

### ***False Witnesses***

In the name of him who is the Truth, dear friends in Christ: The Ten Commandments are the theme of this year's series of Lenten evening devotions. We began last week with two, the Ninth and Tenth, both of which prohibit the sin of coveting. In our study, we saw that they are different than the rest of commands. All the others, while they certainly include sinful thoughts, manifest themselves in sinful actions. Coveting, by contrast, is entirely a sin of thought; but these sinful thoughts can and often do lead to other sins as we saw in the case of King Ahab who coveted the vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth. In that biblical account the king's coveting led to false charges being drummed up against an innocent man, then murder, and finally theft. We tend to think that coveting is somehow a less serious sin because no one can see you doing it. But that's not right. Coveting is a cancer of the soul that robs you of joy and contentment. It's an evil seed that if allowed to grow will inevitably bring forth wicked fruit. Best to dig it out through repentance as soon as you discover it's been planted before it's allowed to germinate and take root.

But that was last week. This evening we turn our attention to the Eighth Commandment, the purpose of which is to protect one of each person's most cherished *and* most fragile possessions: his or her reputation. I think it's fair to say that this too is a commandment that we tend to take too lightly. Maybe it's because as kids we all heard that tired old canard that says "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." What a load of nonsense that is. I'm willing to bet that everyone here has been deeply wounded by words spoken in anger or malice, words that sting just as much now as when you first heard them. Don't let anyone tell you that words can't hurt. But what I'm speaking of here is actually a Fifth Commandment issue: wounding others with your words.

More to the point with regard to the Eighth Commandment, what you say (or don't say if you should) about someone else can in a matter seconds obliterate their honorable reputation, the reputation that took them a lifetime to build. You can in an instant indelibly brand someone as a thief, a liar, an adulterer, a cheat, or with any other notorious label simply by making the accusation – publicly or privately by whispering it in an ear, writing it in a letter, texting it in a message, posting it on a website; it makes no difference. Once you deliver the words, they can't be retracted. Instead they spread from one gossiping mouth to another. Some who hear will likely believe. And even if they don't believe completely, you will have raised doubts in their minds about the person whose reputation you've soiled.

Because of this, it's small wonder that St. James warns us of the dangers of not controlling our tongues. He calls the tongue a restless evil, full of deadly poison. And so it is. He compares our tongues to fire: little flames – like children playing with matches – that can so easily get out of control and burn down great forests. And, we might add, homes; and cities; and more importantly, the people who live in them.

This is why it is so necessary that before you open your mouth to say anything about anyone, you make absolutely, positively sure that what you say is true. No rumor has it, no so and so said, no I'm pretty sure or reasonably confident. If you don't know it for a fact, then keep your mouth shut. This command prohibits first and foremost false witness about your neighbor. You wouldn't want anyone saying about you unverified information that's either unfavorable or unflattering; so don't you do it to anyone else. That's how the fire that destroys reputations

starts and spreads. So don't light the match. Don't pour gas on the flame. Rather, be a fire extinguisher.

And that's so easy to say. We can all nod our heads in agreement. But when the opportunity arises to throw mud at someone, especially someone with whom we disagree or perceive as an opponent or competitor, we can't seem to resist. Why is that? It's because we think taking them down will somehow be advantageous to me. Take the trial of Jesus for example. Here we have the legitimate religious and judicial authorities actively seeking what they know to be false accusations that can be charged against Jesus to condemn him. Why would they do that? What's driving them is fear. They see Jesus as a threat. He's gaining a large following. His teaching and miracles are making him very popular. Many in Jerusalem believe that he's the Messiah. They're talking about declaring him King. On what we call Palm Sunday, the crowd openly declared it in the streets. If this is allowed to go on, the leaders fear, it will bring the Romans down on us like a ton of bricks. They'll crush us. We need to get rid of Jesus to save ourselves. What irony. They're right about that; but for the wrong reason.

There's more to it, of course. It's not *just* fear. They're also jealous of Jesus' popularity. They don't like his teachings. They don't like the way he outwits them every time they try to trip him up in his words. He makes them look foolish. They need to get rid of Jesus in order to prove their superiority and maintain the myth of their own righteousness. This is why they're so eager for any information that makes Jesus look bad. They don't care if it's true as long as it does the job.

