

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

YOU SHALL NOT GIVE FALSE TESTIMONY AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOR
Mark 14:53-72; Eph. 4:25-32; Lent Midweek 2; February 28, 2024

The Ten Commandments can be divided into two sections. The first three deal with our relationship with God. A Bible verse summarizing this is, **“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”** (Mt 22:3; Dt. 6:5). The last seven commandments deal with our relationship with our neighbor, summarized by, **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”** (Mt 22:39; Lev. 19:18). To love God and our neighbor is the fulfillment, or keeping, of all the commandments (Ro. 13:10).

In the 8th Commandment, God instructs us to love our neighbor by protecting and defending his reputation by what we say—and in some circumstances by refraining from saying anything at all. (*Review in Bulletin responsive reading of 8th Com.*)

- P** What is the Eighth Commandment?
- C** **You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.**
- P** What does this mean?
- C** **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.**

The primary application of this commandment involves protecting our neighbor’s good reputation when he or she is brought into court and involved in the justice system. We must tell the truth in court as witnesses. Even if this involves a family member or friend who has been accused, we must not lie to protect that person, but must tell the truth because in a court of law there is another side, and the other person will be harmed by our lies. Even though our justice system is adversarial with a prosecution trying to prove guilt and a right of defense against that, the system only works if truth is the foundation. Both false witness and failures to speak up in defense of the innocent lead to reputations and lives ruined and lost.

The accounts of Jesus’ trial before the Jewish Council and Peter’s denial of Christ are clear examples of breaking the 8th Commandment. Jesus was sentenced to death based on a false accusation, and Peter failed to speak up for Jesus when called upon.

The chief priests, elders, and scribes knowingly sought false testimony against Jesus. Mark notes, **“For many bore false witness against Him.”** This reminds me of the older wording of the 8th Commandment: **Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.** In legitimate court proceedings, the very fact that witnesses are lying in order to convict an innocent man is enough to dismiss the case as fraudulent. In Jesus’ case, the false witnesses contradicted each other so the high priest changed tactics and put Jesus on the witness stand in order to get Him to incriminate Himself.

He asked Jesus, **“Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”** Jesus stated, **“I AM.”** Jesus confessed that He was the Son of God and one with the LORD GOD, *Yahweh Elohim*, of the Old Testament. This got Jesus accused and convicted of blasphemy against God. The irony of this is that Jesus was found guilty of telling the truth—He is God’s Son—and sentenced to die for telling the truth. What they did to Jesus is a classic example of breaking the 8th Commandment. They listened to false testimony, and when that didn’t work, they told lies about Him and refused to defend His innocence. They broke the 8th commandment and went on to break greater ones: the 5th, **You shall not murder**, as they sentenced an innocent Man to death; and the 4th, **Honor your father and your mother**, as they corrupted God’s law, which had authority over them.

Mark goes on from Jesus’ trial to Peter’s denial. Peter broke the 8th commandment by lying about Jesus. When called on to acknowledge and confess his Lord, Peter denied knowing Jesus, betraying and slandering Him. When pressed, Peter **invoked a curse on himself and swore an oath, “I do not know this Man of whom you speak.”**

The 3rd Commandment requires hearing and learning God’s Word. The 8th Commandment requires us to defend God’s Word as Truth when those around us deny or contradict it. Churches and the pastors who serve in them that claim to be Christian, but knowingly reject and deny what is written in Holy Scripture, betray and slander God. They should defend God and speak well of His Word as something true and necessary to believe and trust in. When people make a claim something like, “All Churches are basically the same,” that is slander against God and His Word.

It is quite common these days that family members belong to a variety of churches. On the one hand, we rejoice when our family members are active in Christian churches, especially since a majority of Americans no longer attend any Christian church. On the other hand, false teaching in heterodox churches undermines true faith in God and endangers salvation. God will be the Judge, but if people actually believe some of the things they are taught in many churches today, they are no longer Christians. When the faith confessed in the Creeds—who God is, what Jesus did to save us from sin and death, and the necessity to believe in the only true God to be saved—is denied or explained away, it shows that those churches are not the same Church that has existed from the beginning. To go along with false teaching and join such a church is to deny and betray Jesus. It slanders Him and hurts His reputation. It is bearing false witness against Jesus since He taught this faith.

Those are some of the prohibitions against disobeying the 8th Commandment. Luther also includes admonitions to keep and obey it. “We should fear and love God so that we... defend [our neighbor], speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.” All of us who participate in “social media,” things like Facebook, Snapchat, Tik Tok, Instagram, You Tube, and the like, and use messaging apps like “Twitter”/X, email, and texts, need to realize that a sinful morality opposite to the 8th Commandment thrives on these platforms. God does not give exceptions for our bad treatment of those holding different political views. Having the ability to gossip about or put them down people before others does not mean that Christians should participate in that. Verbal bullies should be condemned for their hurtful words and actions, not given a million “likes” and shared with the rest of our contacts.

Hear again what St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians. This describes how we should communicate about others: **Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths [phones or computers], but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.**

As we consider our places in life according to the 8th Commandment, it doesn't take long to discover plenty of ways we have broken it. God is calling us to repent of our sins, turn from them and want to better, not having the desire to keep on doing them as if they don't matter. The sins of false testimony resulted in the suffering and death of Jesus. Peter's denials of knowing Jesus led to his fall from faith. God in Christ forgave Peter's sins by going to the cross for him. Jesus also forgives our sins against the 8th Commandment.

Jesus—lied about, betrayed, slandered, and demeaned—willingly went to the cross, refusing to claim innocence, to defend and save Himself. Dying on the cross, Jesus spoke those incredible words, “explaining everything in the kindest way” and “putting the best construction on everything,” even though it was not deserved. Jesus prayed: **Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.** We break the 8th Commandment, so Jesus kept it for us. Amen.