



# The Ten Commandments

## (45) The Ninth Commandment

### (3) Loving with Our Words

Exodus 20:16

Ephesians 4:17-32

Text: verse 29

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This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final sermon on the Ninth Commandment in this series on the Ten Commandments. The Ninth Commandment is “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” In the first sermon on this commandment we looked at its most literal and narrow application which has to do with telling the truth when you are a witness in court, or any court-like situation and we saw that this commandment is rooted in God’s concern for justice. In the second sermon on this commandment we considered a broader application of this command which is telling the truth in all situations and we saw how that application of this command is rooted in God’s concern for truth. We also considered the relationship between truthfulness and relationships following the lead of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:25 where he speaks of our membership in the body of Christ as a reason for putting away falsehood and speaking the truth.

This evening we are going to conclude our study of the Ninth Commandment by looking at another text in Ephesians 4, this time verse 29 which says “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” In this application of the Ninth Commandment we might say that the focus is on loving one another by our words. Of course, that is the case with every angle the Bible takes on the working out of the Ninth Commandment. The second table of God’s law is all about loving our neighbor and so the focus of the Ninth

Commandment is on loving one another using our words. Love is expressed by treating one another in a just manner. And love is expressed by telling the truth to one another. But what we are focusing on this evening is building up one another by our words and that is very obviously a call to love one another by how we speak of them and to them.

There is an old adage concerning the effect of our words that is profoundly untrue. "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me." That saying has been used by children in playgrounds who were pretending not to be hurt by the mean words of another or who were so full of themselves that they did not care what some particular peer said about them. There may be some situations in which the insults of another do not hurt, but generally speaking we can be hurt very deeply by the words of others or we can cause a great deal of pain to others by words that tear them down. On the other hand, the capacity of our words to encourage and build up and help one another is very great indeed.

God is a speaking God and one of the powerful capacities that he has given us is the ability to speak and communicate using words and in a fallen world that powerful ability can and is used in very destructive ways as well as in more positive ways. And one of the fruits of salvation is the renewal of our ability to love and one of the key ways that love is expressed is through our words. But as is always the case in the Christian life, while we are in this life, we are being perfected, but we are not yet perfect and so an important aspect of growth towards what we will one day be is putting off the practice of hurting others by our words and putting on the practice of building others up by our words.

The relationship between our words and our salvation is expressed clearly by Jesus in Matthew 12:33-37. This is one of the places where he speaks about the relationship between a tree and its fruit. He says in verse 33 that "the tree is known by its fruit." The contrast is between a good tree which produces good fruit and a bad tree which produces bad fruit. And in this particular passage, Jesus applies this idea to our words. He says in verse 34, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." And then he continues, "The good person out of his good

treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” In the context he is speaking about words. So he goes on to say. “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Jesus is not teaching works-righteousness here. He certainly does not mean that we will be saved on the basis of the words that we speak. Rather in the light of the rest of his teaching it is clear that we are all bad trees by nature and by means of his saving work, Jesus’ followers are transformed into good trees and the good fruit that results is evidence of our salvation. The kind of words that we speak show whether we are good trees or bad trees.

Further whether we are good trees or bad trees is determined by the presence or absence of the transforming and renewing power of Jesus in our lives through the Holy Spirit. My reason for bringing this up in this context is to place the subject of how we use our words in the context of our relationship to Jesus Christ, but also to underscore how terribly significant our words are in our relationship with God. So what we are thinking about is the impact of salvation on the way that we use our words and the place of our words in giving evidence of where we stand in our relationship with God.

So we return to the text that we are focusing on, Ephesians 4:29, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” We are not to allow corrupting talk to come out of our mouths. We can get a pretty good idea of what that means by thinking of the idea of corrupting. Other words that fill out the idea that Paul is driving at are “harmful” or “unwholesome.” (PNTC Ephesians, p.344). Corrupting words are harmful or unwholesome words.

It is also helpful to compare the idea of “corrupting talk” with the contrast that Paul makes in the verse. Instead of letting corrupting talk come out of our mouths, we are to build others up and “give grace to those who hear.” So corrupting talk would include the words of false teaching or words of temptation – words that have the effect of corrupting the minds of other people. We use the word “corrupting” in

that way when we say one person has a corrupting influence on another. “Don’t hang out with that crowd. They will corrupt your mind.”

But Paul’s intention here is broader than just forbidding the corrupting of the mind of another. Corrupting talk contrasts with talk that builds up – or words that give grace. That makes it clear that Paul’s intention is quite broad. There are all kinds of ways that we can use our words in ways that are harmful rather than up building. We can legitimately apply this verse forbidding any use of words that cause harm and requiring that instead we use our words to help, encourage and build one another up.

