Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Imagine being in court for a crime that is punishable by death. And then imagine having a witness tell outright lies that will likely lead to a guilty verdict? It would be awful, wouldn’t it. Well, many crimes in Old Testament times were punishable by death. And so, truthful testimony was vital. And that is why the commandment is framed as it is. But much more is in view with this commandment than just giving false testimony in court. As we read a moment ago, from James 3, “*The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness … it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison*.” So, what are sins of the tongue? Well, they are things like gossip, slander, reviling, critical speech, and twisting some-one’s words, to name a few. And some of you may know of Jerry Bridges’ book called ‘***Respectable Sins***.’ And what he means by that title is those sins that Christians seem to tolerate and excuse more than others. And sins of the tongue are one example. But brothers and sisters, young people and boys and girls, this should not be. So, get ready to get uncomfortable, because there will be some straight arrows that pierce our crooked hearts today. But hopefully, that is one reason why we are here.

And our approach today will be to work through the sins of the tongue that I just mentioned, identifying each sin, and then seeing how our text helps us pursue the opposite of these things. And as to **the why of all this**, Ephesians 1-3 is a celebration of God’s amazing grace through Jesus Christ. We do not *deserve* salvation, we cannot *earn* salvation, and we *contribute nothing* to our salvation. It is all of Jesus! “*By grace you have been saved*,” Paul proclaims in Ephesians 2:8. But he then adds that we were “*created in Christ Jesus for good works*,” and that we are “*being built together [with our fellow believers] into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit*.” So, beginning in chapter 4, Paul begins to explain what this looks like. He calls it “*walk[ing] in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called,*” and he then pictures it as putting some attitudes and behaviours off and putting other behaviours and attitudes on. So, this is how grateful Christians who are saved by grace alone ought to live. And the very first Christian attitude and behaviour that he identifies in verse 25 is the need to “*put away falsehood*” and to “*speak the truth*.” And then in verse 29, he 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*.”

