

“The Tongue is a Fire”: Sins of the Tongue in the Letter of James

Introduction

1. The Problem of Sin in Human Society:
 - a. Abortion, Euthanasia, Violence, Bloodshed (5th Commandment)
 - b. Sexual Immorality, Pornography, Adultery (6th Commandment)
 - c. Theft and Extortion (7th Commandment)
2. Sins of the Tongue?: One of the Ten Commandments:

You shall not bear *false witness* against your neighbor. (Exodus 20:16)

3. The *Catechism* on the 8th Commandment:

The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. This moral prescription flows from the vocation of the holy people to bear witness to their God who is the truth and wills the truth. (CCC 2464)

1. The Gravity of Human Speech (James 3:1-5)

1 *Let not many of you become teachers (Greek didaskaloi), my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.* 2 *For we all make many mistakes (Greek, ptaioimen, “stumble”) and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also.* 3 *If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies.* 4 *Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.* 5 *So the tongue (Greek glossa) is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!* (James 3:1-5)

The *Catechism* on Human Speech and the Truth

*Man tends by nature toward the truth. He is obliged to honor and bear witness to it: "It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are persons . . . are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth." Truth as *uprightness* in human action and speech is called truthfulness, sincerity, or candor. *Truth or truthfulness is the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and in guarding against duplicity, dissimulation, and hypocrisy.**

*"Men could not live with one another if there were not mutual confidence that they were being truthful to one another." (St. Thomas Aquinas) The virtue of truth gives another his just due. Truthfulness keeps to the just mean between what ought to be expressed and what ought to be kept secret: it entails honesty and discretion. In justice, "as a matter of honor, one man owes it to another to manifest the truth." (CCC 2467-69, citing St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 109, A. 3)*

The Catechism on the Sin of Lying

"A lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving." (St. Augustine, *De Mendacio* 4:5). The Lord denounces lying as the work of the devil: "You are of your father the devil, . . . there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:44) *Lying is the most direct offense against the truth. To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error. By injuring man's relation to truth and to his neighbor, a lie offends against the fundamental relation of man and of his word to the Lord.*

The gravity of a lie is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims. If a lie in itself only constitutes a venial sin, it becomes mortal when it does grave injury to the virtues of justice and charity.

By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. *It is a profanation of speech, whereas the purpose of speech is to communicate known truth to others.* The deliberate intention of leading a neighbor into error by saying things contrary to the truth constitutes a failure in justice and charity. The culpability is greater when the intention of deceiving entails the risk of deadly consequences for those who are led astray.

Since it violates the virtue of truthfulness, *a lie does real violence to another. It affects his ability to know, which is a condition of every judgment and decision. It contains the seed of discord and all consequent evils. Lying is destructive of society; it undermines trust among men and tears apart the fabric of social relationships.* (CCC 2482-2485)

2. The Tongue and the Fires of Hell (James 3:6-12)

6 And the tongue is a fire. *The tongue is an unrighteous world* (Greek *kosmos tes adikias*, "world of evil") among *our members*, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell (Greek *geenes*, "Gehenna") 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, 8 but *no human being can tame the tongue* -- a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 *With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God.* 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (James 3:6-12)

The Catechism on False Witness and Perjury

False witness and perjury. When it is made publicly, a statement contrary to the truth takes on a particular gravity. In court it becomes false witness. When it is under oath, it is perjury. Acts such as these contribute to condemnation of the innocent, exoneration of the guilty, or the increased punishment of the accused. They gravely compromise the exercise of justice and the fairness of judicial decisions. (CCC 2476)

The Catechism on Sins of the Tongue Against Others

Respect for the reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury. He becomes guilty:

- of *rash judgment* who, even tacitly, assumes as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor;

- of *detraction* who, without objectively valid reason, discloses another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them;

- of *calumny* who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them.

To avoid rash judgment, everyone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbor's thoughts, words, and deeds in a favorable way: *“Every good Christian ought to be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another's statement than to condemn it. But if he cannot do so, let him ask how the other understands it. And if the latter understands it badly, let the former correct him with love. If that does not suffice, let the Christian try all suitable ways to bring the other to a correct interpretation so that he may be saved.”* (St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 22) Detraction and calumny destroy the reputation and honor of one's neighbor. Honor is the social witness given to human dignity, and *everyone enjoys a natural right to the honor of his name and reputation and to respect*. Thus, detraction and calumny offend against the virtues of justice and charity. (CCC 2477-79)

James on Sins against the Reputation of Others

Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors. As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (James 5:9-11)

The Catechism on Other Sins against the Truth

Every word or attitude is forbidden which by *flattery, adulation, or complaisance encourages and confirms another in malicious acts and perverse conduct. Adulation* is a grave fault if it makes one an accomplice in another's vices or grave sins. Neither the desire to be of service nor friendship justifies duplicitous speech. Adulation is a venial sin when it only seeks to be agreeable, to avoid evil, to meet a need, or to obtain legitimate advantages. (CCC 2480)

St. Basil the Great on the Many Sins of the Tongue

“Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile” (Psa 34:13)... Do we need to recall the many names which are given to *sins of the tongue*? For from it come *slanders, coarse jokes, idiocies, irrelevant accusations, bitterness, swearing, false witness*—the tongue is the creator of all these evil things and more. (Basil the Great, *Catena*; cited in Bray, *James*, ACCS, NT vol. XI, p. 39).

3. Wisdom and Truth in the Mouth of Believers (James 3:13-18)

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness (Greek *prautes*, “humility”) of wisdom. 14 *But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.* 15 This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish (Greek *epigeion, psychike, daimonidodes*). 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first *pure* (Greek *hagnos*) then *peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity* (Greek *adiakritos, anupokritos*, “impartial, sincere”). 18 And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:13-18)

The Catechism on Sins of the Tongue that Stem from Pride

Boasting or *bragging* is an offense against truth. So is *irony* aimed at disparaging someone by maliciously caricaturing some aspect of his behavior.

The Catechism on Repairing the Damage from Sins against the Truth

Every offense committed against justice and truth entails the duty of reparation, even if its author has been forgiven. *When it is impossible publicly to make reparation for a wrong, it must be made secretly.* If someone who has suffered harm cannot be directly compensated, he must be given moral satisfaction in the name of charity. This duty of reparation also concerns offenses against another's reputation. This reparation, moral and sometimes material, must be evaluated in terms of the extent of the damage inflicted. It obliges in conscience. (CCC2486-87)

Conclusion: Jesus and Paul on Christian Speech

"Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. *Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.* (Matthew 5:34-38)

Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ³ Therefore *whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.* (Luke 12:2-3)

Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. *Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. ...Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* (Ephesians 5:22-32)