

THE DECALOGUE – WORD #9 – SPEECH

Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20 (New Living Translation) **“You must not testify falsely against your neighbor”**

False testimony, exaggeration, misinformation, half-truth, gossip rumour, lie, there are so many ways to say something that is not truthful and will result in injury, harm or have unintended consequences far beyond what was said. The ninth command seeks to establish stability in society by governing our speech especially in relation to others. It seeks to guard both our reputation and the reputation of others. Our reputations govern what others think about us and the Bible has much to say about reputation. Here is a [link to 100 verses](#) that have something to say about it.

In establishing the Ten Commands as the cornerstone of Jewish society God was setting up the framework for a civil society where people could live in community and harmony with one another. They could interact safely with trust and confidence in other people knowing that they shared basic values and a common purpose. Lack of trust in others results in so many consequences that they cannot all be listed. We only have to remember one time when either we were not trusted or where we did not trust someone else to know the devastating effects on our lives. There are emotional, psychological, physical and sociological consequences to speech that is untruthful, selfish and intended to harm others.

In the New Testament, James knows full well about the power of the Tongue. In James chapter 3 he speaks of the tongue as a small thing that has great power. It is like a rudder that steers a big ship, a small spark that starts a great fire, a small word that becomes a “grand speech” or a “great boast”. His summary statement in verse 8 is that “no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison”. Sad, but is this the end of the matter? It is true that “no human being can tame the tongue”, but is that where it ends? To answer that question we need to move from the “Old Covenant” or the Law as given in the Pentateuch to the “New Covenant” or the future promise that was first expressed in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and then reiterated in Ezekiel 36:26-38. The only way that we, as human beings, can get control over our sinful impulses and tendencies is to have God’s Spirit living within us and exercising his sovereignty over our lives. The fundamental difference in the “New” Covenant as compared to the “Old” is that this one is internal while the old was external. The Old was defined by external “Commands” that while very good, were not possible to be followed in a consistent daily manner. The New covenant will be “in their minds and written in their hearts”. They will no longer be unfamiliar with who the LORD is “because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest”. And God “will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” The way in which this is accomplished is found in Ezekiel 36:26-27 “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

So it is not hopeless, as James seems to indicate. Change is possible. We can live in a new society, a new community where our word is our bond; where we can trust what others say; where our words are constructive and build each other up. But we need to remember these are the outward signs of inward change. We need to be changed from the sinful people we once were to people indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit. Then we need to daily surrender our control over our sinfulness to God’s Holy Spirit.

Therefore, when we speak we need to be asking ourselves some basic questions.

- Is this true?
- Is this helpful for others?
- Who am I seeking to build up or affirm here? Myself or someone else?
- Is this a grumble or complaint?
- Does it need to be said now? OR Can it wait?
- What happens if I am silent on this issue?
- Is there a better way to phrase my speech?
- If I need to make an argument or dispute something, how can I do it graciously?
- What will people hear from my tone?

There are probably lots more questions we should ask ourselves before we say something but these are a good place to start.