Liberty University
DigitalCommons@Liberty University

Faculty Publications and Presentations

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School

Spring 2000

The Power to Bless: James 3:1-12 (a sermon)

R. Wayne Stacy
Liberty University, wrstacy@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons, History of Religions of Western Origin Commons, Other Religion Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Stacy, R. Wayne, "The Power to Bless: James 3:1-12 (a sermon)" (2000). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 318.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/318

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

The Power to Bless: James 3:1-12 (A Sermon)

*R. Wayne Stacy**

Frederick Buechner, in his book *The Alphabet of Grace*, speaks softly and poignantly of his experience of acknowledging, in the most awkward of circumstances, his call to ministry.

> In an elegant house on Long Island one summer Sunday, down a long table cluttered with silver and crystal and the faces and hands of strangers, my hostess suddenly directs a question at me. She is deaf and speaks in the ringing accents of the deaf, and at the sound of her question all other conversation stops, and every face turns to hear my answer. "I understand that you are planning to enter the ministry," she says. "Is this your own idea, or have you been poorly advised?"
>
> I had no answer, and even if I'd had one, it wouldn't have been shoutable, and even if I'd shouted it, she couldn't have heard it, so the question was never answered and thus rings still unanswered in my head.[1]

What is striking about this is the fact that Buechner, after all the intervening years, is still doing business with those words, is still wounded by them. In another place, he admits that the woman who uttered those words meant by them "no real harm."[2] And yet her words wound still. Why? Why do words, mere words, have such power over us?

Words appear insubstantial, immaterial, even trivial. I mean, you can't weigh words. They have no substance, no solid form. As T. S. Eliot described them in *Burnt Norton*,

> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still.[3]

* Dr. Wayne Stacy is Dean of M. Christopher White School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

We talk with words. We talk without words only with great difficulty, and yet rarely do we talk about words. That's because they're symbols. Their importance lies not in themselves. Rather, like all symbols, words are merely a way of talking about one thing in terms of something else.

Someone has said that the mind is like an art gallery with pictures hanging on the wall, and underneath each picture, a little plaque on which is inscribed the name of the picture appearing above. And so when I say a word, what you see is a picture, not the word underneath. When I say "book," what you see is a volume, not the letters B-O-O-K. And so it goes. I say a word; you get a picture. "Doctor," "senator," "southerner," "nun." As I say the word, the picture appears hanging on the wall of your mind. The problem is that, the human mind being an individual thing, we don't all have the same pictures hanging on the walls of our minds. That's why ambiguity and misunderstanding cling like barnacles to our words and encrust our speaking with confusion. I speak a word with confidence that it will slide so easily off my tongue into the ear of my listener and immediately the picture hanging on the wall of my mind will appear in that of my listener's. But anyone who's had to say, "No, that's not what I meant at all," knows that it's not that easy. At any point the semantic freight carried by our words can be derailed or sidetracked.

Words, it seems, are fickle, capricious little things that twist and turn with the slightest provocation. Perhaps that's one of the reasons speech has become so discredited and devalued in our culture. The quickest way to deprecate something is to banish it to the lotus land of words. "Ah, it's just hearsay." "Talk is cheap." "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words...." More than one poet has rued the fact that words seem too puny, too anemic, too insubstantial to be trusted with something so great as an idea or an image or a feeling.

But that word about words is not the last word. Words are also a form of power, and like all forms of power, they can be used to bless or curse, to heal or injure, to save or damn.

"Aids." "Daddy." "I love you." "I want a divorce." Can you feel that?

The woman behind the counter at the welfare office peers through the glass at the disheveled, hollow-eyed figure standing before her: "Uh, sir, I have to have your address to process your claim."

"I'm sorry?" he says.

"Your address, sir, I have to have your address. Where do you live?"

"I don't have an address."

"Well, where do you live, then?"

"In the park."

Feel it? They're just words. That's all. Just words. And yet. . . .

When I was in my first pastorate, I was called late one night to the emergency room by one of my members who happened to be the E. R. nurse at the local hospital. She had asked me if it would be okay to call me should there ever be a need for pastoral care for someone who didn't have a minister in the area. I said, "Sure." She met me at the door and on the way to the waiting room told me the story of the young couple who had just brought their infant son to

the E. R. There were huddled whispers in white corridors about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Now, the E. R. physician wanted me to accompany her into the waiting room to tell the parents. When we walked in, there they were, folded together like frightened children. They stood when they saw us. And clearing her throat, the doctor let them go—seven little words: "I'm sorry," she said, "we did everything we could." Just words.

Bill Clinton looks deeply into the camera lens and intones: "Listen to me, I did not have sex with that woman." And we listened, and we wanted desperately to believe. But later we learned that they were just words, only words, and in ways we cannot fully understand, much less articulate, we feel sullied by them.

"I give you my word." Despite all the devaluation of the linguistic currency of our culture, that's still a heavy expression, isn't it. "I give you my word." Feel it?

