Pollution

James 3:6-12 [5b]How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! [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. [7]For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, [8] but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. [9] With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. [10]From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. [11]**Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?** [12]Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

James 3:11 μήτι ἡ πηγὴ ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς **ὀπῆς βρύει** τὸ γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ **πικρόν**

> ὀπή *opē* **-** Opening**,** of fissures in the earth, of caves in rocks or mountains, holes
>
> βρύω *bryō* - Pour forth (abundantly), send out, to abound, gush forth, teem with juices
>
> πικρός pikros – salt, bitter, harsh, virulent (poisonous)

James has already confronted us with the contradiction of blessing God while cursing people made in His image. Apparently, one direct statement wasn't enough. In the next two verses he paints two vivid pictures to make sure we don't miss the point.

The first is a spring. Can the same spring produce both fresh water and bitter (*pikros*) water? Of course not. Something is terribly wrong if both are flowing from the same source. James's illustration isn't really about water; it's about us.

That picture immediately made me think about pollution. It doesn't take much to contaminate a clean spring. A relatively small amount of poison can render fresh water undrinkable. Restoring it, however, is another matter altogether. Cleaning polluted water takes far more effort than polluting it in the first place.

Relationships work much the same way. A husband says to his wife, "I'm no longer attracted to you." A wife says to her husband, "You don't know what it means to be a man." A father says to his son, "You'll never amount to anything."

Each sentence is like pouring bitterness (*pikros*) into what was once clean water.

Those words are not easily forgotten. An apology is important, but it is rarely the end of the healing process. Trust is rebuilt one conversation at a time. Confidence is restored one encouragement at a time. Relationships are often purified through months—or even years—of faithful, gracious words and actions.

Words are remarkably easy to release and remarkably difficult to retrieve. Harsh words are easy to say and painfully difficult to undo. James reminds us that our speech is never merely sound waves disappearing into the air. Our words leave deposits in the hearts of those who hear them. Some refresh like cool spring water. Others pollute.

Before speaking a single word, we'd often be better off to stop and ask a simple question:

> "Am I about to refresh this relationship, or contaminate it? "

And in doing so, become someone whose words make others look forward to the next conversation.