

If you confront your neighbor and he will not repent, then we continue with Jesus' second and third steps in turn:

"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.' 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" (vs. 16,17).

Ideally, however, when we lovingly carry out Jesus' first step, we pray that seldom will we need to move on to the second and third steps.

All of this is not nearly as hard as it sounds. In fact, God makes it all astonishingly simple. Do no injury by your tongue, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Luther explains as much in paragraph 9, which we read in unison:

[9] Thus we have now the sum and general understanding of this commandment, to wit, that no one do any injury with the tongue to his neighbor, whether friend or foe, nor speak evil of him, no matter whether it be true or false, unless it be done by commandment or for his reformation, but that every one employ his tongue and make it serve for the best of every one else, to cover up his neighbor's sins and infirmities, excuse them, palliate and garnish them with his own reputation. The chief reason for this should be the one which Christ alleges in the Gospel, in which He comprehends all commandments respecting our neighbor, Matt. 7, 12: *Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.* (661-663)

Of course, as for all sins, Christ died for sins against this Commandment too. Rejoice at that truth, and pray the Lord Jesus to cleanse your tongues of all transgressions against the reputation of your neighbor. And, as you do, know that such cleansing is yours, and taste that cleansing as your tongues taste and see that the Lord is good as you receive His Body and Blood in the Supper today. And thus let Christ's love reign supreme among us, guiding our words like a rudder a ship, sanctifying our ears and eyes to take our neighbor's words and actions in the kindest possible way. Amen.

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

Few things can kill a congregation like sins against the Eighth Commandment. Thankfully, we've not seen a lot of damage among us from sins against this Commandment yet, but that doesn't mean we should wait for the damage to address the problem. So let's dig into the Eighth Commandment, and, as we do so, may the Lord stir within us repentant hearts and obedient faith.

We read together the Commandment and explanation from the Small Catechism:

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or give him a bad name, but defend him, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way.

Last week God commanded us to protect our neighbor's property and possessions, and this week He commands us to protect something just as important, perhaps even more important: our neighbor's reputation. While a good reputation takes a lifetime to build, it can be lost in a moment, and its loss is devastating.

The Eighth Commandment applies first of all in the courtroom, that, called upon to give testimony, we do not perjure ourselves, lie, or slander our neighbor, or remain unduly silent when we know something of importance, whether out of greed, malice, or an attempt to save our own hide.

The Eighth Commandment deals with a lot more than courtrooms, however, and it is outside of the courtroom that we find ourselves most tempted to break it, that is, in every day life. Hardly a day passes that we ourselves do not bear false witness against our neighbor or listen to someone else do the same, whether wittingly or unwittingly.

Luther says this happens especially with regard to God's Word and His preachers, in the church or against the church. Anyone who has held membership in a church long enough will surely find Luther's observation to be correct in most instances. Churches can quickly become gossip factories, with members more focused on each other's dirt or the pastor's supposed shortcomings than the gospel and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and when that happens, nothing good comes of it, and when that happens, no one

has more repenting to do than the self-righteous flapjaws condescendingly dirt-dishing as if they themselves sat in the judgment seat of God.

Luther hits the nail on the head and pounds away in the fourth paragraph in our insert, when he says halfway down:

Here belongs particularly the detestable, shameful vice of speaking behind a person's back and slandering, to which the devil spurs us on, and of which there would be much to be said. For it is a common evil plague that every one prefers hearing evil to hearing good of his neighbor; and although we ourselves are so bad that we cannot suffer that any one should say anything bad about us, but every one would much rather that all the world should speak of him in terms of gold, yet we cannot bear that the best is spoken about others. (*Concordia Triglotta*, 655)

St. James writes, “*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.*” (1:26). And, “*Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things*” (3:4,5).

Have you bridled your tongue according to God's will and in love for your neighbor? Where has your tongue guided you as of late? Has it spoken in your neighbor's best interest, or has it shoveled his or her sins into ears where those sins didn't belong?

Luther writes in the beginning of paragraph 6:

[6] Those, then, are called slanderers who are not content with knowing a thing, but proceed to assume jurisdiction, and when they know a slight offense of another, carry it into every corner, and are delighted and tickled that they can stir up another's displeasure [baseness], as swine roll themselves in the dirt and root in it with the snout. This is nothing else than meddling with the judgment and office of God, and pronouncing sentence and punishment with the most severe verdict... God therefore would have it prohibited, that any one speak evil of another even though he be guilty, and the latter know it right well; much less if he do not know it, and have it only from hearsay... (657-659)

This last Tuesday at Fire and Brimstone I asked why more people enjoy reading *People Magazine* than the Bible, even though, to be honest, the Bible has just as much scandal and drama. I don't think we have to think too hard to come up with the

answer. We like dirt. Now, I'm not saying it's a sin to read *People Magazine* and other such rags, as there are useful articles if you sort through some of the trash, but I do find it telling that we as a human race are so much more interested in such things than in God's own message to the world.

While I find it interesting, it's no surprise to God. He was well aware of our sinful nature's obsession with other's sins and soap operas, and so He moved St. Matthew to record Jesus' teaching found in the eighteenth chapter of His Gospel. First, Jesus says, “*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over*” (v. 15). Luther explains this at the end of paragraph 7:

Let this, then, be your rule, that you do not too readily spread evil concerning your neighbor and slander him to others, but admonish him privately that he may amend [his life]. Likewise, also, if some one report to you what this or that one has done, teach him, too, to go and admonish him personally, if he have seen it himself; but if not, that he hold his tongue. (659)

When you think someone has sinned, there is only one person for you to approach about it: that person. At that point, what you think is your neighbor's sin is no one else's business. And if you are not willing to approach the one who you think has sinned, you have no place approaching anyone else, and you yourself are the one who has fallen into sin should you do so. That means that if you have a problem with another member, you go to that member, or a problem with a pastor, you go to that pastor, and so on and so forth. And yes, that also means that, should you come to me, as your pastor, with a concern over another's supposed sin, the first question I am going to ask you is if you have spoken to the individual, and if you haven't, I am going to send you on your merry way to do so before you tell me anymore. Our neighbor's reputation is too important to take chances on, and, as Luther reminds us at the end of paragraph 8, “*If you were acting for your neighbor's reformation or from love of the truth, you would not sneak about secretly nor shun the day and the light*” (661).