

# Catechetical Resources

## THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

**Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.**

*By Harold E. Warnke*

### THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

#### YOU SHALL NOT GIVE FALSE TESTIMONY AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOR

**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.**

#### I. WHICH OF OUR ENTRUSTED POSSESSIONS DOES GOD PROTECT WITH THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT?

##### A. With Commandments 4-7 God protects various valuable possessions of ours.

As long as we live here on this earth, our God entrusts to each one of us various valuable earthly possessions. They are ours to use for the glory of God and for our welfare; they must not be taken from us unlawfully. Therefore God has given various commandments to insure that no one takes from us what He has entrusted to us.

For example, who can measure the value of a truly Christian home? The 128<sup>th</sup> Psalm speaks about the blessings of the man who fears the Lord, whose “wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thy house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table.” God protects our homes with His Fourth Commandment.

What earthly blessing is more valuable than life itself? It’s true: “All that a man hath will he give for his life” (Job 2:4). An example is the wealthy man who was kidnapped—his family gave the kidnappers millions of dollars in exchange for his life, leaving him much poorer than before. Most of us would probably give up our possessions also, if it meant saving our lives. God protects our lives with His Fifth Commandment.

Who can ever place a monetary value upon the love, helpfulness, and companionship of a faithful Christian spouse? In his Proverbs, King Solomon more than once speaks glowingly of a faithful wife: “Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the Lord” (Proverbs 18:22); “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies” (Proverbs 31:10). God protects our spouse with His Sixth Commandment.

Nor can we live without some earthly goods. It’s true, as our Lord said, that we should not be worried about daily bread, nor spend ourselves in amassing great wealth where “moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal” (Matthew 6:19). Rather, we are to seek “first the kingdom of God and His righteousness: and all these things (bodily necessities) shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). Yet, as Dr. Luther correctly wrote in his explanation of the Fourth Petition, we are to pray day by day for “everything

required to satisfy our bodily needs, such as food and clothing, house and home, fields and flocks, money and property.” God protects those entrusted earthly possessions with His Seventh Commandment.

In each one of these instances God has placed a sturdy fence (the Commandments) around these entrusted blessings so that the danger of being robbed of them in part or totally may be lessened. He did that to make us happy and grateful.

## **B. With the Eighth Commandment God protects our precious good name.**

### **1. Our good name is a precious possession.**

#### **a. Scripture repeatedly testifies to the value of a good name.**

In the Old Testament, King Solomon wrote: “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches” (Proverbs 22:1); “A good name is better than precious ointment” (Eccl. .7:1). Thus God Himself, through King Solomon, implies that one can heap up for himself gold and silver, stocks, and bonds, lands and buildings, but what good is all of it, if one’s name is consequently despised by men, women, and children? Can all of those riches bring us the joy, the satisfaction, and the peace that our good reputation furnishes? If we were given the choice between riches with disgrace or shame on the one hand and a good name with only sufficient goods on the other hand, there is no question about the right decision: the good name is infinitely better. God says so.

The New Testament also frequently tells us the value of a good name. When, for example, the time came for the Jerusalem congregation to choose elders to help the Apostles, they were to seek “among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.” Thereby the mother congregation at Jerusalem furnished a fine example for all of its daughter congregations. When we choose our church officials, they should also be wise men of good report who are filled with the Holy Ghost.

Another New Testament Christian with a good report was Timothy, St. Paul’s well-known and greatly-loved co-worker. Of him Scripture states that he “was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium” (Acts 16:2). Ananias, through whom God restored Paul’s sight, also had a good name. He was “a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there” (Acts 22:12).

#### **b. Religious writers have repeatedly testified to the value of a good name.**

Long before our Lord was born, the author of Ecclesiasticus, one of the Apocrypha, wrote:

Man’s body is a fleeting thing, but a virtuous name will never be annihilated. Have a care for your name, for it will stand by you better than precious treasures in the thousands; the boon of life is for limited days, but a good name, for days without number (Sirach 41:11-13).

In his Large Catechism, Dr. Luther wrote in the first paragraph of his explanation to the Eighth Commandment:

Besides our own body, our wife or husband, and our temporal property, we have one more treasure which is indispensable to us, namely, our honor and good name, for it is intolerable to live among men in public disgrace and contempt. Therefore God will not have our neighbor deprived of his reputation, honor, and character any more than of his

money and possessions; He would have every man maintain his self-respect before his wife, children, servants and neighbors.

**c. Secular writers have also repeatedly testified to the value of a good name.**

For example, Geoffrey Chaucer, justly famous for his intriguing *Canterbury Tales*, repeated and expanded an ancient story in his Manciple's Tale (a manciple is a buyer of provisions). In that tale Phoebus had a white crow which he taught to speak and to mimic. One day the crow revealed his wife's infidelity to the manciple. In a rage the husband then killed his wife. Later Phoebus was so sorry for what he had done that he tore out all of the crow's white feathers, turning it black. He also took away the crow's ability to speak and flung it to the devil. Ever since that time the crow has been a cawing, unloved, black bird. That is a good fairy tale which shows the evil results that follow from the loss of one's good name,

William Shakespeare, the greatest of English dramatists, also recognized the value of a good name. In his *Othello*, he had Iago say to Othello: "Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, is the immediate jewel of their souls: who steals my purse steals trash, 'tis something, nothing; 'twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands; but he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him, and makes me poor indeed" (Act III, Scene 3).

Indeed, a good name is one of our greatest earthly possessions, as Scripture repeatedly testifies and as both religious and many secular writers agree.

**2. Our good name is constantly in danger of being damaged or destroyed.**

Our good name is in danger, simply because the human heart is desperately wicked and selfish. Our Imagination is evil from our youth, as Genesis 8:21 testifies. By nature we are always inclined to blacken someone else's reputation; to read gladly the gossip columns in many newspapers and magazines, especially when they print the foibles of well-known people; to listen to the latest gossips; to repeat with embellishments any evil acts, particularly those of people whom we dislike. All such actions and many more effectively damage one's reputation.

Dr. Luther wrote about this "detestable, shameful vice of backbiting or slander by which the devil rides us . . . It is a common vice of human nature that every one would rather hear evil than good about his neighbor. Evil though we are, we cannot tolerate having evil spoken of us; we want the golden compliments of the whole world. Yet we cannot bear to hear the best spoken of others" (Large Catechism, 264). That too is a result of the natural human heart's sinfulness.

**3. Therefore our God gave His Eighth Commandment to protect our good name from damage or destruction.**

Our God understands the human heart perfectly. He knows full well how eager natural man is to blacken someone's reputation; He is well aware of all the malicious gossip that comes from our lips; and He understands exactly what grief and havoc a bad reputation can create.

To eliminate such evils from the lives of His children, He therefore instituted the Eighth Commandment: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."

It is an important Commandment, no less important, really, than the other Commandments of the Second Table. With it our God comes to us, His children by faith in Christ, with the earnest admonition: "Just as you would not consider killing your neighbor (Fifth Commandment), just as you would not plan to steal his spouse (Sixth Commandment), just as you should never rob him of the possessions entrusted into his care (Seventh Commandment), so you who have been cleansed by the blood of Christ must not harm or destroy your neighbor's good name."

On the contrary, your love toward your God, your thankfulness for all that He has done for you, should move you to do everything possible to help your neighbor to keep and to improve his good reputation. Thus our God protects that valuable possession, our good name.

These thoughts were emphasized by our Lord, when He repeated the Eighth Commandment to the rich young man (Matthew 19:18; Mark 10:19). St. Paul also repeated the same Commandment in Romans 13:9.

In the following sections we shall discuss in detail the points which our God forbids with His valuable Eighth Commandment, as well as the good words that He commands, so that our and our neighbor's good name might be kept and improved.

## **II. WHAT DOES GOD FORBID WITH HIS EIGHTH COMMANDMENT?**

### **A. In general God forbids every kind of “false witness” (or testimony).**

#### **1. What does “bear witness” mean?**

The answer to this question can readily be seen from the example of John the Baptist, as written in John 1:7, 34. In these verses we learn that this great forerunner of our Lord, “came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light . . . (he was) the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord . . . behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world . . . (he) bare record that this is the Son of God.” John knew beyond any doubt that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior of the world, for the Holy Spirit had convinced him of this all-important truth. Then that mighty preacher of the living God proclaimed the certainty of this blessed truth to all who would listen.

Like John the Baptist, we too are to bear witness of the Lord Jesus so that many people everywhere might learn to know Him as their only Savior from sin, death, and damnation. “Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 43:10); “Ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8), asserted Jesus to all of us just before He ascended into Heaven. Thereby He prescribed the one all-important task of the Christian Church for all future ages. By word and deed every Christian is to spread the precious Gospel everywhere. That is bearing witness: telling others what we know of a certainty regarding God or our fellow man. Of course, all of this must be in keeping with the general law of Christian love toward God and toward our neighbor. Such witness bearing is required of us who are children of God by faith in Christ.

#### **2. What is a definition of the “false witness” that God forbids?**

Our Catechism answers that question by stating that “false witness is all talk that comes out of a false heart.” (We shall have something to say about the sins of the heart against this Commandment in Part 4 of this section.) Then our Catechism immediately illustrates this statement with a number of examples. The first one happened very early in the world's history, when the devil spoke falsely to Eve (Genesis 3:1-5). First he asked her if God had really forbidden the eating of all the fruits in the Garden. Eve correctly said that she and her husband might eat of the fruit of the trees in the Garden, excepting only one particular tree. If they ate of that, they would surely die.

