



## **Chris Taylor's Sermon – 9/16/18**

### **James 3:1-15**

### **A Small Thing**

The opening line of this third chapter seems to come out of nowhere and then disappears just as quickly, “Not many of you should become teachers... for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

One moment (the second chapter) James is talking about the connection between faith and works. Now suddenly he shifts, he talks specifically to the teachers and leaders. He tells us we are going to be held to a higher standard. Where did that come from? What led him to take this leap from one subject to an entirely different one? But while the message may feel disconnected from what has come before, it is still an important one for us to hear.

In the Presbyterian Church we have always held our leaders to a higher standard. To become a member we ask just two things: is Jesus your Lord and Savior, and will you be an active, supportive member of the church? That's it. But when it comes to our church officers – our elders, deacons and pastors – we require a great deal more: not just the Lordship of Christ; but a commitment to the authority of Scripture; the guidance of our confessions; to the rules of our form of government; to the call to preserve the peace, unity and purity of the church and to the call to give the church our best energies, intelligence, imagination and love.

Eight different vows, and every elder, deacon and pastor has to make them. The ninth and final vow is distinctive to each office: for elders the vow to faithfully watch over the people and provide for their worship, nurture and service; for deacons, the vow to offer a ministry of compassion; and for pastors the vow to be a faithful minister of Word and Sacrament.

The point is that in the Presbyterian Church we take it as a given that those who teach, and those who lead should be held to a higher standard. We hold them to that standard because they have been placed in a position that can have a significant impact on the church. For those who hold those positions this idea that God is going to judge us with a greater strictness may not feel like good news, but it does make a lot of sense – with trust comes responsibility.

Should we apply that same standard to our political leaders? We used to. It used to be that if you had an affair, for example, you could give up any hope of elected office – if you couldn't keep that most basic and sacred vow, then there was good reason to believe you would be unable to keep covenant with those who had elected you. I think it still makes sense.

I don't care if you are a Democrat, Republican or Independent: character matters; and it matters because it is not just political skills or a political agenda, but also the character of our leaders that is going to impact and shape the nation for generations to come. Our children are watching. Our youth are watching. And whether we recognize it or not, they are drawing lessons from what they are observing every day. I want my grandchildren to know that character matters and that it is integral to real success, no matter what their chosen field.

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James, of course, doesn't stop with that first line. I love the second, "For all of us make many mistakes." And to that, I think, we can all say "Amen." We are an imperfect people. All of us. And I think if we really understood what that means and embraced the truth of it, it would make all the difference in our life together. We aren't here because we are somehow good enough to earn God's favor. We are here by God's grace. That's it: grace and grace alone. We're here because of that unearned, unmerited forgiveness that has come to us through Jesus Christ.

When we join together in offering our confession each Sunday, that's really what we are saying. We are admitting to God and to each other that we aren't perfect. Like someone at an AA meeting, we are saying "I'm Chris, or I'm Sarah, and I'm a sinner." I'm not here because I'm so good. I'm here because I need God, I need God's forgiveness, and I want to do everything I can to open my life to God's presence and power.

But if the very basis of our fellowship isn't our works but God's forgiveness, then why do we keep putting so much energy into trying to look like we have it all together? Perfect isn't possible in this world. The issue isn't that we all strive to be better. The issue is that we do it for the wrong reasons. We think we have to be perfect in order to prove our worth, in order to earn God's love or the love and respect of those around us. But if in our hearts we know that we aren't perfect, where does that leave us? It leaves us striving to create an impression that in our hearts we know isn't true. That dissonance, in turn, creates all kinds of problems in us, and in the communities of which we are a part.

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The other night, Bonnie and I watched "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society". It is on Netflix. Very enjoyable. The protagonist, an author named Juliet Ashton, goes to the island of Guernsey just after the Second World War hoping to write an article about this club she has just heard about. Guernsey is just off the coast of Normandy, not actually a part of the United Kingdom, but a protectorate of the crown. During the War, it was occupied by the Germans who ended up sending about a thousand of the inhabitants to camps in Europe.

When she arrives, Juliet find the hotel is still being repaired, and so she ends up in the home of a strict, matronly woman who pointedly places a Bible on the dresser when she shows Juliet her room. Right from the start there is nothing kind or compassionate about this woman. She is rigid and difficult and judgmental, and while at one point she self-righteously insists that

she will never engage in gossip, later on she does exactly that: offering a scathing judgment that leaves Juliet shaken and in tears.

So why is it that we Christians are so often the bad guys in movies today? Whatever happened to Bing Crosby and Father O'Malley? It is a reflection, I think, of the times we're in, and if you ignore or overlook the hundreds of millions of dollars that churches in this country pour into their communities, and the countless hours that Christians volunteer in service and ministry to make a difference in this world, well then, maybe you could say that we have earned the criticism. Because for all the good we Christians do – and understand here that just like Katrina and New Orleans, it will be volunteers and donations pouring in from all over the country that is going to have the biggest impact in the recovery from this most recent hurricane – but for all the good we do there is a tendency among some Christians to become almost obsessed with the law and righteousness, and then imposing that righteousness on others. That's what happened with that woman in the movie. She didn't actually hit Juliet, but the damage she caused was every bit as real. And it was her tongue that did it: sharp and cutting; devastating in its judgment.

That's the connection for James. That's why he goes on in our text to talk about the tongue and the extraordinary damage that it can do. Like the tiny rudder that can guide a massive ship, the tongue has an impact out of all proportion to its size.

Here's the thing: it is hard to show someone else something we haven't experienced for ourselves. If we haven't felt the impact of God's grace and love – if we are still trying to prove our worth through our own righteousness – then it is very difficult to extend that grace to someone else.

"All of us make many mistakes." It is when we begin to accept that we aren't perfect and that our worth isn't tied to being perfect that grace starts slipping in. Does that mean we stop striving? No! What it does mean is that the reason for our striving makes a radical shift. We strive not to prove our worth, not to earn God's love, but to open ourselves more and more to the Kingdom-kind-of life that God longs to share.

I'm not perfect. I make mistakes as you all know. But I'm a child of God, absolutely precious to my Creator even in all my imperfection. That's the basis for my sense of self. That is the foundation of my identity. And it sets me free; free to simply be who I am with nothing to hide, nothing to prove. And yes, I strive to be better every day, but not because I have to. My striving isn't about trying to make God love me more. I strive, rather, because I long for that life that God wants to share. I'm God's beloved! And so are you!

What a blessing we would be in this world if we learned to use our tongues not to curse and not to judge, but to care, to encourage, to lift up and to love those that we encounter. Would that we might be the church that people point to and say, "Look at how those Christians love each other!" May God grant us the grace so to live. Amen.