

THE TENOR OF THESE WORDS

EXODUS 34:27-28

"Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments."

There are 800,000 words in the English language. The average person will use about 60,000 different words in a lifetime, and has a working vocabulary of 7,000 words... In a single day you'll use 18,000 total words - enough to fill 54 pages of type. In a year the average person speaks a little over 6 1/2 million words, enough words to fill 132 books of 400 pages each.

Words, words, words - we're constantly using words!

Linguists say of the four major languages, English is the most difficult to learn... Try learning a language where "*fat chance*" and "*slim chance*" mean the same.

In the English language the three most difficult words to pronounce are "*I was wrong*." The two sneakiest words are "*Plus tax*." The two most pleasant words are "*Check enclosed*." And the longest word in the English language is the word "*sMILEs*"... look closely, and you'll find that there's a *mile* between the two "s"s.

This morning, we're talking about words... but what exactly is a "*word*"? A word is an agreed upon symbol. It's an emblem made up of prearranged letters that represents an object or idea. Humans string together these symbols to express thoughts, and communicate with one another. From words we produce language.

Words are **the apparel in which we dress our thoughts before they leave the home of our minds.**

It's been humorously said, "*Language is a wonderful thing: it can be used to express thoughts, or conceal thoughts, and or sometimes even replace thinking*." At times it's a lot easier *to talk* than it is *to think*.

The problem though with symbols is that they can be misinterpreted. If you don't believe me just watch a third base coach flash signs to the batter at home plate. His flurry of symbols can be confusing. And this is also true of words. Words can be misunderstood.

For example, "Take the word box, the plural of which is boxes: but the plural of ox is oxen, not oxes... One fowl is a goose, and two are called geese: but the plural of mouse is never meese... You may find a lone mouse, or a whole nest of mice: but the plural of house is houses, not hice... If the plural of man is men, why shouldn't the plural of pan be pen?... If I speak of a foot and you show me two feet, why shouldn't a pair of boots be called beet?... If one is a tooth and a whole set are teeth, why shouldn't the plural of booth be beeth?... Then the masculine pronouns are he, his, and him; but imagine the feminine as she, shis, and shim!" You get my point. Language can be confusing...

One of the problems with words is their multiple meanings. One word can have different definitions. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, on the average, each of the 500 most frequently used English words have 23 distinct definitions. For example, the word "round" - "r-o-u-n-d" - has 70 different meanings.

Thus, to grasp the true meaning of a word, that word has to be examined in its proper context.

And this is especially true when it comes to God's words. All too often people take verses out of context, and use them to express what God never intended.

It reminds me of the man who was in serious trouble. In desperation he opened his Bible for guidance...

He'd never read the Bible before, so he decided to play Bible roulette. He thumbed through the pages of the Bible, and then he dropped his finger on a verse.

The first verse he read was Job 3:1, "he cursed the day of his birth." This wasn't very encouraging, so he tried again... This time his finger pointed to Matthew 27:5, "he went and hanged himself." Now he's really depressed... He gives it one final try. This time his finger points to John 13:27, "what you do, do quickly."

It can be dangerous to simply open the Bible and pull different Scriptures out of context. It's been accurately stated, "A prooftext without context is often a pretext."

The London Daily Telegraph reports on a high-tech British company who devised a computer program that translated English into Russian. A Bible verse was fed into the computer, Matthew 26:41, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The translation came out, "The whiskey is agreeable, but the meat has gone bad."

Words are the symbols that make language and communication possible, but words can be *misused, misunderstood, misinterpreted, and mistranslated*.

There are times when words alone don't always communicate the message an author intends.

Often, you can read the words, study them, even memorize them, and treasure them, yet that doesn't always mean you've accurately understood them.

This was a problem with the Jews of the first century. In Romans 2:17-23 Paul writes, "Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes..." They were so confident they knew the Bible they made themselves teachers.

But "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, do not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?"

The Jews took pride in their knowledge of the words. They could quote verses - they had it memorized and categorized - but they never truly grasp its meaning. The Jews knew the words per se', but they missed out on God's intention, and the verse's full meaning.

This is why God told Moses in verse 27, He was making a covenant with the people not just according to "these words," but with "the **tenor** of these words." The Hebrew word translated "tenor" means "the puff, the air, or the essence behind the word." The implication is the original meaning or intent of the word.

