

“Tell the Truth”
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Ephesians 4:25
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In the midst of his description of Christian ethics and the Christian way of life, Paul says this:

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.”

Earlier in this same section of Ephesians, in v. 15 of this same chapter 4, Paul had said a similar thing:

“...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...”

We are to be and to live as people of the truth and people of love for the sake of others! Once again, in order to impress upon our minds, the ubiquitous presence of the Ten Commandments in the Bible I am citing the 9th commandment not from either of the renditions of the Ten Commandments – that in Exodus 20 or that in Deuteronomy 5 – but from a statement in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Here the commandment is not rendered in the same words – “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” – but in their equivalent, that is, in words with the same meaning. Here not in the negative form only – “Thou shalt not...” but in both the positive and negative form: putting away falsehood and speaking the truth.

After leaving his long ministry in the village of Olney, John Newton, the celebrated hymn writer, former slave ship captain, became the minister of a London parish, St. Mary Woolnoth. He preached his first sermon in his new parish on Ephesians 4:15: “speaking the truth in love.” He began this way:

“The Bible is the grand repository of the truths that it will be the business and the pleasure of my life to set before you. It is the complete system of divine truth to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken with impunity. Every attempt to disguise or soften any branch of this truth in order to accommodate it to the prevailing taste around us either to avoid the displeasure or court the favor of our fellow mortals must be an affront to the majesty of God and an act of treachery to men. My conscience bears me witness that I mean to speak the truth among you.” [Cited in Aitken, *John Newton*, 272]

He then went on to make clear that his preaching would be useless unless he spoke the truth in love. He concluded his sermon by asking his parishioners to pray for his ministry that it might be made effective to the saving of souls precisely by his speaking the truth in love.

Off to a good start we would say. However, though the congregation received the sermon warmly, Newton wanted to extend its influence by sending a copy of it to every house in the

parish, to many who would not have attended church on that first Sunday morning of his ministry. His intention, of course, when he ordered that a copy be sent to each household, was that it would be sent to them free of charge. The printer, however, had other plans. He sent the sermon together with a bill for six pence – not a negligible amount of money in those days – and the fact that they were being charged for the sermon and charged so much caused a great deal of resentment. Newton was embarrassed and had to scramble to undo the damage.

The problem was caused by deceit. It wasn't necessarily a lie in the ordinary sense of the word. The printer didn't tell Newton that he was going to send it free of charge and then charged for it. But he certainly knew that he didn't have the minister's approval for what he was doing and probably knew very well that he wouldn't get it if he asked. So, he didn't ask and sent the bill. Both the minister and the congregation accordingly felt that they had been lied to: the parish thought that the minister wasn't speaking the truth in love, he was speaking it for money; and the minister that the printer had ruined his effort to speak to the congregation by hiding the fact that he intended to charge a tidy sum for each copy of the sermon.

A perfect illustration of the way in which the truth is battered, hidden, misused, just as often or more often than outright lies are spoken. We all have more than enough experience of this, do we not? We know how easy it is to exaggerate the truth to make a better story or to make ourselves look better than otherwise we might. We know how easily we hide the truth if it is not to our advantage. A statistical report is to be sent by every member congregation of the PCA to the denominational offices every year. There are many, many churches that do not report their statistics. And, if you know human nature, you know largely why that is; the statistics do not reflect well on the minister. He would rather people guess what the size of his congregation is than that they see how small it is. He hides the truth in other words. We know how easy it is to believe a story that *we want to be true*, even if we have little reason to think *that it is true*. We know how easy it is to speak the truth, indeed what a craving we find in our hearts to speak the truth, if it involves a juicy story about someone else and so, in some way, makes us look better in comparison (perhaps the principle reason for gossip). No one could honestly say that we are speaking the truth in love, though we may lie to ourselves and concoct some reason in our minds why it is important for others to hear what we have learned about our neighbor. How many times have we encountered the truth of William Blake's famous lines:

The truth that's told with bad intent
Beats any lie you can invent.

Any thoughtful Christian knows that we can bear false witness with the truth as sure as we can do that with a lie. And, of course, there are the lies, the host of lies and the world of lies that are spoken every day. Lies, we think, make our lives easier, get us out of trouble, make us look better in the sight of others, and so on. Excuses abound for telling lies and they seem persuasive when people don't know, don't believe, or forget that God knows and cares whether we tell the truth. How many outright lies have we told in the course of our lives? Little lies and big lies: whether telling our mother that we brushed our teeth when we did no such thing, or telling a fellow Christian that we were praying for them when we had never offered a single ardent prayer to God on their behalf, or writing down that number on the taxable income line that we know is not an true statement of our taxable earnings.

