

Psalm 119:145-160

- ¹⁴⁵ With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O LORD.
I will keep your statutes.
- ¹⁴⁶ I cry to you; save me,
that I may observe your decrees.
- ¹⁴⁷ I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I put my hope in your words.
- ¹⁴⁸ My eyes are awake before each watch of the night,
that I may meditate on your promise.
- ¹⁴⁹ In your steadfast love hear my voice;
O LORD, in your justice preserve my life.
- ¹⁵⁰ Those who persecute me with evil purpose draw near;
they are far from your law.
- ¹⁵¹ Yet you are near, O LORD,
and all your commandments are true.
- ¹⁵² Long ago I learned from your decrees
that you have established them for ever.
- ¹⁵³ Look on my misery and rescue me,
for I do not forget your law.
- ¹⁵⁴ Plead my cause and redeem me;
give me life according to your promise.
- ¹⁵⁵ Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek your statutes.
- ¹⁵⁶ Great is your mercy, O LORD;
give me life according to your justice.
- ¹⁵⁷ Many are my persecutors and my adversaries,
yet I do not swerve from your decrees.
- ¹⁵⁸ I look at the faithless with disgust,
because they do not keep your commands.
- ¹⁵⁹ Consider how I love your precepts;
preserve my life according to your steadfast love.
- ¹⁶⁰ The sum of your word is truth;
and every one of your righteous ordinances endures forever.

Exodus 20:16

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Sermon

Most of you probably know that the First Nations and indigenous peoples who live up and around the arctic circle have dozens of words in their various languages for snow. The Yupik people in central Siberia have 40 words, the Inuit dialect spoken in Nunavik has over 53, including “matsaaruti,” for wet snow that can be used to ice a sleigh’s runners, and “pukak,” for the crystalline powder snow that looks like salt.”¹ In Wales, Alaska the Inupiaq dialect has over 70 terms for different kinds of sea ice, many of which indicate the safety of the ice for sleds and people to walk upon. The Sami people of northern Russia and Scandinavia top out with 180 words for snow and ice, and an additional 1,000 words for reindeer. My personal favorite is “njirru” which refers to an unmanageable female reindeer.

Our vocabularies across world languages show a similar pattern—we have more words to describe the phenomena and things we interact with regularly. Academic linguists call this “linguistic exuberance” and I love that so much. We have an explosion of terms to describe those things which define our world. Living with a statistician I experience this every day...just try to use an imprecise word to describe data or a study around John and watch what happens. It’s mostly endearing. Mostly.

This is a commandment about words, the words we speak, the intention behind them, and the attitude with which they are spoken. It’s a commandment that seems easy...that is until we start to live it out in the real world, full of real people.

So, at the top level, this commandment is about how our words affect the reputations and just treatment of others. Don’t lie, don’t slander, don’t commit perjury against another. John Calvin puts this pretty eloquently, “let us not malign anyone with slanders or false charges, nor harm [their] substance by falsehood, in short, injure [them] by unbridled evilspeaking and impudence.”² There’s the literal, legal implication to this: that lying in a court can bring terrible consequences down on your neighbor. And then there’s the social justice component, the very real loss of reputation and name when others speak ill about you. What we have is our reputations, and they’re often far more fragile than I think we consider. We can do great damage with our words, even when they are true. Ok, fine, I get it.

Then, we do what we’ve been practicing for weeks now. We flip it inside out. Don’t just not slander or speak lies, but do the opposite—use your words for the building up of the reputations of others. Again, this point makes sense, even if it is a little boring. It costs us nothing to be kind to one another with our language and thoughts, and we can in fact give one another the gift of using our words and reputation to bolster and support others. This, again, makes sense.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/there-really-are-50-eskimo-words-for-snow/2013/01/14/e0e3f4e0-59a0-11e2-beee-6e38f5215402_story.html

² Institutes Book II chapter VIII.47

Martin Luther actually then takes this point one step further. He goes so far as to say, it's not enough to simply not slander and speak kindly, but on top of that, you should use your words and thoughts to assume the best of others and interpret their actions as generously as possible. He tells us we should "palliate and garnish their reputations with [our] own," and "cover up our neighbor's sins and infirmities, excuse them" because this is what Jesus means when he tells us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.³ And on one hand, sure. I can actually see how the social fabric could be vastly strengthened by a general pattern of all people assuming the good about others and acting with that high level of goodwill and kindness. I really do try to do this sometimes, and I genuinely hope others do this for me.

HOWEVER. Honestly? I don't think this is a great, universal, all the time in every situation way to interpret this commandment. It's too idealistic to actually function in the world we live in, if I'm being pragmatic about it. It's a laudable idea, but in practice I think people could get hurt. And if you want to know why, please tune in to the impeachment hearings going on this week.

Language is so malleable. It's flexible and slippery, and some of us can wield it like a precision scalpel in one hand and the disappearing cards of the magician in another, politicians and lawyers stereotypically being the best at these tactics. The impeachment hearings are like a masterclass in the use of technically factual statements to distract from the truth that is actually being sought. The way questions are asked by both sides is deliberate and also deft in shaping and telling a very particular story. If we follow Luther's suggestion of assuming the best and rosier intentions of everyone all the time, I think we'll find ourselves hopelessly lost in a vast gnarl of political knots. It's not smart to assume the best of every person and every statement, because on both sides of this issue those speaking are trying to manipulate the story and our opinion toward their perspective. This is, actually, not even nefarious at its core—this is the job of the justice system, to present evidence in such a way as to tell a story to those with the right to decide. But to assume the best might overlook this careful shaping of a particular story.

And sometimes, truthfully, people use language, true or not, in ways which do actually harm others. The parents whose sincerely held religious beliefs tell themselves and their child that they can just pray the gay away. Those words wound, and we have the youth LGBTQ suicide and homelessness rates to prove it. You can assume the best about those parents, that they're just trying to honor their beliefs. Sure. And also, the consequence of their belief is the loss of their child, whether literal or metaphorical. Someone is hurt, and the benefit of the doubt may not actually help. Or take gaslighting, which is where people actively undermine others, making them question their own sanity or read of a situation. This is actually a particularly abusive use of "the benefit of the doubt." This is what happens when abusers make their victims think that the abuse is actually their fault, that they in some way deserve to be treated violently. And that benefit of the doubt that we so

³ Larger Catechism VIII.

often give to those we care for most deeply actually perpetuates this cycle of psychological violence.

So, while I appreciate where Luther's trying to go with this idea, I have to say, it feels like the particular myopathy of a highly educated, powerful, white man whose economic place isn't being threatened in the moment. It's fine, so long as you're on top of the heap, but it's probably a pretty damaging piece of advice to offer to anyone else who's experiencing oppression—economic hardship, gender discrimination, abuse, racism, ableism, and all the rest.

Instead, this is what I'd say: this is a commandment which reminds us that for all their ethereal nature, our words actually carry real weight and power, especially when we find ourselves in positions of power where people take our speech seriously. With our words we can wound the reputations, livelihoods, psyches, and even the bodies of others. And so, yes, don't lie. Just don't do it. And offer honest testimony when you are asked. But also, take responsibility for the words you speak and the cost of those words to others. If you speak the truth, but it is a painful or hurtful truth, be cautious. Who suffers, and why? Use your language in ways that promote the good, especially for those who have less power or whose voices aren't as loud or respectable as yours. Say hard things to the people who need to hear them, but do so in kindness. Don't manipulate others with the stories you tell, but be fair in your presentation of the facts. And be quick to apologize, and learn to do better in the future. But most of all, take responsibility for the words you speak, and the effect they have on others.