

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 גַם בְּמַדְעַב מֶלֶךְ אֲלֵתְקָלֶל (gam bemadda'akha melekh al-teqalel)—'even in your knowledge/mind, do not curse the king,' using madda (thought, knowledge). **And curse not the rich in thy bedchamber** וְבַחֲדָרִי מַשְׁקָבְךָ אֲלֵתְקָלֶל עַשִּׁיר (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** פְּעֻזָּב (ki of hashamayim yolikh et-haqlol v'beul k'tufim yaggid z'bar 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

וְאַתָּה	בְּמִזְבֵּחַ	מִלְּאֵל	תְּקַלְּלֶל	וְכִדְרֵי	בְּכִדְרֵי
H1571	no not in thy thought	H4093	not the king	H408	Curse
			H4428	H7043	in thy bedchamber
וְאַתָּה	בְּמִזְבֵּחַ	מִלְּאֵל	תְּקַלְּלֶל	וְכִדְרֵי	בְּכִדְרֵי
H4904	H408	H7043	H6223	H3588	H2315
	Curse	not the rich		for a bird	of the air
				H5775	H8064
וְאַתָּה	בְּמִזְבֵּחַ	מִלְּאֵל	תְּקַלְּלֶל	וְכִדְרֵי	בְּכִדְרֵי
H853	the voice	and that which hath	wings	shall tell	the matter
	H6963	H1167	H3671	H5046	H1697

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.