

WISDOM TO BLESS AND NOT CURSE

James 3:1-12

[MORE THAN I THOUGHT] It is not lost on me that a good majority of the sermons that God just so happens to have me preach often end up in one of two themes: either to shut up and listen or watch what you say. Since I clearly have not taken the hint so far, I get to preach from James 3. So, if you would, open your Bible to James chapter 3.

For those visiting or who were not here the last couple of weeks or the last 2 years when J-T gets his study break, we've been diving into the book of James in a series called: *Gospel Wisdom in a world that's lost its mind from James, the half-brother of Jesus who thought he was nuts but now believes he is Lord.*

I was a little disappointed that Jim simply called it Gospel Wisdom.

James is writing to his former church that has been scattered into a world that is very hostile to Christians and to the Gospel and he is writing to them this book of wisdom on how one ought to live, and not just survive, but also thrive in that world. Wisdom to find joy in hard times, to avoid temptation, to hear, receive and to do God's word, to commit mercy. Two weeks ago, Jim revisited James 1 to remind us that Trials always reveal God and Temptations always reveal...us. Last week, Will showed us that God causes our faith to produce works and those works reveal our faith.

Today, we're going to see that it's not just our actions that matter but also our words. I'm glad it's warm today because I'll be able to use that as an excuse for why I'm sweating up here today.

We're going to look at the weight and judgment that comes with being a teacher, the power of the tongue and the Wisdom to Bless and Not Curse. And while I've never preached on this passage, there was a time when I taught it.

Before Bren and I got involved in New City some 14 years ago, we used to run the youth group at our former church. I had an opportunity to teach this text during a Sunday School class. As the kids were coming in, I asked each of them to hand me their cell phones and I placed them in a box that I had on the table.

What happened next was absolute chaos and fear for most of the teens and complete fun and amusement for me. [EXPLAIN]

Once I gathered them up, we then began to read James 3 starting in verse 1:

The Most Terrifying Warning to Christians in All of Scripture

James 3: 1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

James seems to be referring especially to leaders in the church in verse 1 but very quickly broadens to the whole church, so there really is something for everyone today.

That first verse is, for me, the most terrifying warning to Christians in all of Scripture. There is such a weight to it. And it's one of those weird verses that the more you really understand what it means, the heavier the weight becomes. Uncle Ben would understand: With great power comes great responsibility. Here's my translation of v1:

Not everyone should lead or teach others because the responsibility that comes with it is immense. Those of us who take on this role are held to a higher standard, a stricter judgment. We are responsible for the words we say, the way we say them and, to a degree, what others hear. The choices we make, the lessons we impart—they all come with a weight that can't be underestimated. So just remember, with being a teacher comes great judgment.

If you are a teacher or desire to be a teacher of God's word to God's people and this doesn't give you pause, my friend, you should not be a teacher. And we feel this as elders.

And it's not just in the preaching that we feel this weight. It isn't there just on Sunday morning or even on Mondays and Thursdays when there is book study or during City Groups. Because we are accountable, not just for ourselves but also for you, every decision, every social media post, every "careless" word gets heard differently because of the position we are in. In the decisions we make on behalf of the church we have this deep sense of responsibility that this is NOT OUR CHURCH but this is

the BODY OF JESUS. As teachers, we represent something other than ourselves and so there is a greater judgment if we represent that wrongly.

(I Peter 5 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. 5 Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. 8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

That's the kind of teacher we are called to be. But the reality, as serious as we take this role...even if we were the best of men...we are men, at best. And James reminds us that we ALL stumble. In many ways! This would refer to our works that Will spoke of last week and it also refers to the words we say as we'll see in our passage today. In fact, James says, if we did not stumble in what (we) say (and do), we would be perfect; able also to bridle (our) whole body.

And he means just that, only a perfect man is able to not stumble, to not mess up. There is only one that this is true of.

So James offers up this super heavy, super serious admonition that not many should be teachers because you're going to be judged with a stricter judgment.

[EXPAIN]

James then goes on to roast and vilify the tongue; this small part that causes such big trouble. As the great philosopher Ben Ken Obi once said:

Welcome to the Tongue. You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy. We must be cautious.

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. (**control: Manipulation:** using words as leverage to get someone to act against their will, **gaslighting:** making someone doubt their perception of reality “You’re just imagining. I didn’t say that (when you did)”, **emotional blackmail:** fear of exposure, **loaded language:** “Only an idiot would do that. You ALWAYS do that”, **authority:** “Because I said so (might work with kids, not with adults), **conditional approval:** Tying acceptance to behaviors, **fear tactics:** You’ll regret this!, **ultimatums:** Either you do this or we’re done, **shaming:** using guilt or embarrassment).

Words can have power OVER others. The question is: Who’s the rider on the horse? You or Christ in you?