What is our problem with the truth? Why do we misuse it as often as we do? Why do we shove it, deny it, or put it to harmful use – that is, use the truth as if it were a lie – as often as we do. Well there are many reasons, to be sure, but the profound answer to that question is that we are sinners. I don't mean by that merely that we do wrong things, even that we find it easy to do wrong things. That is true, of course, but it does not go deep enough. No, by "sin" I mean what the Bible means: not simply sins, the misdeeds that characterize our daily life, but Sin with a capital "S," this "x factor" within us that predisposes us not only not to do what is right, but to prefer to do what is wrong, *often to love to do what is wrong*. What else can possibly explain why there is so much untruth abroad in the world and, alas, even in our own lives, and why so rarely when the truth is spoken is it actually spoken for the sake of love and not spoken proudly or harshly or selfishly. I suspect that if we thought carefully and honestly about our speech, we would have to admit that more often than not what comes out of our mouth is something less, often much less, than the truth – real truth, truth we know to be true – spoken in genuine love.

Take, for example, the Lord's famous warning that we refrain from judging others – usually of course we do not keep our judgments to ourselves but find a way to share them with others – lest we be held to the same standard in God's judgment that we have imposed on others. Yikes! Have you thought about that, seriously thought about that? Remember Francis Schaeffer's observation that the Lord could condemn us seven times over simply by hanging a little tape recorder around our necks, play back all that we have said in criticism of others, and then judge us by holding us to the same standard by which we had judged others. Of course, the Lord doesn't need a tape recorder; he knows everything we have said about others and knows precisely in what ways we have in those judgments condemned ourselves.

Johann Albrecht Bengel, the 18th century German pietist, one of the true geniuses of biblical commentary, has a four-word comment on that text in his Latin original. What does the Lord mean when he says "Judge not..." since it is perfectly obvious that we must make judgments about people; indeed, the Word of God teaches us to make certain judgments about people. Says Bengel, the judgment the Lord forbids is judgment made *sine scientia, necessitate, amore*. The judgment the Lord forbids is judgment made without *knowledge* – how often do we rush to judgment without knowing all the facts, having heard but one side of the story? – judgment made without *necessity* – do I need to make a judgment about this person and this situation and do I *need* to make such a judgment; after all, is it any of my business? – and judgment made without *love*, that is am I thinking and speaking in compassion, in the service of the true interest of the other person, would he or she be able to tell that I actually care for them and want the best for them, that I am actually grieved that they are in the situation in which they find themselves? Am I speaking the way I would want someone else to speak about me or to me if I had done a similar thing?

That is what it means to keep the 9th commandment and to tell the truth and to put away falsehood. We can tell the truth with false motives. In such cases we are being false with the truth in another way. We can lie. Or we can tell the truth only with right motives. How little of that is there in this world! How much harm is done by the truth; how little real good. And how much harm is done by outright lies. Think about this, brothers and sisters, and you will know only too well how far you have still to go in the Christian life! Why do we find it so hard simply

to shut up and stop talking about other people? Because both you and I know that we would be absolutely mortified to have so much of what we say about others played back for others to hear. Pascal never spoke truer words than when he said that if everyone only knew what we had said about them behind their backs, we wouldn't have four friends left in the world!

Here is Augustine, a man who, of all Christian men, took great care to guard his tongue when speaking of others. Jerome, his contemporary, never learned that godly art. And that is why it has been said that Jerome was as unlikely to keep a friend as Augustine was to lose one!

“We should never undertake the task of chiding another's sin unless, cross-examining our own conscience, we can assure ourselves, before God, that we are acting from love. If reproaches or threats or injuries, voiced by the one you are calling to account, have wounded your spirit, then, for that person to be healed by you, *you must not speak* till you are healed yourself lest you act from worldly motives to hurt, and make your tongue a sinful weapon...returning wrong for wrong, curse for curse.”