Then followed the first deliberate lie. Satan contradicted God with his infamous, “Ye shall not surely die.” In fact, Satan continued, “God knows very well that if you eat this particular fruit, you will surely be like God, knowing good and evil. “Thereby he not only lied, but he dangled a vague, enticing, and deadly promise before Eve. He did it out of a deceitful heart, not to bless our first parents, but to curse them and the entire human race. Had he revealed his true intentions, Eve would undoubtedly have run from him as fast as her legs would carry her. But he cleverly, deceitfully, and successfully used his lies to cause the fall of man. Small wonder then that our Lord called him “a liar, and the father of it” (John 8:44). He was the very first to bear false witness.

Every one in the world's history has to a lesser or to a greater extent at some times followed that frightful example of Satan. Our Catechism cites the story of the wicked Pharisees who came to Jesus one day with their insincere, poisonous flattery. They said: "Master, we know that Thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth . . . tell us therefore, what thinkest Thou? Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" (Matthew 22:15-17). The following verses clearly show that these evil men were not at all interested in a correct answer to that question; rather they were trying to trap Jesus. Had He answered, "Yes," then the Jewish nation would have turned against Him, since they hated the Romans. Had His answer been, "No," then the Romans would certainly be after Him for counseling rebellion. In either case, His answer was to be used to denounce or to condemn our Lord. The Pharisees had come with a flattering tongue, moved by a deceitful, hate-filled heart. This was a pure case of bearing false witness. (We shall have more to say about flattery in Section II, C, 2, e. )

A third Bible example of someone who bore false witness is that of Judas, when he complained rather bitterly about Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus with costly ointment (John 12:1-6). As Judas pointed out, the ointment could have been sold for much money. That, in turn, could have been given to the poor and thus it would have done a great deal of good. As it was, so Judas implied, the money was more or less wasted without any real benefit to anyone. On the face of it, those statements have a fine ring to them; yet, as St. John immediately wrote, Judas did not care for the poor at all. Instead, he, the treasurer of the group, wanted to get his hands upon the money. He was a thief whose fine-sounding words came from a deceitful heart. They were nothing but rank false witness.

Finally, our Catechism reminds us of King Herod's words to the Wise Men: "Go and seek diligently for the young Child (the Baby Jesus); and when ye have found Him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship Him also" (Matthew 2:8). That, again, was nothing less than shameful false witness, since King Herod was only trying to deceive the Wise Men regarding his true intentions. He had no plans whatsoever of worshipping the Christ Child; instead he wanted to find Him and kill Him. His fine-sounding words were nothing but poison flowing from a false heart.

From the examples just cited one can then quickly form a useful definition of "false witness." It is in general every deceitful statement that arises, consciously or unconsciously, from that wicked, false heart with which all of us were born. That is what our God forbids in His great Eighth Commandment. It is the thought that we shall apply to specific situations in Part II of this paper.

### **3. What is the source of the "false witness" that God forbids with His Eighth Commandment?**

Our Lord answered that question in Matthew 15:19: "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies, " The heart is without doubt the source of all false witness. In it may arise dozens of evil thoughts that are sins against the Eighth Commandment. For example, hatred and envy of one's neighbor, when it leads to or can lead to speaking evil of him are sins of the heart against the Eighth Commandment. So are greediness and the love of gossip, fear of someone or the desire to win a favor from him, even the hope of profit or of winning friends. All these and many, many more thoughts can and often do lead to false witness. They are sins against the Eighth Commandment, even if they do not result in false words. Such evil thoughts lead to God's condemnation, as Hebrews 4:12 says: "The Word of God is living and active . . . it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (NIV). We must, consequently, beware of thinking any evil that can lead to sins against the Eighth Commandment, praying that God will give us the strength to think only good thoughts.

### **4. What types of sins does God particularly forbid with His Eighth Commandment?**

Every one of the first seven Commandments apply to thoughts, words, and deeds, as we have shown repeatedly in this series. The Eighth Commandment is somewhat different. True, it forbids all sins of the heart, all thought sins, as we learned in the previous paragraph. However, it deals particularly with sins of the tongue, with our words, even as the Ninth and Tenth Commandments treat particularly the sins of the heart.

Dr. Luther wrote in his Large Catechism: “It (the Eighth Commandment) forbids all sins of the tongue by which we may injure or offend our neighbor. False witness is clearly a work of the tongue. Whatever is done with the tongue against a neighbor, then is forbidden by God.” Our explanation of the Eighth Commandment will, consequently, treat sins of the tongue almost exclusively. That does not mean, of course, that one should overlook the sins of the heart against this Commandment.

## **B. Specifically, God forbids every type of false witness in court.**

### **1. God forbids Christians normally to go to a heathen court.**

In his Small Catechism Dr. Luther says nothing about sins against the Eighth Commandment in court. That is understandable, since he was writing for children and their every day life. However, in his Large Catechism he did write about judges and magistrates and their relationship to this Commandment, as we shall learn in a few moments.

Moreover, Scripture has a great deal to say about courts and about how God wants His children to conduct themselves therein. We shall discuss the chief parts in the paragraphs to follow.

The major Scripture passage that treats of Christians going to court is written in I Corinthians 6:1-8. It reads as follows in the NIV translation:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that God’s people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers!

You will note from this Bible passage that St. Paul begins with a striking, penetrating question: “Dare you Christians, whether you are plaintiffs or defendants, go against each other before a court of this world? That is indeed shameful; it should be unthinkable. Why don’t you let yourself be wronged or cheated rather than to make such a disgraceful spectacle of yourselves?” When we see how quickly two people who quarrel become reconciled, when one gives in, and when we note how a lawsuit simply prolongs strife, possibly for years, then we can readily see the wisdom of Paul’s advice.

Well, then, what is a child of God to do if he has a quarrel with his brother in the faith one that the two of them cannot settle between themselves? “In that case,” wrote St. Paul, “bring the matter before another Christian, even the lowly one, for his help and advice in settling the matter amicably. You surely will be able to find such a person and thus avoid the shame of appearing before a court of the unbelieving world.”

You may object that your matter is too important for a lowly Christian to settle. “Then,” continued St. Paul, “consider this: don’t you know that on the Last Day you will join God in His judgment upon the world and even upon the angels? And if that is true, how much more is even the lowliest among you able to judge the things of this life?”

Yes, indeed, let the two disputing brethren choose a fellow-believer; let them tell him the facts of the case; let them listen carefully to what he has to say; let each one then accept the recommendation of the third party, even if it means giving in a little, or not getting exactly what he wants, or even accepting wrong. Let no one give in to his old Adam that always wants his own way and bristles when he does not get it; let no one say yes to the devil who always wants us to fight against our neighbor; let no one bring a matter against his fellow-believer in Christ before the unbelieving court; much less ought one to go to court against a brother or a sister in his own family. That is St. Paul’s good advice, given by inspiration of God.

What a blessing it would be, if all Christians followed the will of God in this matter. That would automatically eliminate many of the trivial matters for which people often go to court; it would also save much money. Two farmers, for example, went to court about a calf; before the case was settled, it cost them much more than the calf was worth. Two Christians took a matter that involved just a few dollars to the Wisconsin State Supreme Court at a huge cost for each one.

Doing what I Corinthians 6:1-8 requires would also reduce the huge caseload of almost every court in our land. In the 1970's the number of lawsuits within our country increased dramatically over those of any other era in our history; people who in former days would not consider going to court now do so at the slightest provocation.

All of this does not, of course, mean that a Christian dare never go to court under any circumstances. In the first place you will notice that St. Paul was writing only about Christians. His advice does not necessarily apply to a dispute between a Christian and an unbeliever, simply because an unbeliever would not normally tend to agree with the principle stated in I Corinthians 6, nor would he be inclined to accept another Christian's recommendation. In such a case a Christian will surely have the right to defend himself, assuming other measures fail, even if it means going to a public court.

An example of a Christian, yes an entire church body, going to court against an unbeliever happened in Wisconsin during the late 1800's. The so-called Bennett Law had been passed by the Legislature. It was a law that clearly threatened the existence of the Wisconsin Synod's parochial-school system. When all else failed, the Synod then joined with the Roman Catholic Church in fighting the law through the courts. Fortunately, it was eventually declared unconstitutional.

Various other cases can and do frequently occur, when we Christians might go to court. We might want the answer to a legal question that only a judge can give; we might be a defendant in a suit brought by someone else; we might be asked to help our neighbor by being a witness for him in a certain case; we might be judges or members of the jury; we might be lawyers by profession. In each such case our presence in court is required for a shorter or a longer period of time.

When that happens, when we appear in court for whatever reason, our conduct is to be governed by God's holy Eighth Commandment. Dr. Luther wisely wrote in his Large Catechism, "In its first and simplest meaning, as the words stand ('you shall not bear false witness'), this commandment pertains to public courts of justice." Then at the close of the paragraphs dealing with courts, he summarized as follows: "This is one aspect of the commandment, and its plainest meaning, applying to all that takes place in court. "

In the paragraphs to follow we shall apply the truths of this Commandment to everyone who appears in court.

## **2. God forbids false witness in court by a witness.**

The Bible frequently speaks of false witness in court. For example, someone may deliberately lie, often with the hope of gaining some reward, like the "sons of Belial" who testified falsely that Naboth had blasphemed God and the king. They had been persuaded to do this by that dreadfully wicked queen Jezebel. The direct result was that an innocent man was executed (I Kings 21:7-14).

In New Testament times the Jewish leaders bribed the Roman soldiers who had guarded Jesus' tomb to say, "His disciples came by night, and stole Him away while we slept" (Matthew 28:12, 13). What an absurd statement! Why were they sleeping; and if they were sleeping, how did they know that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body? Yet, that was their false testimony.

