WRETCHED WORM PUBLISHING

THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

A Free Three-Sermon Series Companion

Optional fourth message • A ministry companion to Taming the Tongue by Shawn Alexander

SCRIPTURE FIRST • CHRIST AT THE CENTER • GRACE BEFORE PERFORMANCE

Before you preach

These are expository sermon outlines, not manuscript scripts. Read each primary text closely in your chosen translation, develop illustrations for your local context, and preach as a shepherd who knows the people in front of you. The notes are offered to save preparation time, not to replace prayerful study.

Expanded preparation notes: The historical and literary observations, cross-references, and quotations below are options for deeper preparation, not extra sermon points a pastor must squeeze in. Let the primary biblical passage determine the message. Check every reference in its own context before using it.

Quotation guidance: Brief selections are taken from Shawn Alexander's Taming the Tongue: A 30-Day Devotional. They are offered as optional illustrations or transitions, not as substitutes for explaining Scripture. Attribution is included where each excerpt appears.

The series at a glance

MESSAGE 01 • Small Tongue, Serious Consequences • James 3:1–5a

MESSAGE 02 • When Words Become Wildfire • James 3:5b–8

MESSAGE 03 • One Mouth, Two Messages • James 3:9–12

OPTIONAL MESSAGE 04 • The Heart Behind the Words • Luke 6:43–45; Ephesians 4:25–32

Pastoral and theological commitments

- Scripture has final authority. Read the whole passage before using any outline point.
- James 3 confronts sinful speech, but the series is not a program for earning acceptance with God. Justification rests in Christ alone; growth is the Spirit's ongoing work.
- Preach the gospel explicitly each week. Conviction should lead to confession, faith, and obedience, not self-atonement.
- Distinguish courage from harshness and gentleness from cowardice. Speak truth without contempt.
- Never use the call to forgive to pressure a vulnerable person back into danger. Abuse, threats, or coercion warrant protection, pastoral oversight, and appropriate reporting.
- Feel free to adapt, rearrange, and translate these outlines for your church. Do not sell the packet as a standalone product or imply an endorsement from the author.

Preparation rhythm

- Read the sermon text several times and trace its argument.
- Check every cross-reference in context; add only the ones that serve the passage.
- Name one doctrinal truth, one sin to confront, and one gospel promise to explain.
- Choose one authentic illustration that does not expose private conversations or people.
- Prepare concrete application that moves from words to desires to Christ.
- Pray for the congregation and for a heart that receives the same correction.

Scripture text is intentionally not reprinted. Read from the translation authorized for public worship and follow its publisher's permissions where applicable.

MESSAGE 01

Small Tongue, Serious Consequences

PRIMARY PASSAGE James 3:1–5a

BIG IDEA Words carry influence far beyond their size. James begins by calling those who teach to sober accountability and then reminds every believer that a little tongue can steer a whole life.

PREACHING AIM Call hearers to reckon honestly with the influence of their speech without confusing careful words with a changed heart.

Read the text in context

James is writing to believers about living faith. Chapter 3 begins with a caution to would-be teachers, whose words carry particular responsibility. The bit and rudder are not invitations to trust our own control; they picture how a small member can direct something much larger.

Historical and literary context to consider

- James introduces himself as a servant of God and writes to the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (James 1:1). That address draws on Israel's scattered people and frames his instruction as a call to lived faith. The letter repeatedly tests profession by practice (1:22-27; 2:14-26).
- James has already told his readers to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger (1:19), and has warned that unrestrained speech can expose hollow religiosity (1:26). The teacher warning in 3:1 grows naturally out of those themes; it is not an isolated leadership tip.
- The bit and rudder are ordinary ancient images. James is not promising that the person with the strongest will can steer every outcome; he is emphasizing how a small member can wield influence far beyond its apparent size. The warning begins with those who teach because their words carry a particular responsibility.

Opening approach

A small steering wheel can turn a heavy vehicle. A little slip of the tongue can change the atmosphere at home before breakfast is finished. We often excuse words because they were brief. James tells us to consider where they steer.

Expository movements

1. Our words come with responsibility (vv. 1–2)

James starts with teachers, not because speech matters only in a pulpit, but because public teaching raises the stakes. Those who teach God's Word must not treat that privilege lightly. Then he levels the field: we all stumble, including with our mouths.

