

“Words”

Exodus 20:16; Ephesians 4:29 ¹

When I finally got the hang of it, I really enjoyed being the Officer of the Deck, or the OOD, on a Destroyer. I enjoyed being the OOD at sea, but I think what I really liked the most was guiding the ship six miles down the Cooper River from the pier to the open ocean. There was a wonderful sense of power that came with speaking a word or two and watching a huge warship begin to move in answer to my command.

While it was exciting to watch the ship’s progress down the channel and plan for what needed to happen next, my mind also had a rearward focus. I continually wondered how things were going deep in the stern of the ship in a fairly cramped space known as “After Steering.” The OOD worries about After Steering because the greatest calamity in restricted waters is loss of steering. If the OOD loses the ability to control the rudder, he has very little control of the ship, and it is likely to run aground.

The steering gear of a ship is its single most important system, so important, in fact, that it has normal and alternate hydraulic pumps, normal and alternate electrical power, emergency power, and can even be operated laboriously by hand. Why? Because the rudder, though relatively small, directs and controls the course of the ship, determining its safety or its destruction.

Did you know that the importance of a ship’s rudder is actually addressed in the Bible? The third chapter of James puts it like this: *“When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. 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. 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”* (James 3:3-6).

Wow. Those are strong words about the tongue, aren’t they? And they bring us to the Ninth of the Ten Commandments: *“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor”* (Exodus 20:16). We do well to remember that the Ten Commandments are not Ten Suggestions, as though God said to us, “Here are some ideas I want you to check out and see whether they work for you.” No, as Master Designer of all that is, God tells us, “Here are some principles that will make your life work if you follow them. If you don’t follow them, your life is going to run aground. I guarantee it.”

We usually call “false testimony,” or “false witness,” by a less flattering name—lying. **Lying was the original source of every evil in the world:** *“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”* (Genesis 3:4-5). Whether it was Satan’s lie in the Garden of Eden, Emperor Nero’s lies about the early Christians, Hitler’s lies about the Jews, or the lies that you and I tell today, lying is always destructive.

God hates lying because lying hurts God’s children. The Bible tells us, *“Like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is one who deceives their neighbor and says, ‘I was only joking!’”*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 16, 2015.

(Proverbs 26:18-19). Along this line, the rabbis taught that “the gossiper talks in Rome and kills in Syria.”²

Proverbs tells us that “*There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community*” (6:16-19).³

We may teach our children the jingle, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” but even as we do we know it isn’t true. The truth is that we can and we do hurt each other terribly and permanently by what we say.

Sometimes as I listen to people talk I wonder whether we’ll have anything at all to talk about when we get to heaven. I doubt that we’ll be running down the administration. We won’t be able to talk about how things have “gone to the dogs” or about how it used to be in “the good old days.” The weather will be perfect. We won’t have any aches and pains. We won’t be gossiping and sniping at each other because God is going to remove that poison from our systems.

Well, if you take away gunning at the administration, griping about the mess things are in, grumbling about the weather, groaning about our aches and pains, and gossiping about others, you’ve just about completely eliminated many people’s ability to carry on a conversation.

The Bible tells us that “*When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise*” (Proverbs 10:19, NLT). To put that another way, silence is good and talking is dangerous. I call this “the CNN factor.”

It seems to me that the invention of 24/7 news has led to much that is unhelpful. If you have to be saying something all the time, the odds are very great that you’ll make much of little, saying things you’d never have said had you taken time to think about them.

Our own conversation is like that, too. People who talk a lot frequently succumb to the CNN factor and find themselves saying things that would be better left unsaid. I suggest to you, for example, that there is very little difference between repeating what you know to be false and repeating what you don’t know to be true.

Shadow has been cast on many a good reputation by questions such as “Have you heard about so-and-so?” The answer being “No,” the questioner says, “Oh well, the less said, the better.” And without saying anything definite, the deceiving effect of innuendo and false witness has been set in motion. We can bear false witness against our neighbor by a shrug, a gesture, by the tone of our voice, or even by silence.

Even the apparent kindness by which we feign concern over the failure or inability of another can be just as damaging as lying. Pay attention when you hear or use the words “bless her heart,” or “bless his heart.” In Southern culture, those words are quite often the introduction to disparagement and insult; and the “juice” in our juicy morsels of misinformation is the very life-blood of the persons of whom we speak.

