

The Christian Life – Part 3
Living Gracefully
James 3: 1-18

The message this morning is the 3rd in a series of 5 from the Epistle of James on living the Christian life, discovering how we can be blessed. Most of us have already found that living the Christian life is not easy and that we need help, we need power, we need support, and we need wisdom to walk worthy of our calling to be disciples of Jesus. Our God is a God of love and grace and provides all the help we need so that we can persevere. Some of that help is found in the Scriptures, and my hope is that we are finding all that we need and more in the Epistle of James.

In week one we began our quest with three “C”s: confronting our sins, confessing our sins and then correcting our sins. Last week we talked about growing in faith and love, putting our faith to work by making positive changes in our life and even in the lives of those God has placed among us. Today we will see how our faith will help us to live gracefully. We will begin by defining what that means in our walk as disciples of Jesus.

Grace is a distinct part of our Christian faith. As believers in the triune God as revealed in the Scriptures, we understand grace as unmerited favor from God. Earlier in James’s letter we were reminded that every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of light. Grace is one of those good and perfect gifts. The gift of life is one of those good and perfect gifts. Faith is a gift of God’s grace. Salvation, our rescue from the effects of sin and spiritual death is a gift of God’s grace. Wisdom, or the application of human knowledge is a gift of God’s grace. God’s grace is a universal yet variable gift, perfectly and justly meted out by a perfect and just God. It is universal in that all of humanity is blessed with some, and it is variable in that all receive exactly what is needed to live a life pleasing to God. Grace is not earned nor deserved; it is something that God intends for us to respond to. It is truly a gift and not a reward for our works. In that sense, **living gracefully begins with humility and appreciation to God for all that we have and all that we do not have.** Gratitude and humility are the bedrock and foundation for graceful Christian living. We will not be able to live abundantly for Jesus without them.

There are other elements that go along with living gracefully. In an earthly sense, grace might bring to mind a swan seeming to swim effortlessly on a pond, or a Lipizzaner Stallion prancing on a track or a dancer or ballerina gliding along a stage floor. The word graceful implies balance, poise, and control. In that respect, **living gracefully is facing trials, tribulations, and adversity with calmness and resolve.** It is being calm on the outside even though we are not calm on the inside. A few weeks ago, Reverend Lester reminded us we can do that when we put on the whole armor of God and trust upon the Holy Spirit to guide us. If you need a refresher, you can find his message on our website.

Another part of **living gracefully is treating others with dignity and kindness.** John Wesley might say do good to them and do no harm to them. The first is sometimes easier than the second, but when we see others like ourselves, sinful people in need of a Savior, it becomes much easier to do both. If we are to do no harm, we will listen, think, and choose our words carefully before speaking. That is not something that comes naturally to most of us, but something that comes with practice and discipline.

Those are three things that characterize living gracefully, and there are many things that will keep us from it. Other than a failure to acknowledge God and His goodness, **the greatest obstacle to living gracefully is the failure to control the most powerful part of the human body, our tongue.** In today's world that would also mean controlling our thumbs, which are the tongues of social media. James tells us what most of us already know. He says that the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The King James renders that word as iniquity, which means wickedness, evil, and immoral. In other words, it is one of the devil's best weapons used to wreak chaos and strife. It affects our entire existence, not just ourselves but those around us. It is the wildest beast we can imagine, one that no human can tame. The tongue has the power of a nuclear weapon, with the capability to start a great war and at the same time tremendous potential to maintain peace and order. It is an agent of the free will God gives each of us, a great gift and a restless or unruly evil full of deadly poison.

James says it another way in **verse 9**. We use our tongue to praise and bless the Lord and Father and we also use it to curse those who are made in the likeness of God. God is so very pleased when our tongues come together and produce the sweet sounds of praise and worship. When a thousand tongues come together it is even more pleasing. God is not the only one that is happy to hear them, for we too are blessed when unity in worship happens. How many times have tears of joy come to our eyes as we sing a beautiful song or hear a special piece of poetry? And on the other hand, how many of us have been wounded by words spoken in anger or haste, perhaps by a fellow church member? From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

One reason that murder is such a grievous sin is that we are all created in the likeness or image of God. That means we are literally God's handiwork, and we are not free to destroy what God has chosen to create in His image without consequence. It is possible to do that by raising our voice instead of raising our fist or a weapon. How many of us have hurt someone else, perhaps even unintentionally, by something we said? How many of us have harmed our Christian witness by using language that is coarse or otherwise inappropriate? James said it well. My brothers and sisters this ought not to be so!

It does seem that we have a good excuse. After all, we are born sinful people and we do live in a sinful world. And since **verse 8** says that no one can tame the tongue, why should we bother trying? It is a question worth considering. It is like Christian perfection. Nobody is perfect so why try? Is he saying that we can't tame our own tongue, or is he saying that we can't tame the one in someone else's mouth? Or might he be inferring that someone with more power than a mere human being will be needed to help us to do both? Those are questions that are also worthy of our consideration. The simple answer is that we will need to control the words that leave our mouth if we are to become the disciple of Jesus God is calling us to be.

Can we tame a tongue that is not our own? Can we control the words that come from the mouth of another person? For many of us, we would believe the answer would have to be no, for God created each of us with a free will, the ability to make choices. The decision to curse or swear, the choice to spread rumors or gossip, the tendency to use hurtful words in anger are made by the individual. We can't stop someone from having an uncontrolled tongue. Or can we?

Even today, one of the things I still find amazing is that people are uncomfortable swearing around a pastor. Even though today's clergy have lost much of the respect that previous generations once enjoyed, there is still an effort to be on one's best behavior when in the presence of the pastor. I have encountered dozens of people over the years who would cuss up a storm around me until they learned that I was a minister. At that point their language soon included 2 words we often have trouble saying: I'm sorry.

Tami often shares with me that her co-workers and clients use much nicer language around her once they realized she was a disciple of Jesus. It is not the title or the collar or the cross we wear that brings about the change in behavior but the one we represent: Jesus. There is something about Jesus that brings about change in people. The point is that it is possible for all of us to influence the tongue and for matter the actions of others if we are careful to model the love of Christ while doing it.

Can we tame our own tongues? Most of us would probably say no, for even the most faithful of Christians can unintentionally say something that may hurt another in a great way. There will be those who will say things behind someone's back to get revenge. All of us have likely fallen prey to one or more of those things. Yet as Methodists, believing that we are moving on to perfection in this life, we must say the answer to the question is yes. At least in theory it is possible. **3:2** James reminds us that when we do not stumble in what we say, we are a perfect person. On our own we have not the power to be perfect in our words and actions. We must allow someone who does to take control. There is something about Jesus that brings about change in people.

Perhaps that is the message James would have us grasp. We were once lost, but now are found. We were once blind, but now we see. Since we are changed people, we must be extra careful that the words that come from our mouths do not betray us. How different the world would be if more of us chose to live gracefully. **God is pleased, and we are blessed when we live gracefully for His Son Jesus.** Followers of Jesus are changed people, graceful people, people that have the power to change other people. That truth will be especially applicable, even critical, as we continue to discern how Jesus is building His church using the people of Millcreek. I trust that our words will show others that we are living gracefully, committed to becoming the disciple and the church that God has called us to be. Let us see how pleased we can make Him and how blessed we can be! Amen