BRING IT HOME Ask the church to consider conversations in which others rely on their words: parents, supervisors, small-group leaders, teachers, and friends. Do we speak as people who will answer to God for our words?

GUARDRAIL Resist turning v. 2 into a claim that a Christian can achieve sinless perfection through verbal discipline. James is exposing both the seriousness and difficulty of speech.

2. Small instruments can change large directions (vv. 3–4)

James points to a bit in a horse's mouth and a rudder on a ship. The images are not chiefly about horsepower or ocean currents; they are about proportion. Something small is able to direct something large.

BRING IT HOME A brief sentence can strengthen a weary believer or deflate a child. Words can direct an argument toward repentance or toward a week of silence.

GUARDRAIL This is a warning and a stewardship. Do not overstate the analogy as if a mouth alone determines every outcome or another person's choices.

3. Influence calls for humility, not self-confidence (v. 5a)

The tongue is small, yet makes great boasts. James places influence beside the temptation to pride. The same gift that can guide can also magnify self. The issue is not merely volume but what the heart wants to accomplish through speech.

BRING IT HOME Before your next difficult conversation, ask: Am I trying to serve the person in front of me, or am I trying to win?

GUARDRAIL The passage does not promise quick fixes. It calls us to humble attention and prepares us for James's harder images of fire.

Additional Scripture to consider

Choose the passages that actually clarify the primary text for your congregation. These are preparation options, not six mandatory sermon readings.

- **James 1:19-27** Why listening, speaking, and the credibility of religious practice are already linked in the letter.
- **Proverbs 10:19; 12:18** Wisdom literature's recurring concern with careless words and speech that can heal or wound.
- **Proverbs 18:21** A vivid companion text on the far-reaching consequences of speech; avoid treating it as a promise of magical verbal power.
- **Matthew 12:33-37** Jesus connects words to the heart and to accountability. Compare the tree-and-fruit image without letting it displace James's argument.
- **1 Timothy 4:12-16** Especially useful for preachers and teachers considering the weight of visible teaching and personal example.
- **Psalm 141:3** A prayerful response for congregants who recognize their need for God's help.

Illustration you may adapt

Picture a family dinner after a long workday. Someone asks an ordinary question, and the answer arrives with an edge. It is only one sentence ... but it changes the whole evening. A later apology matters, yet so does asking why irritation was ready to speak so quickly.

Christ and the gospel

James exposes more than a bad habit. We need mercy for careless and proud words. Christ is the sinless Savior who never manipulated, lied, or sinned with His speech, and He bore the guilt of sinners who have. In Him, forgiven people learn to speak differently through the Spirit. We pursue disciplined speech because grace has found us, not so grace will finally accept us.

From the devotional (optional quotation)

> *"The mouth usually tells on the heart before we are ready to admit what is in there."*
>
> ~ Shawn Alexander, Taming the Tongue: A 30-Day Devotional, Day 1, "The Tongue Reveals the Heart"

Response and reflection

- Read James 3:1–5 aloud again. Where does the author place the weight of responsibility?
- Name one arena where your words exercise more influence than you normally admit.
- What did you want in the last conversation where your tone changed the room?
- Choose one person to encourage specifically this week and one apology that should not be postponed.

Suggested closing prayer

Lord, forgive the careless influence of our words. Guard those who teach, humble those who lead, and teach every one of us to speak as people who belong to Christ. Make our words more useful to others and more faithful to Your truth. Amen.

SERIES CONNECTION Next week: James turns from steering to burning. The problem is not only that words can guide a life; they can also set relationships ablaze.

MESSAGE 02

When Words Become Wildfire

PRIMARY PASSAGE James 3:5b–8

BIG IDEA Sinful words can spread destruction with frightening speed. James strips away our excuses and shows why our hope cannot rest in human self-control alone.

PREACHING AIM Expose the destructive reach of sinful speech, lead to particular repentance, and point to Christ rather than despair or mere willpower.

Read the text in context

James moves from the tongue's small size to the tongue's enormous capacity for harm. His fire imagery is intentionally severe. The comparison with animals in vv. 7–8 magnifies the problem: human beings can tame creatures, but cannot master the tongue by their own power.

