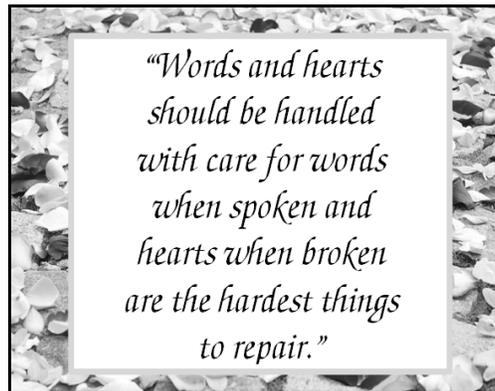


BLESSING AND CURSING



Scripture:

Psalm 19

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. ²Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. ³There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; ⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, ⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. ⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; ⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; ⁹the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. ¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹²But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. ¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer

James 3: 1-12

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



BLESSING AND CURSING

This passage reminded me of the song that contains both a blessing and a cursing sung by Roberta Flack titled, *“Killing Me Softly With His Song.”* Part of it goes: “Strumming my pain with his fingers, singing my life with his words, killing me softly with his song, telling my whole life with his words, killing me softly with his song.” The second verse says: “I felt all flushed with fever, embarrassed by the crowd, I felt he found my letters and read each one out loud. I prayed that he would finish but he just kept right on...”

That song hit the number one place on the Billboard chart and stayed there for five weeks. Roberta Flack won a Grammy. And *Killing me Softly* is listed among the five-hundred greatest songs of all time. Why? I think because it speaks to our hearts about love, pain, and despair with beautifully structured poetry. The words are very relatable; we can imagine the story and the pain the author was feeling when writing it. When you hear the meaningful words sung with such a beautiful voice, it is a blessing. Let’s listen. (The song was played for the congregation.)

The song has both a blessing and a curse in it. The blessing is that the words touched her heart so deeply, but the curse was the painful memories it evoked in the listener. Words can both bless and curse.

YOUR WORDS

Jesus used some choice words (as recorded in Matthew 12) when he spoke to the Pharisees. But I don’t believe he said them softly. He confronted and basically cursed the Pharisees by saying, “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

“By your words you will be condemned.”

Pretty scary, huh!

Your words are that important and have a huge impact on you and those close to you.

If we really believed that, I think all of us would do what the Bible also recommends. Be slow to speak, slow to anger, and quick to listen.

Words of blessing are very powerful and healing. Think for a moment when your family member said some memorable words of blessing to you.

I remember after my father died, my Aunt said, “Oh, you were the apple of his eye!” And I said to her, “Really? He never told me that! I wish he had.” But just ten days before he died my father did ask my forgiveness for not being the kind of Dad I deserved to have. Those words were a blessing and so powerful for healing my self-esteem.

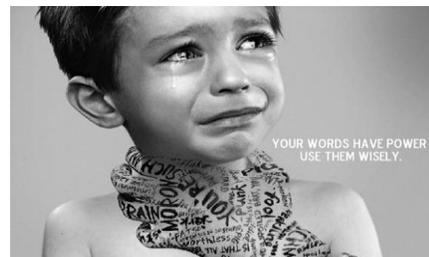
Are there words of blessing you could say to your loved ones that you have left unspoken for some reason? Have you been too rash with your words and need to ask forgiveness to bless and heal those you have hurt?

The book of Proverbs warns against using negative words: Proverbs 12:18 says: “Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing.”

And Proverbs 18: 21 says: “The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk (gossip or slander) will reap the consequences.”

CHILDREN’S SELF ESTEEM

The ones who feel the consequences of our words most severely are the children in our midst. We might think they are just words, and the kids don’t take them seriously, but as this sad image shows, kids are very sensitive to our words and their personalities as they develop are shaped and formed by the words they hear describing them.



For example, the “black sheep” in the family often lives up to that label as soon as it is spoken out loud. The “good one,” the “difficult one,” the “handsome one,” the “smart one,” all the words we use to label a child have a big effect on their self-esteem. Another translation of Proverbs 18: 21 says: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS

Being aware of the power in words has led to a movement against using the word, “retard” to describe people with developmental delays. “Retard” has a terribly negative connotation that makes it hard for a child to overcome.

Ann Coulter of Fox news called our President, “a retard.”

In response, a young man with Down syndrome wrote this letter. (Notice how he connects her words and actions with her heart.)

Dear Ann Coulter,

Come on Ms. Coulter, you aren't dumb and you aren't shallow. So why are you continually using a word like the R-word as an insult? I'm a 30 year old man with Down syndrome who has struggled with the public's perception that an intellectual disability means that I am dumb and shallow. I am not either of those things, but I do process information more slowly than the rest of you. In fact it has taken me all day to figure out how to respond to your use of the R-word last night.

I thought first of asking whether, by using that word, you meant to describe the President as someone who was bullied as a child by people like you, but rose above it to find a way to succeed in life as many of my fellow Special Olympians have. Then I wondered if you meant to describe him as someone who has to struggle to be thoughtful about everything he says.

Finally, I wondered if you meant to degrade him as someone who is likely to receive bad health care, live in low grade housing with very little income and still manages to see life as a wonderful gift. Because, Ms. Coulter, that is who we are – and much, much more. After I saw your tweet, I realized you just wanted to belittle the President by linking him to people like me.

