

Sermon on Lord's Day 38
By Rev. W.B. Slomp

Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

Sing: Psalm 84: 1, 2, 4

Sing: Psalm 141: 1, 2, 3, 7

Read: Ephesians 4: 17-32; James 3: 1-12

Sing: Psalm 55: 1, 3, 11, 13

Text: Lord's Day 43

Sing: Psalm: 119: 65, 66

Sing: Hymn 61: 1,2, 5, 6

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters,

The subject of today's sermon concerns something that you all took with you when you came to church this morning. As a matter of fact, you always carry it with you. You carry it with you when you go to work, when you visit your friends, when you are at home, when you go shopping, when you go to school, and when you go to the gym. You are never without it. I am speaking about your tongue. It is a precious part of your body. We love to use it. We are delighted when little children find their tongue. It is wonderful when our children speak their first words: "mama", "dada", or "amen" at the end of a meal. When the child speaks his first words we are delighted and tell others about it. We tell the grandparents and the aunts and uncles. "Did you hear what our little angel said? Isn't that wonderful?" And once the child starts speaking in full sentences you are even more delighted.

But little children do not always speak wholesome words. They pick up bad words from others around them; sometimes dirty words, angry words, and inappropriate words. And they repeat them. That dismays us. "How could my innocent little child use such a word? It must be due to the influence of others."

Brothers and sisters, that is the problem with our tongues. Already when we are young we use our tongues for good purposes and for bad. The tongue is a delightful part of our body. But at times it is also an evil part of our body so we have to be careful how we use our tongues. In today's sermon I will address:

The Many Uses of the Tongue.

It is:

1. God's gift;
2. Satan's slave;
3. The Spirit's tool.

The Lord God gave the 10 Commandments, the ten words of the covenant, to his people Israel at Mount Sinai. That included the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness." You will agree with me that this commandment was especially meant for God's people, for his children. But it is also a good commandment for all people. It would be a terrible world if people did not frown upon the bearing of false witness, of not telling the truth. Oh sure, it happens a lot in our society, but nevertheless it is not an accepted practice. That is especially the case in a court of law, for if you bear false witness in a court someone could be wrongly convicted of a crime.

But, God gave this commandment first of all to his covenant people. And so let me ask you a question, "Do you belong to God's covenant? Do you consider yourself to be one of God's children?" You might think that that is a funny question but there are those who are not sure how to answer that question. Because of their sinfulness they do not feel that they are a true child of God. And so they try harder. They want to make themselves acceptable to God. And yet, they find that they just can't live up to what God requires. That's disappointing. It makes you want to throw in the towel.

That is why the question "Are a covenant child of God?" is so important. For we are talking about our relationship with the Lord our God.

Let us go back for a moment to the time at Mount Sinai when Moses came down the mountain with the 10 Commandments and spoke the words that God had written on the two tablets. And let us imagine that you are standing there amongst the Israelites, God's people. You have only recently been set free from the land of Egypt. You have escaped from the land of slavery. And now you hear the voice of the Lord God saying, "I am the Lord your God who has delivered you. I am the one who miraculously led you out. I protected you from your enemies and provided you with everything you needed."

As the Lord God speaks these words, to whom is he speaking? He is speaking to each and every one of them standing there, isn't he? The elderly, the middle-aged, the teenagers and the children, together they have been delivered from the hell of Egypt. Imagine yourself standing among them. You are very excited. What a relief to no longer be in that horrible land where you have no freedom; where you worked as a slave; where you were stripped of your dignity as a human being.

But suddenly you hear somebody speak up and say, "I'm not so sure whether or not I have been set free. I'm not so sure if I belong to this delivered people." Wouldn't that be strange? How could someone say that? He, along with the all the others, had not so long ago gone on dry land through the Red Sea. Not so long ago, he was under bondage in Egypt having to work as a slave. And now he is standing there in the desert as a free man.

It is true that there are always doubters in our midst. You can fool yourself and think that you do not belong and you can even walk away. But that does not take away the reality of the fact that you have been rescued, you have been delivered, you have been set free.

Brothers and sisters, that is what you heard this morning as well when we heard the 10 words of the covenant: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Within the New Testament context, that means that the Lord God has rescued you from the land of sin and indeed from sin itself. God says that to each and every one of us. For to whom do these words ultimately point? They point to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who fulfilled the law for each and every one of us. He has set us free from sin and from slavery to sin. You believe that, don't you?

