

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 15th, 2024
BLESSING AND CURSING

Abba, we come to you uttering both blessings and curses. Help us to live in this tension between sinner and saint, and to keep our focus on you and the person and work of your Son, Jesus.

AMEN

Preaching is Scary

The warning regarding those who teach might make one not want to continue to preach. In fact, one well-known Baptist preacher (Spurgeon) told his students:

If you can do anything else, do it. If you can stay out of the ministry, stay out of the ministry.

However, if you are called to preach, you can take comfort in the words of St. Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth (I Cor 9:16-18):

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching

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I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

The Tongue - Cursing

James then turns to the tongue. I don't know if any of you have horses or boats, but anyone who has taken Physics or Mechanics understands the power of **physical** leverage – a small amount of motion can be multiplied by levers or pulleys to move heavy objects. Those of you who own a home understand the value of **financial** leverage, how with a small amount of money down, you multiply your returns significantly. And anyone who listens at all the news understands the power of a sound bite, such as this one from over 60 years ago:

Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.

And as shown on the cover of the bulletin, God provided us with an object lesson that ties directly to the text. The Airport Fire began Monday here in Trabuco Canyon before spreading to Riverside County. Officials said the blaze was ignited accidentally by a **spark** from heavy equipment used by public workers.

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Let me share a couple of examples of how the tongue – the spoken word - can create a virtual forest fire.

The first was a friend of mine from my prior congregation. He was a real rocket scientist who has a very high-level clearance. At one point, the teachers at school misinterpreted something one of his kids said, which triggered a child protective services investigation and nearly ended his career. Second, there are numerous stories of how lies and half-truths have led to the homicide or suicides of children, teen, the elderly, or even whole families. To quote Adam Savage, the myth that

Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me.

has been thoroughly busted.

The Tension

In verses 9 and 10, James writes about what is – that with the tongue we utter both curses and blessings. Then in the subsequent verses, he says this is wrong, telling us that only blessings should come from the mouth that has been redeemed by God.

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But we shouldn't despair that if we curse, we can't be saved. This tension between what is and what should be is the reality for all believers who view themselves honestly.

Paul summarized this tension in his letter to the Romans (7:15-19):

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Luther understood this and wrote (LW 26:232):

Thus, a Christian man is righteous and a sinner at the same time, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God. None of the sophists will admit this paradox because they do not understand the true meaning of justification.

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So how do we respond? An article published by 1517 put the answer this way:

We do not face this paradox by explaining away our sin or watering down our justification. Instead, we face it with the full strength of the gifts of God.

The Tongue - Blessing

If the tongue can create so many problems, is it even necessary? The answer, of course, is yes. Paul wrote to the Romans (Rom 10:17)

For faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

For most of human history, the primary means of communication was the spoken word. It wasn't until significantly after the invention of the movable-type printing press, around 1440, that the written word supplanted the spoken word as the primary means of communicating history, tradition, facts, and even God's revelation to His children. We see this in our own kids, who speak before they read. While our modern ears sometimes dismiss the power of the spoken word, God spoke (or sang) all of creation into existence. And because I'm acting on God's authority, the words of absolution that I pronounce every week

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As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore, forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Have the power to accomplish the forgiveness promised.

And while as a congregation you've tasked me with proclaiming that forgiveness in the public worship service, every one of you can proclaim for the same forgiveness to one another when called upon to do so in private. In fact, in the Smalcald articles, Part III, Article IV – On the Gospel, reads as follows:

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich [and liberal] in His grace [and goodness]. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual

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conversation and consolation of brethren, [Matt. 18:20](#): Where two or three are gathered together, etc.

Pastors often include mention of these enumerated means of grace, the sacraments, in their sermons. But that last part, the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren, is spoken of much less often. As I mentioned last week, because we are church – the gathered by God, because we are a royal priesthood encompassing all who believe, because today's reading describes us as brothers [and sisters], siblings adopted by our heavenly Father through Water and the Word, we can and should minister to each other with the word of promise – that because of the person and work Jesus our sins have been forgiven.

Be assured that the words thus spoken have the power to create and sustain faith in all who hear them.

AMEN