God was making a covenant with His people not according to the words alone, but His covenant was based on "the intent behind the words." Hear Exodus 34:27 from the Amplified Bible, "Write these words, for after the purpose and character of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel."

God wanted Israel to remember that His covenant with them didn't just consist of the letter of the law (*the words alone*). They were also accountable to God for what He intended by the words that He had uttered.

God didn't want the Jewish people to simply *write the words, reverence the words, memorialize the words*, then forget the meaning behind the words. He didn't want them to lose touch with *the intention of the Law*.

For most of their history the Jews were never in serious danger of losing *the letter of the law*. The two stone tablets on which God wrote the Ten Commandments were taken by Moses and placed in the Ark of the Covenant for their safe keeping.

These tablets were the national treasures of Israel. Men fought wars and laid down their lives to protect God's Word. In Romans 3, Paul commends the Jews for being faithful custodians of the sacred Scriptures.

But though the Jews were careful to protect *the letter of the Law* - they were not as diligent to preserve *the tenor of the Law*. It's easier to hold onto a *page* than to remember its *purpose*. The Jews kept a tight grip on the sheet music, but over time they forgot the tune.

It's amazing how the intent of something said can be so clear at the time it was first spoken and heard - yet the original motivation becomes totally lost later on.

Like the kid who leaves for the lake to go fishing. His mom tells him, "*under no circumstances are you to swim!*" But at the lake the boy rationalizes, "*Mom said no swimming, she didn't say anything about wading...*" And before you know it he's waist-deep in the water.

It's amazing how kids can get legalistic when it's convenient. My point is, *often it's easier to uphold the letter of the law, than it is to keep the spirit of the law.*

I read where a man named Terry Allen, age 34, was arrested in San Antonio, Texas on charges of *breaking and entering*. He was caught red-handed removing the burglar bars from the window of a beauty salon. Yet Allen told the judge he was guilty of *simple theft*, not the more serious crime of *breaking and entering*.

Mr. Allen said he never had any intention of entering the salon, all he wanted was the burglar bars. The thief was worried about crime in his neighborhood and wanted to install the burglar bars at his own house. The judge didn't buy it!... *and neither does God...*

When God called Israel to be His people He didn't sign a *contract* with them, He proposed a *covenant*.

A contract is a legal transaction. It's a paper you stick in a safety deposit box and refer to it only occasionally. But *a covenant is more than a contract*. It's a sacred trust between two people. When you marry you don't just sign a contract you enter into a covenant.

What matters in a *contract* are the words - **the legalize**. The wording has to be just right. But what matters in a *covenant* is the commitment it expresses.

A covenant implies the intention to walk together and do whatever it takes to love one another. A contract simply cuts a deal. A covenant guides a relationship. And God wanted a covenant with His people, Israel.

You can lose **the letter of the Law** through sloth, or neglect. I once lost my Bible when I laid it on the roof of my car - then drove away. It blew off on the way home.

But you lose **the spirit of the Law** by drifting from the person who gave it to you in the first place. When the Law stops being a reflection of that relationship, and becomes nothing but words, and loses its meaning.

Like the kid who went swimming... while he was with his mother it was crystal clear what she intended. But once there was some distance between them, the boy stopped taking her words seriously - **as her words**. They were now only terms to twist and work around.

And this is what's happened in the United States. Our Constitution was never intended by its framers to be interpreted in a way that allows for the murder of unborn babies and alters the very nature of marriage.

The First Amendment was never intended to provide a license for pornography, or to keep any mention of God out of our schools and public institutions. *If our founding fathers saw how the Constitution is being interpreted today, they would roll over in their graves.*

You can go to the National Archives in Washington DC to see the original *letter of the Law* - but sadly, our country has forgotten *its tenor* - *or the spirit of the Law*.

And this is what happened to God's law in the life of the nation Israel. By the time of Jesus, the Jews were so out of touch with the Lawgiver, that they were interpreting the Law in ways God never intended.

Jesus called the perpetrators, **"blind guides."** The Pharisees were interpreting God's Law in a way that made it convenient for them to keep - instead of interpreting it according to *the tenor of the words*.

