

Sermon for November 5, 2017 - The 8th Commandment

Exodus 20:16 NIV84

Theme: **When it comes to your neighbor's reputation, God wants you to. . .**

- 1) Speak to him instead of judging him.
- 2) Defend him as best you can.

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

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Do you remember ever learning this little rhyme? I do. It is meant to help a person being teased.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." How I wish this statement were true, but the sad fact is that name calling, false accusations, and betrayals of trust often hurt far more than being hit with a stick or stone. Bones mend and bruises heal; but scars on a reputation seem to last a lifetime.

Yes, the damage words inflict is often as heinous as a physical beating. We all know it's true. How often don't we hear about some young person at wits end – contemplating suicide over online bullying that seemed to ruin his or her life?

No, you won't go to jail for gossiping, and slander is rarely punished as it should be, but speaking ill of your neighbor – even if there's some truth to what you are saying – is as disgusting to the LORD as assaulting someone physically.ⁱ

With the eighth commandment as our guide, then, let us learn that: **When it comes to your neighbor's reputation, God wants you to. . .** 1) Speak to him instead of judging him. 2) Defend him as best you can.

Part One: Speak to him instead of judging him.

The eighth commandment reads: *"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."* Strictly speaking, this commandment forbids lying in court against another person. And why is that forbidden? Well, you only have to look as far as Jesus' trial to see the injustice and hurt false witnesses cause. Look at what happened to Jesus' reputation: humanly speaking, he went from being hailed as the Messiah on Palm Sunday to being considered the worst kind of blasphemer, criminal and fraud by the time Friday came around – all because of false testimony!

As the Scriptures record, the LORD hates *a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.*ⁱⁱ And the LORD not only hates this when it is done in court, but anywhere – even when it's just gossiping among friends. Thus the Bible says: *"Do not slander*

one another.ⁱⁱⁱ Do not betray another man's confidence.^{iv}” And Jesus himself says: I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.^v

Yes, the LORD hates every kind of talk that diminishes our neighbor’s reputation in any sort of way – regardless of whether or not it is “true”. Yet look at how easily we pass on stories we’ve read on the internet or gossip we heard at the beauty shop or bar. More often than not these stories put the person talked about in a bad light. And yet we can’t get enough of them, can we? We enjoy hearing them. We enjoy telling them. Why?

I’ll tell you why: we like hearing about other people’s faults so that we can feel good about ourselves as we compare our actions to theirs. We dump on people with our words in an attempt to make ourselves look better. Yes, our problem is a problem with the heart, as Jesus himself once said: “*Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*”²⁰ *These are what make a man 'unclean.'*^{vi}

Oh, how evil we are! How quickly we hurt people by thoughtlessly shooting off our mouths, or typing spiteful comments to an internet post. How easily we shake our heads at others, not considering the distress it might cause the person who hears about it and the anger it produces in God. How quickly we shake our heads over others, not considering the distress it might cause the person who hears about it and the anger it produces in God.

Thank God for Jesus. He lived the perfect life of love we all failed to live – never slandering or speaking ill of others. And when he did confront people with their sin, it was always with the purpose of getting them to repent. Even when faced with the bitterest of slander, he did not bite back, but willingly endured it all for our salvation’s sake. Yes, for us Jesus died on the cross – with all our sins of selfish slander, gossip, betrayal and lies. For us he suffered God’s righteous wrath in order that we might be forgiven.

Jesus gave the 8th commandment that we might see our sins and repent of them. Then, in the peace of his forgiveness and trusting in his mercy, God invites us to live a new life – instructed by his Spirit as to how we can thank and praise him for his salvation: by living a life of genuine love towards our fellow man by keeping this commandment.

And how do we begin to do that? Well, as sinning against this commandment starts in the heart, so does the secret of keeping it. It begins with taking our neighbor’s words and actions in the kindest possible way – assuming the best about people, and not the worst.

For example, imagine you offer a friendly wave to an acquaintance, but he just keeps on walking without acknowledging you. You might be tempted to think: “How incredibly rude. I can’t believe he’s ignoring me.” Later on, you might tell a different friend what happened – commenting on how mean the other person was for not acknowledging your wave. You might even begin to harbor bitter thoughts against him - remembering other past faults, and saying to yourself: I would have never acted that way.”

O how perverse you have become! Are you sure that his failure to wave was on purpose? Perhaps he was simply so lost in thought that he failed to recognize you. Maybe he just received some

traumatic news that occupied his mind. But you, by thinking so poorly of him, already judged him in your heart!

