

**“You Shall Not Give False Testimony
Against Your Neighbor!”
Sermon on Exodus 20:16
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Exposition: “You Shall Not Give False Testimony Against Your Neighbor!”

The Bible reminds us: *We love, because God first loved us.* Amen.

God’s Word for our special consideration today continues our series on the Ten Commandments. It is the eighth commandment—Exodus chapter twenty, verse sixteen: ***You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor!***

We might further expand upon that, as Martin Luther did in the Small Catechism. Doctor Luther considered all Christ’s commands in the Bible, and he grouped together a bunch of them dealing with our neighbor’s reputation underneath this eighth commandment. He wrote: “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.”

This is the eighth commandment, and it is also the Word of the Lord.

Introduction: Eighth Commandment Is Especially Difficult for Christians

Dear fellow Christians, for whom the eighth commandment poses a special temptation:

There may be no more difficult commandment for a Christian to keep – especially a modern-day American Christian – than the eighth commandment.

Yeah, I know that’s painting with an exceedingly broad brush. I also know that we are prone to shatter all the commandments—because of the stubborn, genetic deformity with which our souls were born: that evil inclination always to rebel against God.

Still, follow me on this.... There may be no more difficult commandment for a Christian to keep than the eighth commandment. See, it sort of goes like this....

All around us people do wrong, just as we do wrong. And all of our society tells us that we can judge none of those evil things (unless, of course, it’s mistreating dogs, or being a hypocrite, or something truly heinous, something really, really bad like those things). I mean, otherwise: everything that another age might have called a perversion, a vice, or a sin—these days that’s simply an individual’s personal lifestyle choice. Oh, it might be wise or a mistake; it might be functional or dysfunctional. But it’s still his choice, and we don’t dare judge.

Well, that’s bunk! The Bible says: “The spiritual person makes judgments about all things”—First Corinthians two, fifteen. And again: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ...Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!”—First Corinthians six, two & three. So, when we fail to distinguish between good and evil, we fail to help others, and we ourselves fall into mortal danger, and all of that breaks the eighth commandment.

That means it is a Christian’s duty constantly to be judging whether things are good or evil. And when we fail to do that, we’re sinning. But then, once we’ve judged good and evil, what are we supposed to do? Well, we ought to use that knowledge of ours to benefit other people. And when we fail to do that, we sin, and we break the eighth commandment, too. Do you see how easy it is to do that?!

Application: Examples of Keeping the Eighth Commandment

So, how can a person keep the eighth commandment? Well, let me give you a couple examples....

Let's say a public figure commits a crime—or any other sin. We will acknowledge that that's evil—even if he's one of our guys: on our team, from our political party, or a favorite entertainer of ours. But then what? Well, to keep the eighth commandment, shouldn't we be sure to pray that he confesses his sin, finds favor from God through Jesus Christ, and more and more overcomes that sin in his life?

But how about an example closer to home? A coworker, friend, or family member of ours gets into some trouble. You name the trouble: shoplifting, sex outside of marriage, an entirely preventable bankruptcy or divorce, drunkenness or drug abuse, or any sort of a crime. First of all, we will acknowledge that that's evil. Then what? Well, certainly we'll pray. But there's more that we can do. Our love will lead us not to gossip with others about that individual, but rather to visit personally with that individual.

If he's not a Christian, the conversation may go something like this.... We'll come to our friend in private and gently say, "Hey, I heard about the trouble you're in. How are you doing?" And we'll listen, because we really do care. And then, we'll say, "Well, I want you to know I care. I'm your friend. And I'm here for you." And then, after a little bit longer, we will not fail to add, "Hey, when I'm in trouble, that's my reminder that I always need Jesus." (And please, do use the name "Jesus"—it's not just that you need "someone beyond yourself", or "the guy upstairs", or even just "God", which to a modern-American mind is really vague.) "I need Jesus. I need his forgiveness. I need his help. And do you know what? So do you. And I can help you." And then, do help him! If you can use some assistance, bring that person to church, then bring him to one of us pastors, then bring him to a Bible Information Class, so that he really can learn about Jesus.