² David Hazony, *The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life* (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 216. Those who betray national secrets, most recently Edward Snowden, give painful reality to this saying.

³ David Hazony writes a good bit about the implications of lying for the fabric of community itself.

As Iago said in Shakespeare's *Othello*, "Good name, in man and woman, my dear Lord, is the immediate jewel of their souls. Who steals my purse, steals trash; 'tis something, nothing; 'twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands. *But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him, and makes me poor indeed.*"

It's actually more immoral to bear false witness than to counterfeit checks or money. The checks and the money can be caught and destroyed, but a lie once released can never be stopped again. I agree with David Hazony's contention that "the protection of reputations is every bit as crucial if not more so, as the protection of property. Community depends on mutual responsibility, which in turn depends on mutual trust, which in turn depends on reputation. By fostering a discourse of slander, the false witness threatens the very foundations of community."⁴

Consider a pillow full of downy feathers. Once I have released them, I can't control the path of their flight. I can't control where they land. Nor can I ever gather all of them up again. And that's what the tongue does—it releases "feathers" of death that can never be completely regathered and arrows of death that can never be recalled. God will forgive us if we sincerely ask for forgiveness, and we may even be able to be reconciled with the person or the persons we've hurt. But some of the damage can never be undone.

My friend, do you—or do I—ever allow yourself to be critical, to speak disparagingly about others, pointing out their faults, making them the object of your ridicule, your sarcasm, your so-called wit, or your cloak-and-dagger compassion? Many a person who engages in such behavior would be shocked to be called a malicious liar whose tongue is fueled by the fires of hell, but the Bible says that this is precisely the situation, and at one time or another, every one of us is guilty.⁵

So what are we to do? Let me quickly suggest six things that will help us keep the Ninth Commandment. **The first thing we need to do is to open our hearts to deeper works of God's grace.** It's been said that "A person's character is the inscription that habits have engraved on the heart, and words translate this inscription." The Bible puts that idea this way: "*The mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned*" (Matthew 12:34-37).

Even with such stern warning, it is by no means easy to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth . . . even to ourselves. You and I are unfortunately very likely to tell our stories in such a way that we ourselves come out of them well. We tell our stories in such a way that we ourselves are put in the best possible light. In telling a story, we're quite likely to put little or no blame on ourselves and attempt to locate all the blame with someone else.

I suspect that we all know how easy it is to exaggerate, to make statements that are not *quite* true, and to twist the truth just a *little* bit to protect ourselves. And the only way we get past this is for God to do a deeper work of grace in our hearts.

And so it is that the most fundamental of lies is the lie that we tell to ourselves, about ourselves. It is a lie that justifies in our own lives what we condemn in others. It is a lie that demands from others what we ourselves would never attempt to fulfill. It is a lie that makes us blind to things in our lives that are glaringly and painfully obvious to others.

⁴ Hazony, p. 213.

⁵ James 1:26, 3:6.

If we're going to be truly honest, our conversation with God will go something like this: "It's not my brother nor my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. It's not my father nor my mother, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." As someone pointed out, *there is so much bad in the best of us, and so much good in the worst of us, that it ill becomes any of us to talk about the rest of us.*

The second thing we can do is to learn to be silent. The greatest skill of the tongue . . . *is not to use it.* And what are we doing when we're silent? We're listening.

Have you ever wanted to know the secret of being considered to be a good conversationalist? Well here it is. The secret to being the best conversationalist on the block has nothing to do with having the latest gossip. The secret of being a good conversationalist is to be the best *listener* on the block; but there's more to this than just listening.

We also need to make a conscious decision to obey the inner nudges and whispers of God's Spirit as He seeks to do the very thing we ourselves can never do: to tame our tongues. It's really not very complicated. When the Spirit says "Watch it!" then watch it. When the Spirit says, "Don't do that!" then don't do it. When the Spirit says "Don't say that!" then don't say it. When the Spirit says "Bite your tongue," then put your teeth into it. That's really all there is to it.⁶

Third, be an encourager. The Bible tells us, "*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen*" (Ephesians 4:29).

