

Ecclesiastes 10:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.

Analysis

Curse not the king, no not in thy thought (גַּם בְּמַדְעָךָ מֶלֶךְ אַל־תִּקְלַל, gam bemadda'akha melek al-teqalel)—'even in your knowledge/mind, do not curse the king,' using madda (thought, knowledge). **And curse not the rich in thy bedchamber** (וּבְחֲדָרֵי מִשְׁכָּבְךָ אַל־תִּקְלַל עָשִׁיר, uvechadrei mishkavekha al-teqalel ashir)—'and in your sleeping chambers do not curse the rich.' **For a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter** (כִּי עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם יוֹלִיךְ אֶת־הַקּוֹל וּבְעַל כְּנָפַיִם יַגִּיד דָּבָר, ki of hashamayim yolikh et-haqol uva'al kenafayim yaggid davar)—literally 'for a bird of the heavens will carry the voice, and a winged creature will report the matter.'

Remarkable wisdom about discretion: don't curse (qalal, to treat with contempt or speak ill of) authority even in private madda (thoughts) or chadrei mishkav (bedroom chambers), because somehow it will be exposed—'a bird will carry the voice.' This proverbial expression (origin of 'little bird told me') acknowledges reality: secrets rarely stay secret. More deeply, it counsels guarding one's heart against contemptuous attitudes toward authority, knowing thoughts shape character and inevitably leak through speech. Romans 13:1-2 commands submission to governing authorities; 1 Peter 2:17 says 'Honor the emperor.' Even unjust rulers deserve honor for office, if not person. Jesus never cursed Caesar; Paul blessed hostile authorities.

Historical Context

Ancient monarchies had extensive spy networks; courts were riddled with informants. The 'bird' imagery reflects genuine danger—careless speech could reach royal ears with deadly consequences. Daniel navigated such environments carefully (Daniel 6).

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How do you maintain respectful attitudes toward authorities you disagree with or consider unjust?
2. What does it mean to guard not just speech but even 'thoughts' against cursing those in power?
3. How can you balance honest critique of leadership with the biblical command to honor governing authorities?

Interlinear Text

גַּם	בְּמַדְעֶךָ	מֶלֶךְ	אֵל	תִּקְלֵל ל	וּבְחֲדָרֵי
H1571	no not in thy thought	not the king	H408	Curse	in thy bedchamber
	H4093	H4428		H7043	H2315
יֹלֵךְ יְרֵךְ הַשָּׁמַיִם	עוֹף	כִּי	עֶשֶׂה יֶרֶךְ	תִּקְלֵל ל	אֵל
H1980	of the air	for a bird	H3588	Curse	H408
	H8064	H5775	H6223	H7043	
דְּבָרִי	יֵגֵד יָד	הַכְּנָפִים	וְכֵן	הַקּוֹל	אֶת
	shall tell	wings	and that which hath	the voice	H853
	H5046	H3671	H1167	H6963	

Additional Cross-References

Acts 23:5 (Parallel theme): Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.

Exodus 22:28 (Curse): Thou shalt not revile the gods, nor curse the ruler of thy people.

2 Kings 6:12 (Kingdom): And one of his servants said, None, my lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber.

Isaiah 8:21 (Kingdom): And they shall pass through it, hardly bestead and hungry: and it shall come to pass, that when they shall be hungry, they shall fret themselves, and curse their king and their God, and look upward.

Luke 19:40 (Parallel theme): And he answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.

Luke 10:40 (Parallel theme): But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.