

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
August 18, 2024

## **Words of Truth**

Proverbs 12:13-23

In the 1997 film *Liar Liar*, Jim Carrey stars as lawyer Fletcher Reede. Fletcher has built his entire career on lying. Though he loves spending time with his young son Max, Fletcher consistently gives priority to his career, breaking promises to Max and to his ex-wife, Audrey, and then lying about the reasons. After Fletcher misses Max's birthday party, Max makes a birthday wish that Fletcher will be unable to lie for one day, and the wish immediately comes true. Fletcher soon discovers that he is unable to lie, mislead, or withhold the truth in any way.

This inability to lie gets Fletcher into all sorts of embarrassing situations. It alienates him from co-workers. His car gets impounded when he confesses all his traffic violations and unpaid tickets to a policeman. When he's in court, he's unable to bend the truth in order to pursue his case. After a complicated case involving a divorcing couple, Fletcher ends up being held in contempt of court, and gets Audrey to bail him out. The two of them eventually get back together. Fletcher promises Max that he'll spend more time with him. And though the 24 hours have passed and he's free to lie again, Fletcher says that it feels better to be honest. By the end of the movie the family returns to normal and all is well.

How wonderful it would be if issues of lying and deception could be remedied with just one birthday wish and 24 hours of honesty. But as we hear in today's text from Proverbs, the situation is way more challenging and complex than that. When we open the book of Proverbs, we need to remember that its aim is to help people become wise and godly. In Proverbs, the learning objective isn't primarily to master a body of knowledge but to live rightly toward God and others. Instead of promising a diploma in a particular specialty, Proverbs' opening verses speak of obtaining a degree in discernment: "For attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair" (vv. 2-3). So the question that drives the book of Proverbs is the question that drives the pursuit of wisdom in many other times, cultures, and places, namely, how best to live.

One of the ways we live is through our words. That's why today's text begins with the part of the body that can be the source of so much unrighteousness, the lips. "Evildoers are trapped by their sinful talk, and so the innocent escape trouble" (v. 13). This may also be translated literally, "In the transgression of the lips is an evil trap." The reference seems to be to someone who's in trouble, and tries to escape their plight through false speech, only to end up going from the frying pan into the fire. Then the next verse underscores how what comes from our lips can generate fruit that's either good or evil. So our words, like our hands, can produce things that bring either blessing or destruction.

The rest of our text is populated with numerous references to words and speech. "An honest witness tells the truth, but a false witness tells lies" (v. 17). "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (v. 18). When it comes to the fruit of our lips, the options are laid out before us. On the one hand, good and truthful words that promote righteousness, justice, peace, and healing. On the other hand,

evil and deceptive words that contribute to unrighteousness, division, hurt, and destruction. Truthfulness that prompts God's delight, contrasted with dishonesty which God abhors.

How could it be otherwise, since the God we worship and serve is a God of truth. As author Jen Wilkin captures it, "Because he is truth, all of his actions reveal truth and all his words declare it. As the fullness of truth itself, God is incapable of lying, though sometimes our limited perception may cause us to doubt that this is the case."<sup>1</sup> No wonder that Satan's angle of attack, and the first lie recorded in Scripture, is the Serpent saying to Eve, "You will not surely die," telling her that if she eats of the forbidden tree she will have godlike powers (Gen. 3:4-5). As Eve, and Adam, yield to this tempting deception, they cross the line into sin, and we ourselves participate with them in denying what is real and true, given by the God of truth.

In our earlier Scripture reading from John, Jesus says of the devil: "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" (8:44). Jesus describes himself as the one who tells the truth, about himself, about God, about us. In fact, he does more than just tell the truth. He declares that he is "the truth" (John 14:6). Truth, as it turns out, is more than just a body of knowledge. It's actually God embodied, revealed in the person of Jesus, who tells us that as we abide in relationship with him, we'll experience freedom, including freedom from sin's grip in the form of dishonesty and deception.

Several years ago, in an article for *National Geographic*, one writer observed: "Lying, it turns out, is something that most of us are very adept at. We lie with ease, in ways big and small, to strangers, co-workers, friends, and loved ones. Our capacity for dishonesty is as fundamental to us as our need to trust others, which ironically makes us terrible at detecting lies. Being deceitful is woven into our very fabric."<sup>2</sup> But God hasn't created us for falsehood. He has made us to know the truth about reality, and to live in a way that aligns with the reality of his sovereignty and love, including the way that we use our words. In today's text from Proverbs, we hear, "Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment" (v. 19). "Lips" and "tongue" refer to more than just the mouth. They represent the whole person. These words challenge each of us to think about whether who I am is aligned with the reality of God's kingdom or not. When it comes to the reign of God, truth and honesty will last. Falsehood and deception will not. So how is dishonesty present in my life, especially in my speech? Where and how am I lying to others? The God of truth will not let us evade these questions.