I can still recall the disbelief when my beginner Sunday School teacher first told me the story of blind, old Isaac's blessing the wrong son. Jacob, the second-born, conniving opportunist of a son, tricked his older brother and duped his blind, old father into speaking the paternal blessing on the wrong kid! My response was swift and, I thought, perfectly logical: "Why didn't he just take it back?" You see, when I was young, if we did something we didn't like, we'd just declare a "do-over," sort of like a Mulligan in golf. And I asked my Sunday School teacher, "Why didn't he just call a 'do-over' when he learned the truth?" Uh, that's a do-over! "That's really dumb!" I said. "Why didn't Isaac just declare a 'do-over' and bless the right kid this time?" You can imagine my surprise when my teacher told me that for the Hebrew people words had power which, once spoken, once let loose in the world, could not be called back or retrieved. Like arrows flung in flight from a bow, they could never be taken back.

In her powerful and moving novel, *Saint Maybe*, Anne Tyler tells the story of Ian, a young man who's eaten up with guilt because he wrongly suspected his sister-in-law of having an affair and of being unfaithful to his brother. She hadn't. But he told his brother anyway. His brother, believing Ian, became so despondent at the news that he took his own life. Ian is haunted by the guilt of what he'd done that cannot be undone. He can't sleep; he can't eat. "Oh God," he pleads, "how long will I have to pay for a handful of tossed-off words?. . . Can't we just back up and start over? Couldn't I have one more chance?"[4]

Words are a form of power, and like all forms of power, they can bless or curse, heal or harm, save or damn, give life or take it.

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." He goes on:

> For we all fail much. But if anyone does not fail in any matter, this one is a perfect person about to bridle even the whole body. But if we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we [thus] guide their whole bodies. Notice also the ships, [though they are] impressive and driven by

stout winds, they are guided by a little rudder wherever the will of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a little member but boasts great things. Behold a small fire engulfs a great forest. And the tongue is a fire! (3:1-6a)[5]

James' Jewish-Christian background is probably behind his warning here about the high stakes of teaching. In Judaism there was no more sacred relationship than that of rabbi and disciple. This was due in part to the Torah-centric character of Judaism. But it was also due to the fact that the rabbi, as an authoritative teacher of Torah, represented God to the people and the people to God. It was a position which held much respect in the ancient world, and James cautions those who would aspire to the position to remember that it also carries with it a concomitant responsibility.

And since words are the teacher's trade and the tongue his/her tool, James reminds the teacher to choose words with great care, because words exercise a power disproportionate to their size and substance. In good paranaetic[6] style, James employs metaphor and analogy to drive home the point. 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 more incendiary than a raging forest fire.

"And the tongue is a fire," he says. It's an apt metaphor, because it conjures up a raging inferno burning out of control. Anyone who has ever left a conversation or a meeting thinking to themselves, "I can't believe I said that! What came over me?" will understand what a consuming conflagration the tongue can ignite. Words wound.

But words also bless. Nehemiah 8 pictures blessing words spoken at the watergate. Following the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, the faith of Israel entered its dark ages. Much of the population was deported to Babylon. There, far from temple and Holy City, the people of God had to learn to practice their faith without benefit of temple and priest and sacrifice. It would be seventy years before Zerubbabel would build another temple, and then only a poor, pathetic parody of Solomon's splendid shrine. But on a crisp, Fall morning, the priest Ezra led a rag-tag group of returnees to the watergate in Jerusalem to try to rekindle the faith that had been nearly extinguished in the suffocating slavery of Babylon. He climbed into a makeshift pulpit, unrolled the scroll, swallowed hard, and let them go—words, just words. But when he read those words, a power not his own took wing among the people. Why, the story goes that he read from sunup to midday and not a soul nodded off! That hardly ever happens when I preach. And when he opened the scroll, the people stood out of respect for the power of the words, and when he finished, they cried, "Amen, Amen!" Oh, it was a powerful time at the watergate, when a teacher stood up and read the words of history and hope and heritage and through them called the people back home. And when they heard those words—good words, strong words, blessing words—the people of God were reborn.

Words are powerful things.

"Let not many of you desire to be teachers," James warns.

"I hear you're entering the ministry," she said. "Was this your own idea, or

were you poorly advised?" meaning no real harm.

So easily they wound. . . and bless.

"Let not many of you teach!" said the teacher. But please, let some.

Her name was Ruth. Dr. Ruth Whitford was my major English professor in my undergraduate studies at Palm Beach Atlantic College. A graduate of Columbia, she had done postdoctoral work in Renaissance literature with C. S. Lewis at Cambridge. It was she who first introduced me to the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien and G. K. Chesterton and George MacDonald saying to me: "As an English major who is preparing for ministry, here are some people who bring faith and literature together effectively, and you need to be aware of them and their contributions." Her classes were celebrations of the great ideas expressed in the greatest literary works of the ages. She would sit in a circle with her majors and talk to us for an hour, completely without notes, about the lives and works of the great literary minds and of the ideas in whose service they wrote—Chaucer and Mallory, Shakespeare and Donne, Moliere and Voltaire, Turgenev and Tolstoy, Kafka and Balzac. One by one she invited them in, and they took their seats in our circle and told us their stories. Accursed fifty-minute class periods! How I hated that bell.