Historical and literary context to consider

- James intensifies his argument at 3:5b. After comparing the tongue with small instruments that direct large things, he compares it to a tiny spark that can ignite a great forest. The shift is from influence to devastation; the illustrations belong to one continuous warning.
- The reference to "hell" in 3:6 uses Gehenna language of judgment. James's severe imagery should not be softened into a lesson about annoying speech, nor pressed into a claim that every angry sentence is literally set on fire by a supernatural force.
- The reference to taming animals in 3:7-8 highlights a human paradox: great ability to manage creatures but inability to master one's own tongue. Preach the text's rebuke of self-sufficiency without concluding that repentance, accountability, or Christian obedience are pointless.

Opening approach

A wildfire does not ask whether the first spark was meant seriously. Neither does a rumor. Once a sentence is loose, we do not control where it travels. James will not let us call the matchstick harmless because it was small.

Expository movements

1. A little fire can consume a great deal (vv. 5b–6)

James describes the tongue as a fire, capable of staining life and setting relationships ablaze. He names an evil that is not limited to a few dramatic outbursts; speech can contaminate ordinary life when it serves sinful desires.

BRING IT HOME Consider a sarcastic comment turned into a running joke, a rumor repeated as concern, or an accusation posted before facts were checked.

GUARDRAIL Do not imply every heated conversation is identical, or treat this text as a substitute for safety reporting where abuse or threats exist.

2. Sinful speech reveals a deeper corruption (v. 6)

James's language is stark because the problem is spiritual, not cosmetic. Anger wants to punish. Pride wants the last word. Envy wants to reduce someone else. The tongue often gives the heart exactly what it asks for.

BRING IT HOME Rather than stopping at "I should have kept quiet," ask what desire or fear was ruling you in that moment.

GUARDRAIL Explain the image reverently. James is not saying ordinary words possess magical power, or that every disagreement is a literal fire from hell.

3. No human technique can become our savior (vv. 7–8)

People tame wild creatures, yet James says no human being can tame the tongue. The point is the insufficiency of merely human mastery. This is not permission to surrender or to neglect obedience; it is a blow to self-sufficiency.

BRING IT HOME Practice pausing, listening, and checking facts. Yet pray even more urgently for repentance and Spirit-produced fruit. Practical habits serve sanctification; they do not create a new heart.

GUARDRAIL Do not promise that one prayer will permanently remove the struggle. Christians grow through ongoing repentance and faith.

Additional Scripture to consider

Choose the passages that actually clarify the primary text for your congregation. These are preparation options, not six mandatory sermon readings.

- **Proverbs 16:27-28; 26:20-22** Speech as a burning force and gossip as fuel that sustains conflict.
- **Psalm 140:1-3; Romans 3:13-14** The venom and destructive-speech imagery that appears in the biblical diagnosis of sin.
- **Matthew 15:18-20** Jesus identifies the heart as the source of speech that defiles; do not treat the mouth as an independent moral problem.
- **Ephesians 4:29-31** A concrete pattern of putting away corrupting speech and learning words that build others up.
- **1 Peter 2:21-23** Christ's sinless response under insult and suffering, and a fitting bridge from exposure of sin to the Savior.
- **James 4:1-3** An adjacent diagnosis of desires and conflicts that can fuel the words James has just condemned.

Illustration you may adapt

A coworker sends a message meant for one person. It is forwarded, embellished, and eventually reaches someone it wounds. The sender may regret the consequences, but repentance also asks why the story seemed worth passing along. An apology may be necessary ... and repairing trust may take time.

Christ and the gospel

James gives us nowhere to hide behind a polished vocabulary. But he does not leave repentant sinners without hope. Jesus was reviled and did not retaliate in sin. He died for guilty speakers and rose again. Those united to Him are not justified by a streak of polite conversations; they are justified by Christ, and the Holy Spirit begins to shape words that reflect Him.

From the devotional (optional quotation)

> *"Grace does not minimize the fire of the tongue... it gives redeemed sinners a new reason and new power to put that fire under Christ's rule."*
>
> ~ Shawn Alexander, Taming the Tongue: A 30-Day Devotional, Day 2, "The Fire We Carry"

Response and reflection

- Which kind of “spark” is easiest for you to excuse: sarcasm, gossip, contempt, exaggeration, or angry replies?
- Who bears the cost when that pattern spreads?
- Is your first impulse to manage consequences or to confess the sin that produced the words?
- What concrete act of repentance, correction, or restitution is needed?