Betty Hudson is a member of a former church I served, and she was so practiced at this that I believe every word I have ever heard her speak was been one of encouragement to or about someone. And the wonderful thing is that the encouragement we offer to our family and friends can frequently become, by God's grace, a self-fulfilling prophecy of growth and achievement. As the Bible puts it, "*The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life*" (Proverbs 15:4, NLT)

Fourth, pray for persons you're tempted to talk about. It is a cardinal rule of the Spirit that we don't pray for people we talk about, and we don't talk about people we pray for. The Bible says, "***Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs***" (Proverbs 10:12). Prayer changes things. Prayer changes events. Prayer changes people. Prayer changes us.

Fifth, protect the Body of Christ. Gossip and tale-bearing are cancers that destroy the Body of Christ more quickly than just about anything else in Satan's arsenal. And because this is true, our response to them needs to be decisive, as it would be with any other life-threatening situation.

It's at this point that I want to invite your attention to the lavender insert in your order of worship. One side of this handout lists some of the most important points from the book, *Love Covers*,⁷ and the other side lists some of the most important ways each of us can build Christian community within our fellowship. I don't have time to go over those now, but I urge you to read both of those pages carefully. It is not an exaggeration to say that they just might change your life.

⁶ Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father's Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998), p. 220.

⁷ Paul Billheimer, *Love Covers: A Biblical Design for Unity in the Body of Christ* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1981).

Gordon MacDonald told a story that helps to make this point: “One time, twenty or so years ago, I was on a speaking tour with a close personal friend. As we walked down the street, the name of a common friend came up, and I said something unkind about that person. It was sarcastic. It was cynical. It was a put-down. My friend stopped, turned, and faced me until his face was right in front of mine. With deep, slow words he said, “*Gordon, a man who says he loves God would not say a thing like that about a friend.*”

“He could have put a knife into my ribs, and the pain would not have been any more. But you know something? There have been ten thousand times in the last twenty years when I’ve been tempted to say something unkind about a brother or sister, and I hear my friend’s voice say, “**Gordon, a man who says he loves God would not speak in such a way about a friend.**”⁸ If every one of us did this every time gossip began, gossip would soon cease, and an incredible spiritual power would be released within the Body of Christ.

Finally, open your heart to *still deeper works of grace.* That’s where we began, and that’s where we end up, too. . . . A monk told his monastic leader, “I am troubled in spirit, and I want to leave the monastery.”

The older man said, “Why?”

The younger man replied, “I have heard unedifying stories about one of the brothers.”

“Are the stories true?”

“Yes, Father. The brother who told me is a man of trust.”

The older man answered, “The brother who told you is not a man of trust. For if he was so, he would not have told you these stories. When God heard the cry of the men of Sodom, he did not believe it until he had gone down and seen it with his own eyes.”

The younger man said, “I, too, have seen it with my own eyes.”

When the older man heard this, he bent down and picked up a wisp of straw, and then asked, “What is this?”

“It’s a piece of straw.”

Then the older man reached up and touched the roof of the cell and asked, “What is this?”

“It is the beam that holds up the room.”

“Then take it into your heart that your sins are like this beam, and that your brother’s sins are like this wisp of straw” (Matthew 7:1-5).⁹

And so it is with us. The Ninth Commandment invites us to confess *our own* sin, claim God’s forgiveness, and learn to open our hearts to one another. Let’s learn to be silent. Let’s become encouragers. Let’s protect the Body. Let’s learn to pray more deeply. As the Psalmist prayed, “*Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips*” (Psalm 141:3).

And why do we do all these things? “*So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. . . . Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work*” (Ephesians 4:13-16). And that, my friends, is Good News.

⁸ Gordon MacDonald, “Feeling As God Feels,” *Preaching Today* tape #196.

⁹ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Owen Chadwick, in *Western Asceticism* (Westminster, 1983).

Love Covers: A Biblical Design for Unity in the Body of Christ

Paul Billheimer (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1981)

“Love covers over all wrongs” (Proverbs 10:12); *“Love covers over a multitude of sins”* (1 Peter 4:8).

