# Every Word a Gift!

Sermon Preached by Rev. Chuck Cole at St. Johns UMC in Staunton 07/25/2021

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# Exodus 20:16

# New International Version

16 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

# James 3:4-12

# New International Version

4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. 5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Sarah and I once took a course called the Sonship Course. The Sonship Courses purpose is to help individuals understand that as Christian we are adopted as heirs in the family of God, that Christ is our elder Brother and God our Father. As Christians we are loved with an intense love. In the course there is a one-week challenge to discipline the tongue specifically to not gossip, complain, criticize, blame-shift, defend yourself, boast, or deceive others. The goal of the exercise is to tame the tongue and avoid speaking in a sinful or destructive way. Part of the purpose is to grasp that your identity is not dependent on how others perceive you or what you say but in God. I think I did alright on the assignment but I do not think I could say I did perfectly. I remember being told that one time someone did the assignment perfectly. (Can you guess how?) The person did this by refusing to speak to anyone all week. While by not speaking you are going to succeed in not speaking poorly at the same time any good or blessing that may come from your words is cut off as well. That is certainly not the vision God has for our words.

We have all heard the old saying: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Words most definitely can hurt profoundly deeply in us, not only are they painful but they can affect the way we view ourselves and the way we act toward ourselves. They can also affect the way others see us and think about us and interact with us. They can be devastating.

The apostle James gives us a very vivid description of what destruction the tongue can reap if used wrongly. In James 3:4–12 we see the power of the tongue, and the damage it can cause if it is not controlled. James equates the tongue to a rudder of a ship: it can change the direction for everyone. A hurtful word can hinder and derail. He says the tongue is like a blaze that can set a forest on fire! Words can enrage and lead to violence and feed on themselves and they can move and get out of control rapidly inflicting damage over a wide area. James says our tongue is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison”! Our tongue can be like a poisonous snake loaded and ready to strike and inflicting painful damage when it does, And worst of all with our tongue he points out we bless God and curse others made in his Image. But that’s not the way it is supposed to be (James 3:10). As we hurt, injure or degrade another human being we offend God. We are meant to with our tongue a source of life of good water of blessing to bless others as well as God. 1

# In 2 Corinthians Chapter 12 Paul says

# 20 For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. 21 I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged. 2 Corinthians 12:20-21

# Notice that in the first part of the passage the list includes things specific to the tongue slander and gossip along with things which the tongue or pen almost always plays a part in discord, jealousy, rage and disorder. Words are used to divide and curry favor and prove your superiority etc.

# Ephesians 4:29

# English Standard Version

29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

# Ephesians 4:29

# The Message

29 Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift.

I love that image of our words being a gift. Our words can be a weapon that wounds or gift that heals, they can lift up or tear down and even things that are true - in the sense of factual truth - can be unhelpful if they are said without wisdom and love. To love another person as Christ loves them is to strive to make each word a gift to the hearer and in light of our commandment the one being spoken of.

Our commandment for today touches on this most precious gift. It says “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” On face value, this is another commandment that seems simple enough: do not spread a false report about your neighbor and don’t misrepresent someone in a court of law. This commandment is basically on the one hand about perjury, in which someone is accused of something, the court asks you a question about the incident, and you give a false testimony. It is also about not passing on destructive untruths about your neighbor outside of court, in the court of public opinion or in any group of people it calls for very careful discernment when anything negative is spoken about your neighbor.

Like with most commandments the surface of the command is crucially important but just the tip of the Iceberg.

We should be careful with our words for some very practical reasons. Even when speaking with good intent we often do not know what we think we do.

Like with the video with the Gorilla in it we often miss pretty important things because our focus is elsewhere and we make assumptions about what we see and hear. Like in the telephone game our information can get distorted or confused or we can rely on untrustworthy or bad sources.

There is also the problem of the way our brains work. We read or listen or see often by filling in what we think is there and so end up reading or listening to something that has not actually been communicated. This is why I think so often couples end up saying you said this and the other person is like I did not say that. We often see, hear or read what we expect to not necessarily what is written or said.

 For example I will often read a headline, thinking it says one thing, because my brain makes assumptions then as I read the article I think this headline makes no sense and I go back and see it did not say what I thought it said. In those cases the error was corrected. But what about those times I read the headline and move on leaving a false impression and if I say anything about that headline I may be passing something false on. Sometimes this could be inconsequential but other times if it is about a person it could be bearing false witness.

We need to be humble with our words because we often are wrong in our understanding but also the consequences of our words can be devastating to others so we need to respect their power and handle them with great care acknowledging the limitations of our own knowledge.

Let us strive to make our words a gift.

Along with words, and writing in all its forms we also have the relatively new in terms of human history social media - Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok. These means of communication can have tremendous power for good and ill, things posted on social media can take on a life of their own and be harder to control than ordinary speech. If you think the spoken word can spread like a forest words on social media are the mother of all wildfires.

In many cases memes and stories are specifically designed to make us react quickly and comment, like or share before we have a chance to carefully consider its truthfulness or if it is truly beneficial for others. We may be liking or sharing something that bears false witness or does not edify.

Bullies and others can use social media to hurt and harm in extremely powerful ways. Bullies, selfish and self-righteous can use social media to insult, intimidate and harm on a whole new level.

Malevolent actors can use it to push destructive agendas.

Just yesterday I saw a post in a clergy group that asked the simple question do you wear a robe to lead worship? If so when? What about in Summer?

I saw a comment by a fellow clergy person on the Staunton district and so I read a few comments and they were all people just sharing what they personally did. Later I saw that the post had been deleted and the person who posted it said the comments had become contentious and he eventually deleted the post all together. For the internet contentious is mild, and I am not quite sure what this persons level of contentious is, but what was intended to be something good became destructive fairly quickly.

I have considered is social media really worth it? Should I just stop using it?

I have come to the conclusion that because of the huge number of people that use it, it is kind of like television or the telephone. It can be ignored but then a lot of good potential is lost along with avoiding the bad. Also if I am concerned with influencing others which is a fundamental aspect of Christ likeness than it is a means of communication that I need to consider. So I try to keep in my feed voices that use Facebook the way I would like it to be used and to use it well myself.

As we consider social media we need you ask.

Do we obey the ninth commandment on social media? The next time you go to share an article you’ve read or a screenshot of someone’s tweet, ask yourself if you’re being honest in this action. Is the article true and fair? Are you in sharing something misrepresenting someone or something? Are you showing love to someone who carries the image of God—even when you have a firm conviction they are wrong? Are you fulfilling Jesus’s command to love your neighbor as yourself? Or are you simply looking to be “right” and win an argument? Are you being lazy not checking something out before passing it on? God calls us to be honest and not misrepresent someone or something with our speech. Is your post or share a gift to those who will read it?

There is an acronym that may help us to consider our words before they are written, typed or shared to see if they are a gift. The acronym is T-H-I-N-K. Ask your way through these questions.

T - is it True?

H - is it Helpful?

I - is it Inspiring? - If we are thinking in Christian terms is it edifying does it build up.

N - is it Necessary?

K - is it Kind?

Our words are powerful indeed and are worthy of care in use. Our commandment and the scripture more broadly set as a basic principle do not knowingly injure another by passing along a false story. It of course in fact calls us to much more than that. It calls us to use our words to use their power for good to lift up others. Make your words a gift. Amen.