There are quite a few verses in the Bible which fill out what Paul is speaking about when he forbids us to allow corrupting talk out of our mouths. Just a few verses further on in this letter to the Ephesians, 5:4, Paul writes, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” In Colossians 3:8 he says, “But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.” There is quite an emphasis in these verses on foul or filthy or obscene speech. If we have much contact with the people of the world we will know that such speech is very common. Clearly it was common in Paul’s day and it is common today. One of the impulses that flows from our fallen sinful nature is the tendency towards being foul-mouthed. This is one of the ways of using words that Paul is forbidding. Such language is corrupt and corrupting. Its influence is negative. It is the opposite of using our words in wholesome and helpful ways.

There is another category of corrupting talk that I want to mention. It is implied in our text by the exhortation to build one another up by our words. The opposite of building up of course is tearing down. And so this verse is warning us against tearing others down by the way we speak of them or to them. One of the ways that we can do this is through gossip. Scripture refers explicitly to gossip a number of times. For instance, in Romans 1 when Paul is describing the sinfulness of all of us apart from God, he mentions gossip as one of the manifestations of that sinfulness. Paul also speaks of gossip in his second letter to the Corinthians 12:20. In that passage he says that he was afraid that when

he visited them he would find “quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.”

What is gossip? Gossip has to do with how we speak about other people. It is about passing on something about another that reflects unfavorably on him or her. It involves speaking about others in a way that negatively effects that person’s reputation. What is said may be true or it may be false. The key is that it causes the person listening to think less of the one who is being gossiped about. It tears down his or her reputation.

We must be very careful about the way that we speak of other people. Of course, speaking about other people is inevitable. Our lives intersect with others. The church is a body of believers whose lives are intertwined in various ways. The people we know are going to be frequent subjects of our conversations. Speaking about one another in various ways is an inevitable part of our social interactions.

Sometimes what we say is just neutral – just the passing on of some fact. You might say to a conversation partner, “I had coffee with so and so yesterday.” You’re just passing on a fact that is not positive or negative. Sometimes when we speak of others we speak in a favorable way. So we might say, “Wilma is a good cook.” That is not gossip. It is good to say positive things about other people when what you say is true and motivated by a desire to enjoy thinking together on something good about someone.

And there are some situations in which it is up building to say something negative about another. Here we must be very careful that sharing that information is truly necessary and has a positive intention. For instance, let’s say a child is misbehaving in Sunday School. If it is minor and easily corrected there is no need to say anything to anyone outside of the classroom, but if it is more serious and persistent, it will be necessary for the teacher to speak to a parent. Something negative is said, but the motivation is love and the purpose is to build up the child. And there may be other situations in which there may truly be a desire to build another up by discussing some area of concern, but we must be very careful here that it is truly necessary and motivated by love.

But then there are situations in which we are tempted to mention something negative about another person when there is no need to do so and no benefit to the reputation of that person. That is gossip. Its purpose is to harm the reputation of another. Often saying negative things about other people is motivated by a desire to look good by comparison. When we say that so and so is lazy, for example, we are also implying that we are not lazy like that other person.

We must be very careful when we are tempted to say something negative about another person. There are some very specific situations in which it is necessary and truly for that person's good, but in most cases it cannot pass the test of love or the wording of this passage, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."

Slander is another word that the Bible uses in forbidding sins of the tongue. Slander is similar to gossip, but usually it is more blatant, and it involves besmirching the reputation of another by saying something negative that is not true. There is a lot of slander used in politics or in the cutthroat environment of the business world. Often slander is purposeful – a calculated desire to harm the reputation of another for some advantage over them, or for revenge or for spite. But it can be less blatant and calculated. Sometimes we can pass on a falsehood about other out of a careless regard for the truth and a malicious desire to put someone in a bad light.

So we have false teaching or other speech that corrupts the minds of others. We have foul speech that also is corrupting and unwholesome. We have gossip and slander, both of which have to do with passing on either negative truths or lies about another person that reflect badly on them.

Then we have ways of speaking **to** others which tear them down rather than build them up. Jesus takes a very dim view of insulting other people. In Matthew 5:22 he says, "[W]hoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool! Will be liable to the hell of fire.'" In the same verse he also speaks about anger and the context suggests that the anger leads to word that are harsh and

destructive. There are passages which forbid certain attitudes which often result in words that tear down rather than build up. Ephesians 4:31-32, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." Bitterness is often expressed by bitter words. Wrath and anger are often expressed with angry and hurtful words. Malice is often expressed by hateful words.

Insults, angry words, harsh words, ridicule, these are all ways that can hurt, and tear others down by using words. These kinds of words can humiliate, cause terrible pain and be destructive of relationships. In all of these ways we can break the commandment to love our neighbor by the way in which we use our words. And if we think about our own experience and also the way that words are often used in the world, we see how much ugliness and destructiveness and misery is caused by the breaking of the Ninth Commandment – through failing to love by our words.

