

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: PART VIII TAMING THE TONGUE

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The Talmud tells the story of a king's two jesters whose sage and pithy wisdom were the talk of the kingdom. One day, in a philosophical mood, the king sent them on an errand. "Simon, my fool, go out and bring back the best thing in the world. And you, John, go out and secure for me the worst thing in the world."

In a short while both jesters were back, each with a package. Simon bowed low, "The best thing in the world, sire!" and unwrapped his package to reveal a tongue. John began to laugh and quickly unwrapped his bundle. "The worst thing in the world, O king," and he, too, presented a tongue.

Speech is arguably man's greatest gift and at the same time his most dangerous ability. It is impossible to estimate the good it has done when great men and women have truthfully instructed and inspired others. But we also know that falsehoods disguised as truth have destroyed reputations, marriages, jobs, friendships, churches and so much more. Every one of us sitting here this morning has been *blessed* by someone's tongue....and I would believe that we've all been *blessed out* in negative ways, sometimes by the same ones!

God commands in [Exodus 20:16](#), "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," but liars and lying abound and we've all been affected. We could string together stories of "false witness," from gossip over the back fence to the claims made by politicians and manufacturers to out-and-out perjury in a court of law, which is the prima-fascia intent of this commandment.....the violation of which sent our Lord Jesus to the cross.

It's not that we don't KNOW lying is wrong, after all God created each of us with a conscience! To soften the sin and cover our guilt, we use a whole bunch of euphemisms:

little white lie, fabrication, evasion, stringing someone along, inaccuracy, exaggeration, fudging the truth, rationalization, "whopper," deception, misrepresentation, dishonesty, putting someone on, and, love this one, fibbing.

In John 1:47 we find an interesting commentary about lying, which is so common that it seems to be "in our genes"! "Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said about him, 'Behold, an Israelite in whom there is nothing false!'"

Jesus seems genuinely surprised! He describes a person without deceit, a person who's completely honest and sincere. Jesus wasn't being sarcastic.....a favorite tool of the tongue, when He described Nathaniel. Nathanael's complete honesty and integrity impressed Jesus, indicating its rarity.

Imagine if Jesus saw any one of us coming towards Him. Would He turn to His disciples with the same comment, *"Look, here comes a person of complete and total honesty whose tongue has never born false witness!"*

We are all very aware that our tongues can praise God and our tongues can take His name in vain. Our tongues can bless other people and then turn around and bless them out. We seem to LOVE to talk trash about other people.

Where did this all start? Why have we gotten into such a "Tongued Mess?"

Remember Genesis 3? Adam and Eve had just partaken of the fruit of the ONE tree in the garden that God had put off limits, realized their sin and hid when they heard God coming. God's question was straightforward, *"Where are you?"* Adam's answer was just as honest. *"I heard you coming and I hid because I was afraid the fig leaf would fall off!"* Was

that really the issue? No...HE knew that GOD knew the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!"

So Adam did the first thing that came to his mind.....he blamed Eve. And Eve's words have been used by millions since, "***The devil MADE me do it.***"

God HATES lies in whatever form they come: perjury in the courtroom, lies between friends, gossip in the parking lot, or slander over the phone.....and why is that? Because God literally can be defined as TRUTH. Jesus' words ring clear when He tells us that He is "the way, the truth and the life!" (John 14:6) God IS truth and His Word is truth. (John 17:17) Since God literally defines Himself as TRUTH, then lying has no place in the lives of His people and, in a very forthright way tells us that liars will have no place in heaven! (Revelation 21:27)

We know lying is a problem and that each lie has consequences.....so why lie?

Sometimes we do it to make ourselves look better.....pad a resume' with an extra job or a degree, spice up our boring biography with a few juicy stories, shave a few pounds off our driver's license, or a few years of age off our stated total!

Sometimes we do it to escape punishment..... officer, I didn't realize I was speeding because I was on my way to the bedside of a church member who is dying and I just HAD to get there fast....see my clerical collar!!!

Sometimes it's MEANT to hurt someone else (and at the same time build ourselves up). Did you SEE who she was talking to in the hall....I can't believe it.....I thought she was YOUR friend! It may not be a lie...but does help?

Sometimes it's for profit. My father, a Lutheran principal had a teacher who would call in sick and then substitute in the public schools to make extra money!

What God is asking each and every one of us to do in this commandment is to live honestly, to speak (and act) with integrity, and when we hear a lie....and it's not a sin to hear one....to stop it in its tracks!

Dear ones, this is one of those areas where we as people of the truth....as Easter people....as people of Christ need to be seen as truly being DIFFERENT from the people of the world. Paul puts it this way in **Colossians 3**: "*Since you have been raised with Christ, set your minds on things above, NOT earthly things. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and put on the new self...in the image of the Creator!*" How could we possibly expect to be witnesses to the TRUTH about Jesus when others aren't sure how to take what comes out of our mouths?

As God's chosen people, we ought to be *lousy liars*, speaking the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth....and doing it in love for God and out of love for those around us. Since God, in baptism, has already given us a heart transplant....free of charge..... it's time for our tongues to follow along.

SO.... How DO we know we're speaking the truth? How DO we know when to, as 'mama said' 'if you can't say something good don't say anything at all? How do we know when to speak up and when to keep quiet? And since we're called to "speak the truth in love," is that license to simply walk around giving our "truthful opinions" about everybody and everything around us.....*to be totally and completely honest with you Fred, that's the ugliest tie I've ever seen!*"

All of this speaks to the intent of our hearts and minds and all of this is reflected in Jesus' summary of the entire Law of God, to "*love the Lord with all our beings and love our neighbors as ourselves.*" There are times when discerning the truth in what we say and what someone else says isn't easy. We've seen some graphic examples of this in the news this weekend, and it may be best to 'tame the tongue' and prayerfully consider all the facts before we speak.....so that our own tongues don't add to the fire.

There are times, however, when truly KNOW we've been the victim of someone else's sin....what do we do now? In Matthew 18 Jesus gives us His instructions: *if someone sins against you, go and talk to them ONE-ON-ONE!* Talk to them with the goal of clearing the air and restoring the integrity of BOTH of you. ONLY when you have totally *exhausted* this approach should you involve a third person, both as a "witness to the truth" AND to be sure WE are also speaking the truth!

One of the most valuable possessions ANY of us have is our reputation, how other people see us and regard us. Each of us, and this speaks to the witness we show the world about the Christian faith we proclaim and profess, is charged with maintaining our OWN reputation AND the reputations of those around us. I am perfectly capable of tarnishing my OWN reputation, should I so choose, NONE of us has permission to use our tongues to destroy the reputation of someone else!

Back when I was a kid, if one of us were caught telling a lie or using bad language, my parents would deal with our terrible tongues in a most direct way....they would wash our mouths out with soap! I can't remember the brand of soap, but I can certainly remember the taste....it made an impression!

God has washed us in our baptisms and as His children, forgives us our sins, no matter how many or how often. To bring glory and honor to Him and to love our neighbors as God loves us, we are called to USE our tongues to praise our Lord and to, as Luther says, defend our neighbors, speak well of them, and put the best construction on everything. How wonderful it would be to have our Lord Jesus standing in the hall, see us coming, and remark, *“Behold, here comes Farquar, a Lutheran in whom there is No Guile!”*