Understand, when men lose touch with the *spirit of the Law* they make two mistakes with the *letter of the Law*... First, **they often go beyond its original intention.**

They read into the Law more than God planned. They add to it man-made traditions and trappings.

This was the issue in Matthew 23:4 when Jesus said of the Jews, **"they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."**

Nowhere was this more apparent than with the laws regarding the Sabbath Day. The Fourth Commandment was simple - **keep the day holy!** The command was issued with few stipulations. God left it up to His people to work it out according to the *"tenor of the Law."*

But over time the *"tenor of the Law"* was substituted with *traditions of men*. The Pharisees had 70 detailed stipulations they attached to the fourth commandment.

Exodus 20:10 said that on the Sabbath Day you should do no work... *but what constituted work?* The Pharisees said if you penned two letters of the alphabet it was work... If you aided in someone's healing it was considered work. *(If a person was bleeding out or having a heart attack you could keep them from worsening, but you couldn't do anything to make them better - healing had to wait for Sunday).*

The Pharisees also assumed *work* must certainly include carrying a burden... *but what was a burden?* They said you couldn't lift a child, or wear an artificial limb - both cases were examples of burden-bearing. According to the Pharisees you couldn't even wear your false teeth into the Synagogue on the Sabbath Day without it being work and a violation of the Law.

In Matthew 15:6 Jesus said concerning these Sabbath restrictions, **"Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition."**

Religion had altered the true intention of God's Law. The purpose of the Sabbath was to provide mankind with a day to rest and worship - an oasis in a weekly wilderness. God meant for the Sabbath to be a hammock, but the Jews had turned it into treadmill.

God devised the Sabbath Law to bless and serve mankind, but the way the Jews interpreted it turned us into its slaves. Jesus said in Mark 2:27, **"The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath."**

And Christians today need to be careful we don't make the same mistakes with the words of the NT.

We take commands like Hebrews 10:25, **"(do) not forsake the assembling of ourselves together..."** and we attach all kinds of stipulations to the word *"forsake."* **"You can miss one Sunday a month, but if you miss two, you're forsaking... which means you're forsaken!"**

Or someone reads in Titus 2:5 where the younger women are suppose to be **"keepers at home"** and we conclude a mother should never work an outside job. Well, the Bible also states that a husband is suppose to go out into the world to provide for

his family, but does that mean he can never help with housework? *I've tried that interpretation. My wife didn't buy it!*

Or we read, "**bring all the tithes into the storehouse.**" And immediately we tell other believers *where*, and *when*, and *how much* they should be giving to God. We just took a helpful word and turned it into a shackle.

The NT is full of important principles, but don't turn *spiritual principles* into *rigid Laws*! It's not for us to dictate how all God's commands should be carried out.

Yes, we should obey God's Word, but how we obey depends on the Holy Spirit's application to our own lives. Jesus promised that God's Spirit would guide us into all truth, and apply the Scriptures according to our own individual growth and personal circumstances.

Sometimes it's easier to just lay down the Law - but God wants us to stay tuned to the *tenor of His Words*.

In many ways the Pharisees went *beyond the intent of the Law* - but the second mistake people make when they lose touch with the spirit or tenor of the Law, is *they fall short of the written Law's true intent*. And this also happened to the Pharisees - not only did they *go beyond* the Law's demands, they *fell short* of them.

They recognized only the Law's surface meaning. They accepted its literal sense, but went no further.

This is what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. The letter read, "**you shall not murder,**" but Jesus said the spirit of that Law included, "*don't hate*" - *since hatred is the seed from which murder grows*. The Law is as much about our attitude - as it is our actions.

The same was true with sexual sin. The letter of the Law said "**you shall not commit adultery,**" but the tenor of the Law included "*don't even lust after a woman.*" According to Jesus keeping the Law involved our *hearts*, as well as our *hands* - attitude not just action.

Jesus said of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:25-26, "**Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.**"

The Jews had ignored the inner attitude. This was why they were so self-righteous. They obeyed the outward requirements, but fell short of any inner purity.

And again we as Christians can follow in their *Pharisaical footsteps*. Christianity is more than following outward rules - it's a desire of the heart. If righteousness is nothing more than external compliance we'll become self-righteous. But when we seek an inward purity the Holy Spirit comes to our aide.

Don't just conform your conduct to the letter of the Law, seek to be transformed by the Spirit of the Law.