At another time the Jewish leaders likewise "persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and God' ...they produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against the Holy Place and against the Law'" (Acts 6:11-13, NIV). Once more the result was the death of an innocent man (Acts 7:57-60).

The best-known example of false witnesses in the Bible is their use by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court, when Jesus was on trial before them. Of this trial Scripture states: "For many bore false witness but the

witnesses agreed not together. And there arose certain and bore false witness against Him, saying, ‘We heard Him say, I will destroy this Temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.’ But neither so did their witness agree together” (Mark 14:56-59). They twisted Jesus’ words, written in John 2:18-22, to mean something that He never intended, for He was speaking of the Temple of His body. The result, as we know full well, was the infamous verdict, “He (Jesus) is guilty of death” (Matthew 26:66).

Again, a witness with hatred in his heart may testify in court only of the evil that someone has done and overlook the good, like the Jews who spoke against Paul before Festus. They “laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove” (Acts 25:7). Paul, on the other hand, testified truthfully: “Neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended anything at all” (Acts 25:8).

So we can summarize as follows: Every time anyone testifies under oath to something he did not see or hear, every time that one declares something to be the truth which he knows to be a lie or vice versa, every time one adds or subtracts from the truth, he is bearing false witness, something strictly forbidden by this Commandment.

Our God is so serious about this matter that He frequently stresses the punishment that will surely follow the transgression of this Commandment. For example, “A false witness shall not be unpunished,” wrote King Solomon in Proverbs 19:5; and “A false witness shall perish” (Proverbs 21:28). In I Timothy 1:9, 10 our God places perjurers into the same category with murderers and adulterers. In the last book of the Old Testament, God warns that He will “come near to you in judgment; and I will be a swift witness against . . . false swearers” (Malachi 3:5).

Perjury was severely punished in Israel’s Old Testament Civil Law: “If the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you. And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you” (Deuteronomy 19:18-20). We remember also wicked Jezebel’s frightful end. When the dogs had finished with her corpse, there was nothing left except her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands, although false witness was only one of her many frightful sins.

Today our courts still recognize the evils of perjury and they may sentence a perjurer to prison terms. The important thing, of course, is that false witness is a dreadful sin against our all-holy God. If you are ever placed into a position where you have to bear witness, be sure to ask for our Lord’s guidance so that you never sin while bearing witness.

### **3. God forbids false witness in court by a defendant.**

The devil and one’s Old Adam quickly and quietly combine to move a defendant to bear false witness in court. As a result, he may deny a plaintiff’s allegation, thereby harming the other person’s good name; or the defendant may refuse to admit his guilt, even though he knows in his heart that he is guilty, thereby making it difficult for the prosecution to prove his point; or the defendant may plead the Fifth Amendment on the ground that his answers might tend to incriminate him, thereby withholding the truth that might help the plaintiff’s case. All of these examples are sins by a defendant against the Eighth Commandment.

When a Christian has done wrong, he must admit it regardless of the consequences. That is what Achan did, when he sinned against God’s express orders. God had commanded the Israelites to destroy everything in the city of Jericho, except some items that were to be kept for the Lord’s treasury (Joshua 6:17-19). Yet Achan’s greed moved him to steal and to hide some of the gold and silver and a garment. That action angered God so greatly that He allowed Israel to be defeated in battle by a minor enemy. Joshua, the leader, learned that the defeat was the result of Israel’s sin. By lot he discovered that Achan was the culprit. When he then confronted the sinner, Achan readily admitted: “Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel and thus and thus have I done.” For his crime, so Joshua 7 tells us, Achan and his entire family were put to death (they were guilty also, since they had known of Achan’s sin).

We too must admit our guilt, when we have sinned, regardless of the consequences. Let no one among us lie in court for fear of punishment; let no one seek a crafty criminal lawyer to free him, though he be guilty; let no one defend his crime by trying to blame someone else or excusing himself in other ways. For, even though the earthly punishment, when we admit our sin, might be as severe as death, one can still repent and save his soul.

On the other hand, if a defendant lies to escape physical punishment, he falls under the curse of God who will surely punish both body and soul. “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord: but they that deal truly are His delight” (Proverbs 12:22); and, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper” (Proverbs 28:13). We should remember also our Lord’s words spoken in another connection: “Whosoever will save his life, shall lose it” (Matthew 16:25).

#### **4. God forbids false witness in court by a plaintiff.**

A plaintiff may and frequently does bear false witness in court. Sometimes he tells an outright lie; at other times he may speak a half truth that greatly damages the defendant’s reputation. A Bible example, previously cited in II, B, 2, is that of the wicked elders and nobles of Jezreel to whom that terribly evil queen, Jezebel, had sent letters to kill Naboth (I Kings 21:1-16). In her letters, she commanded the elders to procure false witnesses who would testify that Naboth had blasphemed God and the king, a crime punishable by death. To make the trial seem legitimate, the queen had the elders “proclaim a fast,” usually a sign that some great wickedness had been perpetrated. Then the elders and the nobles, who were the plaintiffs in the suit against innocent Naboth, had him condemned and stoned. Thereafter Naboth’s vineyard became the king’s property, something he had long coveted.

The most outstanding example of false witness on the part of plaintiffs is, of course, the trial of our Lord both before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court (see II, B, 2), and especially before Pilate. “We found this fellow perverting the nation,” shouted those accusers, “and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ the King” (Luke 23:2). Part of that testimony was clearly false; part, though true., was not at all true in the sense in which they meant it. Therefore it was all false witness by the plaintiffs.

We too, when we are plaintiffs in a case, are in danger of saying everything possible to condemn the defendant and of either stating nothing in his favor or of belittling all testimony favorable to him. The devil, the world, and our flesh combine their wicked powers in such cases to move us to sin, you can be sure of that. Therefore, if we are ever a plaintiff in a court suit, let’s be sure to pray that God will guide us so that “putting away lying; (we) speak every man truth with his neighbor” (Ephesians 4:25), with all that this implies.

#### **5. God forbids false witness in court by a lawyer.**

The very nature of his work, the defense of his client, presents numberless temptations for a lawyer to sin against the Eighth Commandment. If he is a criminal lawyer, “the tricks of the trade” may succeed in freeing his guilty client or in procuring a very light sentence for him. If the claims lawyer seeks damage for his client, he may try for a figure much higher than the case deserves, thereby receiving rich rewards for his wickedness. If he questions a witness whose testimony has particularly damaged the case of his client, he may try to blacken that witness’s reputation, also a grave sin against this Commandment. If it will help his client, he will often try to plant doubt in the judge’s or the jury’s mind, even though his client is indeed guilty. Time and again he is tempted to put his case in a better light than it deserves.

The Bible has something to say about sins of this type also. What King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:16 is surely a warning to every Christian lawyer: “Then I saw under the sun—in the place of justice there is wrong, and in the place of right there is wickedness!” (Beck).

In the New Testament times Ananias, the high priest, brought Tertullus, the attorney, to prosecute Paul before Governor Felix (Acts 24:1-9). Tertullus testified against Paul in this way: “We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even

tried to desecrate the Temple; so we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about these charges we are bringing against him” (NIV). Those charges were at best only half truths that placed Paul into the worst possible light. Every word that was spoken was a downright sin against the Eighth Commandment.

Admittedly, a Christian lawyer may at times have difficulty in distinguishing between a vigorous defense of his client and a sin against the Eighth Commandment. He needs to study carefully what God has said about bearing false witness and what Christian writers have written on the subject. Above all he needs a good understanding of the Word and he needs to pray constantly that our God might guide him rightly in all his court appearances.

## **6. God forbids false witness in court by a judge or by a jury.**

### **a. Judges, juries, and every Christian must pronounce judgment at times.**

One sometimes hears Matthew 7:1 and Luke 6:37 (“Judge not, and ye shall not be judged; condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned”) quoted as forbidding all judging. That obviously cannot be the real meaning of these passages and of Romans 14:13 and I Corinthians 4:5, as well. Otherwise no one, not even a judge or a jury, would be able to judge anyone or anything. That is simply not true.

Judges and juries must judge rightly, as we shall hear in a moment. We Christians must also do a certain amount of judging, as is clear from various other Bible passages. For example, the prophet Amos bids us to “hate the evil, and love the good” (5:15), something that is totally impossible if we do not determine what is evil and what is good. In the very same chapter in which our Lord commanded, “Judge not,” He also cautioned us to “Beware of false prophets . . . by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:15-20). The same thought is echoed by St. Paul in that familiar passage, Romans 16:17: “Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. “ It is totally impossible to beware of false prophets or to avoid them, if we do not judge whether they are preaching falsely. Furthermore, our Lord specifically said that we are not to judge “according to appearances, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24), while St. Paul wrote, “He that is spiritual judgeth all things” (I Corinthians 2:15). St. Paul also prayed for the Philippians that they might grow in judgment (Philippians 1:9). Obviously, then, Christ’s words in Matthew 7:1 and Luke 6:37 are not meant in an absolute sense; they do not forbid all judging.

What our Lord had in mind is that we refrain from all loveless judging all judging that arises from a better-than-thou spirit. That warning is desperately needed, since our old Adam is always quick to see faults in others, while overlooking our own; it is always ready to judge and to condemn in others the same sins that we ourselves commit. In our self-righteousness we can easily magnify someone else’s faults and justify our own. That is the kind of judging that is strictly forbidden by our Lord in Matthew 7:1 and Luke 6:37.