Now in connection with the ninth commandment, please realize what that means. The Lord God has also set you free from the sin of the ninth commandment. What a great blessing that is! For look at how guilty we are. In paradise we followed the lead of the father of lies, Satan. He made Adam and Eve question God's truth. He told them that God did not really mean what he said when he forbade them to eat of the fruit in the Garden. Adam and Eve believed the lie and they became liars. James calls the tongue a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. He says that no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

That is what it has become since the fall into sin. And yet, look at what a beautiful gift it was and is. God gave us the gift of speech in paradise. As a matter of fact this world was created by the spoken word. God spoke and the whole universe with everything in it came into existence. God spoke and man became a living human being. And God also gave man the ability to speak. He gave that ability only to man. He distinguished him from all the other creatures of the earth. Why did God give man the gift of speech? He did that so he could be in a relationship with man, so that he could communicate his thoughts to them, and so that they could do the same with regard to their Creator. He gave us a tongue to praise him. He gave man a tongue so that we could experience the wonderful connection with the Almighty creator.

Even after the fall into sin, God continued to endow man with the gift of speech. We can have meaningful conversations with the Lord our God. We can tell him our troubles. We can ask him to strengthen us. And we can hear his voice. We hear his voice in his written word. We hear his voice when we go to church, when he tells us that he has set us free from sin, and from slavery to sin. We can hear his voice in the thunder and in the winds, and in the waterfalls, for he is the one who created it all. He created sound that we can hear and respond to and enjoy. He gave us the ability to make music.

And we can also communicate with one another. Can you imagine being in a world where you cannot communicate with anyone? You would go bonkers. We need to be able to connect with others. We have to be able to communicate our pain and our sorrows, our joys and our triumphs. We need that connection with each other. God has created us to have relationships and relationships are maintained through communication, especially through the use of the tongue.

2. Brothers and sisters, we come to the second point: The tongue is Satan's slave. Satan has done a lot of damage. He is out to destroy relationships and he especially uses the tongue to accomplish that end. He does not want us to be in a good relationship with God or our fellow man. For that reason we have to understand the intent of the ninth commandment. This commandment is not primarily about the telling of the truth. Certainly truth is an important element of this commandment but that is not the central idea. This commandment has to do with our relationship to God and to each other. God wants to promote good relationships. The important question is not how we deal with the facts, but how we deal with our fellow human being.

Let me try to explain that from Scripture. Remember the midwives at the time of Moses' birth. Their names were Shiphrah and Puah. These midwives lied to Pharaoh when he asked them why they allowed the little baby boys to live. For, you'll recall, he had commanded the midwives to kill every baby boy that they delivered. The midwives, however, had no such intention. They feared God and so they lied to Pharaoh. They said that the Hebrew women were so vigorous that they give birth even before the midwives arrived. It was an outright lie yet God commended the midwives for what they did.

Think also about the prostitute Rahab in Jericho. She had the Israelite spies in her home, but she lied to her fellow countrymen as to their whereabouts. She too was commended for what she did. Why? The midwives and Rahab didn't tell the truth. Shouldn't they have been punished instead? No. They were interested in the well-being of their fellow man. They were interested, first of all, in obeying God. Truth is always in service of relationships. It is to give life, to maintain life, and to nurture life. Truth is never self-serving. For that reason you should never lie in order to promote your own cause or to save your

neck. A Christian must be reliable. You should count on him or her to tell the truth. You should count on him to keep promises. But the truth is always in service to our Creator, and our fellow man.

Because of sin, we have difficulties with relationships, first of all with our relationship with God. God gave us our tongues in order to praise him with them. He also gave us our tongues so that we could pray to him. We can pray to him in a quiet place. But we can also pray to him through music. Unbelievers use their tongues to blaspheme God, through the music that they play, and the words that they use on the airwaves, and in the books that they produce. A beautiful gift of God such as sexuality is being cheapened by the words spoken, and by the images displayed. In this way the relationship with God and with one another is at best superficial, and at worst nonexistent.

But let's stay close to home. Paul says in Ephesians 4:25 that we must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to our neighbor. This is necessary because, as he says, we are all members of one body. We are the body of Christ. We belong to God's people, just like the Israelites did at Mount Sinai. We are together on the road of salvation. Therefore we have to do our utmost to remain on that road together. We don't want anyone to fall away. We especially don't want anyone to fall away because of our sins.

And yet, there are so many ways in which we make others stumble because of our tongues. We can be unkind and harsh with one another. We are all guilty. It can even be that because of the things we have said, some people will leave the church. They are hurt and disappointed. We all hurt one another with our tongues. Ministers are sometimes hurt as well. They hear about the things that people say about them behind their back; hurtful things, unkind things, untrue things sometimes. But this comment is not meant to look for pity; ministers are well aware that they are not any better. The catechism says that I must defend and promote my neighbour's honour and reputation. We are told not to twist anyone's words, not to gossip or slander, or to condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly or unheard. Brothers and sisters, we do this all the time. All of us. Ministers included. It's horrible. Our tongues are frequently in slavery to Satan who is the father of lies. The Lord Jesus said to the Pharisees in John 8:44, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

We have all been infected with Satan's poison. We have to be keenly aware of that. James says that our tongue, even though it is only a very small part of our body, is nevertheless a very powerful instrument. He says it is like a bit in the mouth of a horse. Or like a small rudder of a large ship. A horse is strong, but it can be controlled by a little bit in his mouth. And a large ship can be tossed to and fro by strong winds and strong currents and yet a small rudder can steer and control it.