Do you understand what he was saying? Take the worst case, someone who with his words actually did you wrong, someone who treated you unfairly or unkindly; someone who in some way belittled you; someone who has lied about you. You cannot pass judgment on that man or woman, you cannot speak to him or her or to others about him or her, unless and until you can do so with love; and not with love as you tell yourself you have, but with love that *God* will think is love, love like his love, gracious, warm-hearted, kind, forgiving; love that keeps no record of wrongs, that tramples them underfoot, that remembers them no more, that buries them in the deepest sea. Brothers and sisters, if we only spoke the truth that way – not only to our enemies and about our enemies, but to everyone else as well – I fear many of us would say very little about others. Not with false motives but with true; not to hurt but to heal; not to serve ourselves but to serve others. That is the obligation of the 9th commandment.

What? Why what then would we talk about? If we couldn't talk about others – usually to some degree and in some way belittling them – what would we have to talk about? Conversation in Washington D.C. would cease, of course, but among us as well. Or would it? We love to talk and, fortunately for Christians, we have wonderful things to talk about, a world of wonderful things to talk about. God himself, his works and ways, the gifts he has lavished on us in defiance of our sins, his faithfulness to us, his love for us, and ours for him and for our husbands and wives and our children and our Christian brethren and the needy world and on and on. “Come and let me tell you what God has done for my soul.” But, no, we prefer to run others down; that is the conversation we find more fascinating. Embarrassing, shameful as it is to say this, can you dispute the truth of what I am saying? I've known people who seem to find it natural to speak about holy things and happy things and good things and when speaking of others almost always speak kindly and appreciatively. *I think I envy them most of all.* I once read the words of a friend of the Scottish pastor and author, Alexander Smellie – some of you have read his classic book *Men of the Covenant* – who said of Smellie:

“...after almost fifty years of friendship I can testify that I never heard him say a word of anyone which was ungenerous or unworthy.” [Gammie, *Preachers I Have Heard*, 95]

Does anyone here imagine that such a thing might honestly be said of him or her? Alas, it could not be said of me.

One of the things that made Alexander Whyte a hero of mine was the pitiless way in which he exposed my sins, but at the same time encouraged me both in the confidence of my forgiveness and in the necessity of trying once again to put them to death. I needed someone who would tell me the truth about myself, do it with love, and help me to deal with that truth in an effective way. My only comfort in the hard truth about myself and my moral failures is that Whyte found the truth about me first and foremost in himself. And one of his themes was the way in which our conversation, our speech, lays our sins bare. Here is a classic.

“A holy man used to say when he returned home from a night of table-talk that he would never accept such an invitation again, so remorseful did such nights always leave him; so impossible did he find it for him to hold his peace, and to speak only at the right moment, and only in the right way. And, without his holiness, I have often had his remorse, and so, I am quite sure, have many of you. There is no table we sit at very long that we do not more or less ruin either to ourselves or to some one else. We either talk too much, and thus weary and disgust people; or they weary and disgust us. We start ill-considered, unwise, [untimely] topics. We blurt out our rude minds in rude words. We push aside our neighbor’s opinion, as if both he and his opinion were worthless, and we thrust forward our own as if wisdom would die with us. We do not put ourselves into our neighbor’s place. We have no imagination in conversation, and no humility, and no love. We lay down the law and we instruct people who could buy us in one end of the market and sell us in the other if they thought us worth the trouble. It is easy to say grace; it is easy to eat and drink in moderation and with decorum and refinement; but it is our tongue that so ensnares us. For some men to command their tongue, to bridle, and guide, and moderate, and make just the right use of their tongue, is a conquest in religion, and in morals, and in good manners, that not one in a thousand of us has yet made over ourselves.” [*Walk, Character, and Conversation...*, 244-246]

That was part of Whyte’s reflection on the Lord’s own table conversation, especially on that occasion recorded in Luke 7, when he was invited to Simon the Pharisee’s house for dinner and a woman who had lived a sinful life in the town showed up uninvited and washed the Lord’s feet with her tears. Whyte goes on:

“...much as I would have like to see how he acted in everything, especially would I have watched him how he guided, and steered, and changed, and moderated, and sweetened the talk of the table.”

