

## **Words of Life: 5. The Power of Words**

**Exodus 20:16; James 1:26**

**March 14, 2021**

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How well do you know the Ten Commandments? In this series, we've looked at most, but not all of them. Here they are (using the Common English Translation): I. You must have no other gods before me. II. Do not make an idol for yourself. III. Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance. IV. Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. V. Honor your father and your mother. VI. Do not kill. VII. Do not commit adultery. VIII. Do not steal. IX. Do not testify falsely against your neighbor. Next week, we will look at the tenth commandment. If you were memorizing, how did you do?

As we've looked at each commandment, we discovered there's more to the Commandment when we look at them through the eyes of Jesus. These are guardrails to keep us from harm and to keep us on the path that leads to abundant LIFE.

Today, we will look at the ninth commandment. Say it with me: **Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.** To understand why this made the ten that God gave to Moses, it's important to know the context. God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. They crossed the Red Sea, and suddenly they were free. None of them had never been free. Everything about their lives and how they interacted with each other had been controlled by the Egyptians. As with any large group of people, there were disagreements and disputes. Almost immediately, there was a court to settle their disputes. At first Moses did this. Then he appointed 70 others to do this because it was more than he could do alone. Within this context, the ninth commandment was saying: Don't say something about your neighbor that isn't true, and don't testify for a friend about something you didn't see them do. In other words, don't lie.

And if was as simple as that: don't lie in the courtroom, we could end this message here and get on with our day. But there is more to this commandment. Was there ever a time when you were falsely accused by a sibling who told mom or dad you did something you didn't do? Maybe so they wouldn't get into trouble. Or did someone in school ever accuse you of something they didn't see you do? Or in your workplace, blamed for something you didn't do? And as a result, you got into trouble or even went to jail. It happens. Last year, I read Bryan Stevenson's book, *Just Mercy*, which describes his work with the Equal Justice Initiative that has been successful in overturning guilty verdicts for persons in death row who had been falsely accused. It happens.

In fact, at the center of our faith is Jesus who was wrongly convicted of a crime he didn't commit as a result of false testimony. **The chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they could put him to death. They didn't find anything they could use from the many false witnesses who were willing to come forward.** All the good that Jesus did and yet many were willing to step forward and say false things about Jesus. According to Jewish law, it was necessary to have two witnesses who agreed, and they didn't have that. [slide] **But finally they found two who said, "This man said, 'I can destroy God's temple and rebuild it in three day.'"** Jesus actually said that, but he wasn't talking about the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus called his body a temple and said this temple would be destroyed and three days later raised. A comment taken out of context and used against him, and he was convicted of blasphemy and put to death.

Most of us will not end up in a courtroom, so how might this commandment apply to us? Surely, we haven't forgotten the last election season and all the stories about various candidates and

their character that were shared on social media. It reached a point where it was hard to know what's true. Anybody else get tired of hearing how bad each candidate was? Our daughter got her college degree in political science with a focus on political campaigns and she tells me the reason the political ads are so negative is because they work. They are intended to plant this seed of doubt – and we tend to remember the bad stuff even when it's not supported by the facts. And we don't just remember it, we pass it on.

When I was in college, I remember other students talking about a certain teacher to avoid. But when it came time to sign up for classes, that teacher was unavoidable. One the first day, I already felt intimidated and had resigned myself to getting a bad grade in the class. But one day, I got up enough courage to visit her office during office hours, and I asked for her help. I told her I had to pass the class and I wasn't sure that I could, and she agreed to work with me whenever I wanted. She said, "I will help you pass this class." I'll admit she was never my favorite teacher, but she was nothing at all like her reputation – which I later learned came about because of a student who failed her class.

It's easy to talk about people and share whatever we've heard about them. You don't know if it's true, but you heard it from someone who heard it from someone. But is it true – and even if it is, did the person give permission to have this information shared? There have been times when I've received an email, asking me to pray for an individual who was going through either a medical issue or a relationship issue – and when I called to check on that person, I discovered the information relayed to me wasn't accurate. Remember the telephone game. A group of people sat in a circle and one person whispers a message in the next person's ear and then is passed to around the circle. Was the message ever the same by the time it reached the last person?

