

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear friends in Christ,

Throughout this series on the 10 Commandments, we've emphasized the purpose God gave them. It's not: "Do your best, then you find out your grade on Judgment Day." God does not use the 10 Commandments as a test to see if you get to be his child. He has made you his children through Christ Jesus, and now he gives you 10 Commandments. They are loving instruction from a loving Father to dearly loved children. They are good. They remind us how much we need is love and forgiveness in Christ. They guide us in paths that are pleasing to him.

Today we are going to talk about the 8th Commandment: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbors." In each of the Commandments, God is protecting one of his blessings. In the 8th Commandment, the important blessing God is protecting is the gift of a good name or a good reputation.

We're in football season, so I'm going to use a football-related introduction to line up our thinking with today's topic. I'm going to say the name of two famous football coaches, and I want you to think about what pops into your mind, and what feelings these names evoke:

- 1) "Tom Osborn" I don't have to say anything about him, do I? This former Nebraska head football coach is known by all... unless you are a recent transplant to Nebraska. Everyone knows his reputation. Everyone knows his accomplishments. I have never met a person that does not have a high regard for the man.
- 2) "Joe Paterno" Like Tom Osborn, he was a hero among college football coaches. He was the head coach at Penn State from 1966 to 2011. Like Osborn he was dearly loved, highly admired, an icon in his community... in fact, near god-like status. But in 2011 he was dismissed from the team because of a child sex abuse scandal involving his former defensive coordinator, Jerry Sandusky. A name so highly respected in short order was ruined. In short order, buildings were renamed. Trophies were renamed. Monuments removed.

The destruction done to Paterno's good name was not, in this case, caused by lies, rumors or gossip. It appears the loss of his good name in this case was his own doing. But what this illustrates is how extremely important a good name is, and also how fragile it is. It can so quickly and easily be lost!

Solomon recognized this already 3,000 years ago, and he penned a proverb about this: (Proverbs 22:1) "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold." And so in the 8th Commandment, God protects a person's good name.

U.S. law code also recognizes the value of a person's reputation. Defamation is against the law. If you tell lies about someone and hurt their reputation, they can take you to court. Related terms are "libel" which is defamation through writing; and "slander" which is defamation that is spoken.

However, God's law is more comprehensive than use law when it comes to a person's reputation. God is clear in his word that you have a high responsibility with your words not to damage a person's reputation... but instead to use your words to defend, protect and uphold the reputation of others.

We might like to think that words have little power. As a kid you probably said to the person who was calling you names, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Well, nice come back, but it’s just not true. Names, words, gossip, slander, revealing secrets... they do hurt people... and they can easily do far more damage than sticks and stones. A broken bone can heal. A broken reputation often cannot.

Words are powerful. If someone you highly respect says something to you, those words might stick with you for the rest of your life.

To teach us the power of our words, we turn to James 3:2-10.

2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. [It’s really hard to say the right thing all the time. If you could, then you must be perfect in every way, because always saying the right thing is the hardest.]

Little things can have great power. Three examples.

3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. [You have to wonder how the inventor of the bit was first received. “Okay, guys, I’ve got this great invention. Look! (He holds up a 5 or 6” wide metal rod with rings on both ends.) This will allow you to control an 1100 lb horse!” I wonder if they laughed at him, that such small piece of hardware would actually control a horse. ... But it does! A small thing has great influence.

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.

If you take a look at the rudder on a ship compared to the size of the ship, it’s incredible how small they are. And yet they control, direct, turn a massive ship.

5 Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

Compared to the total mass of your body, your tongue is tiny. But James makes the point that it is powerful. It controls, guides, turns in a way that is grossly disproportionate for its size.

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. [Now he wants to talk about the damage you can do with your words. He compares it to a fire. A small spark can start an entire forest on fire. A small match or discarded cigarette can cause hundreds of thousands of acres to burn. Then the comparison:

6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Wow, what a strong warning! Your tongue is light a constantly lit pilot light. It’s always there burning, always with the potential to start a forest fire of damage.

James wants us to understand that you are walking around every day with a loaded weapon. It is your tongue.

Maybe some of you heard the tragic new story recently about some parents that took their 9 year old daughter to a gun range and decided she should have shooting lessons with an Uzi (a submachine gun.) She fired off one round before the instructor said, “All right, full auto.” Full auto means as long as the trigger is pulled, the gun keeps shooting bullets. The girl couldn’t control the gun as the bullets kept firing and she accidentally killed the instructor teaching her how to shoot it. Guns must always be treated as a lethal weapon.

James warns us in very clear, strong terms that our tongues are lethal weapons as well, and they are extraordinarily difficult to control.