Suggested closing prayer

Father, we have used words You gave us to wound those You made. Expose the deeper sins that set our mouths on fire. Grant us honest confession, courage to make wrongs right, and a growing dependence on Your Spirit. In Jesus’ name, amen.

SERIES CONNECTION Next week: James takes us from the damage our words do to the contradiction of blessing God while dishonoring people made in His image.

MESSAGE 03

One Mouth, Two Messages

PRIMARY PASSAGE James 3:9–12

BIG IDEA A mouth that praises God yet degrades people made in His image reveals a contradiction that believers must not ignore.

PREACHING AIM Connect worship to weekday speech, uphold human dignity, and invite repentance that bears the fruit of grace.

Read the text in context

James uses an everyday contradiction: blessing the Lord and cursing human beings made in God's likeness. His illustrations of springs and fruit trees underline that a source should produce fitting fruit. The church must never use worship to excuse unholy speech elsewhere.

Historical and literary context to consider

- James addresses his readers as brothers and sisters and places the contradiction directly inside their worship: the same tongue blesses the Lord and curses human beings (3:9-10). The passage is aimed first at self-examination within the community of faith, not at giving believers a better vocabulary for criticizing outsiders.
- James grounds his warning in the likeness of God (3:9), echoing the creation account in Genesis 1:26-27. Human dignity is not earned by good behavior or shared beliefs. The theological problem with contempt remains even when disagreement or correction is necessary.
- Springs and fruit trees were familiar features of daily life in an agricultural setting. James's illustrations in 3:11-12 press the expectation of consistency between source and product. They are not a claim that every follower of Christ already speaks perfectly; they challenge a settled pattern of contradiction.

Opening approach

It is possible to sing with the church on Sunday and cut someone to pieces on Monday. James asks us to look at both days together. The problem is not that we have two mouths ... it is that one mouth tells two very different stories.

Expository movements

1. Our speech can contradict our worship (vv. 9–10)

James names a jarring practice: praising the Lord and cursing people who bear His likeness. He does not shrug at the inconsistency. His plain response is that it ought not be so.

BRING IT HOME Ask listeners to consider their speech about a difficult neighbor, political opponent, family member, or irritating coworker. Are we treating their dignity as optional?

GUARDRAIL Do not confuse recognizing someone's God-given dignity with agreeing with their beliefs or excusing harmful conduct.

2. Every person remains an image-bearer (v. 9)

The people most easily dismissed by our words are still made in the likeness of God. The image of God is the basis of their dignity, not a reward for their behavior. Truthful correction and human dignity belong together.

BRING IT HOME The next time you strongly disagree, name the issue truthfully without using contempt as a shortcut.

GUARDRAIL Avoid telling those enduring abuse to remain in unsafe situations. God-given dignity calls for truth, protection, accountability, and wise boundaries.

3. The fruit calls us to examine the source (vv. 11–12)

James asks whether a spring produces two kinds of water and whether trees bear fruit contrary to their nature. The images do not teach that Christians never fail; they press us to ask whether the direction of our lives aligns with the God we claim to worship.

BRING IT HOME Move from "I need to filter my words" toward "Lord, expose what my heart loves, fears, and resents."

GUARDRAIL Use the warning pastorally. Condemn complacency, not the repentant believer who is grieved by sin and running to Christ.

Additional Scripture to consider

Choose the passages that actually clarify the primary text for your congregation. These are preparation options, not six mandatory sermon readings.

- **Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6** The image of God as the foundation for the dignity of people who may disagree with or wrong us.
- **Matthew 5:21-24** Jesus treats contempt and unreconciled anger as matters of real moral seriousness, not mere verbal style.
- **Ephesians 4:15, 25, 29** Truth in love, truthful dealings with neighbors, and speech that gives grace to hearers. This is the most natural companion for the featured devotional quotation.
- **1 John 4:20-21** The inconsistency of claiming love for God while despising a brother or sister.
- **James 1:26-27** Religious claims and practical obedience are linked earlier in the same letter.
- **Proverbs 15:1; Colossians 4:5-6** Gentle, wise speech that is neither cowardly nor needlessly harsh.