A Scripture example of such loveless judging is written in II Samuel 10:1-19. That passage tells how the king of the Ammonites had died. Thereafter King David sent some of his servants to comfort Hanun, the king’s son. But the Ammonite princes persuaded Hanun that David’s servants were spies, sent to learn the weakness of the city and to overthrow it. Hanun concurred in this false judgment, shaved off one-half of the servants’ beards and cut off one-half of their garments. That judgment and those acts were so utterly shameful that David sent his general Joab to lead the army in battle against the Ammonites. Israel won the victory, killed many of the enemy and subjugated them—all because Hanun had made a false loveless judgment.

### **b. Judges and juries must be honest in their judgment.**

The civil government is God's representative, "ordained of God" (Romans 13:1), "for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well" (I Peter 2:14). Judges (and juries too) are an important part of the government. Therefore God has much to say to them and about them in His Word. We shall cite a few of those Bible passages in the paragraphs to follow:

In Exodus 18:21, 22 Jethro, the father-in-law, gave Moses this excellent advice:

Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: and let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee . . . So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said. (Exodus 18:24).

In Leviticus 19:15 the Lord commanded Moses to tell the people:

Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor.

In his farewell addresses. Moses repeatedly admonished the judges to judge righteously (Deut. 1:16,17; Deut. 16:18,19; Deut. 19:18,19; Deut. 27:19):

And I charged your judges at that time, saying, hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's . . . Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the Lord thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment. Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous . . . And the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he hath sought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you . . . cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say, Amen.

In II Chronicles 19:6, 7 King Jehoshaphat commanded the judges:

Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. Wherefore now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts.

In his Proverbs, (17:15, 23), wise King Solomon wrote:

He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the Lord . . . A wicked man taketh a gift out of the bosom to pervert the ways of judgment.

Despite all of those clear instructions and commands of our God, King Solomon could still complain in Ecclesiastes 3:16: “Then I saw under the sun—in the place of justice there is wrong, and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness” (Beck). The Bible and world history have far, far too many examples of that wickedness on the part of judges and juries. The most notorious of them is Pontius Pilate, the Roman judge before whom our Lord was brought for trial. Pilate began that trial rightly by inquiring, “What evil has He done?” (Matthew 27:23). He reported his findings of innocence with his “I find no fault in this Man, (Luke 23:4); “Nothing worthy of death is done unto Him” (Luke 23:15 ); and, “I have found no cause of death in Him” (Luke 23:22). Yet, in the end, because of the mob’s hysterical accusations and their roaring “Crucify Him,” Pilate finally gave the order to kill Jesus (John 19:1-16). The result is that billions of Christians for centuries have regularly confessed that Jesus suffered and was crucified under Pontius Pilate. What an irony that the one man in all the city who on Good Friday tried to free Jesus would be forever shamed and disgraced in this manner, all because he who had the final word judged wickedly.

The story of Governor Felix, the judge before whom St. Paul was brought, is also familiar (Acts 23 and 24). In that trial St. Paul’s defense must have made a deep impression upon the governor, since Scripture tells us that “Felix trembled, and answered, go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season (that, sadly, probably never came), I will call for thee.” Nevertheless, since Felix hoped for a bribe and also wanted to please the Jews, he “left Paul bound” (Acts 24:6, 7).

Felix was certainly not the first nor by any means the last judge to expect or to receive a bribe. Pontius Pilate was neither the first nor by any means the last to declare the innocent guilty and the guilty innocent. Consider, for example, the many times that the criminal convicted of a major crime has received a comparatively light sentence, while someone guilty of a much lesser offense received a much longer sentence. Let every judge and jury who are guilty of such sins remember that almighty God pronounces an everlasting woe upon those “who for a bribe declare the wicked righteous and take away the rights of the righteous” (Isaiah 5:23, Beck). “When the Lord sees it, He is angry that there is no justice” (Isaiah 59:15, Beck).

No judge or jury can, of course, ever be like God, who is absolutely impartial and perfect in His judgment. “He shall judge the world with righteousness and the people with His truth” (Psalm 96:13); “God does not show favoritism” (Romans 2:11, NIV). Yet, that perfectly righteous judgment of God is the ideal for which every judge and jury must strive at all times. That is what the Eighth Commandment requires of them.

Dr. Luther put it this way in his Large Catechism: “A judge ought, above all, to be a man of integrity, and not only upright but also a Wise, sagacious, brave, and fearless man . . . here (in the Eighth Commandment) we have a goal set for our jurists: perfect justice and equity in every case. They should let right remain right, not perverting or concealing or suppressing anything on account of anyone’s money, property, honor, or power. This is one aspect of the commandment, and its plainest meaning, applying to all that takes place in court.”

## **C. Particularly, God forbids all false witness outside of court.**

### **1. False witness outside of court often happens.**

After treating false witness in court, Dr. Luther in his Large Catechism then wrote about the much more frequent sins against this Commandment outside of court. This is the way in which he continued:

Next, it (the Eighth Commandment) extends much further when it is applied to spiritual jurisdiction or administration. Here, too, every one bears false witness against his neighbor. Wherever there are godly creatures and Christians, they must endure having the world call them heretics, apostates, even seditious and accursed scoundrels. Moreover, the Word of God must

undergo the most shameful and spiteful persecution and blasphemy; it is contradicted, perverted, misused, and misinterpreted (lying against the Word of God is discussed at length in our explanation of the Second Commandment).

The third aspect of this commandment concerns us all. It forbids all sins of the tongue by which we may injure or offend our neighbor. False witness is clearly a work of the tongue. Whatever is done with the tongue against a neighbor, then, is forbidden by God. This applies to false preachers with their corrupt teaching and blasphemy, to false judges and witnesses with their corrupt behavior in court and their lying and malicious talk outside of court. It applies particularly to the detestable, shameful vice of back-biting or slander by which the devil rides us.

With these paragraphs Dr. Luther pointed to the incessant sins against this Commandment outside of court. Even though the term “false witness” is taken from court language, even though false witness occurs frequently in court, yet sins against this Commandment are much more common in the home and in the school, at work and at play, during social gatherings and at meetings. The Eighth Commandment strictly forbids all such sins also, as we shall learn in the paragraphs to follow. (To facilitate our discussion, we shall follow Dr. Luther’s Explanation of the Eighth Commandment, treating particularly three major sins against this Commandment: lying, betraying, and giving our neighbor a bad name. The last part covers the “slander and defame” of a previous Catechism translation).

## **2. God forbids lying to or about our neighbor.**

### **a. What is a definition of the lying that God forbids?**

If one studies a number of Bible passages that treat this subject, he will probably arrive at a definition somewhat on this order: Lying means to say or to imply something is false, when one knows that it is true (or vice versa). It arises from a sinful heart; and it results in hurting or deceiving our neighbor.

Such sins, committed outside of court, are sternly forbidden by the Eighth Commandment. Even though this Commandment in its strictest meaning applies to courtroom procedure, yet our God in many Bible passages applies it also to every-day life. For example, “Ye shall not . . . lie to one another” (Leviticus 19:11); “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs 12:22); “Lie not to one another” (Colossians 3:9). These references and others apply to lying that takes place anywhere, in the courtroom or outside of it.

Is a lie told in jest forbidden by these Bible passages? For example, someone asks us how we are feeling, and we tell them that we are sick in bed, when it is apparent to everyone that our health is very good. Someone may call us by telephone and tell us that Santa Claus is speaking. Or one may tell a story, religious or secular, that is obviously untrue.

What shall we say about such matters? Dr. Luther gave a good answer: “A lie told in jest is really not a lie, for everyone notices immediately, that there is nothing to it and no one is deceived by it. He who lies jestingly is careful to speak in such a manner that one can understand that it is a joke and a lie. Yet, it is a sin, for it is tomfoolery and vanity, and it is possible that simple people could thereby be deceived, especially when one makes a joke of religion.”

What shall we say about repeating something false that one considers to be true? For example, one may quote false statistics, statistics that have changed somewhat without one’s knowledge; or one may quote an incorrect telephone number. Such instances, though technically they be lies, yet cannot be considered lies in the sense of the Eighth Commandment, since one does not make those statements with a false heart, and he is convinced that they are true.

### **b. God forbids “useful” lies.**

Some people call them “white lies, “ untruths or half-truths spoken in an hour of great need or with some useful aim in mind. Scripture mentions a number of such instances. For example, Genesis 12:14-20 tells us that Abraham, that great man of God, the father of the faithful, was guilty of such a half-truth on at least two occasions. When he was forced to go to Egypt because of a famine in Canaan, he was afraid that Pharaoh would want Sarah, Abraham’s beautiful wife, for himself. The Egyptian ruler might even kill Abraham so that he could marry Sarah. Therefore, Abraham advised his wife to tell Pharaoh that she was his sister. As it happened, Sarah was taken to Pharaoh’s house, but God prevented a marriage. When the Egyptian ruler learned the truth, he rightfully rebuked Abraham for his deceit. “Why didn’t you tell me that she’s your wife?” asked Pharaoh (Genesis 12:18, Beck).

Some time later Abraham committed the same sin in Gerar, when King Abimilech also sent and took Sarah, intending to make her his wife (Genesis 20). When God then appeared to Abimilech in a dream and threatened him with death for taking another man’s wife, he immediately sent Sarah back to her husband. He also chided Abraham severely, “What did you do to us? . . . and how did I sin against you that you should bring such a great sin on me and my kingdom? You’ve done things to me that shouldn’t be done” (Genesis 20:9, Beck).

Abraham tried to excuse his sin by saying that Sarah was indeed his sister: Genesis 20:12 tells us that Sarah was Abraham’s half sister, the daughter of his father, but not the daughter of his mother.

