old words, the words from the old man (the sinful nature), are words that have been erased from God's book...they are no longer recorded on account of Christ who has paid for every one of them.
- K. And now in the place of your condemning words are Christ's forgiving words and sustaining words.
- L. There are now new words which dominate and mark your life!
- M. In the book and the movie *The Help* there is a powerful portrayal of a nanny who instilled in all of the children she cared for these words: "You is kind...you is smart...you is important."
- N. Now hear from your heavenly Father the new words that describe you:
  - 1. "You are mine!
  - 2. You are forgiven!

**You are sustained! Now go forth and share this Word, my sustaining Word, to all the world...and my holy fire will not destroy you who are in Christ, but refine you**

**to speak more and more the words that sustain as you rely on Me (the LORD)!" In Jesus' Name. Amen!**