Falsely testifying against your neighbor has an impact. A survey by the Pew Research found that 32% of teens had false rumors spread about them online and a majority had been the target of cyberbullying. Maybe you've had people say things about you that weren't true. Usually, I'm able to brush such comments aside, but a few years ago, I was receiving so many online comments and threats from a particular individual that I went to the police and asked the officer to call that individual on the phone and only then did that person stop. The things we say and pass along have impact.

The New Testament Christians also struggled with this. James, the brother of Jesus – I wonder what he learned from how his brother was treated: **If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion (religion) is worthless.** If you use your tongue to bear false witness, your religion has not taken root in your life. And then he says: **Think about this: a small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire... With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sister, it just shouldn't be this way!** In other words, our words have the ability to set fires that will destroy other people – and that's a problem. James offers a solution. When I was in elementary school, I learned if I ever caught on fire my first instinct would be to run which would only increase the flames. So we were taught to STOP, DROP and ROLL.

Here's his solution: **Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry.** We need to stop, drop, and roll.

Stop: How many times have we let loose with our mouths before we engaged our brains. We see this happen with email. I'm angry about something, so I type out a message and I quickly hit

“send”. I didn’t proofread it. I didn’t wait. I reacted out of emotion and what results is a mess. Instead of hitting the send button, it might be wise to hit save and read it the next day or ask someone you trust to read it before you send it. I’ve deleted a lot of messages without ever sending. How many of us have never forgotten hurtful words spoken to us in a moment of anger? Proverbs 12:18 **The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.** We cannot undo our words. Stop and engage the Spirit.

Drop: To drop is to assume the posture of prayer. Seek God’s perspective in every situation. And that can be hard, especially when emotion gets in the way. Recently, Amanda came into my workspace at home. I was in the middle of something, and she was excited to tell me something. But before she could tell me, I waved her off. What I should have said was – I can’t talk about this now, but I’d really like to do so in a few minutes. If only I had let the Holy Spirit lead me. But did I? Why is it that we often hurt the people who mean the most to us? And once we say it, it is nearly impossible to say I didn’t mean it.

There was a time when the authorities brought to Jesus a woman caught in adultery and asked Jesus, is she right or wrong? Before he ever speaks, what does the Bible say? Look it up – John 8. Jesus bent down and started writing something on the ground. He was taking time, assuming the posture of prayer, communicating with God. And when Jesus bent down it was indicating something else. In this culture where a man always stood above a woman and a woman always bowed to a man, Jesus was placing himself below the woman – he humbled himself – took time to understand the woman. And then the Bible says, Jesus stood up and he does not speak against her like the others. He speaks for her. Was she right or wrong? Adultery was wrong. She was wrong, but Jesus spoke for her. He took her defense and then he spoke God’s redemptive word to her. He did not condemn her. Before we engage the mouth, engage the Spirit – stop, drop, and...

Roll: speak God’s purpose into a life. That’s what Jesus was doing. Think about the words that you use. You have the power to bless – the power to bring life.

There’s a story about a 16<sup>th</sup> century priest named Philip Neiri. One day a woman came to him for confession for her sin of gossip. And for her act of penance, he told her to go home, get a feather pillow, and return to the church. Then he told her to climb the steps to the bell tower, tear open the pillowcase and release the feathers. Of course, the feathers were carried away by gravity and the wind. She returned to the priest and told him she had done as he asked. He said, there is one more thing and then you will be forgiven. Take your pillowcase and pick up all the feathers. Only then did she realize the harm that she had done with her words.

To repent is to think differently and then to have a change of heart that leads to a change of behavior. Let us be people whose words communicate grace and love.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 14, 2021**

**Weekly Prayer:** God, it can be hard to admit that we are not always honest. So, today we confess our dishonesty. Let your Spirit move in us and convict us when we are wrong and gently guide us to the truth. When we have lied, give us the courage to confess our dishonesty and make it right. Thank you again for your unending grace. Change our hearts, O God. They are yours. Amen.