And it's not just a matter of being honest with others. It's also a matter of being honest with ourselves. Sometimes the person you need to come clean with is the person in the mirror. Are there things from your past that you need to face more squarely? Are there sins in your life that you need to reckon with more deeply? Are there attitudes and behavior patterns you've formed that you're too blind to see? Are there things about your health and your habits where you're resisting facing the truth? Where is your self-deception keeping you from freedom in Christ and from bearing more of the fruit of his Spirit?

It's hard to see what's true, to stay in what's true, and to live what's true, especially in a world where falsehood and dishonesty lead to distortion and division. Misinformation, disinformation, misstatements, propaganda, fake news. These terms don't all mean exactly the same thing, but they do get tossed about enough for us to realize that getting a handle on the truth, and determining the facts, and separating fact from fiction, have become more critical than ever, and perhaps harder than ever. Especially with the proliferation of social media, and increasing technological capabilities for manipulating words, sounds, and images, that familiar statement, "Well, I saw it on the internet, so it must be true," is received with justified suspicion.

Last year, Merriam-Webster's word of the year was "authentic," which saw a substantial increase in the number of lookups. The dictionary's definitions of the word include "not false or imitation," "true to one's own personality, spirit, or character," and "worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact." Merriam-Webster's editor at large said, "Can we trust whether a student wrote this paper? Can we trust whether a politician made this statement? We don't always trust what we see anymore. We sometimes don't believe our own eyes or our own ears. We are now recognizing that authenticity is a performance itself."<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the 2022 word of the year was "gaslighting," a term that has to do with misleading someone, especially for one's own advantage. So the language we use, and the words with which we communicate, tell us a lot about how much the truth is, or isn't, prized.

And sometimes it's not just the quality of the information but also the quantity of information. Our lives are saturated with news, media, information, and data. An issue of *The Economist* once carried an article titled, "Yes, I'd lie to you: The post-truth world." It analyzed the dishonesty that's wreaking havoc in politics, journalism, social media, and other areas of common life. According to the piece, one of the most effective ways to tell lies is by hiding the truth in a glut of information. In other words, it's hard to tell what's actually happening, or to get a handle on the way things really are, when you're drowning in distracting information. One expert quoted in the article said, "Right now, it pays to be outrageous, but not to be truthful."

Near the end of today's text from Proverbs, we hear, "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy" (v. 22). Trustworthiness, truthfulness, honesty, authenticity. A desire to know the truth, to speak the truth, to live the truth. These are marks of godly wisdom. The kind of wisdom that others should see and hear in your life and my life, and in our life together as a congregation. The community of Christ's people is where we come to know the God of truth, who has shown us his trustworthiness, most decisively and fully through Jesus Christ.

Pastor Kevin Kim tells the following story about a worship experience at his church during which the congregation was focusing on Christ's forgiveness:

A family came to the Ash Wednesday service here at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. They had a six-year-old son, and they explained to him the practice of confession. They all grabbed a sheet of paper and started writing down their confessions. He did the same. Remember, he is only six, so he is probably still using block letters. He turned his letters around. When the family finished writing their confessions—they didn't write their names on their papers—they folded up their papers and pinned them to the cross. I asked his parents if I could use it. This is his confession: "God, I'm sorry because I lie." But he signed his name, and he didn't fold it up. He pinned it to the front of the cross. His parents asked him, "Why did you put your name on it? Don't you want to fold it up so no one can see?" Then he said, "I wrote my name on it because I want everyone to see it. If they know it was me, maybe they can help me stop."<sup>4</sup>

Christ died to redeem us from falsehood and to bring us into the freedom of truthfulness. And he has given us this congregation in which to grow in the wisdom of honesty. "Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment." Wherever there's any lying or deception in your life, may the God of truth help you put it away, so that you grow in honesty and authenticity, and in being able to discern and do what's true, for his kingdom's sake.

<sup>1</sup> Jen Wilkin, *In His Image: 10 Ways God Calls Us to Reflect His Character* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018). Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, "Why We Lie." *National Geographic* (June 2017).

---

<sup>3</sup> Teresa Nowakowski, "Merriam-Webster's 2023 Word of the Year Is 'Authentic.'" *Smithsonian Magazine* (November 29, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Kim, from the sermon, "Total Nakedness." <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/august/totalnakedness.html> (August 15, 2024).