Illustration you may adapt

Imagine hearing someone speak warmly about God in a gathering, then hearing them mock an absent person ten minutes later. We would sense the mismatch immediately. James tells us to recognize that mismatch first in ourselves before pointing at someone else.

Christ and the gospel

Our inconsistency condemns self-righteousness. None of us can say we have loved God and our neighbor perfectly. Christ fulfilled what we have not, gave Himself for sinners, and grants pardon through faith. The Spirit who renews the heart also bears fruit in increasingly truthful, gracious, and courageous speech. The goal is not a religious performance ... it is life that belongs to the Redeemer.

From the devotional (optional quotation)

> *"Truth without love becomes harshness. Love without truth becomes sentimentality. One wounds while the other refuses to heal. Christ gives us something better: truth governed by love and love anchored in truth."*
>
> ~ Shawn Alexander, Taming the Tongue: A 30-Day Devotional, Day 10, "Speaking Truth in Love"

Response and reflection

- Where is the sharpest mismatch between your Sunday worship and weekday conversations?
- Whose dignity have you ignored with labels, jokes, or contempt?
- Where does repentance require a direct apology rather than a vague promise to "do better"?
- What would truthful, courageous, grace-shaped speech look like in that relationship?

Suggested closing prayer

Lord, do not let our praise of You be disconnected from our treatment of those made in Your image. Expose our hypocrisy without leaving us in despair. Turn us to Christ, change our hearts, and teach us to speak with truth and grace. Amen.

SERIES CONNECTION Optional fourth message: Jesus shows why speech cannot be repaired at the surface alone. The heart is where the deeper work must begin.

OPTIONAL MESSAGE 04

The Heart Behind the Words

PRIMARY PASSAGE Luke 6:43–45; Ephesians 4:25–32

BIG IDEA Our words reveal the heart, and lasting change grows from the grace of Christ, not the performance of better manners.

PREACHING AIM Bring the series to a gospel-centered conclusion and invite a concrete path of repentance, faith, reconciliation, and Spirit-enabled obedience.

Read the text in context

In Luke 6, Jesus uses the picture of fruit and trees to show that words disclose the heart. In Ephesians 4, Paul describes truthful, edifying speech as part of the new life believers are called to live in Christ. The command to forgive stands within the mercy God has shown in Christ.

Historical and literary context to consider

- Luke 6:43-45 comes within Jesus's teaching that also challenges judgmental hypocrisy (6:37-42) and empty professions that do not produce obedience (6:46-49). The tree-and-fruit picture is not a disconnected motivational slogan; it is part of His call for disciples whose lives reflect His words.
- Ephesians 4:25-32 follows the letter's extended exposition of God's saving work and its call to put off the old self and put on the new (4:17-24). Paul addresses speech inside the larger life of a people being renewed in Christ, not as a program of etiquette detached from the gospel.
- Paul names concrete patterns in a community: lying, sinful anger, corrupting talk, bitterness, slander, and malice. He also calls for truthful speech, edification, kindness, and forgiveness. Ephesians 4:32 explicitly roots forgiveness in what God has already done in Christ.

Opening approach

A leaking faucet can be mopped up again and again, but the puddle returns until the source is addressed. We can learn to sound pleasant in public while bitterness, fear, or pride keeps rising inside. Jesus will not leave the source untouched.

Expository movements

1. Our words bring the heart into the open (Luke 6:43–45)

Jesus's tree-and-fruit illustration means our mouths are not spiritually neutral. Words are evidence of what the heart treasures. This is deeper than personality, upbringing, or a stressful week.

BRING IT HOME Think back over the last week's speech. What do repeated patterns suggest you are trying to protect, prove, or possess?

GUARDRAIL Do not pretend one sentence enables us to diagnose the entirety of another person's heart. Begin with humble self-examination.

2. Grace puts off the old patterns and puts on the new (Eph. 4:25–29)

Paul does not merely say "stop talking." He calls believers to put away falsehood, address anger without sinful escalation, and choose words that build up according to need. Sanctification is purposeful, practical, and dependent on our union with Christ.

BRING IT HOME Trade gossip for truthful conversation. Trade rehearsed insults for patient listening. Speak encouragement with the same specificity you once used for criticism.