1. “It is not as important, in any controversy, that the wisest decisions be made, either practically or doctrinally, as it is that the right spirit be maintained. Love, like other graces of the Spirit, grows only under testing” (p. 34).
2. “As with all other controversial viewpoints on nonessentials to salvation, the question is not primarily who is right and who is wrong. The question is not even who is most nearly right. The question is: Are we sufficiently mature in *agape* love to accept as our brothers [and sisters] those whom God has accepted as His [children]?” (p. 40).
3. “Since disunity in the Body probably sends more people to hell than open sin, breaking fellowship over differences in those standards or practices which are not actually necessary to salvation is a greater sin than the supposed error which precipitated the breach. This is not to claim that honest difference of opinion is wrong. What is wrong is the deficiency in love which allows the difference to divide” (p. 42).
4. “After all, the most important question is not who is right or who is wrong—not even who is most nearly right. The important question is: What are we most interested in—proving our point and promoting our own theological concept, thus saving our theological face? Or do we desire to be the answer to Christ’s prayer for unity by healing the wounds of His body, and making possible the outpouring of His Spirit on a world-wide scale?” (p. 53).
5. “Are we sufficiently mature in *agape* love to accept those whom He accepts? Or are we so egotistic that our opinion in non-essentials is more important to us than unity with God’s family and ours? Are we more interested in maintaining our point of view than in helping to bring unity within Christ’s Body?” (p. 66).
6. “No controversial viewpoint is intrinsically divisive. All controversy, discord, or division resides, not in the points of dissent or disagreement, but in the parties themselves. And where nonessentials are concerned, it is all because of a lack of love. All fragmentation or breaking of fellowship, all antagonism, occurs only when there is insufficient love on one side or both. Breaches in the Body over nonessentials are caused not primarily by error or even by differences of opinion on doubtful questions, but by one thing and one alone: a lack of *agape* love. I believe this lack of love is a greater sin in God’s sight than the alleged error which triggered the break” (p. 74).
7. “Is it possible to be right theoretically and theologically while at the same time being wrong in spirit? The important question again is posed: Which is more important, to be right in opinion or right in spirit? . . . God never blesses lovelessness” (pp. 87-88).
8. “Perhaps you are wondering how we are to reach the required maturity in love. I know of no other way except by a deeper work of the Cross, a deeper death to all the life of nature and self. When we are truly willing, God will order the exact set of circumstances that will slay the flesh and increase growth in *agape* love. Love grows mostly by exercise. For example, accepting differences of opinion without breaking fellowship is one way to produce this growth” (p. 89).
9. Like sand in the oyster shell, the irritations in your life are conditioning you for the pearls of greater spiritual depth and usefulness that lie ahead.
10. ***“But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be”*** (1 Corinthians 12:18, see also 13:4-7).

Four Things YOU can do to build Christian Community

1. PRAY

- Pray earnestly to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.
- Pray that God will give you a heart that is filled with compassion and with zeal for the Great Commission.
- Don't be as concerned about what someone else should be doing as with what YOU could be doing if your life were fully yielded to the Lord (Matthew 7:3-5).

2. GUARD YOUR TONGUE

- *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen”* (Ephesians 4:29).
- *“Remember that you will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word you have spoken. By your own words you will be acquitted; by your own words you will be condemned”* (Matthew 12:36-37).
- *“Remember that if you do not keep a tight rein on your tongue, your religion is worthless”* (James 1:26).

3. ACHIEVE A CLEAR SPIRIT

- If you have a concern or a grievance with any other person in our community, pray diligently, study Matthew 18:15-20 and Matthew 5:9, and go to speak with that person according to these principles of scripture.
- If you are aware of someone else who has a grievance with you, pray diligently, study Matthew 5:23-24 and Matthew 5:9, and go to speak with that person according to these principles of scripture.
- Do not let a “root of bitterness” (Hebrews 12:15) grow in your heart about anything that has happened. This is YOUR responsibility, God being your helper.

4. BE TRUSTWORTHY

- Learn the governing documents of our community inside and out.
- Follow both the letter and the spirit of these documents.
- Over-report rather than under-report.
- *Process is more important than outcome.*
- A good decision made through a bad process is a bad decision.
- BUILD TRUST, BUILD TRUST, BUILD TRUST.

*The Community of Faith is composed of those persons
who witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God,
who embody the life of the Kingdom in daily experience, and
who continually seek to enlarge the compass of the Kingdom in the world.*