You assumed that people would understand and accept that being linked to someone like me is an insult and you assumed you could get away with it and still appear on TV. I have to wonder if you considered other hateful words but recoiled from the backlash. **Well, Ms. Coulter, you, and society, need to learn that being compared to people like me should be considered a badge of honor.** No one overcomes more than we do and still loves life so much. Come join us someday at Special Olympics. See if you can walk away with your heart unchanged.

Signed, A friend you haven't made yet,
John Franklin Stephens
Global Messenger, Special Olympics Virginia

WORDS ARE POWERFUL

Words contain power, and like all forms of power, they can bless or curse, heal or harm, give life or take it away. It is for that reason James warns: "Let not many of you become teachers, my brothers [and sisters], knowing that we shall receive greater judgment."

The Jewish-Christian background of James, the brother of Jesus, influenced his warning here about the high stakes in teaching. In Judaism there was no more sacred relationship than that of rabbi and disciple. James cautions those in that position must remember that teaching carries with it a huge responsibility.

Since words are the teacher's trade and the tongue is their tool, James reminds the teacher to choose words with great care, because words exercise power. "Even as a small bit can control a great horse, and a tiny rudder a large ship, so also the tongue, though small, can ignite passions like a raging forest fire."

Sadly, we know the power in raging forest fires all too well these days. When we think about it, many wars in history started with a war of words. Most wars, in fact, started with just four words: "This is my land."

I AM SO HAPPY TO SEE YOU!

To combat the fire in our tongues we must douse it with the water of blessing. Do you know a blessing you can say everyday to those around you?

It can be as simple as something like. "I am so happy to see you today!" Isn't that a blessing when someone says that to you?

Then how does it make you feel when someone says, "You look tired today!" That is a subtle curse, isn't it?

Look to your right at your neighbor right now and say a blessing. Say, "God bless you!" as if they sneezed even if they didn't sneeze.

A blessing is a verbal hug which helps the receiver feel happier and healthier. You can also give them a quick boost to their immune system by just looking into their eyes with your eyes smiling. (Like When Irish eyes are smiling.)

This works with dogs, too. If you just look in a dog's eyes you are blessing them. Scientists have measured both the dog's response and the human's response and found that the human's blood pressure lowers and their happiness feelings rise just by

looking into a friendly dog's eyes. The scientists also found that a dog responds to friendly eye contact the same as if you had given him a hug.

Now look at your neighbor with a frown like a curse. How does that feel? It makes us laugh, but if it was authentically an angry frown, it physically has the opposite effect on your brain. Your own stress level goes up when you curse someone.

Did you know that the average person spends one-fifth of their life talking. A single day's words can fill a fifty page book. The average person fills one-hundred-thirty-two books of two-hundred pages every year. Not the super talkative person (like me) but the average person says that many words!

God created us this way and understands it is both a blessing and a curse to be so full of the need to communicate. And it is a blessing and a curse to feel deeply about what others say about us.

BULLIES

The tragedy in this is when a teen or sensitive adult takes their own life in response to words said by others. Bullies can now curse others just by gossiping on twitter (like Ann Coulter) or Facebook. Repeated, non-stop belittling and mocking led to thousands of teen suicides last year.

One of the biggest bullies in history, Adolph Hitler, used two words, "Final Solution" to curse all the Jews of Europe. The "Final Solution," called for the murder of all European Jews, homosexuals, and disabled people. Approximately six million were killed during the Holocaust. Hitler's words, "Final Solution!" were a powerful curse that still affects us today.

Our Bible has many examples of cursing, such as the curse Cain received from God after killing his brother Abel. But there are many more blessing stories than cursing stories in the Bible. Probably the most famous is the Jacob and Isaac blessing story in Genesis 27 where Isaac is tricked into giving Jacob the blessing meant for the firstborn in the family, Esau. Once the sacred words were said by Isaac they could not be revoked.

Many faiths have blessing rituals. The Native American culture has a Navajo Choctaw tradition that includes five blessings formally given in ceremonies over a person's lifetime. They say that because we are five fingered people there are five blessing ceremonies:

1. **Blessingway**: honors the **divine feminine** as a nurturer.

2. **Protectionway**: honors the **divine masculine** as a protector-provider.
3. **Purification and cleansing** ceremony takes place around age 15.
4. **Spiritual renewal**: is a nine-day ceremony for renewing the soul in adulthood.
5. **Journey to spirit world**: is a blessing ceremony for a person on their journey to the spirit world at the time of death.

These five ceremonies must be wonderful blessings for those who receive them!

In the Jewish faith, now it is the season of Rosh Hashanah (and Yom Kippur follows soon after.) There are many blessings said during the acknowledgement of these high holidays in the Jewish tradition. For the two days of Rosh Hashanah the Jewish people greet each other by saying in Hebrew, "Have a good blessed year!"

In the Christian faith we have baptism, anointing with oil for healing and wholeness, Maundy Thursday hand or feet washing, laying on of hands when one is installed as a church officer, and monthly communion. All of these can be considered our blessing ceremonies. Our Presbyterian Book of Worship also has a committal service that can be given as a blessing at the time of death.

BLESSINGS ALL AROUND US

Blessings are all around us if we are aware enough to feel them. Your smiling eyes and loving hearts can promote even more blessings for others. And as we learned in our Alive Inside presentation last Sunday, playing music that connects to our memories can be a true blessing that awakens our souls. (*Killing Me Softly* will be on my playlist when I get one made.)

Frances Ridely Havergal understood the power of words and blessings in songs when in 1872 she wrote the hymn **Lord, Speak to me, that I May Speak**. Let us take her words to heart as we sing and try our best to be a blessing and not a curse for the world.



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