Technically Abraham then felt that he was not lying; yet by withholding the complete truth from Abimilech, he deceived the king. That was certainly a lie and a deliberate sin against the Eighth Commandment, even though Abraham and Sarah felt that it was a useful lie spoken in a hour of possible danger

A similar example is that of the midwives during Israel’s slavery in Egypt (Exodus 1:15-21). Pharaoh had actually commanded those midwives to kill every son born to an Israelite mother, something they refused to do. When Pharaoh then called the mid-wives and asked them, “Why did you do this? Why did you let the boys live?” they replied with this false excuse, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women . . . when they’re in labor, they have their babies before a midwife comes to them” (Exodus 1:18, 19, Beck). Thereafter, so the Bible tells us, “God was good to the midwives . . . and because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own” (Exodus 1:20, 21, Beck).

From that last sentence one might conclude that God approved or even commended the midwives’ lies. Yet, that is most certainly not true; God cannot condone in one instance what He condemns in another, and He never approves of lying, as is evident from many Bible passages. God blessed the midwives, because they feared Him and because they refused to carry out wicked Pharaoh’s evil command, not because they sinned in lying.

Still another Bible example of a so-called “useful” lie is that of Michal, David’s wife (I Samuel 19:9-17). Saul, in one of his murderous moods tried to kill David. But Michal, Saul’s daughter, hurried to tell David, “If you do not save your life tonight, you will be dead tomorrow” (Beck). When David then fled, Michal made an image for David’s bed and told Saul’s messengers that he was ill. When King Saul later discovered the deceit, he reprimanded his daughter, “Why did you cheat me like this . . . and send my enemy away and let him escape?” (Beck) Michal lied again, when she answered, “He told me, ‘help me get away, or I’ll kill you’” (Beck).

Similar cases frequently arise in our lives, too. A visitor to a hospital may exclaim to a patient, “How good you look!” when the patient is really seriously, perhaps even fatally ill. Or a wife may say to the pastor, “My husband has terminal cancer, but please do not tell him.” A little later, when the pastor ministers privately to the husband, he may say, “I know that I have cancer and that my time is limited, but please do not tell my wife.” A parent may tell a child before taking him to the dentist, “It will not hurt”; or a father may make some promise to his child that he has no intention of keeping.

These “useful” lies were particularly prevalent among men in high places during the early 1970’s. A rash of governmental officials, including cabinet members a director of the CIA, even the President of the United States, lied in connection with that infamous Watergate Affair and with the election of Allende in South America. They felt that those lies were necessary, that nothing but evil would come from admitting the truth, and that good would result from lying, even under oath. The result was that multitudes lost confidence in their governmental officials, and many an individual served a prison sentence. Tragically, for the first time in American history, a President of the United States resigned in disgrace, primarily because of sins against the Eighth Commandment.

Well, then, you will ask, what should Abraham, the Israelite midwives, and Michal have said? And what should we say, when we are confronted with similar situations where telling the truth means probable or sure evil consequences? This much is clear from God’s Word: A lie is never excusable or justifiable, not to cheer a patient, not to calm a child, not to gain or help friends, not to save a reputation, not even to preserve a life. The end does not justify the means. A supposed good result never justifies a lie, for the Bible tells us often enough that everyone is to speak the truth with his neighbor, as we shall hear presently.

Abraham could have shown much more trust in God to protect him and his wife; the midwives and Michal could have said that they would under no circumstances be murderers, for “we ought to obey God, rather than men” (Acts 5:29), regardless of the physical consequences. “Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell, “ said our Lord in Matthew 10:28.

A visitor to the hospital does not need to tell the patient, “You look awful; I think that you are going to die any minute.” Instead, we commend even the sickest patient into the hands of a merciful God, praying that He might give help and strength, if it be His will. If not, then we know that our Heavenly Father has something infinitely better in mind: Heaven with all of its glories, through Christ our Lord.

### **c. God forbids “injurious” lies.**

Every lie is injurious and we might well classify them all under this heading. Yet, some result in such great injuries that we shall make a special classification of them.

Numerous Bible passages and Bible stories show us the evils that result from “injurious” lies. For example, Potiphar’s wife accused Joseph of trying to seduce her, when in fact she was the culprit. As the direct result of this infamous lie, Joseph was unjustly thrown into prison, where he might well have remained indefinitely, if God had not intervened (Genesis 39:16-20).

Gehazi, Elisha the prophet’s servant, coveted the gifts which General Naaman offered and which Elisha refused. He ran after General Naaman to tell him falsely that the prophet Elisha wanted some of the gifts for the two sons of the prophets who had just arrived. Elisha knew exactly what his lying servant had said and done, and he announced the punishment: “The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed forever. “ Then, as Scripture tells us, Gehazi “went out from his presence a leper as white as snow” (II Kings 5:27).

Since “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9), it is not surprising that we and everyone else around us are prone to tell lies that bring injuries of one kind or another to someone or to some groups of people. For example, a large, segment of the advertising world claims that the particular product it represents is the world’s best, when in reality many others, some of which may be much cheaper, may be just as good. The pocketbooks of those who have been lied to then suffer. Many parents teach their children to believe in Santa Claus or in the Easter bunny, thereby effectively hindering or even preventing their children from knowing the purpose of our Lord’s lowly birth and of His glorious resurrection. A politician may make promises to the electorate that he has no intention of keeping, and consequently some people suffer because of the broken promises. (According

to some surveys in the 1970's the American public has a lower opinion of politicians than it has of any other major class of people.) Parents or teachers sometimes make threats that they will never carry out, and again the child suffers. All of us can undoubtedly add to this list of lies that injure someone or some class of people. And what does God say about these sins? "He that speaketh lies shall not escape" (Proverbs 19:5).

#### **d. God forbids "deceitful" lies.**

All lies are, of course, deceitful, and one could therefore simply place all lies into this category. Yet, though all lies are sinful, there may be a difference in the purpose that the liar has in mind and in the results of the lie. Therefore we are treating this subject under several different categories.

Let us first mention a few Bible stories of people who lied in order to deceive someone else. One example is that of Rebekah and her son Jacob deceiving Isaac so that Jacob would receive his father's blessing (Genesis 27). When Isaac was aged and blind, he asked his older son Esau to hunt for some game, and prepare a meal of it. Thereafter the father would bless his son. But Rebekah and her son Jacob deceived Isaac into believing that Jacob was actually Esau. During the interview Jacob lied repeatedly even answering Isaac's, "Are you really my son Esau?" with a definite, but deceitful, "Yes" (Genesis 27:24, Beck).

Joseph's brothers were also guilty of a deceitful lie, guilty of it, in fact, for many a year. After they had sold their brother into slavery, they withheld the truth from their father. Hypocritically they brought Joseph's coat, dipped in blood, to the father and asked with the idea of deceiving him: "Examine it. Is it your son's tunic or not?" (Genesis 37:32, Beck). When Jacob immediately concluded that a wild animal had killed his son, the brothers said nothing at all about the real truth of the matter. Year after year they concealed their sin by letting their father live under the wrong impression, even though the father said weepingly that he would continue until death to mourn for his beloved son Joseph. For years the brothers lived a lie, simply because they refused to tell the father the truth about his son.

Recall also the well-known New Testament story of Peter's threefold denial of our Lord (Luke 22:54-62). Time after time this Apostle of our Savior lied in order to deceive people into believing that he did not know Jesus. Fortunately, our Lord recalled Peter and moved him to weep bitter tears of repentance outside the courtyard.

In their great wickedness people have even tried to deceive God by their lying. Can you imagine such a stupid sin, one that tries to deceive our all-knowing God? Yet, consider the case of Cain, the first child born on this earth (Genesis 4). After he had killed his brother Abel, God came to ask him: "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he (Cain) lied. "Should I watch over my brother?" (Genesis 4:9, Beck).

The story of Ananias and Sapphira in New Testament times is also well known (Acts 5:1-11). They lived at a time when various Christians sold some of their property and brought the money to the apostles to help take care of the needy. "Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 5:1, 2, NIV). He pretended that he was bringing all of the money he had received, but Peter knew immediately that Ananias was lying. He said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Ghost and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, was not the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God. When Ananias heard that, he fell down and died" (Acts 5:3-5, NIV).

So did Sapphira a few minutes later, when she too lied about the price. Thereafter "great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events" (Acts 5:11, NIV). That, of course, was one of the purposes that God had in mind: Every member of the church was to remember the fate of that

lying husband and his equally deceitful wife so that every Christian would be warned against committing such a dreadful sin.

And yet people do tell deceitful lies time and again. A church member says, “I cannot afford to give any more,” when he knows full-well that he should have said, “I don’t care to give any more.” Mrs. Smith warmly welcomes Mrs. Jones with “Do come in; what a lovely dress,” when she is so busy that she really doesn’t want to see Mrs. Jones at all. A student tells his teacher, “Yes, I studied the lesson,” even though he never opened the book. Someone telephones to say that a bomb has been planted into a building, but it is all a hoax. A popular magazine stated that few used-car salesmen will ever get to Heaven, but they are a great American tradition, thereby revealing the deceitful lies of some members of this profession. Indeed, such deceitful lies meet us on every side.

What does God say about such deceivers? He calls them wicked, “There is no fear of God before his eyes . . . the words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit” (Psalm 36:1-3).

#### **e. God forbids “flattering” lies.**

Flattery, an insincere praise of people or things, and hypocrisy, that dreadful pretense to be something which one isn’t, and deceit, the pretending something is true when it is really false, are all closely related. They are sins that every one of us can easily commit, especially if our old Adam feels that he has something to gain thereby. Therefore our God earnestly warns against them.