4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. (**direction:** fear of loss, sense of urgency, if/then, maneuvering, you want them to be somewhere that you feel they need to be)

Words can have power over their CIRCUMSTANCES. The question is: Who’s the pilot of the ship? You or Christ in you?

5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. (**glory:** wanting others to be impressed with you) **How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!** (**destroy: Insults and name calling:** goes after their self-esteem and identity, **gossip and rumors:** damages their reputation and leads to isolation, **manipulation:** erodes one’s confidence in decisions and perceptions, **lies:** destroy trust, **criticism and blame:** causes deflation and inadequacy, **threats and intimidation:** climate of fear and anxiety, **verbal abuse:** causes emotional and psychological trauma)

Words can have power over Self. Through Pride. The question is: Who has power over you? You or Christ in you?

James is not kind about the power of the tongue. He goes on in V6

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members (individuals in the church), **staining the whole body** (the body of Christ -

the Church), (stain) **setting on fire the entire course of life** (wheel, ups and downs, ebb and flow, rhythms, daily), **and set on fire by hell.**

James is clearly conscious of the danger for the tongue to do great and perhaps irreparable harm to the body of Christ. This is why there is stricter judgment for those that teach.

7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed (controlled, trained) **and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no** (not even one) **human being** (man or woman) **can tame the tongue. It is a restless** (unrestrainable) **evil** (intrinsically worthless, depraved, injurious), **full of deadly** (death bearing) **poison** (rust, venom).

Why do words matter so much? Last week we saw that actions matter. Works, when done out of faith, mean something. They reveal a core truth about us. If you're saved, if you have faith, then works will be the evidence of that faith.

That is no less true of our words. And while these first 2 verses are directly connected to the warning that not many should be teachers and carries a specific weight and significance to those who teach in the church, it also applies to all Christians.

You see, it is with the tongue that the reality of our faith is both confessed and professed. Confession declares what **I believe** to be true and profession is what I **declare to others** to be true. It is with the tongue that we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:11). Romans 10 verse 13 declares "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." The writer then goes to ask a profoundly fundamental question:

"14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? [a] And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? That's profession.

Confession is internal, it benefits me. Profession is external and benefits others.

Ultimately, James is not referring to a literal tongue but rather any device that reveals the heart. Be it your tongue, your hands or your cell phone and any combination of those and more. This was the point I was making with the youth group back in the day. Teachers and members of the body are not just responsible

for the words we speak out loud, we're responsible for how we say them, what we write, what we text, what we email and all the various forms of communication. Morse code and smoke signals included. [They were afraid their words would expose their heart]

People's words are tested by the way they live. -Jim Wynalda

What you believe is revealed by what you say and how you say it.

Our words, what we say and how we say them, always reveals the heart. We will know what measure of Spiritual Fruit we have cultivated by the amount of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control our words demonstrate and produce. [REPEAT]

Wisdom, knowing WHO God is and WHAT God does, seeks to filter EVERY thought, every emotion, every desire, every word through the Holy Spirit. We are to strive, discipline, encourage, exhort and admonish each other to this goal. Christ went to the Cross and held his tongue. We can learn and lean into more of the Gospel so that we can hold our tongue in order to not control, to do harm or to poison.

James has already warned us once about the tongue in chapter 1:26 and says that if you are not able to bridle your tongue, your religion is...well...worthless.

If your words and your actions do not align...you are a liar. And worse than deceiving someone else, you deceives your own heart. You can't help but think of a horse and rider when you hear the word bridle. And even though the horse is much larger and stronger than the rider, this little tiny bridle gives the rider total control. James is telling us that one of the biggest marks of a Christian that hears the Gospel, receives the Gospel and does the Gospel, is one who has control of his words.

Col 4 gives are pretty good model for how we ought to speak: **2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.** 3 At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, **to declare the mystery of Christ**, on account of which I am in prison— **4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.**

5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

That's what our tongue should be used for. And that really takes us into what verse 9 thru 12 leads us which is:

Wisdom to Bless and Not Curse

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 (source of life) pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree (fruitfulness), my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

If you do a word search of the word "bless" you'll find nearly 500 references in Scripture. That's our smarty word for today: BLESS.

It comes from the word eulogeo, where we get our word eulogy. Yoo means well or good. Logo means word or to speak of and when you combine the two you get the Eulogy which means to speak well of, to take a good account of.

This includes something said as well as thinking well of someone. It can be the subject of a discourse meaning that you can have a good report of someone in an instance or examine a thing to find the good, intend good upon them, do good to them, think well of them or speak good about them and to them.

Even a casual glance at nearly 500 references of the word Bless you cannot miss that bless, blessing, and blessed is almost always connected in some way to God.

To bless and to be blessed cannot be separated from a direct and sincere proximity to God. It is quite necessarily interwoven with the Gospel and the Gospel is defined as WHO God is and WHAT God does. Last week, for communion, after Will's sermon about why faith and works are so integral to the Christian life, God gave me this picture: You cannot separate who God is from what He does. He defines who He is by what He does and he acts out of who He is. Being blessed is drawing us nearer to God. Blessing someone is drawing them toward God.