1. So, let’s begin our consideration of the sins of the tongue and what ‘building up’ speech looks like. And we start with **gossip**, which is a frequent inclusion in the New Testament ‘sin lists.’
   1. Gossip is the spreading of unfavourable information about a person, even if what you say is true. And we are gossiping when we say things like: “Did you hear what \_\_\_\_\_ did/said?” “You will never believe what \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ did yesterday.” “Well, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ told me that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ said…”
      1. I am sure that many of you have heard the story about the man who engaged in gossip and was feeling guilty, so he went to the wise man up in the mountain cave to ask what he should do. And the wise man said, “Take a whole bunch of duck feathers and throw them up in the air and then come back and see me tomorrow.” So, the man did that and then went back up the mountain the next day. And the wise man said, “Go back down and collect all the feathers you threw out.” And the man replied, “That is impossible. I will never find all the feathers back!” And the wise man just stood there nodding his head. For that is the problem with gossip, you see, once spoken, the damage is done. And it spreads like wildfire. And you can’t get gossip back.
      2. Now, there is a difficult line between gossip and genuinely seeking counsel about how to deal with someone. And this is where we must examine our motives – Am I sharing this with this person’s best interests at heart? Would they be happy to know I was telling someone else about this? Would I like it if someone else was sharing this about me? Is this really *necessary* to share? Am I really intent on using this counsel to go and engage with this person? And if there is any doubt with these things, don’t do it. And if your motives are pure, then keep the circle as small as possible. In short, in light of who we are in Christ, and our text, ask yourself this question: “Will what I am about to say tear down or build up the person I am about to talk about?”
   2. And before we move on, the other half of this sin is ***receiving* gossip**. **Proverbs 18:8** says, “*The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body*.” And this is so true, isn’t it. Gossip appeals to our sinful nature. We naturally love to hear gossip. But imagine if more and more of us, for Christ’s sake, and for the sake of the brother or sister who is being gossiped about, challenged the gossiper, and said to them, “Why did you tell me that?” “Have you talked with \_\_\_\_\_\_ about what you just told me?” “Do they know that you are sharing this with me?” “Hey, hold on a sec, I am not sure that we know all the facts.” “How about we go to \_\_\_\_\_ together and talk about what you just said to see if it is true…” Wouldn’t you appreciate knowing that your brothers and sisters reacted to gossip about you in this way. I am sure you would!
2. The next sin of the tongue is **slander**, which is also found in the New Testament ‘sin lists.’
   1. And slander is like gossip, but **the information is *knowingly false***. So, it damages a person’s reputation. And we can do this when we ascribe wrong motives to a person, when we cannot see into their heart. So, for example, we tell someone else that so and so is mad with me because they have not responded to an email or because of the way they looked at me when I saw them at the mall. Really? We can’t know that. We slander also when we knowingly misrepresent another person’s opinion or actions to make ourselves look better or to try and get them into trouble. We also slander when we make something out to be much worse than we know that it is. So, slander is deliberately passing along what we know is false.
3. And slander is a form of **lying**, which is the next sin of the tongue that we want to consider.
   1. To lie is not tell the truth. And we are to be people who speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as the saying goes. In **John 8:44**, Jesus was speaking about the devil. He said, “*When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies*.” So, when we lie, we are behaving as though the devil were our father. But he is not. Our Father is God in heaven. And His Son and our Saviour, Jesus, is “*the way, the truth, and the life*.” Therefore, we ought to speak the truth.
   2. But we are in the second table of the law, which has to do, especially, with love of neighbour. So, **lies that injure our neighbour are particularly in view here**. And so, whether it is in court, in a work situation, in regards to relationships, or in our general conversations with others, we must remember that our lies will tear another person down, whether that be personal hurt or reputation or their freedom or their financial well-being, rather than to build them up, as our text commands us to do.
4. The next sin of the tongue that we want to consider is actually a group of sins that come under the umbrella term **reviling**. And reviling is also a prominent sin in the New Testament ‘sin lists.’ It includes such sins as speaking harsh words, insults, sarcasm, mocking, and ridicule.
   1. And the common denominator in all these sins of the tongue is that they put down or tear down or injure or humiliate or hurt. **Proverbs 12:18** says, “*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts*.” And if you have been on the receiving end of any type of reviling, then you will know that pain all too well.
      1. I expect that all of us have heard from our parents the saying that goes: “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” And it is a useful saying in some ways. But words can *really* hurt, as Proverbs 12:18 says.
      2. In Jen Wilkin’s book on the Ten Commandments, she describes the sin of reviling like this: “While flattery, silence, and misattribution (which we will look at next) are the subtle pickpockets of reputation, reviling stands in the lobby of First Reputation Bank spraying bullets and sacking the vault.”
      3. And she makes the probing observation that social media brings the worst out of us in this area, sadly, in ways not much different than with unbelievers. She says, “We routinely exercise our online speech in the business of tearing down the good name of our neighbour the politician, the pastor, or the public figure … We are like Bonnie and Clydes, with fully loaded-keyboards and fully seared consciences.”
      4. But she also observes that “social media is just a new vehicle for an old sin, one that works its way into whatever medium it can. We revile with our sarcasm that tears down our neighbour with a wink and a laugh. We revile in correcting our children by shaming [them] through tone and language choice … We revile in emails and text threads and bumper stickers and casual conversations – in any setting and by any means where we perceive the opportunity to raise our own value by pushing down someone else’s.”

* 1. In the **James 3** reading from earlier, we read, “*With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so*.”Earlier I quoted from **Proverbs 12:18**, whichsays, “*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts*.” But the rest of the verse says: “*But the tongue of the wise brings healing*.” So, let me ask you this: Are you one of the wise? Or, better yet, let me not ask you that question, but those who know you well: Would they say that you are a wise one whose tongue brings healing, or are your words often like sword thrusts? “*My brothers [and sisters], these things ought not to be so*.”
  2. And **what about when we are on the *receiving end* of reviling**? How should we respond? By giving back as good as we get? Well, in his Gospel, Mark tells us that the Lord Jesus was on the receiving end of reviling. When He hung on the cross, “*those who were crucified with Him also reviled Him*.” How did He respond? **1 Peter 2:23** tells us: “*When He was reviled, He did not revile in return*.” And so, as **1 Peter 3:9** says, “*Do not repay … reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing*.”

1. In the Jen Wilkin quote a moment ago, she referred to **flattery, silence, and misattribution** as “the subtle pickpockets of reputation.” So, what are these sins of the tongue and how do they tear down a person’s reputation?
   1. Well, **flattery** is when you say something nice about someone, but you do so in order to control them or manipulate them or get something out of them.
      1. **Proverbs 26:24-28** says, “*Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbours deceit in his heart; when he speaks graciously, believe him not, for there are seven abominations in his heart … A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin*.”
      2. Countries all round the world are trying to ban hate speech at present. Well, these verses in Proverbs make it clear that flattery is hate speech. And that is because it can so easily lead someone into pride or foolishness.
      3. And so, while genuine praise and encouragement is entirely in keeping with what our text commands, unmeant praise or over-praise is wrong.