The warnings against flattery especially occur frequently in Scripture. Consider, for example, Absalom, that hypocritical rebel, who by smooth, flattering words stole the hearts of many people from King David, his father. When people came to present their case before the king, Absalom would say, “Your claims are good and right, but the king has not appointed anyone to hear you. I wish . . . someone would make me judge in the land. Then anyone who had a case to be tried would come to me, and I would give him justice . . . and so he stole the hearts of the men of Israel” (II Samuel 15:1-6, Beck).

This type of self-seeking flattery eventually led to Absalom’s rebellion and to his death. That caused King David such overwhelming heartache that he spoke some of the most moving words in all literature: “Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom my son, my son” (II Samuel 18:33).

In New Testament times the rulers of the Jews sent spies to Jesus “who pretended to be honest” (Luke 20:20-22, NIV). In reality “they hoped to catch Jesus in something He said so that they might hand Him over to the power and authority of the governor.” The spies began the conversation with this flattering statement, “Teacher, we know that You speak and teach what is right, and that You do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.” With that flattery they pretended to be seekers after the truth, when all the while they were Jesus’ mortal enemies.

Another horrible example of flattery is written in Acts 12:20-23. King Herod had come to Caesarea. On a certain day he, “wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne, and delivered a public address to the people.” While he was speaking, the people began to shout, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.” That, as Dr. R. C. H. Lenski wrote in his commentary, “was nothing more than a bit of flattery to tickle the vanity of the king.” “Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died” (NIV).

#### **f. What else does God say about the sin of lying?**

In the preceding paragraphs we have already indicated what God thinks and says and does about lying in its various forms. However, to show how truly abominable this sin is in the sight of God, we shall quote a few more Bible passages. Of lying in general our God said, “Ye shall not . . . lie to one another” (Leviticus 19:11); “Lying lips are abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs 12:22); “He that

speakech lies shall perish” (Proverbs 19:9b); “He that telleth lies shall not tarry in My sight” (Psalm 101:7).

Again, our God earnestly admonishes us, His children by faith in Christ, “Put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:25). That thought is repeated in Colossians 3:9; and Revelation 21:8 tells us that all unrepentant liars “shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.”

For those whose entire life is one of deceit and hypocrisy our Lord reserved some of His most stinging words. “Woe unto you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites,” He cried again and again in Matthew 23; “Woe unto you, ye blind guides . . . ye are like whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.”

Pretending to worship God is deceit and therefore also a lie that our Lord strenuously condemned: “This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and honoreth Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me” (Matthew 15:8).

Consider also the various passages that condemn flattery by name, like Proverbs 12:13: “The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things” (such boasting is also a form of lying); “A man that flattereth his neighbor spreadeth a net for his feet” (Proverbs 29:5). Since God abhors flattery, St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “Neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know . . . God is witness” (I Thessalonians 2:5). Flattery is, of course, much different from a sincere word of praise, a point which we shall discuss in III, D.

### **3. God forbids betraying our neighbor.**

To betray someone means out of a false heart to reveal his secret, either with or without the intention of harming him. The best-known Old Testament example is that of Delilah who betrayed her husband, Samson, into the hands of the Philistines (Judges 16). With his enormous strength Samson had repeatedly killed huge numbers of the Philistines. Their lords then came to Delilah and bribed her to learn the secret of her husband’s fantastic strength. He finally revealed it to her; she, in turn, told the Philistines; and they “grabbed him (who now had lost his strength), gouged out his eyes, and took him down to Gaza. They tied him with double chains, and he was grinding at the mill in prison” (Judges 16:21, Beck).

The most widely-known example of betrayal in New Testament times is the dastardly act of wicked Judas who promised the chief priests that he would betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14-16). Our Lord tried several times to warn Judas against this fearful sin, the last time in the Garden of Gethsemane, but the betrayer’s heart was so enslaved by the devil that he simply would not listen (Luke 22:47, 48). Later, filled with remorse, but not truly repentant, Judas hanged himself and damned his soul (Matthew 27:3-10).

One of the best-known examples of betrayal in church history is that of Emperor Sigismund who had given John Hus a safe conduct to the Council of Constance (1414-1418). The Council had been called to deal with the Hussite teachings and to reform the church. John Hus attended the Council, because he relied upon the Emperor’s promise of safety. However, soon after Hus arrived, he was arrested and later burned at the stake, indeed a dreadful example of betrayal. The Pope claimed that he was not bound by the Emperor’s safe-conduct grant.

American secular history has also had its share of betrayers. One of the most infamous was General Benedict Arnold in Revolutionary War times. General Arnold, commander of West Point, negotiated with the British general, Sir Henry Clinton, for its surrender, but his treachery was exposed by the capture of Major Andre. Nevertheless, General Arnold betrayed his position of trust. What Americans think of such an evil is shown by the statue in honor of General Arnold’s leg lost in battle for America, but his name is regarded with disgrace almost everywhere.

Today blackmailers obtain huge sums of money by threatening to reveal someone’s secret and thus bring great harm upon him; workers betray their company’s secrets to their competitors; spies betray their

country's most cherished secrets (when President Truman revealed to Stalin the existence of the atomic bomb, the Russian ruler was not at all surprised, for his spies had told him all about it); newsmen may reveal something told them in absolute secrecy, damaging someone; and finally, we too are easily tempted to betray our neighbor's secrets and thus harm his reputation.

What does God say about such betrayal? Answer: "A person who gossips gives away secrets, but a trustworthy mind can keep a secret" (Proverbs 11:13, Beck); "He that goeth about as a tale bearer revealeth secrets" (Proverbs 20:19); "When you argue your case with your neighbor, do not tell another person's secret" (Proverbs 25:9, Beck).

In his Large Catechism Dr. Luther therefore wrote: "What is secret should be allowed to remain secret, or at any rate to be reprov'd in secret" (see III, D).

#### **4. God forbids giving our neighbor a bad name.**

**a. In his Small Catechism Dr. Luther used two synonymous terms to express this thought. These are the two German terms that Dr. Luther used: "Afterreden" (slander) and "bösen Leumund machen" (defame).**

Various attempts have been made to explain the difference between these two expressions. For example, Professor R. Pieper in his *Der Kleine Katechismus Luthers* states that "slander" means saying something detrimental about our neighbor behind his back; "defame" means spreading evil reports in various ways. Pastor H. Schulz in his 1895 Essay to the Missouri Synod Minnesota and Dakota District Convention also stresses the "behind one's back" in explaining "slander" and bringing matters to such a point that people speak evil of someone as a definition of "defame." (Both sources, Pieper's and the Missouri Synod's Minnesota and Dakota District Reports for the late 1880's and the 1890's are some of the best commentaries on the Ten Commandments. A number of the thoughts for this series of papers have been derived from those two sources.)

One can see at once that it is difficult to distinguish between the two terms. Nor does Dr. Luther attempt to do it in his Large Catechism. There he uses terms like "slander," "back-biting," and "gossip" interchangeably. That is exactly the course that the revisers of the WELS Catechism text have followed, when they combined the two terms "slander" and "defame" into "give him a bad name" (Reports and Memorials, 1977). In this writer's opinion this is a wise and faithful translation of Dr. Luther's text.

#### **b. How does one give his neighbor a bad name?**

Dr. Luther answered in one of his sermons, as quoted by R. Pieper (all translations of Dr. Luther's writings, except for the Large Catechism, are by the author of this paper; Large Catechism quotes are in the edition by Theodore G. Tappert): "Slander takes place first when one attributes something false and untrue to his neighbor. Secondly, when one reveals what one's neighbor has done or has clinging to him, something that is indeed true but is still a secret, something that will be a detriment and a hardship for him. Thirdly, when one denies what others openly and truthfully praise and extol in one's neighbor."

Giving our neighbor a bad name may be done when out of a false heart we say something about him that is true or untrue or partly true and partly false. Sometimes this is done consciously; sometimes, unconsciously; generally it will magnify his errors or sins and diminish his virtues or good works; frequently it reveals some evil about our neighbor that is largely unknown.

Of this sin Dr. Luther wrote, as quoted by R. Pieper: "The sword of the slanderer, his tongue, destroys the life of a good name, something that he may never be able to restore. Secondly, he kills the soul of him whom he slanders, since he who was slandered is thereby provoked to anger; vexation, hate, and other mortal sins, or to taking revenge by repaying slander with similar slander. And even if this

does not happen, it nonetheless would and could happen . . . for he has shot an arrow onto him . . . and it will be purely God's grace, if he does not strike and kill him in that way. Thirdly, the slanderer also kills those who listen to him. That listening to slander is a mortal sin is proved by Psalm 15:1: 'Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle?' (Verse 3 has the answer) 'He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbor, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor.'"

### **c. How widespread is this sin?**

We have previously cited the example of Absalom who stole the hearts of the people from David, his father, by flattery and by intimating that his father was no longer conducting the affairs of the kingdom capably (II Samuel 15:1-6). Absalom was so successful in blackening his father's good name that thousands of people followed him in his rebellion against the king (II Samuel 15:7-37).

Various other Bible examples also show how prevalent this sin really is. For example, at one point in the Wilderness Wanderings Aaron and Miriam spoke against Moses, the Lord's prophet (Numbers 12). They wanted to destroy Moses' reputation as being the only one through whom the Lord was speaking. They claimed that God spoke also through them. Their giving Moses a bad name made the Lord very angry, as the last part of the chapter clearly shows.

