

The Third Lenten Midweek, Wednesday, April 1, 2020

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Life-Giving Words

Exodus 20:16; 1 Samuel 19:1–7

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

This week, we continue our walk through the second table of God’s law, taking up the Eighth Commandment which the Lord gave to His people through Moses and which in some fashion is written on the hearts of all people: **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”** (v 16).

God gave this commandment because He knows that every one of us “insofar as he is human [descended from Adam and Eve] is a false witness, betrayer, liar, and that no true word goes out of our mouth when we are in danger.”¹ That condemnation comes from the hand of Martin Luther.

It may seem like an exaggeration—“*no true word goes out of our mouth*”—but Holy Scripture has a great deal to say about the lips and the tongue. In writing about the high standard to which teachers of the faith will be held, St. James said, **“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man”** (Jas 3:2). He adds, **“The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!”** (Jas 3:5–6). We use the same tongue to curse and to bless. This defies understanding. It’s contrary to nature—to how God created us.

The tongue is so difficult to control. Psalms and Proverbs are filled with prayers and sayings about false witnesses, false reports, malicious words, lying tongues, slander, and those who sow discord among brothers. Scripture teaches that Satan is a liar and the father of lies. We recall his first temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden.

A word once spoken can’t be taken back. The damage is done. How many times have I experienced this! A thoughtless word, a cutting word, and especially the words spoken about people who aren’t present. The worst are often the words that come out accidentally and unplanned, when they seem to express the unfiltered and unguarded

¹ Quoted in Albrecht Peters, *Ten Commandments*, Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms, 297.

feelings and thoughts of the heart. Or when I rush to judgment, complain, spread rumors, and respond in haste.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are to live with guarded lips. The tongue of the disciple is intended for blessing others, for confessing our faith, and for calling on God's name. Take care not to use the truth in a way that shames the neighbor or harms his character. Explain everything in the kindest way. Put the best construction on it. Lord, help us to live this way!

Next to one's body, spouse, and property, a person's honor and reputation are another indispensable treasure.

Take the case of Jonathan with David. Jonathan was the son of Saul, the reigning king of Israel, and so the heir apparent and crown prince. David was a famous young warrior. He was also the one anointed to be king after Saul, whom the Lord had rejected for his disobedience. What David had done—killing Goliath and other Philistines—and the praise he received for it led to Saul's jealousy, and then to Saul's desire to kill him. And Jonathan and David were friends, the closest of friends.

So Jonathan sets out to protect his friend by speaking to his father. He tells David, **"I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are [hiding], and I will speak to my father about you"** (1 Sam 19:3). That's the arrangement. Jonathan had way more to gain if he were to betray David, or slander him, or simply remain silent when questioned by his father. It was, after all, Jonathan's place that David was anointed to fill—to be king after Saul instead of Saul's own flesh and blood. And certainly there were less than savory things about David that Jonathan could've shared—faults, secrets, character traits that would've damaged his reputation.

But **Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, "Let not the king sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have brought good to you. For he took his life in his hand and he struck down the Philistine, and the Lord worked a great salvation for all Israel. You saw it and rejoiced. Why then will you sin against innocent blood by killing David without cause?"** (1 Sam 19:4-5). Jonathan defended David's reputation. He did though it cost him the crown. He persuaded his father to relent—at least for a time, and so protected David's life, the life of God's anointed, from whom our Lord Jesus Christ is descended according to the flesh.

Jonathan spoke truthfully and charitably about his neighbor, so others would view him in the best possible light. He protected his neighbor's reputation. Like Jonathan, let us

aim to have a peaceful, helpful tongue that doesn't hurt anyone but helps everyone. Strive for this especially in talking about other. Be true advocates and defenders of your neighbor, even when you know his faults.

How miserably we have kept this commandment! Why do we so often lie? Lying comes from unbelief, from a lack of fear, love, and trust in God above all things. But we speak the truth and agree with God when we condemn our sinful nature and our lying tongue by confessing our guilt: I, a poor, pitiful sinner.

Our Lord, Son of David yet David's Lord, used His words and His silence to serve us. False witnesses spoke against Him. He suffered the loss of honor, the complete ruin of his reputation, even the wrongful taking of His life. He could've spoken up. He could've defended Himself. He could've instantly cleared His name. He could've called twelve legions of angels to fight for Him. But He came not to be well-spoken of by others. He came not to be praised. He came to be pierced by the slings and arrows of their tongues. He came to suffer for our sins of the Eighth Commandment. And He did.

And on the third day He rose again. He rose again to speak a word endures forever. A word that He will never take back. A true word. A word that does what it says. A word to serve all His neighbors, including you. From His holy tongue and His precious lips to your open ears: "I forgive you all your sins." What could be a better use of the tongue than that? Than the absolution that comes from Him and speaks His forgiveness. Or the word of the Spirit, who testifies to your adoption in Christ against the accusations and lies of Satan. You are a child of God, redeemed by Christ.

Forgiven and redeemed, we disciples pray, "**Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue**" (Ps 120:2). And He does, by taking into Himself the false witness of the world, even to the point of death, death on the cross, and then rising to proclaim forgiveness. And we pray this, too, "**O Lord, open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise**" (Ps 50:15), that life-giving words may flow from Christ through our lips to our neighbor's ears in praise of our God.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
