

## *Taming the Tongue: Praise • James 3:9-12*

Have you ever been in a family argument where tempers were hot and emotions were strong and the telephone rang? You answered the phone with a pleasant “hello” and spoke with calm voice and sweet words to a total stranger, ended the conversation, hung up and got right back to passionate emotions and unkind words.

John Bunyan was the seventeenth century English author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, one of the all-time best selling novels. One of his characters was named “Talkative”. Bunyan described “Talkative” by saying, “He was a saint abroad and a devil at home.” That could be said about a lot of people who behave differently on Sunday than on other days of the week, who treat strangers with respect but family members and co-workers with contempt.

Personally, I realize that the greatest evidence of my own Christianity is not what comes out of my mouth while standing behind the pulpit. The greater proof of whether or not I am a Christian is what I say and how I treat my family Monday through Saturday.

As always, the Bible has something significant and positive to say about this practical human issue. Take a look at James 3:9-12:

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

The highest form of human speech is praising God. That praise may be direct or indirect. We can speak directly to God telling him how great we think he is or we can tell other people how great God is.

I like to receive praise. I think we all do. This past week has been a very good week for me. Several people have talked to me or sent notes to me that said very kind and wonderful things: praise about me as a person and praise about things I have done. It made me feel good inside. It gave me feelings of satisfaction. It made me like the people who gave the praise.

There is a theory that says you have to be careful that you don’t praise people too much because they might become proud. Frankly, that has not been my experience. I don’t think the praise of others makes me proud. I think it encourages me, strengthens me and helps me to go on when I would otherwise have doubts. Praise makes me want to do even better. I’m not sure I can adequately tell you all I think and feel about receiving praise, but I can tell you that I like it! And so does God!

God is a person. In many ways we are a lot alike. He has feelings and emotions. When we tell God how much we love him, how great he is, how impressed we are with the good job he does, how grateful we are for his goodness in our lives—

God likes it! And he deserves it.

There is plenty of room for question and debate about whether you and I deserve the praise we desire, but there is no doubt that God deserves all the praise he can get!

It is a truly wonderful privilege to use our mouths to praise God. We can make God happy. We can make God feel good. We can give to God the praise of our mouths.

Ironically, we can twist the same tongues from praising God to cursing people. Cursing is just one of the potential abuses of our tongues. It is the other extreme from praising God. In between there are 10,000 other options. We can gossip; we can lie; we can tell the truth; we can speak well of people. Cursing is the worst. It is using our tongues to deliberately

*The highest form of human speech is praising God.*

bring evil on the lives of other people.

Examples of a curse would be “God damn you!” or “You can go to hell!” (They mean the same thing.) There is a whole catalog of variations, but I’m not going to list them here. Unfortunately, most of us know the alternatives all too well from everyday experiences.

Just think of what these words mean. These are prayers of a sort that God will take the other person and condemn that person to hell forever in tormented separation from God. That’s a pretty heavy curse! It is a bad word that curses persons who are “made in God’s likeness”.

When we look at other people, do we see the image of God in them? As Christians, we should. It is easy but inappropriate to see the sin in others while we see the image of God in ourselves. When we refuse to see the likeness of God in another person we are far more likely to curse them and write them off. But when we remember and realize that they are designed with God as the template, we back off on the cursing.

We need to remember all this the next time we become angry with someone. Before saying a cruel or cursing word, pray to see God in that person. See him as a man with God’s family traits. See her as a woman God loves. See others as individuals for whom Jesus died.

The issue James is coming to deals with more than just the extremes of the tongue from praising God to cursing people. The issue is when Christians both praise God and curse other people. That is not the way it’s supposed to be. And so James gives us multiple illustrations or examples.

James 3:11-12 asks the question, “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” Actually, the answer to that question is yes. Fresh and salt water can flow from the same spring. There are places in the Middle East where that does happen, but it is not supposed to be that way and the water is not good for much of anything.

In our house we have a number of large aquariums. We have both saltwater tanks and

fresh water tanks. I don’t pretend to know a great deal about them, but I do know the basics. I know that if you put a fresh water fish in a saltwater tank it is really bad for the fish! The opposite is true, too. If you mix them up, what you have is dead fish. And you can’t compromise. You can’t take half fresh water and half salt water and mix them together and expect the fish to survive because it will kill them. It is simply not the way it is supposed to be. They are mutually exclusive. They don’t belong together.

James then moves on to a second example of olives and fig trees. He says, “Can a fig tree bear olives?” Of course not! If it did, it would be weird; it would be unnatural. Fig trees are supposed to produce figs and olives are supposed to grow on olive trees. If you walk by a fig tree and there are olives hanging there, you assume that someone either taped them on as a joke or it’s a mutation. It’s just not the way it’s supposed to be.