In New Testament times the Jewish leaders slandered our Lord almost from the beginning to the end of His ministry. They called Him a keeper of bad company (Matthew 9:11), a glutton and a drunkard. (Matthew 11:19), a blasphemer (Matthew 26:65), one who was out of His mind (Mark 3:21), possessed by Beelzebub the prince of the devils (Mark 3:22), a Sabbath breaker (John 9:16), and a rebel against Caesar (Luke 23:2). All of these statements were pure slander; they were spoken out of a false heart with the intent of harming Jesus' good name. In some cases these enemies of our Lord were undoubtedly successful in turning people against Jesus, but at times their slanders may have backfired. At least, when the Pharisees spread the word that Jesus was a Sabbath breaker, some people asked: "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" (John 9:16, NIV).

The apostles and the early disciples, too, were often given a bad name. For example, on Pentecost Sunday they were called drunkards (Acts 2:13); Stephen was called a blasphemer against Moses and against God (Acts 6:13); at Iconium "the Jews . . . stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers" (Paul and Barnabas - Acts 14:2); at Philippi the owners of a slave girl persuaded the crowd that Paul and Silas were "advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept," after which the two were "severely flogged" (Acts 16:20-23). One can readily understand that this wicked giving others a bad reputation was widespread in Bible times. (Quotations in this paragraph are all from the NIV. )

Nor is it any less frequent today. Indeed, in these last days of world history all sins, including slander, seem to be increasing on every side. For example, gossip is common everywhere among students and faculties, among employers and employees, among politicians and lawyers, among fathers and mothers, among young and old, among pastors and people.

King Solomon understood human nature very well, when he wrote, "The words of a gossip are swallowed greedily" (Proverbs 18:8, Beck). People who would never dream of killing someone or stealing something of value from him nevertheless love to hear scandal about their neighbor. That is why gossip columnists, in our newspapers are so avidly read. By nature we love to hear about the foibles of our leaders and other prominent people. The juicier the scandal, the more our old Adam moves us to self-righteous judgment of the persons involved. If someone sins, then the old Adam feels that we must tell everyone about it. It all reminds us of the buzzards in various parts of North America—they always seem to spot the dead and decaying flesh. That is where they gather, and the gossips who feed on rotten news are just like them. Of them Dr. Luther wrote in his Large Catechism, "Learning a bit of gossip about someone else, they spread it into every corner, relishing and delighting in it like pigs that roll in the mud and root around in it with their snouts."

#### **d. What does God say about the sin of giving our neighbor a bad name?**

Listen carefully to what God says about this dreadful sin: He tells the wicked “with your mouth you devise evil and your tongue plans deceit. You sit and talk against your brother, slandering your own mother’s son. You do that and should I say nothing? . . . Consider this, you who forget God, or I’ll tear you in pieces and nobody will rescue you” . . . (Psalm 50:16-21, Beck). Psalm 52:4, 5 (Beck) has some equally strong words for those who love to hear gossip: “You love every kind of destructive speech, you deceitful tongue! God too will destroy you forever, knock you down and snatch you out of your tent, pluck you by the roots out of the land of the living.” Among the laws that God gave Moses was this one: “Do not go around slandering among your people . . . I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:16, Beck).

Through wise King Solomon God also warned against slandering one’s neighbor: “A malicious man starts quarrels, and a slanderer can break up friendships” (Proverbs 16:28, Beck).

The New Testament is equally clear and emphatic in its repeated warnings against slander and gossip. For example, II Corinthians 12:20 states: “For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (NIV). In I Peter 2:1 our Heavenly Father bids us: “Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit . . . and slander of every kind” (NIV). James in particular has this important word: “Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother, or judges him, speaks against the law and judges it” (James 4:11, NIV). Then there is the longest passage in the Bible that is directed against the sins of the tongue, written in James 3:3-12 (NIV):

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grape vine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Yes, indeed, God’s Word regarding slander and gossip is clear enough. One cannot therefore help but agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Luther when he wrote in his Large Catechism:

There is a great difference between judging sin and having a knowledge of sin. Knowledge of sin does not entail the right to judge it. I may see and hear that my neighbor sins, but to make him the talk of the town is not my business. If I interfere and pass sentence on him, I fall into a greater sin than his. When you become aware of a sin simply make your ears a tomb and bury it until you are appointed a judge and authorized to administer punishment by virtue of your office.

Therefore, God forbids you to speak evil about another even though, to your certain knowledge, he is guilty. All the more urgent is the prohibition if you are not sure but have it only from hearsay. But you say: “Why shouldn’t I speak if it is the truth?” I

reply: “Why don’t you bring it before the regular judge?” “Oh, I cannot prove it publicly; I might be called a liar and sent away in disgrace. “ Ah, now do you smell the roast? If you do not trust yourself to make your charges before the proper authorities, then hold your tongue. Keep your knowledge to yourself and do not give it out to others. For when you repeat a story that you cannot prove, even if it is true, you appear as a liar. Besides, you act like a knave, for no man should be deprived of his honor and good name unless these have first been taken away from him publicly.

No one should publicly assert as truth what is not publicly substantiated. In short what is secret should be allowed to remain secret, or at any rate be reproved in secret, as we shall hear. Therefore, if you encounter somebody with a worthless tongue who gossips and slanders someone, rebuke him straight to his face and make him blush for shame. Then you will silence many a one who otherwise would bring some poor man into disgrace, from which he could scarcely clear himself. For honor and good name are easily taken away, but not easily restored.

It is therefore good for us to ask ourselves questions like the following: Do we know if the evil report we are tempted to spread is true? If it isn’t true, then we are doubly violators, first for listening to someone who spoke the falsehood and then personally repeating it. Has the person involved possibly repented of his sin? If he has and God has forgiven him, how can I continue to spread the news about his sin? Have I given him an opportunity to defend himself? If I haven’t, how can I know his side of the matter? Am I possibly misjudging motives when I gossip about him? How, for example, can I say that someone is giving much money to the church just to make a name for himself, when he really might be a humble, sincere Christian? Oh, yes, it is necessary for us at all times to be on our guard, to watch, to pray, and to seek strength from on High to avoid being a spreader of malicious gossip.

### **III. WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE OF US IN THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT?**

#### **A. In general God requires that we do the opposite of what is forbidden in the Commandment.**

##### **1. God requires that we bear true witness in court.**

If a child of God must always avoid false witness in court, then it is self-evident that his witnessing there must be truthful at all times. A good example is the blind man whom Jesus healed (John 9). The Pharisees, hating our Lord as usual, tried to discredit Jesus. They questioned the healed man repeatedly, trying to move him to deny Christ. Yet, he testified truthfully: “If this Man were not of God, He could do nothing” (John 9:33). Despite the danger of being thrown out of the synagogue (John 9:22) and despite being cast out of the house in which the questioning took place, he answered truthfully. Thereby he furnished us with a good example of what our testimony in court should be, when we are the defendants.

A true witness is required by plaintiffs also. We certainly must avoid the evil example of the two plaintiffs mentioned in the apocryphal story of Susanna. She had been falsely accused of adultery by two men. They accused her because she had rebuffed their advances. Daniel came to the rescue by questioning the two separately and showing that their testimony was perjured. They were put to death for their false testimony. That sentence was in keeping with God’s command through Moses in Deuteronomy 19:15-21, a passage that we have cited previously. Even though this is an apocryphal story, it does show how earnestly God requires us to bear a true witness, when we are the plaintiffs.

Likewise judges and juries must bear true witness, as we showed in II, B, 6. These people certainly dare not follow the evil example of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court, in their mock trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:57-66). The men who composed this court were not at all concerned about giving our Lord a fair trial—they were determined to condemn Him to death. That is exactly what they did to their everlasting shame.

## **2. God requires that we bear true witness outside of court.**

In his explanation of the Eighth Commandment, as written in his Small Catechism Dr. Luther did not write anything about speaking the truth outside of court. Nor is it necessary. If we must not lie to or about our neighbor, then it is self-evident that we must speak the truth to and about him.

The matter is summarized by the prophet Zechariah and by St. Paul as follows: “You shall do these things: tell one another the truth, provide true and good justice within your city gates” (Zechariah 8:16, Beck); “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:24, NIV).

How can we who are children of God by faith in Christ do anything less than speak the truth in all our dealings with our neighbor? Can one member of the body deceive another member? God forbid that we do anything less or more than to speak the truth not only to our fellow believers, but to all our fellow men.

### **B. God requires that we defend our neighbor.**

Our Lord gave us several perfect examples of the way in which we are to defend our neighbor. For example, when His hungry disciples picked some grain, rubbed out the kernels with their hands, and then ate it on the Sabbath Day, the Pharisees were horrified. “Look!” they exclaimed, “your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:2, NIV). They felt that the disciples were working on the Sabbath by picking and “threshing” the grain, work that was strictly forbidden by the Third Commandment.

Yet Jesus defended His disciples. By referring to David’s eating of the showbread (something normally allowed only to the priests) and by referring to the “work” of the priests on the Sabbath (preparing the sacrifices was surely work), our Lord showed that necessary work could be done on the Sabbath Day. The Third Commandment never meant to forbid some thing like that (Matthew 12:1-7).

A second example is written in Luke 10:38-42. That is the well-known story of Jesus defending Mary, when her sister Martha wanted her to help with preparing the meal. Jesus gently chided Martha and defended Mary by stating that she had chosen the one thing needful: listening to His Word. Some time later Jesus defended Mary a second time, when she anointed Him with precious ointment (John 12:1-8).