Now let's say that your friend who is in trouble is a Christian already. It should be easier to talk to him, but sometimes I think it's actually harder. What we should say is something like this.... "Hey, I heard about the trouble you're in. How are you doing?" And again, we'll listen, because we really do care. And again, we'll say, "I want you to know I care. I'm your friend. I'm here for you." But then, we will not fail to add, "Have you settled things with God on this?" And we'll listen. And if we get to hearing excuses, or blaming others, or minimizing the sin, that's when we can serve our Savior and our neighbor. We can say something like this, "You know, it's really just best to lay our sins out before Jesus—no excuses, no explanations. He really does forgive those sins. That's what Christianity is all about. That's why we've got him on the cross at the front of our church. He died for your sins. And really, they're all gone." And it's all the better if we can go ahead and quote a Bible passage at that point to prove what we're saying—even: "God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

See, that's how you keep the eighth commandment!

Appropriation: The Example of Keeping the Eighth Commandment

But now I've got a question for you.... Does all of this sound hard to accomplish? Do you think it might be difficult to put into practice? On the one hand, I sort of hope not. I mean: I tried to make things as clear as possible. And hopefully, you can imagine yourself being a great deal of help to somebody else, when you properly keep the eighth commandment. After all, haven't most of us had somebody confront us for some evil we were falling into—and afterwards, we thanked him for it.

Still, I'm not stupid. Really keeping the eighth commandment, like I've been describing, is hard—and maybe especially nowadays in America. I know personally that it's difficult, because I have such a hard time keeping the eighth commandment.

And then, besides that, you could say to me, "Pastor, you've got to understand. First of all, I don't talk about these things as often as you do. So, it's hard for me. And then, a lot of the people I know who are in trouble—well, I don't know them that well. And even if I do, they don't want to talk about the trouble they're in. And then, if we were to talk, you know, I haven't always behaved myself, and they could say: Look who's talking! Finally, Pastor, nobody wants to own up to their sin. And nobody thinks they need a Savior."

And that's all true, I admit. But I suppose I'd reply, "We've got what they really need. You can do so much good for them. Give it a try. Who knows that the dear Lord hasn't put this person in your path, so that he ends up on the pathway to eternal life through Jesus?"

Maybe a story would help motivate us all. It's actually a true story; it really happened....

There was once this guy. He was a really upstanding guy, too. And he was a magnet for people. His friends adored him. Crowds followed him. Even his enemies couldn't keep away from him.

Well, with all those people surrounding him, you can imagine: they did a lot of sinning. And even though it was hard for this guy, he didn't fail to confront their sinning. One time, when the devil himself had infected one of his best friends, this guy I'm talking about reacted strongly: he called a spade a spade, he called Satan Satan, but then he patiently explained the situation to his friend. Another time, when the devil himself took over a different one of his friends, this guy pleaded for his rescue, though it was too late.

Of course, not everybody was very pleased with this constant confrontation. In fact, there came a time – and it didn't take long – that this guy's enemies plotted to assassinate him. And the plot worked.

First, they took him into custody—despite his well-meant warnings. Then, they declared him guilty (of telling the truth). Then, they took him to another court, where he was declared innocent three times, but finally given up to death.

Back then, they used to execute people by asphyxiation on a cross. Now, when they were driving the spikes through the bottom of his hands to fasten him to the wood, this guy kept the eighth commandment. He said the kindest possible thing he could. He said: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

That's the forgiveness that's ours! All the times we failed to care enough to pray or to speak or to act on behalf of others, that fellow bore our sins on his shoulders. In fact, all the times we've made excuses or blamed others or minimized our guilt, he died as the penalty for those sins, too. And all the times he helped others by exposing and forgiving their sins, God credited that love of his to our accounts.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And that is what we are—through Jesus Christ our Savior!

Conclusion: Eighth Commandment Is Especially Important for Christians

As surely as Jesus was buried in the tomb, so surely he has buried our sins forever—also our sins against the eighth commandment. As surely as Jesus rose from the tomb, he has raised us to an entirely new life. With power and love from Jesus, we can defend our neighbor, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest

possible way. Jesus' power and love make it possible for us to avoid telling lies about our neighbor, betraying him, or giving him a bad name.

For Jesus' sake, we can – and we will! – expose sin: both others' and our own. But we will also forgive sin, just as God has forgiven ours: through Jesus Christ our Savior! Amen.

The Bible reminds us: *Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* Amen.