**Silence** refers to those times when we remain silent when we should speak. And this is especially when the good name or reputation of our neighbour is at stake. When we hear gossip or slander or reviling or lies or false accusations, and we remain silent, we wound our neighbour just as much as those who *are* speaking.

* 1. **Misattribution** is when you take the credit for someone else’s work or idea, or you blame others for your failings. Have you ever had a boss or a co-worker or classmate take the credit for one of your ideas? It stinks, doesn’t it! And being wrongly blamed for something that you did not do is really painful. And so, we ought to look for every opportunity to praise others and give them the credit that they deserve, and we must also be quick to own our own sins and mistakes.

1. Well, the next group of sins of the tongue are **critical speech**, **twisting some-one’s words**, and **pronouncing a rushed judgment**.
   1. **Critical speech** is when we make negative comments about someone else that might actually be true but *do not need to be said*. And this matter is all about motive. Are we allowed to criticize others? Yes. In fact, there will be times when criticism is necessary, because something wrong *and important* has been said or done. But that is the question, isn’t it. Is this criticism *needful*?
      1. Back in the day, when the children were around the dinner table together, one of them would be talking about something that happened when we were all at the shops on Tuesday (when it was actually Monday), and one of the other children would say, “Duh! It was Monday!” And I would rebuke the child who made the Monday comment. We all knew it was Monday. It was just an innocent mistake that was unimportant. And saying it like that was really saying to the other: “You are such an idiot because you can’t even get the days right! And I am so smart for pointing it out!”
      2. So again, is the criticism needful? And are you delivering it in a kind manner?
   2. But the next sin of the tongue is **twisting someone’s words**. And congregation, this is something that we are masters at. We know exactly how to retell a story that make us the hero and someone else the villain, by sharing only the bad things they said and not the good, or leaving out things we said that provoked their response, or by putting the worst light on someone else’s words to prove a point we are making or to make them look guilty to others. And you know what? We start doing this, without ever having attended a class on it, from about age 2.
   3. Another sin of the tongue is **pronouncing a judgment when we do not have all the facts or the person we are accusing is not there to defend themselves**. **Proverbs 18:17** says, “*The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him*.” But all too often, we hear one side of the story and pronounce our judgment. And this is a sin that has been **magnified by social media**. Someone’s actions or words are condemned on Twitter and the tweet gets 300,000 retweets. Two days later a retraction is published because more evidence or context has come to light, but that tweet only gets 10,000 retweets.
   4. And one last sin of the tongue that must be added to this list is the sin of **exaggeration**. And I have to be honest here and say that this is a sin that I am prone to commit. And it seems like such a little thing, but it is not. And I usually do it for the sake of humour, more than anything else. But what I did gets dressed up a little or improved in the telling to make me look better or to make the account a bit more interesting. The problem is though, it’s not the truth anymore. And Kevin de Young nails the issue here when he asks: “Are you someone who can be trusted to represent yourself accurately in even the smallest details of your life?” For of one thing we can be sure, the Lord Jesus would never have added a single kilometer to how far He walked, or subtracted a single minute from how long He slept, to enhance what He was saying.

Well, as we draw to a close, while we have called these sins sin of the tongue, they are, at base, **sins of the heart**. And the Lord Jesus made this point when He said to the Pharisees, “*How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*.” The words we speak are us giving voice to what lies in here. And this is why, as we said at the beginning of the sermon, our text in chapter 4 will only help us if it is read in connection with the truth of chapters 1-3 – who we are in Christ. We must understand and believe that on the cross Jesus paid the price for all our 9th Commandment sins. And we have been united with Him. And He has given us His Spirit, who is making us to be more and more like Jesus. For only then will we love this text and be eager to use our tongue to speak the truth, and to build others up rather than to tear them down.

Do you know what biting your tongue means? We can do it accidentally while we are eating. That is to literally bite your tongue. Ouch! But we use that phrase also to describe when we were going to say something, but we chose instead to not say it. And biting your tongue in this way starts with the heart. It is when, for Christ’s sake, we choose not to say what we were thinking about saying. May the Spirit of the Lord help us to be this sort of person. And when we must speak, may our speech be governed by the principle of Psalm 19:14: “*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer*.” Amen.