

**2.23.20 – *The Power of Words***

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Exodus 20:7

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and lived among us. John 1:1, 14a

**Misusing God's name**

**MONDAY 2.24.20 Exodus 20:7, Luke 6:46-49**

Generations of children have grown up learning, at home or in Sunday School, that the third commandment forbids slang phrases that use the names of God or Jesus. Jesus surely didn't endorse such careless uses of God's name. He did make it plain, though, that he found it a far more serious sacrilege for a person to claim to follow Jesus while ignoring God's plain directions for living a God-pleasing life.

- Have you ever been in a community, workplace, school or other setting in which people who vocally claimed to be "Christians" lied, cheated, willfully hurt others or acted immorally? How did that kind of jarring behavior affect the response of non-religious people to those who claim to be Christ-followers? Since we all struggle to live flawless lives, how can we avoid being like the people Jesus described in Luke 6:46?
- It may be a secondary issue, but popular dramas and comedians certainly model the use of phrases like "Oh, God" or "Jesus H. Christ" as throwaway, funny expressions. Think about the meaning of the commandment that says, "Do not use the Lord your God's name as if it were of no significance." Monitor your own speech patterns this week, and seek to use God's name only in important, reverent ways.

**Prayer:** Lord God, when I call you "Lord," I want to mean it seriously, to shape my life based on your lordship. Guide me in all my choices, of words and actions, to truly make you my Lord. Amen.

**Using grace-giving words to ourselves**

**TUESDAY 2.25.20 1 John 3:15-21**

John began this passage by echoing what Jesus taught: that feelings and words of hatred toward others are a form of murder (cf. Matthew 5:21-22). Jesus didn't seek to kill his foes—he laid down his life for them. But then John extended the principle to the words so many of us speak against ourselves ("even if our hearts condemn us"). Those words, too, can kill our spirit, and there, too, God's mercy is the answer ("God is greater than our hearts").

- What are the kinds of mistakes or habits that most often trigger self-criticism in you? When you are speaking negative, critical words about yourself, do you find them to be “useful for building up”? Do they “give grace” to you as you listen to your own critical thoughts or words? What better ways have you found to correct and build yourself up than being harshly self-critical?
- Pastors or counselors fairly often hear a person say, “God may forgive me for that, but I can never forgive myself.” Christian counselor Bruce Narramore, in his book *No Condemnation*, noted that if we say that, we seem to think we have higher standards for ourselves than God does! How can you more fully internalize the reality that “God is greater than our hearts,” that you can trust God’s forgiveness more than your own self-condemning feelings?

**Prayer:** Loving God, help not only the words I speak to others, but also the words I speak internally to myself, to be acceptable to you, and in harmony with your gracious words. Amen.

### **The spirit and shape of our words to God**

#### **WEDNESDAY 2.26.20 Matthew 6:5-15**

We want all our words, and the meditations of our heart, to be acceptable to God. Perhaps nowhere is that more so than when it comes to the words we speak directly to God, the words we use in prayer. Jesus’ teaching about prayer makes it plain that he did not intend the Lord’s Prayer to be a magic formula recited by rote. Instead, it was a model to guide us into personal, trusting prayer, done not to impress but simply to communicate with God.

- As you think about the Lord’s Prayer as a model, set your typical prayers beside it and consider which elements of the Lord’s Prayer you often pray. Are there any of the aspects of the Lord’s Prayer that are almost always missing from your other prayers? What ways can you see in which using Jesus’ prayer as a model could deepen and enrich your prayer life?
- Jesus’ depiction of people who think their prayers will be heard because they “pour out a flood of empty words” might recall the bizarre, tragic scene of the prophets of Baal “praying” on Mount Carmel (cf. 1 Kings 18:26-29). They saw their god(s) as inattentive, impassive, and needing to be “won over.” How have you learned to trust that God wants to hear you, and you don’t need to impress God by eloquence or lengthy rhetoric?

**Prayer:** God of love and mercy, thank you that in your infinite caring you are always ready to hear me when I pray. Thank you for promising to be with me through all the moments of this day. Amen.