You and I must think about that carefully. Think about the power of the tongue and the damage that it can do. So easily, bad or unwholesome or unkind language comes out of our mouths. So easily we say words to bring another person down, to criticize him or her, or to minimize his or her worth and accomplishments. We dismiss them as insignificant, we tear another person down.

What does Paul say in verse 29 of Ephesians 4? He says that we should not let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, so that it may benefit those who listen. The Lord God wants us to use our tongues to build up, rather than to tear down. Brothers and sisters, let us make an effort to do that. As you go home after church this afternoon think about this sermon. Apply it. I want you to carefully watch the words that you speak. I want you to use only words that build other people up, your loved ones, your friends and relatives, and the people of the church. Use only words that are helpful, and that promote good relationships rather than break them down. Encourage and rebuke one another to do the right thing.

I want you children to do that as well. Only speak kind words to your brother or your sister and to your parents. Also speak kindly about your friends. Don't say anything nasty. Don't call others' names. Try that. Do your utmost, all of you. You will see that that is very hard even if only for a few hours. We are not used to using our tongues in that way. But that is what the Lord God commands. He does not want our tongues to be slaves of Satan who is a liar, a slanderer and an accuser, who wants to break everything down that is good.

3. For you see, instead of our tongues being slaves of Satan, they have to be tools of the Holy Spirit. We come to the third point.

How do our tongues become tools of the Holy Spirit? As you know, we all fail all the time. It may be that between the church services you are able to keep it up and not to say anything negative about other people but you know that sooner or later it will happen again. Furthermore, even though you may not say bad things about others, you nevertheless still harbour wrong thoughts about others in your heart. That's the kind of people we are. And so we're prone to fail.

What then? Does God then reject us because we are such failures? No. Remember we are all liberated people. We all have been saved from our sins. For that reason the Lord God gives us his Holy Spirit to do

his work in our hearts. That is, if you let him. Paul says in verse 32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Brothers and sisters, boys and girls, we are all part of God's covenant people. God has bound us together. How has he done that? Through his Son Jesus Christ. He is the one who has delivered us from our sins, including our sins against the ninth commandment. And it is the Holy Spirit who applies the work of Christ in our hearts. He renews you. He renews your heart. He cleanses your tongue. He does that time and again. Through the Holy Spirit you receive the victory of Christ. As long as you humble yourself before God, and admit what a sinner you are.

If there's anyone who knows about the destructive nature of the tongue, it is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. How he was abused by the tongues of others! Listen to the kinds of things they said about him. "Who does he think he is? He comes from Nazareth, and nothing good can come from that town." Or, "The miracles that he performs are possible only because he is a child of the devil. He belongs to Beelzebub, the Lord of evil spirits, Satan himself." And, "He claimed to have a special bond with God. He even made himself out to be the Son of God. What a liar. Look at him hanging on the cross, like a common criminal, as someone who is cursed." And, "He has saved others. But he cannot even save himself." And so on, and so on. Blasphemy from the tongues of others. The Lord Jesus suffered insult upon insult. But, he bore it all for our sakes because he wanted to restore and maintain our relationship with God.

Brothers and sisters, once again that is what the ninth commandment is all about. It is about our relationship with God and our fellow man. And for that reason if a brother or sister goes astray, then you have to admonish that person, carefully, gently, humbly. It takes a lot of effort to do that. You have to listen carefully to where the other person is coming from so that you can understand him or her, so that you can help that person. You have to stay away from rash judgments about someone else. But you can do that because of the relationship we have with God. You don't want your brothers and sisters to walk away from God's people. You don't want them to be lost in the wilderness. And you want yourself to remain part of God's people as well.

Sometimes we do feel like walking away, don't we? Because of the things that other people have said in the past. But if others have hurt you, and insulted you, you must forgive them, as God forgives you in Christ. You may not harbor grudges. You have to maintain your relationships. And you have to see that you are just as great a sinner as your brother or sister in the Lord. Relationships, that's what Christianity is all about. It is about our covenant relationship with God and our neighbour.

It must be our desire to use our tongues to the glory of God. God has put us to work. It is an enormous task. But it is a task that you can accomplish only through the Holy Spirit. He will instruct you. He will apply the work of Christ to you. He does that, so that in the end, you, together with all your brothers and sisters in the Lord, will be using your tongue only to praise God forever and ever. Amen.