

## WORTHY WORDS

James 3:1-2

(NIV) "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.<sup>2</sup> We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check."

### INTRODUCTION

Hallmark Cards, based in Kansas City, MO, was founded in 1910 by J. C. Hall. Hallmark is the largest manufacturer of greeting cards in the U. S. A few cards, like Birthday cards teasing people about their age, are marketed as practical jokes. But Hallmark Cards reaps its profits by helping us express appreciation and love for others. Cynical or mocking sentiments are funny if directed at someone else, but few people would care to receive a card filled with sarcasm; especially not from a company whose slogan is, "When you care enough to send the very best." Here's a list of "Cards You Will Never See at Hallmark":

"Looking back over the years that we've been together, I can't help but wonder.... What was I thinking!"

"As you grow older, Mom, I think of all the gifts you've given me..... Like the need for therapy."

"You look great for your age.... Almost life-like!"

"When we were together, you always said you'd die for me.... Now that we've broken up, I think it's time you kept your promise."

"I'm so miserable without you.... It's almost like you're here."

"You are such a good friend that if we were on a sinking ship and there was only one life jacket.... I'd miss you heaps and think of you often."

We laugh at such greeting card sentiments because we don't take them seriously. But would it be funny if you sent someone such a card and *meant* every word? We *drive* more responsibly the more we take seriously that 40,100 people were killed on U. S. highways in 2017 (1,000 in Arizona alone) and another 4.7 million seriously injured; some being maimed or paralyzed. We *speak* more responsibly the more we take seriously people can be seriously wounded by our words, or driven into spiritual or physical ruin, by what we say. In **Proverbs 18:20-21** (NLT), Solomon stresses the power our words have to bestow good or to inflict harm: "Words satisfy the soul as food satisfies the stomach; the right words on a person's lips bring satisfaction. Those who love to talk will experience the consequences, for the tongue can kill or nourish life" ("Death and life are in the power of the tongue," KJV, NASB). James, **Jesus'** half-brother, wrote his letter to urge followers of **Jesus** to demonstrate Christ's qualities to others. **James 3:7-10** (CSB) gives us this sobering thought: "Every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish is tamed and has been tamed by humankind,<sup>8</sup> but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.<sup>9</sup> With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God's likeness.<sup>10</sup> Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way."

Today's sermon introduces our study upon the critical importance of God's Spirit gaining control of our tongues, which is the focus of **James 3:1-12**. Our Lord weighed in on this topic by His chilling words of **Matthew 12:36-37**: "I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak.<sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Our two Outline points are The Worth of Our Words to Others and The Worth of Our Words to Ourselves.

### I. THE WORTH OF OUR WORDS TO OTHERS (James 3:1)

"Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." Teachers held high rank in the early Church. Apostles, prophets, and evangelists were ever on the move launching new faith communities and guiding believers. It fell then, as now, to "pastors and teachers" to instruct and train converts within each congregation. Due to the supreme importance of fulfilling Christ's mandate to "make disciples" of His followers by "teaching them to observe

all" He "commanded" us to do (**Matthew 28:19-20**), teachers ranked just behind apostles and prophets as the leaders Christ "appointed" to care for His Church (**I Corinthians 12:28-30; Ephesians 4:11-13**).

