

Jonathan Mark  
FMC Reedley  
James 3:1-12  
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### Blessing God, Cursing Neighbor

Good morning Church. This morning I want to welcome you on a journey of wisdom and empathy. To ask the questions, how can well-meaning words hurt our fellow Children of God? Why do many hold our fellow Christians to high standards and then shame them when they inevitably fall short? Let us walk with the book of James so that we can gain wiser tongues.

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our rock and are our redeemer.

How can we be wise in how we use our words? Because we can burn someone with harsh words as surely as flame catches a forest on fire. And I mean. Thanks James for stating the obvious. Sticks and stones break my bones and words break my heart. I know that what I say matters.

In my life, I have been told so many stories from people about how harsh words have stuck with them, especially harsh words are spoken from the mouths of church folks. Words can indeed be full of deadly poison. They can leave scars as surely as a sharp blade. One of my lesbian friends shared with me a story of an elderly churchwoman who explained how she was only saying that gay people were going to hell out of love. After she shared this story she exasperatedly told me how could something be said out of love if all she heard were hurtful words? Or when church members whisper and pass judgment on each other. There's the addict, who invited them? There's the woman who had kids with multiple men, what a prostitute, who invited them. There's the kid who attempted suicide, who invited them. These subtle jabs often ignore the full complexity of our lives. These words hurt because they make our past mistakes our forever identity and dismiss the possibility of forgiveness. How would you feel if I exposed something you felt ashamed of and then told you how your mistakes can keep you from the loving arms of God and community?

Ouch. Our words can cut deep.

These are all examples of people who say these things in the name of being a good Christian. And to be clear, we must speak the truth to one another. Being open and honest about our conflicts and our beliefs, but I implore you all to use wisdom when you do so. Ask the question, how are my words being received? Are they being received in love or in condemnation? Do my words build up the community of faith, or tear it down? Am I putting a stumbling block in front of one of God's children, so that they no longer feel like they belong in a community of faith?

Ouch. Our words can cut deep.

These questions haunt the author of James as he laments how humanity is not perfect and the church has a problem with how people treat each other. And as I read this passage about the vitriol of the tongue, I am struck by verse 9, with [our tongues] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. The likeness of God, refers to how humans are made in the image of God. How can I say that I love God in one breath, and curse one of God's beloved in the next? This reminds me a lot of the book of James's more famous quote, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? I am reminded that our Christian walk is more than pious words to God, it's more than proving how holy we are, our walk is also about the words we use for our neighbors. In short, we cannot bless God and curse our neighbor. That would be like a spring that pours forth both fresh and brackish water. It is a foolish thing.

Ouch. Our words can cut deep.

What is behind this very human and historically Christian way of cursing our neighbors with shame and rejection? I think if we go back to the start of the passage we find our answer, "not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes." Our passage today describes with great simplicity how humans judge each other. Humans have done this as a way of controlling one another, of punishing people with feelings of shame so that they conform to the practices and expectations of society. This is why in the middle ages, the death penalty and imprisonment were rare, but the stocks were common. That way when someone makes a mistake, their mistake is made known to the community, they are tied up in the city square, and the community shames them to teach them a lesson. But my (and I hope James's) rebuttal is to err is to be human. So it may have been useful to shame people, but today some Christians have taken it too far by making shame permanent. This is good news for those among us who have felt the sting of rejection.

Do not misinterpret me, mistakes still matter. I still want to live a life where I am kind to people. I still want to protect our people from abusers that seek to take advantage of forgiveness But... but... Our words can cut deep.

And so I want to invite people to take the next step with me. The step of not shaming people when they are inevitably not perfect. The step of compassion and empathy is that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. That here is a church of the sick and not the perfect. Because it is foolish to bless God with the same tongue that we curse our neighbor. If we have received

forgiveness from God, then we should not make the mistake of the unforgiving servant and instead pass God's forgiveness onto our fellow child of God. If when we ask for forgiveness God does not hold our iniquities against us, should we as Christians do the same with our fellow siblings of Christ?

So I invite you into the creative space of living in a church without shame and overflowing with forgiveness. A church of reconciliation, where we start from the position that we are not perfect and that we humans can and do hurt each other. Thus reconciliation is at the center of our work. Reconciliation becomes a daily task, where we address when we foolishly say hurtful words. Because we will not know when a casually thrown out phrase hurts our sibling in Christ, so speak truth to each other. Let each other know when we have misunderstood one another. Let us continuously work at mending broken hearts and deepening our relationships.

Our words can hurt. Our words can cut deep. Let us be wise in our words so that they are not just meant in love, but also received in love. Amen.