

It takes courage to speak up when those around you are speaking and listening to lies. While our Lord was being slandered, accused of casting out demons by the power of Satan, no one stood up to defend him. Instead, others asked him for more signs, putting the Lord on trial, insisting that he give more proof that he is the Son of God. No one was speaking up for Jesus. But then a lone woman's voice called out from the crowd. She declared that Jesus' mother, who gave birth to him and nursed him, was blessed. God bless this woman for speaking up! It took courage on her part. And Jesus didn't deny what she said. His mother was certainly blessed. She was the mother of God, after all! Elizabeth called her blessed among women. Jesus then responds by pointing this woman in the crowd to a much greater blessing. He says, "Blessed are those who are hearing God's Word and keeping it."

It can be intimidating to speak up for the truth of God's Word. What can you say? Do you know enough? Are you prepared to get into a debate with those who seem to know a lot more than you do? This woman in the crowd saw how her Lord was being maligned and attacked. They were calling him cursed, accusing him of witchcraft, charging him with being in league with Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. The woman could tell that Jesus wasn't cursed. She heard him debate his opponents. She saw him cast out the demon. She recognized that Jesus was being mistreated. So she found the courage to cry out in approval of her Lord. She wanted to support him, and perhaps the most supportive thing you can say to someone is to compliment his mother.

Our Lord's response to this woman is not a contradiction. He doesn't put her to shame or ring a buzzer indicating that she didn't get the answer right. No, Jesus is taking this woman's confession and strengthening it. He is teaching her, amid all the chaos, where true and lasting blessing from God comes from. What made Mary blessed was certainly that she gave birth to God in the flesh and raised him as her own dear Child. But Elizabeth expressed it very well in her words to the Virgin Mother. After she says, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Child in your womb," after expressing the great honor she has to have the mother of her Lord visiting her, after she points out that her baby leapt for joy in her womb, then Elizabeth said the following to Mary: "Blessed is she who believed that the Lord will accomplish what he promised to do for her."

The woman who blessed the mother of Jesus was right to do so. It took boldness to speak up for him the way she did. But Jesus doesn't leave her to speak on her own. He unpacks her words for her and gently guides her as a meek and kind Master. Why was my mother blessed? Yes, she gave birth to God. Yes, she was humble and chaste and devoted to her calling. But more than any of this, what made her blessed was that she believed the Word and promise of her Savior. When Mary heard what the Shepherds told her from the angels, that God is glorified by showing peace and goodwill toward men, she kept these words in her heart. When her twelve-year-old Son said that he needed to be in his Father's house attending to his Father's business, she kept these words in her heart. She treasured these great words and promises of her Lord. She held onto them as her most prized possession.

The devil tries to intimidate us from confessing our faith. If he can take the Word of God out of our mouth, then he can soon take it out of our hearts as well. He bullies you into thinking that you can't speak up, that you don't know enough, that you should just shut up and leave the theology talk to the experts. But this is a lie. You know the Apostles Creed, don't you? What about the Ten Commandments? The Lord's Prayer? Who do you think taught you these words? Where do you think these are all drawn from? When someone is denying that baptism saves, didn't you learn the simple teaching of Jesus that those who believe and are baptized will be saved? Didn't you learn that St. Peter

says that baptism now saves us? When someone is denying that Christ's body and blood are given in the bread and the wine, you can speak up. Sing along to the words of institution. If someone denies that Jesus took away all sins, you can sing the words of John the Baptist, "Lamb of God that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us!" Don't be afraid to speak what you know. Because these words of Scripture are given to you by your Lord Jesus. Hold onto them! Treasure them! Keep them deep in your heart, sing them, and confess them as your own!