The Lord committed no sin. That means he never lied, but it also means he never spoke the truth unkindly or unwisely or selfishly. And a serious Christian has only to ponder that fact to stand utterly amazed at what a sinless life actually is and requires! Because that is what the 9th commandment requires: not only that we speak the truth and refuse to lie, but that we speak the truth with holy and loving motives, which is, as we all know, a far more difficult thing than not lying! *The 9th commandment requires nothing less than that we love our neighbor with our words!*

How much trouble, pain, sorrow is caused by the words we speak. How much more difficult is the life of the Christian church because Christians in the church open their mouths as often as they do but speak the truth in love as rarely as they do. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” What an utterly ridiculous thing to say. Words do much more damage than sticks and stones, they wound more deeply, the hurt they cause lasts much longer, and is so much more difficult to forget or forgive. I’m quite sure there are people in this congregation who harbor hard thoughts toward others in this congregation because of words – perhaps true, perhaps not, but definitely not spoken in love – that were spoken long ago. And that is a sad tragedy, a deep failure of Christian grace and love, and one that weakens us all, our witness, our fellowship, and our unity of heart and purpose. In all of this we are not doing what God has commanded us to do. Are we?

So how do we keep the 9th commandment? What does that commandment require of us in the push and pull of daily life? Well, perhaps the first thing it requires is that we shut up a great deal more than we are accustomed to doing. If we cannot speak the truth in love, the best thing for us to do is not to speak at all. The adage was: if you cannot say something nice about a person don’t say anything at all. Alice Roosevelt Longworth is supposed to have said, “If you can’t say something nice about someone, come sit here by me.” Alas, her version reflects the far more common human practice. But surely for a Christian who is thinking about his or her speech, it is simple wisdom to guard your tongue, to say nothing if you can’t speak what you should as you should. If we so often regret the things we said, if our conscience regularly rebukes us and gives us no peace – and I hope your conscience does that – then how much happier we will be if we just keep our mouths shut.

More than that we must make it more of a practice than it now is to refuse, actually to refuse to lend our ear to unloving remarks about others. We are all guilty of this many times over. We listen, sometimes avidly, either to lies about others or to the truth being spoken in an unloving way. As one old writer wisely put it:

“He that raises a slander carries the Devil in his tongue; and he that receives it carries the Devil in his ear.”

“Love believes all things” says Paul in his great chapter on love. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing; it bears all things. Love protects. And if we are to speak the truth in love, we must both speak and hear the truth only in that loving way. “Sorry,” we should say, “I don’t wish to hear this. I want to love my brother, my sister, and this makes it more difficult for me to do that.” Or, even better, “You know that is hard for me to believe, I wonder if that’s really true, because I have always admired and appreciated him, or her, for this or that.” Or, still better, “Well, I hope that isn’t true, but if it is, I am certainly no one to pass judgment; I would only be condemning myself, guilty as I have too often been of the very same thing.” There is so much unkindness spoken of others, so much rejoicing in wrongdoing, that there are literally unlimited opportunities for us to refuse to lend an ear.

But that cannot be the final answer because we are taught in the Bible to use our tongues as an instrument for good, to glorify God, to build others up, to love and help others as the right words

so powerfully do. So, as with all the other commandments, our marching orders are to put ourselves to work cultivating the grace of that particular form of obedience. In this case: loving others with our words. A person who is pouring into his or her speech compliment, kindness, appreciation, even celebration of others will learn how much good is done when truth is spoken in love, how such speech binds Christians together, and how the practice of such speaking lays the ax to the root of the unkindness that so often flows from our mouths. You can spend less time worrying about what not to say when you are regularly making a concerted effort to encourage others with what you say about them and to them.

Lest we not take all of this as seriously as we should; lest we not face up to how the 9th commandment exposes us as the moral disappointments that we are, remember this: nothing lays bare who and what we are as infallibly as our tongues. As the Puritan Thomas Brooks put it:

“What is in the warehouse will be in the shop. So, what is in the heart will be in the mouth. If there is anything of God, of Christ, of grace, of heaven, of hell, of sin, of the world, of self in the bottom of your souls, your tongues will discover it.” *Ouch!*

Oh Lord, please let that not continue to be true of me, that my tongue, my speech, especially my speech about others, is the true indication of what is in my heart! *Far too little love in my heart if that is the case!*

But if so, may I say, may you say, what David said in Psalm 39 and then again in Psalm 141:

“I said, ‘I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle.’”

“Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.”

The human heart being what it is, no one is ever going to keep the 9th commandment without setting out to do so with thought, reflection, plan, and serious intention and without an honest acknowledgement of how difficult and demanding the work will be. But what a difference it will make if we speak only the truth and never the truth without love. Christ did not suffer and die for us that we might talk to and about others as, alas, we so often do.