I'll never forget a conversation I had with her one day in her office, dusty little room more congenial to books than people. I had not done well in her class that semester because I was too busy out "doing the Lord's work," I told her, youth revivals and such, instead of concentrating on preparing myself for ministry. She asked me to come by her office one day after class where she gently scolded me for not applying my best efforts as a student to my studies and telling me about the importance of a life of study to one who aspires to ministry.

She said, "You know, Wayne, there's more than one way to love God. We're commanded to love God not just with our hearts, but with our minds too. What we do in classroom no less than sanctuary is an expression of our faith in God."

She continued, "When Jesus was asked one day to sum it all up, he quoted Israel's creed, the Shema, and said, 'You are to love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind.' But look it up. The Shema doesn't say that we're to love God with our minds. That's not in there. Jesus added that. Must have thought it was pretty important, huh."

Then, she added, "Now Wayne, don't misunderstand me. I'm not against heartfelt religion. There's nothing wrong with strong emotion in faith. But Wayne, head and heart needn't be enemies. You see, I'm a Christian for two reasons: because it feels right and because it makes sense. I wouldn't be a Christian if it felt right but didn't make sense, nor would I be a Christian if it made sense but didn't feel right. I'm a Christian because it feels right *and* makes sense. Wayne, if you're going to be what God truly wants you to be, you must let your head and your heart become friends."

Those few words, spoken quite offhandedly in an impromptu teacher-student conference, changed my life. I left the office that day determined that, as God is my witness, I would never disappoint that woman again.

Ask her; she'll tell you, "I'm a teacher. Words are my tools." She wasn't trying to be a hero, still less a saint. She was doing her job, being faithful in the place where God had put her, speaking the truth in love, giving grace a chance to do its work. And her words blessed me.

You know what? Now that I think about it, I'll bet she doesn't even remember that conversation.

But I do. I do.

---

[1] Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), 40-1.

[2] *Alphabet*, 109.

[3] T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), 19.

[4] Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991).

[5] Author's translation. Strictly speaking, what follows James 3:1 (verses 2-12) can either be taken as a warning directed specifically to teachers or as more general ethical instruction applicable to the entire community. Because of the prominence of the role of the teacher, both in the Jewish world as well as in the earliest Christian church, I take this passage to be directed specifically to teachers rather than to the church in general. That it may also be applied with profit to the church in general, however, I do not deny.

[6] The Epistle of James is the best example of paranaesis in the New Testament, see Martin Dibelius, *James*, rev. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams, "Hermeneia" (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 3. Paranaesis was a method of delivering ethical teaching and exhortation on a wide variety of subjects generally in the form of proverbs, aphorisms, and short thought-units gathered together with little or no thematic unity. The purpose of paranaesis was to exhort more than instruct; the preacher/teacher assumed that his/her audience already knew the essential teachings of their faith. The purpose was to exhort them, even goad them, into action.

Paranaesis flourished during the first centuries BCE and CE, both in the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds, and James bears affinity to each. The use of the diatribe, in which the speaker/writer anticipates the objections of his/her opponent, states them, and then swiftly dispatches them (see James 2:14-26), was characteristic of the Stoic and Cynic philosophers of the Hellenistic world. Moreover, folksy illustrations used to draw life-lessons, such as James' use of the horse and the ship in our text, were also common Hellenistic literary devices, cf. Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, "Harper's New Testament Commentaries" (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 5. And the Jewishness of James is so pervasive that one hardly need document it, cf. "The twelve tribes in the Diaspora" (1:10), the torah (1:25), the Christian church is called a "synagogue" (2:2), the use of the Shema (2:19), the concern for the "pious poor" (2:1ff), etc..

Paranaesis rarely employed thematic connections to organize its subjects. Rather, individual units of paranaesis were more often linked by formal affinities or linguistic affections. In the western world, we're trained to organize out thoughts thematically and conceptually rather than formally and linguistically; as a result organization that takes the latter form rather than the former is often overlooked. For example, in James 1:2-5a the writer says:

> Consider it all joy, my brothers [and sisters], whenever you should encounter various trials knowing that the proof of your faith works endurance And let your endurance grow up to full maturity, in order that you might be mature and complete *lacking* in nothing And if any of you *lacks* wisdom, let him/her ask of the giving God

Verses 2-4 deal with facing adversity, whereas verses 5ff change the subject to our need for wisdom Conceptually, the two ideas have little, if anything, to do with each other But formally they are linked by the alliterative catch-word "lack" (*leipomenoi* in verse 4 and *leipetai* in verse 5)

So also, then, in James 3 5-6 the linking device is not logical but formal—an image, a catch-word, in this case "fire," the first usage being literal and the second metaphorical Later in our text (James 3 11ff), James will use the same formal linking device to connect his admonition on the tongue with his call to submit to the "wisdom from above," only this time the connecting catch-word is "bitter" (*pikron*), again understood literally in verse 11 and metaphorically in verse 14