

To God Alone Be The Glory

The Eighth Commandment. “You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Besides our own body (5th Commandment), our spouse (6th C), and our temporal property (7th C), we have one more treasure that is indispensable to us, namely, our honor and good reputation (8th C). It is important that we not live among people in public disgrace and dishonor. God does not want our neighbors deprived of their reputation, honor, and character any more than of their money and possessions; he wants everyone to maintain self-respect before spouse, child, servant, and neighbor.

In its simplest meaning, the command, “You shall not bear false witness,” pertains to public courts of justice, where one may accuse a poor, innocent man and crush him by means of false witnesses. Where judges, mayors, princes, or others in authority sit in judgment, true to the usual course of the world, people are loath to offend anyone by truthful testimony. Instead, they speak dishonestly with an eye to gaining favor, money, prospects, or friendship. Consequently, a poor man is inevitably oppressed, loses his case, and suffers punishment.

And it is a common misfortune in the world that seldom do people of integrity preside in courts of justice. A judge must, above all, be a person of integrity, and not only that, but also wise and perceptive, in fact, bold and fearless. Likewise, a

witness must be fearless; more than that, someone who is upright. Those who are to administer justice equitably and to impose penalties will often offend good friends, relatives, neighbors, and the rich and powerful who could do much to harm or help them. Therefore they must be absolutely blind, closing their eyes and ears to everything but the evidence presented, and render judgment accordingly.

So then all people should help their neighbors maintain their legal rights. One must not allow these rights to be thwarted or distorted but should promote and resolutely guard them, whether this person is judge or witness, and no matter what the consequences may be. Our jurists are to take care that they deal fairly and honestly with cases, that they let right remain right, not perverting or concealing or suppressing anything on account of someone’s money, property, honor, or power.

This commandment also applies to spiritual matters. Here, too, all people bear false witness against their neighbors. Upright preachers and Christians must endure having the world call them heretics, apostates, even seditious and desperate scoundrels simply because they speak up for the truth and will not be quiet about needed reforms in the church and in people’s lives. Moreover, the Word of God must undergo the most shameful blasphemy; it is contradicted, perverted, misused, and misinterpreted. But let this pass; it is the blind world’s nature to condemn and persecute the truth

and the children of God and yet to consider this no sin.

This commandment applies to all of us. “Bearing false witness” is a work of the tongue. God wants to hold in check whatever is done with the tongue against a neighbor. This applies especially to the detestable, shameless vice of backbiting or slander. Everyone would rather hear evil than good about their neighbors. Even though we ourselves are evil, we cannot tolerate it when anyone speaks evil of us; instead, we want to hear the whole world say golden things of us. On the other hand, we cannot bear it when someone says the best things about others.

To avoid this vice, therefore, we should note that none has the right to judge and reprove a neighbor publicly, unless authorized to judge and reprove. There is a very great difference between judging sin and having knowledge of sin. You may certainly know about a sin, but you should not judge it publicly. I may certainly see that my neighbor sins, but I have no command from God to tell others about it. If I were to interfere and pass judgment on him, I would fall into a sin greater than that of my neighbor. When you become aware of a sin through hearsay, do nothing but turn your ears into a tomb and bury it until you are appointed to be judge and are authorized to administer punishment by virtue of your office.

Those who are not content just to know, but rush ahead and judge, are rightly called backbiters. Learning a bit of gossip about someone else, they spread it into every corner, relishing and delighting in the chance to stir up someone else’s dirt like pigs that roll in manure and root around in it with their snouts. This is usurping God’s judgment and pronouncing the severest kind of sentence, for the harshest verdict a judge can pronounce is to declare someone a thief, a murderer, a traitor, etc [to label them and let them be known to all by their sin]. Therefore those who accuse their neighbor of such guilt assume as much authority as the emperor and all rulers. For though you do not wield the sword, you use your venomous tongue to bring disgrace and harm upon your neighbor.