I love Matthew 5:20. Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." This statement jarred the people who first heard it. No one was more righteous than the Pharisees, yet theirs was an outward, ornamental kind of righteousness. It hadn't seeped down into the roots.

Jesus is saying to enter God's Kingdom it's not enough just to keep "the letter of the Law" - you must also be tuned in to "the tenor, or spirit of the Law."

In the same passage, Jesus said He didn't come to change, or destroy the Law - He came to fulfill it! By His words and deeds - His miracles and mercies - Jesus reminded us of the "tenor of these words."

In one sense, Jesus didn't say anything new, but in another sense everything He said was new! He came humming the tune the Jews had forgotten. **The Jews had the sheet music, but Jesus sang the melody!**

Hearing Jesus talk about the Law was like going to a live concert when you'd only heard the band on CD... It was like going to a college football game when for years you'd only seen the games at home on TV...

When people heard Jesus talk, and watched Jesus walk, they saw the spirit the words had been meant to convey. They understood what God had meant all along, *and it was nothing like what they had thought...*

Having lost the tenor of the law, they turned the Law into a collection of *archaic rituals*. But what the life of Jesus demonstrated was an *attractive righteousness*.

Once there was a king who dreamed he had lost all his teeth. He called for his wise men to interpret...

The first fellow - with a frown on his face - told the king that all his relatives would die and he'd be left alone. The king didn't like the wise man's interpretation so he had him executed in front of the royal court.

But the second wise guy stood before the king with a huge smile on his face. He said the king would live a long life and out-live all his relatives. The king liked his interpretation and the wise guy was richly rewarded.

Ironically, both men said the same thing, but it was the way they spoke. This was true of Jesus! He repeated the prophets, but it was the way He said it!

The song of God the Jews sung was a dirge. Like this... It was tiresome, boring, stiff, archaic, formal...

Jesus sang the same words. Like this... It was the same lyrics, but a new beat. The way He played it made you want to clap, tap your toes, and sing along! The lyrics hadn't change, but the tune was fresh.

Jesus lived free from petty religious details, and legalistic restraints - yet his life seemed so much holier, so much purer! He was the embodiment of joy! Jesus sung the same song to a *happier and healthier* tune.

When the *words of God's covenant* were no longer clear, God sent *His Word made flesh* to show us what He'd meant all along! Jesus revealed the Law's intent.

And above all, the characteristic that most sharply separated Jesus from the Pharisees was **"love."**

The **"tenor of the Law"** - it's **"spirit"** - it's **overarching intention** was love! In Matthew 22 Jesus was asked, **"Which is the greatest commandment in the law?"**

He replied, **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."** In short, this is the whole enchilada - here's the entirety of God's Law... ***Love Him with all you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself.***

All the seemingly irrelevant laws we read about in Exodus... *what to do if your ox gores your neighbor's ox* were teaching an agrarian people how to love their neighbor. Today, the same rules might apply to what should happen when your Ford Taurus gores your neighbor's Ford Taurus... *How do we apply love?*

The Ten Commandments Moses etched into the rock tablets, weren't just ten arbitrary rules. God's Top Ten consisted of two tables of five commands each. The first five teach us *how to love God*. The second five teach us *how to love our neighbor*. But all ten are about love - for God and others. Love is the essence or the spirit of the Law. **Love is "the tenor of these words."**

The sad trajectory of Jewish history demonstrates that the further the people got from God the more difficult it was for them to hear *the tune, the love song*.

By the time of Christ the song was completely lost. They no longer loved God, nor loved their neighbor.

Recall the story Jesus told about the man mugged on the road to Jericho. It was a non-Jew, a Samaritan, who showed him more love than the priest or Levite. The two religious Jews were pictures of outward piety, *but they had no love!* Jesus was showing us that mere religion had missed the point! The Jews had taken the Law of love, and turned it into a loveless religion.

In fact, the Jews became so tone deaf they accused Jesus - *the man with perfect pitch* - of singing off-key!

Imagine *me*, Pastor Sandy, a guy who's completely tone-deaf - *who can't carry a tune in a bucket* - accusing our worship team of singing a little pitchy!