## **Monday, March 15**

### **Scripture: Exodus 20:15; Jeremiah 7:4-11**

Do not steal.

Don't trust in lies: "This is the LORD's temple! The LORD's temple! The LORD's temple!" No, if you truly reform your ways and your actions; if you treat each other justly; if you stop taking advantage of the immigrant, orphan, or widow; if you don't shed the blood of the innocent in this place, or go after other gods to your own ruin, only then will I dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave long ago to your ancestors for all time. And yet you trust in lies that will only hurt you. Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, sacrifice to Baal and go after other gods that you don't know, and then come and stand before me in this temple that bears my name, and say, "We are safe," only to keep on doing all these detestable things? Do you regard this temple, which bears my name, as a hiding place for criminals? I can see what's going on here, declares the LORD.

**Observation:** We may limit the 8th commandment to certain actions (such as breaking into a person's house or car). We may confine it by situations: "It's not 'stealing' if the other party can afford to lose what I take." But the prophet Jeremiah spoke with an invading Babylonian army close to Jerusalem. He said, "If you steal" (no qualifiers) you shouldn't think even faithful Temple (church) worship will keep you safe. (See James 5:1-5 and Exodus 23:4-5.)

**Application:** Why would people repeat "This the Lord's temple!" three times like a magical spell? An earlier episode might explain it: The deliverance of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. in Hezekiah's reign had become almost legendary and led to the idea that Jerusalem was untouchable because of the sanctuary (see 2 Kings 18:13–19:37). Are you ever still tempted to think that some past blessing from God guarantees continual safety, whether you've upheld your covenant with God or not?

**Prayer:** God, everything in the world is ultimately yours (Psalm 50:9-12). Help me deepen my grasp of the folly of trying to cut corners to increase my little pile of stuff, and to live with your profound integrity. Amen.

## **Tuesday, March 16**

### **Scripture: Isaiah 10:1-2**

Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees and keep writing harmful laws to deprive the needy of their rights and to rob the poor among my people of justice; to make widows their loot; to steal from orphans!

**Observation:** The prophet Isaiah used the words "rob" and "steal" to describe pronouncing wicked decrees and writing harmful laws. That must have stung. It likely made some Israelites angry, those who justified unjust acts toward needy people, widows and orphans by saying, "It's not wrong—it's legal." Powerful people still sometimes draw up laws, not to foster equal justice, but to try to legitimize injustice.

**Application:** Isaiah didn't only address a few unjust leaders. While God holds elders, judges, and prophets responsible for misleading people, those who follow cannot claim innocence. There is a certain codependency between corrupt leaders and corrupted people. One cannot exist without the other. How do you seek to be a responsible follower in choosing which leaders you follow in business, politics, entertainment, and church life?

**Prayer:** God of all, awaken me to any places where I use “legal” as an excuse for something I know down deep isn’t “right.” Grow me into a responsible follower, careful to choose leaders of integrity. Amen.

## Wednesday, March 17

### **Scripture: Matthew 19:16-22; Luke 19:1-10**

A man approached him and said, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus said, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There’s only one who is good. If you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments.” The man said, “Which ones?” Then Jesus said, *“Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony. Honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.”* The young man replied, “I’ve kept all these. What am I still missing?” Jesus said, “If you want to be complete, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me.” But when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn’t because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today.” So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Human One came to seek and save the lost.”

**Observation:** Today’s two Scripture readings show that Jesus expanded the 8th commandment’s reach, as he did with the 6th and 7th commandments. (He didn’t quote “Do not steal” in the Sermon on the Mount but did in his reply in Matthew 19:18.) There was no suggestion that the rich young man got his many possessions dishonestly, but Jesus challenged him to use them to help others. Zacchaeus, whose wealth sprang from being a Roman tax collector, responded to Jesus by voluntarily sharing much of what he owned.