Of course, in the heat of the moment, when tensions are high, when you feel like you're out of your element, it's very difficult to find the right words to say. Maybe you can't remember the chapter and verse or even the right book of the Bible. Those who present themselves as very smart and educated will insist that you cite your sources. Ok, fine. Let them test you. They tested Jesus, after all. But don't let their testing and their scrutinizing keep you from speaking what you know to be the truth! After you speak up, then you may find that you could have said more. You could have put it more succinctly. You could have been better prepared. Don't let that silence you. Instead, turn to your Lord. Turn to his Word. Seek more clarity from what the Scriptures say. If you think you must wait until you are a master before you can speak up, then you will never speak up. But when you turn to your Lord and his Word, you will find that he is kind to you. He corrects you and instructs you through the clear fountain of the Scriptures. He teaches you humility even as he strengthens your zeal for his truth. He sharpens you. He makes you realize that while it may seem like the devil and the world are testing you, your Lord is in fact the one testing you. As Psalm 11 says, "The LORD tests the righteous." When he is testing you, he is strengthening your faith, driving you deeper into his Word, and planting his truth deeper into your heart.

Beelzebul means, "Lord of the flies," or more specifically, "Lord of the pile of dung." This is what the Jews called the devil. They were right to call him this. After all, the devil must be defeated. Though he may promise honor, fame, and riches in this life, he must in the end rule only the dung heap with the flies as his servants. But when the Jews called the devil the Lord of the flies, they were taking the devil lightly. This is why Jesus tells them that the devil is much wiser and stronger than they give him credit. The devil is too crafty to cast out his own demons. He takes every opportunity to deceive and intimidate. He arms himself with every lie, every sin, every false teaching. We aren't strong enough to withstand these strong weapons of Satan. Only the Word of God can do this. And only Christ, who fulfilled the Word of God, can overturn him.

The devil is the strong man who is armed with lies and deceit. He knows more than you. He is more experienced than you are. He leads you into sin, and then he uses your sin to silence you and intimidate you from speaking the truth until the Word of God is completely absent from your lips. Jesus warns against this tactic of the devil and his demons. He casts them out. By washing you by his own blood in the washing of water with the Word, Jesus casts out all evil spirits who would lead you astray. They can't handle the living water of God's Word, so they travel through deserted places, trying to find a host. When they can't find someone else, they come right back, even more determined to take the Word of God out of your heart. And it isn't enough that you simply clean up your act a bit. You can have your house swept and put in order. But when the evil spirits come back, they bring reinforcements. You can say that you don't steal or cheat anymore. You can point to some good habits you have developed. But what is that to the demons? They can just as easily point out the sin that still exists in your heart.

The devil arms himself with your sin, and he even tries to use God's Word against you. The law rightly reveals that you are sinful, that you don't speak up enough, that you don't understand the Word of God like you should, that you have not kept God's name holy, held his peaching sacred, and gladly heard and learned it. So the devilish strong man from hell can easily use this against you.

That strong devil will try to convince you that you can just ride the fence and remain neutral. You can remain a Christian while remaining silent and never learning to talk about God's Word to your friends and family. Though the devil knows this is impossible. That strong man from hell knows that either you are with Jesus or you are against him. Either you confess Jesus, or you confess the lies of the devil. Either the finger of God continues to keep faith in your heart, or the devil is sifting you like wheat. But don't lose your courage! Because Jesus is the stronger man. Unlike the devil, who uses God's Word only to deceive, intimidate, and shut you up, Jesus has fulfilled the Word of God. By his perfect obedience, suffering, and death, Jesus has satisfied the holy law on your behalf. So if you have this confidence that the righteous and holy God of all is for you – if he doesn't accuse you – then you do not need to be afraid of the devil's threats and intimidations.

Jesus drove out a demon who was mute. When the demon had gone out, the speechless man spoke. This is what Jesus does for us. He opens our lips and loosens our tongues to speak his truth. Don't let the devil and his deceivers silence you. When you have Christ, who fulfilled the Word for you, when the eyes of your faith are toward him, then you have every confidence to believe and confess what his Word says. Of course, you aren't worthy in yourself to speak it. Of course, you will find that you still have a lot to learn. The law will continue to teach you how sinful your flesh is. But follow the example of that woman from the crowd! And be prepared to receive from God's Word more instruction and encouragement. Because when you confess Christ, you are returning to your Lord and Master who continues to strengthen you both in your heart and in your mouth. Those who are taught by Christ in this way are truly blessed. Amen.