And we are the same way. We're always ready to believe and rebroadcast anything that makes a rival look bad. Making that guy look bad makes me look better. We especially see this in the world of American politics. Somehow even the staunchest professing Christians seem to think the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment doesn't apply there. We feel it's no sin to malign the qualifications, integrity, honor, or intentions of someone as long as he's the guy (or the guy whose party) we want to see defeated in the next election. And we justify ourselves. You see, if that candidate gets elected, he'll implement policies I don't like – which is another way to say “I fear what will happen if he's elected” – which is the same reason the Sanhedrin sought false witnesses to condemn Jesus. Oh. That makes them, me. Ouch. Guilty as charged.

And this is only to speak of the negative aspects of the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, the “You shall not” part. Positively, the Commandment requires that we defend and protect the reputation of others. It means when others are tearing someone down with false accusations, it's our job to stand up for them and speak well of them. That brings us to Peter who told the Jesus he'd stick with him to the very end. And he follows Jesus, all right – but only at a safe distance. He stands in the courtyard warming himself by the fire, listening to the lies they're heaping on his Lord. And Peter, the Rock, is petrified with fear. “Why, if I speak up for Jesus, they'll turn on me.” His is another form of false witness. It becomes more and more evident when he's asked repeatedly, “Hey, aren't you one of the followers of this Jesus?” “No, no. Not me. I don't know what you're talking about.”

We too bear false witness of Jesus when by our words or actions we deny that we are his followers. As Christians, we bear Christ's name. And when others see us doing things no Christian should do, we bring dishonor to Jesus. There is no such thing as following Jesus at a safe distance. You stand either with him or against him. Where do you stand? What do your words and actions testify about Jesus? Ouch. Got me again.

Yet another aspect of defending one another's reputations is the obligation to suppress negative information about someone even if it's true. We all have hidden in our past things that we want to keep hidden. To be sure, the sins we committed yesterday we don't want published about. You wouldn't want the whole truth about you to be known, would you? All your sins exposed for the whole world to see? Then don't do it to anyone else. Scripture informs us that love covers a multitude of sins, or as we heard in the wise words of Solomon, "rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

For this we have the biblical example of Joseph, the one who was so ill used by his brothers. Recall that they hated him, threatened to kill him, and sold him to slave traders headed for Egypt. The brothers then led their father, Jacob, to believe that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. It about destroyed the old man. He spends the next twenty years mourning the loss of his beloved son. But then, miracle of miracles, Jacob discovers that Joseph is alive. He's become the Prime Minister of Egypt. Eventually the whole family is reunited. But Joseph very wisely never tells his father how he came to be in Egypt in the first place. And why should he? He had forgiven his brothers. And it would only bring pain and resentment to his father if he knew the truth about his other sons. The whole truth can destroy otherwise good relationships. The tongue of the wise brings healing by what it says, but also when it knows to stay silent.

Finally, in a positive sense the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment requires that we explain everything in the kindest way. This is what we used to call putting the best construction on everything. This means that we are not even to imagine ill of each other. When we see or hear things about others that appear on the surface to be doubtful or negative, we are not to assume the worst or jump to unfavorable conclusions. Instead we are to presume that there's a good explanation for what the person did. We don't often do this, though. Usually we assume the worst. But the thing about that is, what we're really doing is reading our own sinful thoughts into the situation. If that were me in that situation, this is what I'd be thinking and doing. Thus when we judge the motives of others seen in questionable circumstances, what we're really doing is showing how sinful our own hearts and minds are.

So there it is. There's a lot to this 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment. And a lot more that could be said; but let this be enough for now. Consistent with the theme of Lent, it's time that you examine yourself in the light of God's Holy Word to see in what ways you have born false witness against Jesus and others, and also how you have failed in your loving duty to protect and defend their reputations. I'll pause here for a moment and let you do that ...

Got it? Is anyone here *not* feeling convicted? Then in your heart join me in the prayer of the tax collector who stood in shame beating his chest and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And know that for Jesus' sake, who was falsely accused of all your sins and who suffered and died for them on the cross, you are forgiven, and you go forth from here this evening justified in God's sight and empowered by his Holy Spirit to do what's right. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***