He continues:

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

Now he compares controlling your tongue to controlling an animal. People have been able to tame all kinds of animals. But taming the tongue... controlling it... is something that has been beyond human capability.

James doesn't pull any punches, does he? He makes it clear: we are born with hearts at odds with God... we are sinful at our very heart. That sin spills out of our mouths frequently, and try as we might to control what we say, we fail again and again. Can you think of a week that goes by when you can't think of something you regret saying?

The natural use of our tongues is to tear down, hurt, to start fires. We naturally tend to destroy the reputation of others instead of build it up. Gossiping comes as naturally to us as breathing. We often don't even recognize it when we do it.

People tend to be on their best behavior while they are church, right? I have yet to see a fist fight take place during a worship service, or afterwards in the narthex. I have never heard a curse word uttered by people who are chatting after the worship service. But one thing I have heard as people chat before or after a service, and I've heard it quite often, is tongues out of control doing damage. People gossiping, people hurting the reputation of others.

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.

I don't know if we appreciate how inconsistent we are with our mouth. Today we sing hymns to God, say prayers, confess our faith. On the way home, or later on today, we lip off to our parents, or say hurtful things to our spouse, or gossip, or tell lies about someone.

Out of the same mouth this happens! Brothers and sisters, this should not be.

God wants us to leave today with a new appreciation for this deadly and loaded weapon we carry around with us constantly: our tongues. How do we control it? How can we tie it down so it doesn't do damage? To be tongue tied is a good thing... if we understand it to mean controlling our tongues?

More conscious of God's law, we see how often we break it when it comes to the 8th Commandment. Just over the last week, how many times have you lied? (White lies count.) How many times have you gossiped? How many secrets have you betrayed? Failing to do what we should is also sin. How many times did you fail to encourage? Fail to thank? Fail to defend someone when they were being gossiped about?

It starts with repentance. We acknowledge to God our failures to control our tongue, the damage we've done with it, the fires we've started, the reputations we have soiled. We deserve God's anger. We deserve to be punished.

But God goes a different route. Instead he sent his Son. Jesus always kept the 8th Commandment. Search the Gospels and you'll not find an instance of Jesus gossiping or hurting another's reputation. He could easily have played favorites among the disciples and pitted one against another. Instead Jesus used his tongue to teach, encourage and build up. As impossible as

it is for us to control our tongues, Jesus did control his. Always. And that's important to us because he came to be our substitute. And he is a perfect one.

Our perfect substitute gives us what we are lacking: holy tongues. And he takes from us what separates us from God: evil tongues that spit hellfire. He takes responsibility for all of our wrong words, gossiping, reputation destroying. He died for it all at the cross and by his death we are declared by God to be not guilty! And here's what's also amazing. Jesus is still keeping the 8th Commandment for you in heaven by speaking regularly to the heavenly Father on your behalf. He defends us constantly and intercedes for us.

In Christ Jesus you are forgiven. You are perfect in God's sight. By faith, you now have the Spirit of Jesus living in your heart. And that Holy Spirit living in you and working in your life means your tongue can be controlled. What is impossible for you alone becomes possible with the Holy Spirit working in you.

What you say does have an impact. What you say has enormous power to tear down, or to build up. So how will tie your tongue this week? In thankfulness to Jesus, what would it look like to have complete control over all your words? What would it look like if you were only encouraging with your spouse and never tore down? When are you most likely to gossip? With whom are you most likely to gossip? What would it take to completely stop that behavior that hurts the reputation of others? What would the *results* be in our families if we stopped all gossip and had only uplifting communication? In our church? In our school? In our neighborhoods and communities? In our country? Words you speak to someone today could have positive impact and benefit for a person years down the line... maybe for the rest of your life. How can you use your incredibly powerful tongue for good and godly purposes as a blessing to others and for the glory of our great God?

Let's make this specific and concrete so that this isn't a message we hear and agree with, but then we don't actually do anything differently. Right now, I want you to think of the most important people in your life. Make a quick mental list. Family. (Spouse, children, parents, etc.) Work. (Boss, coworkers.) Church. (Fellow member, a church leader, a teacher.) Friends. My challenge for you is that in the course of the next 7 days, you will put what we learned today into practice, and you will use your tongue as a powerful force for good. Intentionally plan to say at least one positive, encouraging, up lifting thing to each of these people... (or write it in a card.) See how powerful just your words are, and how much of a difference they truly make.

Forgiven by Jesus, made new and empowered by the Holy Spirit, dear friends: "Do not bear false testimony against your neighbor. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or give him a bad name, but defend him, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way."

Amen.