GUARDRAIL Truthful speech can be firm. Gentleness must not become silence about abuse, danger, or grave wrongdoing.

3. The gospel gives the why and the power (Eph. 4:30–32)

Paul locates Christian conduct in the work of God, calling believers away from bitterness and malice toward kindness and forgiveness. This is not a way to purchase acceptance; it is the family resemblance of those whom Christ has rescued.

BRING IT HOME Make room for a real apology without an excuse, a conversation that restores truth, or a wise boundary where trust was broken.

GUARDRAIL Forgiveness and reconciliation are not identical. Restoration of trust may require time, repentance, accountability, and safety.

Additional Scripture to consider

Choose the passages that actually clarify the primary text for your congregation. These are preparation options, not six mandatory sermon readings.

- **Luke 6:37-49** Read Jesus's heart-and-fruit teaching alongside His calls to humility, neighbor-love, and obedient hearing.
- **Ephesians 2:8-10** Grace precedes good works; the series must never reverse that order.
- **Ephesians 4:17-24** The old self/new self context that governs the speech commands in 4:25-32.
- **Ezekiel 36:25-27** The promise of a cleansed and renewed heart in Israel's restoration context; a broader redemptive backdrop, not a shortcut around that historical setting.
- **Colossians 3:12-17; Galatians 5:22-25** New-life practices, speech shaped by thanksgiving, and fruit the Spirit produces.
- **Psalm 19:14** A fitting final prayer joining words and inward meditation.

Illustration you may adapt

A person can spend an afternoon composing the perfect apology and still add, "but you made me angry." The grammar sounds like repentance until the heart tries to hand the blame back. Grace teaches us to say, "What I said was wrong. Will you forgive me?"

Christ and the gospel

This is the good news beneath the whole series: the Savior who commands holiness is the Savior who secures our pardon. No one is saved by winning a speech audit. Christ's obedience, death, and resurrection are our hope. Through faith in Him we are forgiven, and His Spirit begins making new fruit grow. When we fail, we do not run from Christ to shame or self-defense ... we run to Christ for mercy and change.

From the devotional (optional quotation)

> *"The goal was never simply to have a quieter mouth. It was to have a redeemed heart increasingly producing redeemed speech."*
>
> ~ Shawn Alexander, Taming the Tongue: A 30-Day Devotional, Day 30, "Let the Redeemed Speak"

Response and reflection

- What recurring pattern has this series exposed in you?
- How have you justified that pattern rather than confessing it?
- What has Christ accomplished for guilty sinners who cannot repair themselves?
- Whom should you encourage, apologize to, speak truthfully with, or protect this week?

Suggested closing prayer

Jesus, thank You that our hope is not perfect speech, but a perfect Savior. Forgive our sins, change what we love, and bear Your fruit in our words. Let our homes, workplaces, and churches hear more truth, humility, courage, and grace because You are at work in us. Amen.

SERIES CONNECTION Invitation: Continue in the 30-Day Devotional and six-week small-group study, not to earn God's favor, but to keep applying His Word together.

Six-week small-group bridge

The sermon series works by itself. For churches that want to continue in community, the 30-Day Devotional, Participant Workbook, and Small Group Leader's Guide form a separate six-week journey (five devotional days per week). It is not necessary to buy the books to use or preach the free sermon outlines.

WEEK 1 • The Heart and the Power of Words
Days 1–5 • Memory focus: Matthew 12:34

WEEK 2 • Anger, Healing, Pride, Listening, and Truth
Days 6–10 • Memory focus: James 1:19

WEEK 3 • Contentment, Humility, Silence, Peace, and Worship
Days 11–15 • Memory focus: Psalm 34:1

WEEK 4 • Courage, Testimony, Integrity, Forgiveness, and Advocacy
Days 16–20 • Memory focus: Proverbs 29:25

WEEK 5 • Truth, Wisdom, Contentment, Witness, and Accountability
Days 21–25 • Memory focus: Colossians 4:6

WEEK 6 • New Heart, Spirit, Cross, Glory, and Dedication
Days 26–30 • Memory focus: Psalm 19:14

Free service companion: The downloadable fill-in-the-blank sermon-notes handout provides a separate page for each message, including the optional fourth. Churches may print and adapt it for use during worship. The six-week study books remain optional deeper-study companions.

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