Then he offers a third illustration. He asks the question, “Can a grapevine bear figs?” And the answer is no, it can’t. Figs are supposed to grow on fig trees and grapes are supposed to grow on grapevines.

If you went to a nursery and bought a plant that was labeled “grapes” and you planted it and it grew figs, you would think it had been mislabeled. There had been some mistake. That’s false advertising!

God applies all three of these everyday examples to us and to our tongues. Christians are supposed to talk like Christians. Those who wear the label of Jesus Christ are supposed to look like Jesus Christ in behavior and in speech. If we claim to be one kind of person and speak like another kind of person, we are hypocrites. It is not natural, and it is certainly not supernatural.

Praising God and cursing people don’t belong together in the same person. It’s unnatural. It’s hypocritical. It’s a mixture that is a mistake. James 3:10 tells us, “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers,

this should not be.” A person who uses his or her mouth to praise God and make God happy should never turn around and use the same mouth to curse someone else and make God unhappy.

Do you remember what Peter did the night before Jesus was crucified? He started the evening insisting that he would always be faithful to Jesus even if it cost him his life. But before sunrise he denied he even knew Jesus and he did it with “oaths and curses” according to Matthew 26:35 and 69-75. As soon as he did it he knew it was wrong and deeply regretted his hypocrisy.

You may think this strange, but I find a certain amount of comfort and encouragement when I see that someone who was so close to Jesus could be so inconsistent. It helps me put into perspective my own inconsistencies and my own hypocrisy. I know I have said one thing to Jesus and said the opposite to somebody else on the same day. I am encouraged that a man as great and godly as Peter did the same thing.

But I need to be very careful that I don't take too much negative comfort. I need to remember that Peter learned his lesson. He changed his ways and he didn't do it again.

Why do people curse, anyway? I suppose there are as many reasons as there are people, but probably it can be categorized in a few different groupings. Some curse because that's what they've heard from others. They are merely mimicking the words that surround them.

Some curse because they have lost control and profanity seems to be a way of getting power back. We don't like to admit it, but all of us like control and power. If we feel weak, out of control and powerless we stupidly think that swearing will make us strong and powerful and others will listen.

There are some, and I suppose this is the worst of all, who genuinely desire evil for others. They want harm to come on another per-

son. Their hearts and motives are vengeful and wicked. They speak with a cursing tongue with the hope it will inflict as much harm as possible.

Some curse because they are just careless and thoughtless. Discipline is absent and the power of words is not considered important.

The point here is that praising God and cursing others out of the same mouth is as inconsistent, hypocritical and unnatural as saltwater coming out of a fresh water spring, olives growing on a fig tree or figs on a grapevine. To be a Christian is to avoid this hypocritical mix and instead to speak the Christian way.

As Christians we should avoid hypocrisy. If we wear the name of Jesus Christ we should talk and act like Jesus Christ. Few people call themselves hypocrites. What we tend to do is act hypocritically and rationalize that what we are doing is okay.

In a recent Sunday newspaper there was a feature article about men who batter their wives. One man in a therapy group made a point that he had never hit his wife although he had put her head through a wall.

It's so obvious when other people rationalize and justify inappropriate behavior in words. But we tend not to see that about ourselves. What we all need to do is to be honest enough to stop making excuses, to quit rationalizing,

to admit when we are wrong and to ask God to clean out our lives and our mouths so that we look and sound more like Jesus.

It was Jesus himself who made the point forcefully in Luke 6:27-28 when he said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” He was saying that the behavior and words of others are never an excuse for us to curse or mistreat others. Christian behavior is based on Jesus, not on what others say or do to us.

The Christian way is to always praise God.

*Indirect praise of God is when we make him look good by the way we live.*

Sometimes that is done directly when we pray and tell him how wonderful he is, when we sing praise songs and worship hymns at church and when we read the praises of the Bible back to God. But most of the time we praise God indirectly. After all, church lasts only for an hour or two a week. We pray at the beginning of the day or whenever we squeeze it in. Indirect praise of God is when we make him look good by the way we live.

We are very familiar with popularity poles that rate the performance of the President of the United States, the governor of the state or other political leaders. What if a survey was taken in our metropolitan area or my neighborhood or your business or in a school or at home - - - a survey to rate the reputation of God? How do you think God would do?

Often God's ratings are low. But we can do something about that. The way Christians speak and live goes a long way to help or hurt the reputation of God. Suppose co-workers know you are a Christian. You are treated unfairly. You are fired unjustly. You are diagnosed with a terrible disease. You are in a difficult home situation or facing an unwanted divorce. Suppose that your words and actions quietly live out the love and goodness of Jesus under the hardest of circumstances. What do you think

that does to God's ratings? It makes them soar! The way we live and speak can bring praise to God. It is the Christian way.

John Bunyan described "Talkative" as "a saint abroad and a devil at home." May each of us be like Jesus Christ both at home and abroad. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in God's sight both now and forever. Amen.

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