

Sermon 9-1-19  
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Martin Luther's Small Catechism Sermon #10. The 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment

**False or True?**

Today we come to the commandment that I think will put more modern Americans in hell than any other. The continuous violation of this commandment at every level is symptomatic of the godlessness into which the society has fallen. Here it is along with Martin Luther's explanation from his Small Catechism.

The Eighth Commandment

**You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.**

*What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

One thing is for sure. This commandment is all about our mouths and what comes out of our mouths. The commandment itself applies to the courts and legal matters. Indeed, a longer passage in Exodus specifically says that we're not to give false testimony in a court of law against anyone. And most of us can satisfy this aspect of the commandment. For how many of us are called upon to testify in a legal case? In this respect, for most people keeping this commandment is like do not murder. Most people think, hey if you don't murder and don't bear false witness you're in with God.

But Jesus made it very plain that the commandments are not merely some rules and regulations you follow in order to be on God's good side. Rather, God's commandments are His very heart. They express His incorruptible righteousness, His glorious holiness to all human kind. The commandments are His holy will for His people. Therefore, it's not enough merely to refrain from doing evil. We are bound to do good as our Creator Himself is good and does good, even to those who hate Him.

Luther understood this aspect of the commandments. Therefore, in the explanation of the commandment, Luther doesn't focus on the courts but on the words we use in interpersonal relationships.

So, we read in Proverbs 22:1, "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold." This says it all. Everything from the intimacies of the family to building a business rests on reputation. Reputation is very precious. There is no going forward in life with a bad reputation. Therefore, those who without cause speak evil of a person with the intention of destroying their reputation are committing a great sin. Those who protect another person's reputation are doing what is good in God's sight.

My sense of the matter is that somewhere around ten years old a child begins to understand the importance of reputation. A child also begins to understand that everyone is flawed. We all think, do and say things that are evil. Children also see that for this reason a charge of wrongdoing brought against another person tends to stick. Whether the other kid did it or not, thought it or not, doesn't matter. Everyone knows that it's possible for all of us to think or do such things. So a false charge will tend to stick just as much as a true charge.

With this realization a new avenue of temptation opens up for the maturing child – disobedience to the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment, speaking evil of another person whether they deserve it or not. Once the sinful nature has tasted blood ruining another's reputation, a whole new world of evil opens up. As it's put in James 3:5-6, "5... Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

For this reason, by the time a child is in middle school the fierce defense of one's own reputation and the tearing down of others' reputations becomes a really big daily thing. It only gradually wanes by the end of high school.

Bullying comes into the picture here. And social media can make the disobedience to this commandment horrendous for vulnerable kids. Social media permits an avalanche of wicked comments to descend upon a kid, driving some to despair and suicide. I suspect that if Jesus Christ were to return later today, just about every middle school kid in America would immediately go to hell – and I'm not joking here – on the basis of disobedience to just this single commandment. And what of the adults who have never repented of what they said in middle school and high school?

Remember. Luther wrote his Small Catechism so that fathers would have a means of instructing their children in the Christian faith and in righteousness. So, imagine the difference there might be in school life if every father regularly instructed his children on the importance of this commandment and its proper application. Defend the reputation of others. Speak well of them. Give the kindest interpretation you can to their shortcomings. Can you also imagine how every business, home and even every church would change if we all practiced this commandment as explained by Luther?

It's just that no one can do this effectively without Lord Holy Spirit. No one can do it effectively without the grace of God. No one can do it without Jesus Christ. For how do we speak well of those we don't like or those who hate us? That can only be done by Lord Holy Spirit.

So, assuming now that we have repented of defining good and evil for ourselves, assuming that we have been joined to Christ in His death and resurrection through Holy Baptism, assuming that we have been filled with His Spirit, how does God's Spirit counsel us concerning this commandment?

David instructs us on something important to pray for in Psalm 141:3-4, "3 Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips. 4 Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers...." In other words, we can't watch our conversation carefully enough. Stray

just a little and you can ruin your own reputation or someone else's. That's why it's always wise to guard your mouth.

Now, other people can and will do evil. What should we say about that? Jesus provided us with a teaching in Matthew 7:1-5, "1 'Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 3 Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

One of the most important realities in life is that Yahweh alone is righteous. Yahweh alone is our Creator. Yahweh alone has authority to judge the living and the dead. He alone has authority to divide humanity between those who enter His Kingdom and those who do not. Only Yahweh has the right to say, "Go to hell." None of us have this right. And this is what Jesus reminds us of here.

So before we judge anyone else with words, it's righteous to judge ourselves. As Saint Paul advised the church in 1Corinthians 11:31, "... if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment." But this can only be done properly when we abandon our own definitions of good and evil and receive Yahweh's definitions of good and evil as expressed in His wonderful commandments.

Therefore, if we get our thinking and our ways in line with Yahweh's thinking and ways we can help others enter into the Kingdom of God and live within it. And getting the planks out of our own eyes, we can see clearly enough to become a help to those around us instead of a hindrance. We can genuinely help them build a good reputation around themselves in Jesus Christ. People will receive our rebukes and listen to our counsel because they will perceive that we're not acting out of hypocrisy but out of a genuine relationship with our Lord.