**Application:** John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, stated his grasp of Jesus’ teaching in his sermon “The Use of Money.” He condensed it to three rules: gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. He added that the first two rules were futile unless the third was followed. How highly do you rank giving in your personal values as compared to gaining and saving? What changes might it take to make you more like Zacchaeus than the wealthy young man who “went away saddened” from Jesus?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, calling you “Lord” means more than putting my name on a church’s member list. I want to make you Lord of my time, my ambitions, my money—my whole life. Amen.

## Thursday, March 18

### **Scripture: Exodus 20:16, 23:1-3**

Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

Don't spread false rumors. Don't plot with evil people to act as a lying witness. Don't take sides with important people to do wrong. When you act as a witness, don't stretch the truth to favor important people. But don't privilege unimportant people in their lawsuits either.

**Observation:** Israel first understood the 9th commandment (like many of the other commandments) as limited to a specific problem. The Hebrew terms used here relate to the proceedings of a trial court. Furthermore, the language here points to a particular type of false statement: false accusation. Exodus 23 stressed the same concern but added that it was more likely for false witnesses to support powerful people. We see in history that ignoring this command makes justice not just difficult, but impossible.

**Application:** Like "do not steal," this commandment might feel unnecessary. No respectable person would testify falsely, right? Of course not. Unless . . . (and then many of us can compose a variety of justifications, where something technically "false" serves a good purpose.) To what extent would you agree with ancient Israel that maybe we should reserve honesty only for legal courtroom proceedings?

**Prayer:** God of truth, I often hear myself and others talk about "white lies." Help me to make truth the default approach, so that I have to think hard about whether any lie is "white." Amen.

## Friday, March 19

### Scripture: Matthew 5:33-37

"Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: *Don't make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord.* But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it's God's throne. You must not pledge by the earth, because it's God's footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it's the city of the great king. And you must not pledge by your head, because you can't turn one hair white or black. Let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one."

**Observation:** In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he extended the reach of truthful witness far beyond just courtroom testimony. His words about "pledging" weren't at all about filling out a church budget pledge card, but about another way of using words to mislead. Other Jewish people sometimes tried to evade the curse incurred in broken oaths by swearing by something less than God. Jesus stressed the value of honesty in what lies behind our words as well as in the words themselves.

**Application:** Psychologists and linguists note that sometimes it's hard to make our questions as well as our statements direct (At times "Do you like this outfit?" may mask the real question: "Do you still love me?"). How can you, in both your questions and your answers, grow in your ability to let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no? What fears make it hardest for you to avoid evasive words and speak plainly?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, when I was a kid, I learned that keeping my fingers crossed made it "okay" for me to use deceptive words. Teach me how to avoid a grown-up version of that kind of thinking as I speak. Amen.

**Saturday, March 20**

**Scripture: Ephesians 4:14-16, 21-25**

As a result, we aren't supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ, who is the head. The whole body grows from him, as it is joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments. The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part.

Since you really listened to him and you were taught how the truth is in Jesus, change the former way of life that was part of the person you once were, corrupted by deceitful desires. Instead, renew the thinking in your mind by the Spirit and clothe yourself with the new person created according to God's image in justice and true holiness. Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, *Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor* because we are parts of each other in the same body.

**Observation:** Sadly, some Christians think telling the truth and being loving are opposites. They embarrass or humiliate others in the ways they "tell the truth." They defend anger, contempt, or sarcasm as just "telling it like it is." But can you be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature? That's why 1 Corinthians 13:6 said that love "isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth."

**Application:** To fail to tell someone else the truth is not loving. To tell them the truth in angry or belittling ways is also not loving. Ephesians said one key to helping each other grow is "speaking the truth in love." Which do you find harder most of the time: speaking the truth at all, or doing so in love? What can help you grow toward maturity in both of those dimensions? (You may need help with this—many of us do. Contact one of our pastors if you would like a referral to a therapist who can help you with this.)

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you honestly challenge me to grow more like you. You give me a climate of love and grace in which to do so. Help me become more like you in the ways I speak the truth in love. Amen.