Each teacher of Biblical truth must avoid two great dangers. First, take every precaution to insure God's truth is being presented rather than merely his/her own opinions or prejudices. A Bible teacher is entitled to his opinions, as is everyone else. But he must not falsely assume his opinions are also God's opinions. Many times over the years the Lord has corrected me by making it clear my opinion about something or someone is *not* His opinion. Because teachers of "the word of God" (**Acts 18:11**) are entrusted with a special responsibility to train others in what *God* expects of us, they "will be judged more strictly." The Greek text describes God meting out a judicial verdict of greater severity due to the greater trust teachers are given. Yet, to some extent, are not all who claim to be Christians accountable to God for what we tell others God either approves or disapproves? **Jesus** gave the command of **John 7:24** to all His followers: "Stop judging according to outward appearances; rather judge according to righteous judgment." More literally, **Jesus** is telling us to stop basing our opinions of what is right or wrong on superficialities; how things merely *appear* to be on the surface. We must take steps to get all the relevant facts before we make our judgments, if our opinions are to be aligned with what God knows to be right. The NLT of **John 7:24** is, "Look beneath the surface so you can judge correctly." A medical student spent his summer vacations working as a butcher in the daytime and as a hospital orderly in the evenings. Both jobs involved wearing a white smock. One evening as a hospital orderly, he was told to wheel a patient into surgery. The patient, a woman, looked up at this medical student and screamed in terror, "Oh, no! It's my butcher!"

Secondly, a teacher of the Bible must also guard against contradicting his teaching by his life. But doesn't God hold every Christian accountable for how much our lifestyle confirms or contradicts what we tell others God expects of them? Are you a hypocrite? The Greek word from which our English word "hypocrite" derives refers to "being false to what one truly is." Unintentionally, none of us truly and consistently live up to the character of our Lord **Jesus** that we seek to present to the world. But being a "hypocrite" has a second meaning: deliberately attempting to deceive others that we are better or godlier than we are; usually for a prideful or selfish motive. **Jesus** repeatedly faulted the hypocritical religious leaders of His day for this deception, as in **Matthew 23:1-3** (NIV): "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to His disciples: <sup>2</sup>"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. <sup>3</sup>So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

Does God know if we are hypocrites, regardless if we fool everyone else, for a time, or even ourselves? Sooner or later, in this life or the next, our hypocrisy will catch up with us. Dr. Nick Yphantides genuinely loved **Jesus**. His specialty was preventative medicine. Each day, he taught others to live a healthier life. But Dr. Nick was in denial about his unhealthy weight. His bathroom scale went to 350 lbs. After maxing out at that level, he excused himself from thinking about his increasing weight. He thought he could be the exception and avoid the health risks he warned everyone else about. Had another man of his weight come into his office, Dr. Nick would have prescribed immediate steps he must take to protect his health. But it's so much easier to *give* advice than to *take* advice. Finally, one day, he bought two bathroom scales; one for each foot. He was shocked to discover that when adding them together he now weighed in at 467 lbs! He knew something must now be done. But his collision with reality almost came too late. At age 31, he learned he had cancer requiring surgery brought on by his obesity. Not until he faced his own mortality did he fully confess his hypocrisy and surrender his body into God's hands as he'd earlier surrendered his soul.

The Apostle Paul struggled with most of the faults that bedevil us. **Jesus** literally had to knock him off his high horse of judging others for Paul's mistaken opinions of their "ungodliness" before Paul began to cooperate with **Jesus** to become progressively more Christlike. Thirty years later, Paul could write with sincerity to the believers in the church he founded in Philippi: "Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be

with you" (**Philippians 4:9**, NLT; **Acts 9:1-18**). Would to God our lives would become as consistently Christlike as Paul's, and our words would be as worthy of the Lord **Jesus!**

## II. THE WORTH OF OUR WORDS TO OURSELVES (**James 3:2**)

"We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check." "Stumble" means "to make a mistake" or "to slip up." James gives us two keen insights here. First, sin is often the result not of deliberate action but of an unguarded moment, as our "slips of the tongue" when we are tired, ill, or stressed. Secondly, because sins of the tongue are easier to commit and harder to avoid than nearly all other sins, one of the best indicators of how spiritually "mature" or "complete" we are (the meaning of "perfect") is the godly worthiness of our words. James suggests if the Holy Spirit is in control of our tongues, our entire lives are most likely under God's control, as well!

