

Making Jesus Known Through Kind Words

“We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.” That’s how Martin Luther described the meaning of the Eighth Commandment in his *Small Catechism*. Unfortunately, it seems that many people today never learned Luther’s words, and our government, our neighborhoods, our friendships, and even our families are paying the price for it.

For those people who know the Commandments (and many people do not), the words, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” are probably most often understood as being limited to the courtroom, where “testimony” is given. Few people seem to realize that every time we open our mouths to say something about our neighbor, we are “testifying.” And our words don’t just involve the person we’re talking about. Our words also reflect back on ourselves, and they reflect on the God in whom we believe.

Our words can either hurt or help our neighbor. We can either tear him down or build him up. Now, thanks to Facebook and other forms of ‘social media,’ our words can be attached to a snippet of video that “proves” our point. “Proves,” that is, until a longer version or different angle of that video shows the facts to be other than first perceived.

What we say and how we say it also reflects back on us. A sharp, snappy response might be our first reaction, one that shows how “on top of things” and “witty” we are. But we forget that in attempting to climb to the top of things, we often do so over the bodies of those we knock down below us. If our words, online or in person, are caustic and cruel, it doesn’t matter if we’re “right” or “wrong.” We’ll still be seen as unpleasant, unloving, destructive people.

All this also reflects on the God in whom we believe. When our words become hurtful, does that mean we believe our God approves of such hurt? Is our God as unpleasant and unloving as we are? Or does He not care about our nastiness to others? And if any or all of that is true, then why would anyone want to trust in and follow such a God?

How, then, can we reflect God’s love, and through our words show that we do, indeed, “Love our neighbors as ourselves”?

In the years after Martin Luther’s death, a number of conflicts and controversies arose among the Lutherans. There were some forceful personalities attached to the various “sides” in these disputes, and some of their names became directly connected with the errors into which they fell. To resolve these disputes, the authors of the *Formula of Concord* didn’t take on the personalities. In fact, they deliberately chose not to mention any of the names involved, and dealt solely with the issues. People could then read the documents and agree or disagree based on the facts, rather than get caught up in the ‘social media’ of the day.

“Facts” fly fast and furiously by these days, with many being quickly to be found ‘other than factual.’ When we spread such “facts,” our tongues quickly become the “restless evil, full of deadly poison” of which St James warns us. May our prayer rather be, “O dear Savior, give me a quiet, patient spirit and a silent mouth, that I may not err with my words. Grant me grace to bridle my thoughts and tongue, and to discipline my heart with God’s Words, and not to spare myself where I do wrong, that I may not cause sin and establish error and commit much evil” (*Lutheran Prayer Companion*, page 212). Then, our lips and our lives will reflect our Savior, the Lord of Love, who has given His life for us that we may live in love with others and forever in joy with Him!