Jesus sang notes that people had never heard. The Jews of the first century were so use to singing flat they didn't appreciate Jesus' *heavenly harmonies*. That's why they became so jealous. At first, they tried to censure His music. But when He kept singing, they tried to silence Him forever. They crucified Him...

On a dark hill called Calvary the music died. But three days Jesus was back on tour. The Father resurrected the Singer, and re-released the music, and Jesus is still singing through the voice of His followers.

Actually, if we probed deeper we'd find that the Jews didn't lose the tune, they never really had it in the first place. They never possessed the ability to love.

This was not only true of the Jews, but of all people. The human heart is naturally selfish. Love is what we lack. Our tendency is greed and self-centeredness.

If you don't believe me, spend an evening at a Chuck E Cheese. *Ever been to one of these madhouses?* Watch how loving the kids are to each other, ***or not!*** There's a reason they hire an off-duty police officer.

This is why *if singing the song is living in love - then without Christ, none of us can carry a tune... I'm not the only one who can't sing! None one of us can sing!*

It's only when we meet Jesus that we hear how the song should really be sung, and we realize just how pitchy, and off-key, and tone-deaf we all actually are.

Jeremiah 31:33 speaks of a New Covenant in contrast to the OT Law. God promises believers, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

Think about this... what if God was willing to surgically remove my larynx, and replace it with Bruno Mars' vocal cords. Wow, how cool would that be!

Yet according to Jeremiah, God has done a greater miracle in each of us who are in Christ! He's taken out that old selfish, loveless nature and He's replaced it with a desire to love. On the cross Jesus paid for a heart transplant - I receive it when I give my life to Him!

Now that I'm in Christ my heart sings a different tune. No longer is my song selfishness and greed, but now it's *love for God* and *love for my brother*. I've now got a voice that harmonizes with God and with His Spirit...

On occasion I might sing flat, but at least now I know when I'm off-key. Through the work of Christ I can now sing the melody! My heart has been tuned to love. Jesus is in me - living out His life, singing out His song!

It's exciting that once a man's heart is *in tune* and *in sync* with *the tenor of the Law* - there's no longer any need for *the letter of the Law*. I mean, if a musician can play by ear, the sheet music only gets in his way!

And this is why Jesus sets us free from the letter of the Law - we're now in possession of its tenor or spirit. When Jesus changes a person's heart, love comes naturally. As we get to know Jesus we'll want to obey!

Remember in High School, while you were busting your buns every night, studying hard just to pull down passing grades - there were a couple really smart kids in the class who got straight A's without even trying. *How envious you were! They made it look so easy.*

Well, now that you're a Christian you're one of *those kids!* God has put His love in your heart. Galatians 5:22 tells us the fruit of His Spirit is love. You're the one who now loves God and loves people without even trying.

This is the Christian Gospel - we're under a New Covenant. Jesus has done the heavy-lifting. It's not up to us to effect the changes we desire. We trust Jesus, and He changes us from the inside out. Jesus etches His law into our spirit. He puts His song in our hearts.

Yet many Christians fail to grasp this concept... They live as if they're under the Old Covenant - as if it's all up to them. They're laboring to play the sheet music, rather than listening for the song in their hearts.

Trust the Lord to put His song in you! Continue in His love, His patience, His kindness, His goodness. Rather than lay down the Law, God wants the Christian to live by the *tenor - or spirit of His Words - to walk in love!*

I once had a basketball coach who expected perfection from his players - and no one satisfied him because none of his players were perfect, *especially me*. As a result we played tense, and tight, *and terrible!*

We were over-coached. He trusted in *His patterns*, rather than in *His players*. And this is the difference between *religion* and *Christianity*. Religion relies on patterns and plays - rituals and rules. It over-coaches.

Whereas, Christianity changes our hearts! God puts His Spirit within us, and let's us live out His love! *Imperfectly...* yes! But passionately and authentically! We hear His song, and we sing it with all our hearts!

I want to close this AM, with a radical statement... *Just being a Bible-believing Christian is not enough.*

So you've got a Bible - you've got the lyrics to the song you should be singing - the sheet music - but now you need God's Spirit to put the melody in your heart.

This is why God told Moses, "*according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.*" And it's according to *the tenor of His Law and Love* that God makes His covenant with us.

You and Jesus can make beautiful music together if you live according to *the tenor of His words... and love!*