So, whenever you are tempted to think the worst of people, repent of your sin. Pray: “Lord, you see how I am tempted to think poorly of this person because of their actions. The truth is, however, that I do not know what is going on in their heart and life. Instead of judging them help me love them. Things may not be as they seem. Forgive my sin, dear Lord, and help me truly love my neighbor - taking his words and actions in the kindest possible way.”

And, after praying such a prayer, drop the matter.

“But,” someone might ask, “what if - regardless of how much I pray - I can’t shake the feeling that what he did was malicious?”

Well then, instead of judging him by telling others what he did, why don’t you talk to him yourself – confessing to him what you are thinking and asking him for the truth to set your mind at ease? And, if in the course of your conversation, you find that he is sinning? Don’t go around telling other people. Rather, take the opportunity to speak to him about his sin – lovingly calling him to repentance, as Luther writes in his Large Catechism:

“There is a great difference between these two things: judging sin and knowing about sin. You may indeed know about it, but you are not to judge it [Matthew 7:1–5]. I can indeed see and hear that my neighbor sins. But I have no command to report it to others. Now, if I rush in, judging and passing sentence, I fall into a sin that is greater than his . . . In Matthew 18:15, Christ says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” . . . Let this, then, be your rule, that you do not too quickly spread evil about your neighbor and slander him to others. Instead, admonish him privately that he may amend his life. Likewise, if someone reports to you what this or that person has done, teach him, too, to go and admonish that person personally, if he has seen the deed himself. But if he has not seen it, then let him hold his tongue.”

Yes, instead of sinfully judging, the LORD wants us to privately correct our neighbor who sins – keeping everything confidential. It is only after he doesn’t listen to us, that we may bring another witness – again keeping all things private. And if he won’t listen to the witness, then we can tell it to the church - out of love for the soul of our erring brother, so he isn’t lost to hell due to his impenitence.^{vii}

So as you can see, brothers and sisters in Christ, when it comes to your neighbor’s reputation, God wants you to speak to him instead of judging him. And, as we will learn next., the LORD also wants us to defend our neighbor against the gossip and slander of others as best we can.

Part Two: Defend him as best you can.

Imagine for a moment that your friends start talking to you about a female acquaintance and joke around about some shameful thing she did. What should your reaction be? Is it ok to join in on the fun – considering that everything your friends are saying seems to be true?

Consider how Jesus reacted when the Pharisees brought before him a woman caught in the very act of adultery – asking him what to do with her. His answer was: *"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."* At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, *"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*¹¹ *"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."*^{viii}

Sin is not something to joke about. God takes no pleasure in our sinful judging or mocking of others – all with the purpose of making ourselves look better at another person's expense. This is why Jesus answered the Jews the way he did, when they brought this woman before him. He pointed out their own sin so that they would stop. He showed concern for the woman's soul. And, as the LORD has both covered up and forgiven the great multitude of our own sins – so the LORD asks us to honor him by treating others the same way he has treated us.

In other words, when friends are having fun at the shameful expense of another, speak up and tell them to stop. Ask them how they would like their sins publicly spoken about and laughed at. Point out that, instead of mocking her, they should do all they can to help her repent of her sin and receive the LORD's forgiveness.

Yes, as the Scriptures amply point out, the LORD takes no pleasure in those who laugh at the sins of others. Consider what happened after Noah found out that his own son mocked him for getting sinfully drunk. He was so angry that he cursed Canaan and his descendants to a life of slavery – a curse that the LORD himself honored, thereby showing his own displeasure towards such sins!

Oh, may the LORD have mercy on us, for the many times we have sinned against this commandment. Thanks be to God, he has had mercy on us for Christ's sake. He forgives our sins. He has given us a new spirit – one that doesn't look for ways to poke fun at my neighbor, but do all I can to help him improve his reputation by bringing him to Christ. As the Bible says: *remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*^{ix}

Brothers and sisters in Christ: When it comes to your neighbor's reputation, God wants you to speak to him instead of judging him. He wants you to defend him before others as best you can. May the LORD help us all do this – thereby revealing us to be His children as we show others the same forgiving love he showed us.^x Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Romans 1:29-31

ⁱⁱ Proverb 6:19 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ James 4:11 NIV84

^{iv} Proverbs 25:9 NIV84

^v Matthew 12:36 NIV84

vi Matthew 15:19-20 NIV84

vii Cf. Matthew 18:15-17

viii John 8:7,9-11 NIV84

ix James 5:20 NIV84

x Cf 1 John 3:10-11