### **Prayer: equipping us with spiritual “armor”**

#### **THURSDAY 2.27.20 Ephesians 6:10-20**

We might think the letter to the Ephesians, written from a prison cell (cf. Ephesians 3:1), would call the Romans the great force opposing Christians. But the apostle Paul’s vision was far more cosmic. “We aren’t fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens,” he wrote. He used the image of soldier’s armor, but the actual spiritual armor he used came into view in verse 18: “Offer prayers ... all the time.”

- To the Ephesians, Paul wrote, “Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time.” To Christians in Thessalonica, he wrote, “Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). But Paul clearly led a very active life—he didn’t kneel by his bed all day, every day. What have you found that helps you to go through even busy days in a spirit and attitude of prayer? What value do you see in nurturing a continual connection with God?
- What do you make of Paul’s words (which fit well into Roman, Greek and Hebrew views of the universe) about “rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens”? Do you see video beheadings, deceitful invasions and police shootings as just expressions of “human cussedness,” or does there seem to be something bigger and darker at work against God’s kingdom? In what ways do you need spiritual armor to keep you “strengthened by the Lord and his powerful strength”?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, at the moments when the darkness of this world seems overwhelming, remind me that your light is greater than the darkness. I pray for your spiritual power to guard me, and fill me with your light. Amen.

**“This is my Son—listen to him”**

**FRIDAY 2.28.20 Matthew 17:1-6**

Although there are always dimensions that remain mysterious, we serve a God who desires to be known. God’s self-revelation, God’s word, comes to us in various ways—through nature (cf. Psalm 19), through inner messages (cf. 1 Kings 19:11-13), through the sweeping story of the Bible (cf. Hebrews 4:12). But most of all, God spoke through Jesus, saying to us as to the disciples on the mount, “Listen to him.”

- Matthew seems to have written his gospel in terms that would speak particularly to Christ-followers with Hebrew backgrounds. Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the prototypical prophet, were two people the Hebrews saw as especially reliable. What symbolic point might Matthew have had in mind in reporting God saying of Jesus, in the presence of those two great leaders, “Listen to him”?
- When this happened, Peter, James and John (as shown by Peter’s rather inane suggestion—when Luke wrote the story in Luke 9:33, he said Peter “didn’t know what he was saying”) were still struggling to understand what Jesus was all about. In what ways do their later lives as apostles suggest that they did, indeed, “listen” to Jesus? How has “listening” to Jesus changed your life for the better?

**Prayer:** God, you gave the command for us to listen to Jesus. Guide me that I may read the gospels, and the other witnesses to Jesus, more attentively and more personally. Amen.

**God’s ultimate Word**

**SATURDAY 2.29.20 John 1:1-5, 11-14, 16-17, John 6:60-63**

At Resurrection, we read John’s prologue every Christmas Eve. But it speaks to us year round—its superb poetry reminding us, in terms that spoke to Jews and Gentiles alike, that Jesus was God’s ultimate word. And though John used a lot of literary skill, he was not being theologically original in this passage. Instead, he was following the lead of Jesus himself, who told a spiritually hungry crowd, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

- In what ways have the words of Jesus functioned in your life as “what is useful for building up,” and as words that “give grace” to you as you hear them? What role have Jesus’ words played in reshaping you from the inside out, so that the words of your mouth and the meditation of your heart become ever more acceptable to God, your rock and your redeemer? How can you more closely connect with Jesus’ words in the weeks and months ahead, to draw even more spirit and life from them?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, reshape my heart and the words that spring from it, to others and to you. Keep me always listening for your words, that they may be a powerful spring of spirit and life for me. Amen.

**Family Activity:** One of the ways we can experience and express positive words is through music. Choose a 24-hour time period where you and your family listen closely to the words in the music playing around you. Pay close attention to the musical lyrics you hear in the car, at home, in stores, in church and at school. Discuss the kinds of messages being shared, the ways groups of people are portrayed and whether the lyrics are building others up or tearing them down. Decide together on one place you can choose to listen to more positive, Christ-like music. Commit to changing your car radio station or updating your playlists and listen to songs that encourage and lift others up. Pray and ask God to help you sustain this change.

*This study was adapted from The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.*