And when we examine ourselves, here's an important thing to look for regarding this commandment. We read in Proverbs 11:13, "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret." And in Proverbs 16:28, "A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends." Finally, Proverbs 26:20, "Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down." We're told the problem with gossip in Proverbs 18:8, "The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts." In other words, it's hard not to gossip. But gossip is betrayal. It's separating close friends and causing quarrels. Is any of this righteousness? So, when properly examined, gossip is a deadly sin we need to purge from our lives.

Jesus provided a heavenly method to overcome gossip. Here it is from Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." In other words don't tell your problem to the neighborhood or the church. Work it out with the person you're in disagreement with.

But if that doesn't work, Jesus taught us to keep strict controls over the matter in Matthew 18:15-17, "15... 'If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." 17 If he refuses to listen to

them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

So there is a point where bad stuff can become public – but only *after* remedial courses of action have been pursued, not before! If we adhere to our Lord’s course of action, then we might begin to get to the place where we begin to fulfill Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:12, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” And in John 13:34-35, “34... ‘As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

There’s one more thing I would address this morning concerning this commandment – a very difficult thing, because our public political life has become one vast wasteland of false witness and slander.

The reason for this is that we are living in a very tense era in which two great political ideas are colliding headlong. As an example of this I point to the city of Hong Kong. Between 1897 and 1997 that Chinese city was ruled by Great Britain. It reverted to Chinese rule in 1997. Now in Hong Kong the historic British system and the communist system that has ruled China since 1949 are in collision.

Communists believe that their vision for humanity, society and life on this planet is historically inevitable – meaning it must happen. They believe it is an immense good and therefore must be forced on the general populace by severely curtailing and regulating all life choices. On the other hand, the historic British/American system is the Protestant understanding that on this earth the best society can do until Jesus Christ returns is to give each individual the maximum amount of freedom with which to make righteous life choices.

Hong Kong is now being forced to switch from individual freedom to the communist utopian vision for society. The political stakes are very high. The people are resisting. But if history is any teacher, the conflict can only end in one way – in a bloodbath and communist victory. For, communism believes it’s the inevitable, grand end goal of history.

And the political stakes are no less high here. America was founded on the Protestant principle of giving each individual the maximum amount of freedom with which to make righteous life choices. And so we have prospered. But communists bitterly disagree.

For over fifty years now communism has infiltrated and now controls major western institutions like education and the media. It’s quite clear from what we’re seeing from politicians like Bernie Sanders – who is an avowed communist and always has been – that they now believe the time is ripe in the U.S. to openly sweep in the chips for the grand social experiments they have in mind. Bernie has great plans for your energy choices, your house and car, your health insurance, your job, your wages, your wealth, your taxes, eating meat and much more. And this will be only the beginning.

In fact, we should have been well along the socialist pathway already, but the election of 2016 put an unexpected roadblock in the way. That roadblock is a guy from New York raised in the 1950’s when the traditional American ideal of giving each individual the maximum amount of freedom to make life choices was honored and revered in opposition to communism.

So, in order to get the roadblock out of the way the most remarkable effort of false witness and slander I have ever seen in my lifetime is in the works. For instance, this past week, a CNN so-called news show entertained a guest professor who solemnly pronounced that this president is [probably responsible for more deaths worldwide than Hitler, Stalin, and Mao](#). And the host gave his claim no pushback.

Now exceeding the murder rap against just those three socialists alone is no easy task. It's an estimated hundred million or more deaths. Yet, a guy who believes in the historic American principle of giving people the maximum amount of freedom with which to make life choices and succeed has somehow pulled off this enormous massacre.

Fortunately, this president knows how to fight back without necessarily bearing false witness in return. Indeed, who needs to bear false witness now that the grand experimenters are openly proclaiming their utopian plans and purposes?

But the political stakes are so high that should a new Supreme Court justice have to be nominated by the present administration it will make the Kavanaugh hearings look like a picnic. And I think we can expect the onslaught of false witness and slander in the upcoming election to reach levels not yet seen. It will be a genuine attempt to sweep in the chips. And it may succeed. Again, if Jesus were to return today there's another whole group – politicians – who would be sent off to hell on this one commandment alone.

So what's the good news in the eighth commandment? There is none. We all disobey it in one form or another. Like all the other commandments it condemns us.

The good news is in Jesus Christ alone. Jesus endured our false witness and slander against Yahweh and Himself at His trial. Upon the cross He bore the sins of the world, including false witness and slander. In death He atoned for the sins of the whole world so that we might be forgiven and healed.

Those who repent of defining good and evil for themselves and receive God's great good of salvation in Jesus Christ receive forgiveness for slander, gossip and all other sins of the mouth. In addition, they receive Lord Holy Spirit under whose guidance we can learn to speak well of people and explain their actions in the kindest way possible. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.