For the sake of time, I'm going to just read through the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 and one verse we've already seen in James to give us a sense of this connection between blessing and God's presence:

Matthew 5:3-11 *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And..*

James 1:12 *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*

With the tongue, we bless our Lord and Father.

We also curse. It means to execrate...to express great loathing for, to doom someone. Have you ever heard of the imprecatory prayers in the Psalms where David is asking God to judge his enemies. It is desiring separation from, opposition to and to be against. It is say "I desire God's judgment on you" or the desire to be disconnected from God.

- **Matthew 25:41** *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*
- **Mark 11:21** *And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."*
- **Galatians 3:10** *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."*

And we'll do this to those who are made in the "likeness of God", to those created in God's image - his image bearers!

If Bless brings someone into the presence of and connection to God, curse is to remove them from that presence and connection.

From our mouth come both blessing, bringing them into the presence of God, and cursing, removing them from the presence of God. This is what we do! This is the essence of the war between the Spirit and flesh. The trials that reveal God and the temptations that reveal ourselves. It is ridiculous and contrary. And this is why James says these things ought not to be!

11 Does a spring (source of life) pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree (fruitfulness), my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

What James is getting at here is: If you have been given the source of life, do you offer life to others? And if you have been rooted into a particular fruit bearing source, do you bear that particular kind of fruit?

Your words and your works will always reveal your heart. James is clear that if you can master your tongue you are perfect but he's also clear that we all stumble in various ways. Thank God there is grace and as we've been reminded that it is not about what we do but **what Christ has done**. This is true and I cling to it in the many times that my works and my words do not match my Lord.

Gospel Wisdom to Bless

Gospel wisdom in a world that's lost its mind is defined as knowing WHO God is and WHAT God does so that I can live in such a way that I can genuinely bless others, bless those made in the likeness of God, those image bearers, in a way that my words and my works draw them toward God as I bless them rather than draw them away from God by cursing them.

Because spirit wrestles against flesh, we need to discipline each other, remind each other, encourage each other, admonish each other, exhort each other that this is the way of Christ. This is a whole body effort. The church does this.

In light of this, a few very practical applications:

For those who teach or desire to teach: feel the weight. Teach what accords with sound doctrine with a desire to bless, to bring people into the presence of God. Teach the Word faithfully, accurately and most importantly pointing to Christ in all things.

Jesus was a teacher. They called him Rabbi. And in all his words he sought to bless others. He is the only one whose words and works never failed. If we teach Jesus and seek to bless others in that teaching, the Spirit will do what only the Spirit can do.

As for our tongue, Gospel Wisdom reminds us that God is in control, we don't have to be or get to be. We don't have to seek to control others with our words, either those spoken or those written. We don't have to manipulate or gaslight, or verbally strongarm someone to get them to do what we want. We get to give them the truth of Jesus, of who He is and what He does. The reality is, we don't have power over them or their circumstances but we know the One who does.

Gospel Wisdom reminds us that we don't really have anything to brag about. That all glory belongs to God. We have nothing apart from what He gives us. This means that I can keep my mouth shut and that I don't have to be the loudest, smartest, funniest or most impressive person in the room. That when I speak, I can make more of Jesus rather than myself.

Gospel Wisdom tells me that I can be gracious with my words rather than destroy. Jesus has, after all, shown me so much grace, so much blessing when I deserve curse. I don't have to destroy others with my words even when they deserve to be destroyed. I get to bless them with words and point them to Christ by showing the same grace He has shown me. Not just with the words I say but also how I say them.

Gospel Wisdom says that I can show kindness and mercy and offer good gifts of good words to others rather than offer poison and venom. Because Jesus is the good Word, the ultimate eulogy, I can offer the same to the dead that will hopefully bring the gift of life.

And finally, we are called to Bless because we are no longer cursed. We ought to be a people that seeks to draw everyone toward God and not be those that expel people from God. The reality is, that apart from Christ, we were cursed. We were apart from God, expelled from His presence. There was nothing we could do to save ourselves. Our sin and our rebellion against God had earned us this curse, this separation from God. And since God is a holy God, he had to carry out his judgment for our sin. A holy God by nature cannot abide with an unholy people.

Unless...if only someone, who was not cursed, would be willing to become that curse for us...Gal 3:

10 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." **12 But the law is not of faith,** rather "The one who does them shall live by them." **13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— 14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.**

Because Jesus, the only Son of God and our Lord and Savior, became a curse for us, we are now blessed beyond all measure as we are not only brought into the presence of God, we are actually set free from sin, the righteousness of Christ is added to our account and we are adopted as sons and daughters of God. Family. With God as our loving Father and Christ as our brother and the Spirit as the seal of our adoption.

What better blessing is there than that?