The October 2010 cover of *Tails* magazine, which has the subheading, "celebrating the relationship between pets and their people," proudly announced, "Rachel Ray finds inspiration in cooking her family and her dog." Ms. Ray hosts four *Food Network* series. She's seen on the *Tails* magazine cover holding her unsuspecting dog in her arms, who doesn't realize he might be the main course in an upcoming family meal. A few well-placed commas, however, changes the meaning entirely: "Rachel Ray finds inspiration in cooking, her family, and her dog." Without the pauses and stops provided by the punctuation of good grammar, helpful words can become horribly twisted and convey the exact opposite of the truth. Unless the Holy Spirit punctuates our words with the pauses and stops God knows are necessary (which means we listen to the Lord when He tells us "not" to speak as well as "what" to speak), even our "good" words may have the twisted impact upon others of a blight instead of a blessing. A poster above a Goodwill collection bin intended to spark more donors by stating: "Thank You! Your Donation Just Helped Someone Get a Job." Instead, the poster spanked donors by stating: "Thank You! Your Donation Just Helped Someone. Get a Job." Would **Psalms 141:3** be a good prayer for each of us: "LORD, set up a guard for my mouth; keep watch at the door of my lips"? Yes!

A sermon of July 21, 2013, "What Is Our Worship Worth?" studied **James 1:26** (NRSV): "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless." No matter how faithful we are in "outward acts of worship" (what "religion" in **1:26** refers to)—Bible reading, church attendance, tithing, or acts of service—if we "do not bridle our tongues"—"keep a tight rein on" (NIV) our words by the "bit" of the Holy Spirit gaining control of our "tongues," God tells us our worship of Him is "worthless" ("useless, fruitless") in advancing the cause of Christ! **Jesus** teaches us in **Luke 6:45** (NLT), "Whatever is in your heart determines what you say." Someone mindful of **Jesus'** words may have come up with the saying once posted in our Church fellowship hall: "I'm careful of the words I say to keep them soft and sweet. I never know from day to day which ones I'll have to eat." William Norris, a journalist who specialized in memorable rhymes, wrote: "If your lips would keep from slips, Five things observe with care: To whom you speak; of whom you speak; And how, and when, and where."

## CONCLUSION

Two guys in a church, Paul and William, were determined to become godlier men. They started meeting together to pray and encourage each other. They even set goals for themselves and became accountable to each other for their behavior. When Paul decided he wanted to break his habit of using profanity, he said he would put five dollars in the offering for every time he swore during the week. To stay accountable, he would tell William how many times he failed. The first week cost Paul \$100. Paul must have been doing okay financially because this didn't stop his swearing. In fact, while he improved somewhat over the next few weeks, he really wasn't having the success he wanted while losing a lot of hard-earned cash. After the fourth week, William told Paul he'd decided the deal needed to be changed for the coming week, but he was not going to tell Paul how it would change. He just said, "Trust me. It will cost you both less and more."

When they met the following Sunday before worship, Paul admitted he'd failed again. William put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Paul, I told you this was going to cost you both less and more. It's called grace." William then took out his checkbook and made out a check to the church, leaving the amount blank. He gave the check to Paul and said, "Your sin still costs, but for you it's free. Just fill in the numbers. And next week there will be more grace." William's grace cost him \$55 the first week; the second week only cost him \$20. There was no third week. Paul couldn't bear to see what his sin was costing his dearest friend, so he quit using profanity.

If we have a shallow view of God's grace to us through **Jesus Christ**, which allows us to escape being destroyed by the penalty and power of our sins, we will think more of *how much* we can be forgiven than *why* we can be forgiven. Some unknown person developed this acrostic to explain God's "grace": **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**. Let's understand "profanity," which originally meant "words not suitable for holy or religious purposes," as any words unworthy of what God's grace cost Him: the brutal torture and death of His Son. Let's also understand "profanity" as words that wound or horrify the God of perfect love and holy purity we worship as Christians. The more we indulge ourselves in any profane action, including words that make us poor representatives of **Jesus Christ**, the Son of God, the more we despise what God's grace costs our Savior and the more we disgrace the purity and depth of God's love toward us!