God's desire is for people to live together in harmony and love and a big part of that picture is people using their words to bless and serve one another rather than to hate and to harm one another. And this is something that he is working towards by means of his great plan of salvation. The words of our text are an exhortation that is addressed to followers of Jesus – to those who have been and are being saved from their sins. Salvation includes being made into a good tree that brings forth good fruit and that good fruit includes using the powerful ability to speak in order to love – to heal – to encourage – to nurture and to build one another up.

Now let's look at what this text says about the positive side of this command. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up ..." We will look a little more closely at the term "building up." This is a term that is used often in the Bible. Its literal meaning has to do with building a structure of some kind, often a house and its figurative meaning has to do with building the church or building up lives. In this case it is used to refer to helping people, to encourage them, to assist them in their personal and spiritual growth.

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 gives a good description of what this looks like in practice, "And we urge you brothers, admonish the idle, encourage

the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.” One of the things that this highlights is the togetherness of the Christian life. Words are what we use to relate to one another, and we are to use our words to help one another to grow as Christians and to build up the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:15 says that we are to speak “the truth in love [and in that way] we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...” And a little later he says that this how Christ “makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

So our words are to be used to build each other up. The text goes on to say, “as fits the occasion.” This phrase is a call to wisdom. In order to truly build one another up by our words, we must be wise with our words. There is a time to speak and there is a time to be silent. There are words that are appropriate and there are words that are not appropriate even if they are well meant. It is significant that the book of Proverbs which is part of the wisdom literature of the Bible, has an awful lot to say about the use of our words for good or for ill.

So we read for instance in Proverbs 12:18 “There is one whose words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Or Proverbs 15:23, “To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!” A word in season is a wonderful thing. A word not in season – not so much. Proverbs 25:11 “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” This is what Paul is getting at when he says that we are to use our words to build one another up “as fits the occasion.” Not just any words will do. Not every time is fitting. We must seek wisdom in how we use our words. That means that we must be careful and thoughtful so that when we speak it is a fitting word – a word that fits the occasion.

And then finally the words that come out of our mouths must seek to “give grace to those who hear.” The same thing of course, but a different image. The idea is that our words must “be a blessing,” “confer a benefit,” or “do a favor” according to one commentator. But the fact that the word “grace” is used here is surely significant. For it reminds us of God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ.

It is always important to think of God's grace to us in connection with God's calling to us to be gracious to others. It reminds us who we are and what we deserve. It reminds us that we are the recipients of so much goodness from God in spite of the fact that we are so unworthy of any blessing and so weak and so unlovely in ourselves because of our sinfulness and weakness and slowness. It is always important for us to dwell on how dependent we are on God's grace in Christ and through the Spirit.

And think of God's gracious words to us – how God speaks to us in his word – how God has spoken to us through his prophets and through his Son. Those words are life-giving. Those words when blessed by the Spirit raise us from the dead and reveal Jesus Christ to us as able and willing to save. The gracious word of God builds us up. How blessed we are through the words that God speaks to us!

And we are to reflect that grace in our words. That is what Paul is getting at when he says that we are to use our words to "give grace to those who hear." How we use our words to others is to be analogous to the way that God uses his word to bless us. Of course, God's words are powerful to a degree that our words are not. But our words can be powerful for good with God's blessing. And that is assumed here when Paul says that we are to use our words to "give grace to those who hear." We can confer real benefit to others through our words. We can truly help and bless one another through our words. We can encourage. We can show understanding and empathy. We can show interest. We can instruct. We can comfort. We can admonish in love. We can affirm the significance and value of others in their uniqueness as image bearers of God. There is so much good we can do by our words.

How can we grow in this? If we are believers we will grow also blessing others through our words by virtue of the powerful and persistent influence of the Holy Spirit on our spirits. As Paul writes in Philippians 2:13 "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." If you are believing in Jesus, he is at work in you through his Spirit so that you will produce fruit.

And yet in his mysterious way, we are involved. The word of God to us in our text is a command. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your

mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” This command is a meaningful command because it is addressed to people in whom God is working “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

And within this framework, we are to think of the goodness of God and the goodness of the life he calls us to live. It is good to bless one another with our words. It is good to live together as brothers and sisters who are seeking to “give grace” to one another by our words. This is a foretaste of heaven. This is part of the way that we witness to the new creation that began in Jesus’ resurrection. This is one of the ways that we draw people to Jesus. This is one of the things that it means to be saved – that we by God’s grace are beginning to live lives that please God and that are worthwhile and beneficial to others. We have incredibly powerful motivations to consider our lives and seek to grow also in this area of using our words to build one another up, “as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”