Therefore God forbids you to speak evil about another, even though, to your certain knowledge, that person is guilty. Even less may you do so if you are not really sure and have it only from hearsay. But you say: “Why shouldn’t I say it if it is the truth?” Answer: “Why don’t you bring it before the proper judge?” “Oh, I can’t prove it publicly; I might be called a liar and sent away in disgrace.” Ah, my dear, now do you “smell the roast”? If you do not trust yourself to stand before the persons appointed for such tasks and make your charges, then hold your tongue. If you know something, keep it to yourself and do not tell others. For when you repeat a story that you

cannot prove, even though it is true, you appear as a liar or a gossipmonger.

In short, what is secret should be left secret, or at any rate be reproved in secret, as we shall hear. Therefore, if you encounter someone with a worthless tongue who gossips and slanders someone else, rebuke such people straight to their faces and make them blush with shame. Then others will learn to hold their tongue. Honor and good name are easily taken away but not easily restored.

So you see that we are absolutely forbidden to speak evil of our neighbor. Exception is made, however, of civil magistrates, preachers, and fathers and mothers in order that we may interpret this commandment in such a way that evil does not go unpunished. The authorities, fathers and mothers, and even brothers and sisters and other good friends are under a mutual obligation to reprove evil wherever it is necessary and helpful, especially when they have firsthand knowledge of it.

But the right way to deal with this would be to follow Matthew 18[:15], where Christ says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” Let this be your rule, then, that you should not be quick to spread slander and gossip about your neighbors but admonish them privately so that they may improve. Do the same when others tell you what this or that

person has done. Instruct them, if they saw the wrongdoing, to go and reprove the individual personally or otherwise to hold their tongue.

This is what the master of a household does: when he sees a servant not doing what he is supposed to do, he speaks to him personally. If he were so foolish as to let the servant sit at home while he went out into the streets to complain to his neighbors, he would no doubt be told: “You fool, it’s none of our business! Why don’t you tell him yourself?” See, that would be the proper, brotherly thing to do, for the evil would be corrected and your servant’s honor preserved. As Christ says in the same passage: “If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” There you will have done a great and excellent deed. For do you think that it is an insignificant thing to gain a brother?

Christ teaches further [Matthew 18:16]: “But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” If you become the ‘one or two others,’ now you have been appointed to hear the case and judge, but still only privately. Thus the people involved are to be dealt with directly and not gossiped about behind their backs. If this does not help, then bring the matter publicly before the community, either before the civil or the church court. Here you are not standing alone, but you have those

witnesses with you through whom you can prove the accused's guilt and on whose testimony the judge can base the decision and pass sentence. This is the right and proper way of dealing with and improving a wicked person. But if you gossip about someone in every corner and root around in the filth, no one will be improved. If you were acting to improve your neighbor or acting out of love for the truth, you would not sneak about in secret in order to pass on little tidbits of evil.

We have been talking so far about secret sins. But where the sin is so public that the judge and everyone else are aware of it, you can without sin shun and avoid those who have brought disgrace upon themselves, and you may also testify publicly against them—but only for the sake of leading them to repentance. For when something is exposed to the light of day, there can be no question of slander or injustice or false witness. For example, I now publicly censure false teachers and their teaching, because it is publicly set forth in books and shouted throughout the world. Where the sin is public, appropriate public punishment should follow so that everyone may know how to guard against it.

The rest of the time we should use our tongue to speak only the best about all people, to cover the sins and weaknesses of our neighbors, to justify their actions, and to cloak and veil them

with our own honor. Our chief reason for doing this is the one that Christ has given in the Gospel, and in which he means to encompass all the commandments concerning our neighbor, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” [Matthew 7:12]

It is a particularly fine, noble virtue to put the best construction on all we may hear about our neighbors (as long as it is not an evil that is publicly known), and to defend them against the poisonous tongues of others.

There is nothing around or in us that can do greater good or greater harm in temporal or spiritual matters than the tongue, although it is the smallest and weakest member of the body [see James 3:5].

[Adapted from Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, © 2000 Fortress Press: Minneapolis, pp. 420-425.]

We have heard God's law explained well by Luther. Now hear God's gospel as recorded in Zephaniah 3. ⁹*“Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. ...* ¹¹*On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me,...* ¹⁴*...Be glad and rejoice with all your heart...!* ¹⁵*The LORD has taken away your punishment.”* It's much easier to love the Lord and keep his commandments when you know that he loves you and forgives you for Jesus' sake.