A fine Old Testament example of defending one’s neighbor is the story of Jonathan, who defended his good friend David, when King Saul wanted to kill him. Even in the face of his father’s fierce, but unjustified, anger, Jonathan asked: “Why should he (David) be killed? What has he done?” (I Samuel 20:32, Beck). For his defense of David, Jonathan could well have been killed, something that Saul actually threatened to do (I Samuel 20:33), yet even in the face of this dreadful danger, Jonathan did what the Eighth Commandment requires of us. Can we do any less?

You may also remember the remark made by Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, when almost every other member of that group hated Jesus with a passion that would be satisfied only with His death: “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?” (John 7:51, NIV).

We do well also to remember a Bible passage like Proverbs 31:8, 9 (Beck): “Speak out for those who cannot speak . . . defend the rights of the poor and needy people.” Therefore, if I hear something untrue about my neighbor, I must, of course, correct the falsehood; if someone accuses my neighbor of some evil I know nothing about, I should tell the person that I prefer to have the accused person present to defend himself; and if I hear some evil about my neighbor that is true, I must still try to point out things in his favor, as much as this can be done in keeping with the truth. In that way I place my tongue into the service of my neighbor, something that the Eighth Commandment requires of me.

Of this matter Dr. Luther wrote (as quoted by R. Pieper): “To summarize, I say: We fulfill this Commandment when we not only bear no false witness, but when we do not wish to hear others say it of someone, or even allow it, as they do who believe the tale-bearers or side with the slanderers. Yes, you are guilty of breaking this Commandment, when you do not devote yourself carefully to excuse or to cover your

neighbor's disgrace and shame, or at least to minimize such shame and to oppose the slanderers and accusers. For this is what everyone would wish to happen to him . . . and even though it is not necessary to confess before a priest that you did not excuse your brother, when he was accused by false witness and oppressed by flattery or slander and you believe that it does not concern you, if you had not done it, you are nevertheless guilty before God because of your damaging silence and your idle tongue which God gave you to serve your neighbor in his time of need. If on the other hand you do excuse him, you will surely stir up everyone against you and you will be killed for it. You should not worry about that . . .”

In his Large Catechism Dr. Luther wrote: “A person should use his tongue to . . . cover his neighbor's sins and infirmities, to overlook them; and to cloak and veil them with his own honor. Our chief reason for doing so should be the one which Christ indicated in the Gospel, and in which He means to embrace all the Commandments concerning our neighbor, ‘Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them’” (Matthew 7:12).

### **C. God requires that we speak well of our neighbor.**

One of the truly fine Bible stories that illustrate this point is the example of Jonathan, whom we mentioned in the previous section (III, B). When Jonathan's father, King Saul, was determined to kill David, “Jonathan spoke well of David to his father Saul. ‘The king should not harm his servant David,’ he told him. ‘He hasn't harmed you but has done some very fine things for you. He risked his life, struck down the Philistine, and the Lord gave all Israel a great victory. You were delighted to see it. Why then should you become guilty of murdering an innocent man by killing David without a reason?’” (I Samuel 19:4, 5, Beck).

King Saul actually listened to those kind words of David's good friend Jonathan, as the Bible tells us: “Saul listened to Jonathan, and so he swore, ‘As the Lord lives, he must not be killed’” (I Samuel 19:6, Beck). Unfortunately, this good disposition toward David did not last. In the very next verses of this chapter we hear how “Saul tried to pin David to the wall with his spear, but he slipped away from Saul” (I Samuel 19:10, Beck).

Somewhat later the priest Ahimelech also spoke well of David before King Saul. He said, “Whom among all your officers can you trust like David? He's the king's son-in-law, a commander of your guard, and he is honored by your household” (I Samuel 22:14, Beck). Sad to say, King Saul then ordered Ahimelech to be killed, because the king felt that he was conspiring with David against him (I Samuel 22:6-21). Thereby King Saul added to the crimes that he was heaping upon himself.

An admirable New Testament example of someone speaking well of someone else is the story of the Jewish elders commending the Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10). The centurion's beloved slave was seriously ill. This Roman captain then asked some of the Jewish elders to go to Jesus for help. The elders pleaded earnestly with Jesus to come and heal the slave. To their plea they added these words of praise for the centurion: “This man deserves to have You do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue” (Luke 7:4, 5, NIV).

Normally, of course, the Jews hated the Romans who had conquered their land. One might expect then that they would also detest this Roman captain. Yet, he was such an outstanding friend of the Jews that they could not help but speak well of him.

That is indeed a lovely example for us to follow, not only speaking well of those who are our friends, but also doing the same for those who are not friendly toward us or those who might even be our enemies. We surely would like to have others speak well of us, as much as this can be done in keeping with the truth. Well, then, “Do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12, NIV). Thus you will help your neighbor to keep and to improve his reputation, instead of harming or destroying it. Thus you will be using your tongue and your lips to prove your love toward your neighbor. Thus, above all, you will be doing the will of Him Who created and redeemed you.

Such a sincere word of praise is, of course, much different from the hypocritical flattery that we condemned in II, C, 2, e. Rather, it follows the example of St. Paul who, in writing his letter to the Philippian congregation, stated, “I thank God every time I remember you” (1:3, NIV), because the Gospel had worked such outstanding results among the members of that congregation. We, too, avoiding all lies and insincerity,

ought to remember to speak a word of commendation for work well done. That also is a part of the Eighth Commandment, as Dr. Luther wrote in his Large Catechism: “A person should use his tongue to speak only good of everyone, to cover his neighbor’s sins and infirmities.”

#### **D. God requires that we take our neighbor’s words and actions in the kindest possible way.**

This means simply that we explain our neighbor’s questionable actions in the best possible light; it means to give him the benefit of the doubt. If it is possible to regard our neighbor’s acts in two different ways, then we must choose the one that will be most favorable to him.

Two Bible examples will clarify this point. The Old Testament example is that of Eli, the high priest, who put the worst construction on Hannah’s act. Hannah had no children. Therefore at a visit to the Temple she prayed earnestly that God might give her a son, whom she would in turn dedicate to the Lord. “She was praying a long time before the Lord while Eli was watching her mouth. Hannah was praying silently—only her lips were moving; she could not be heard. So Eli thought that she was drunk. ‘How long are you going to be drunk?’ Eli asked her. ‘Get rid of your wine.’” Imagine Eli’s embarrassment when Hannah explained, “No, my lord,” Hannah answered, “I’m miserable. I’ve drunk neither wine nor liquor but am pouring out my heart to the Lord. Don’t judge me to be a wicked woman. I’ve prayed long because I am so troubled and grieved.”

Eli must suddenly have realized that he did not put the best construction on Hannah’s action. It was, in fact, just about the worst possible way in which the high priest could explain what she was doing. Hastily he then tried to make amends by saying, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel give you what you asked Him for.” Hannah accepted his apology and replied, “May you continue to be kind to your servant” (I Samuel 1:9-18, Beck).

A striking New Testament example of putting the worst construction on someone’s act is written in that great fifteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. There we hear how “the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (NIV) They implied that Jesus could not be much better than such outcasts of society, if He associated with them.

Then followed Jesus’ defense. He told those outstanding parables of the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son, thereby showing all the world that there was just one reason for His association with sinners: He wanted to win them from their evil ways, wanted to save their souls for the glories of Heaven. If the Pharisees had put the best construction on Jesus’ act, they would have said among themselves that He was trying to help the sinners. But the human heart is so desperately wicked that it is difficult for us to look at the works of others in the best possible light.

Yes, we whose sins have been forgiven by the Lord Jesus, we who consequently have learned to love our Lord, are asked not to condemn our neighbor’s action hastily. Rather we should look for a second explanation, one that is favorable to our fellow man. If, for example, I meet him on the street and he does not greet Me, possibly he did not see me, possibly also there is another explanation. If he has done something wrong, he may have repented of his sin even before I heard about it. If he promised to do something that he leaves undone, he may simply have forgotten to his sorrow.

We ought always to remember the blessed words of Paul the Apostle, “Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (I Corinthians 13:6, 7 NIV). “Love covers a multitude of sins” (I Peter 4:8), covers them in the sense of refusing to spread reports of those sins.

#### **E. God requires that we admonish our neighbor if he sins.**

##### **1. Matthew 18:15-17 outlines the procedure to follow with private sins.**

After studying the previous section C, one might well ask: “But what if my neighbor sins and continues in that sin without repenting? Do I then just ignore the matter, or keep quiet, or must I do something about it?”

The answer to these questions is clear from Scripture. My love toward my neighbor does not allow me to close my eyes to his danger. If he remains unrepentant, he is endangering his soul's welfare, and I must do something about it. What am I to do in such a case? Our Lord gave us exact instructions in Matthew 18:15-17:

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

One of the finest commentaries on these verses was written by Dr. Luther in his Large Catechism:

Here you have a fine, precious precept for governing the tongue which ought to be carefully noted if we are to avoid this detestable abuse. Let this be your rule, then, that you should not be quick to spread slander and gossip about your neighbor but admonish him privately so that he may amend. Likewise, if someone should whisper to you what this or that person has done, teach him, if he saw the wrongdoing, to go and reprove the man personally, otherwise to hold his tongue.

And that would be the brotherly thing to say, for the evil would be corrected and the neighbor's honor maintained. As Christ Himself says in the same passage, "If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." Then you have done a great and excellent work. Do you think it is an insignificant thing to gain a brother?

Christ teaches further: "If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." So the individual is to be dealt with personally and not gossiped about behind his back. If this does not help, then bring the matter before the public, either before the civil or the ecclesiastical court. Then you do not stand alone. You have witnesses with you through whom you can convict the guilty one and on whose testimony the judge can base his decision and sentence. This is the right procedure for restraining and reforming a wicked person.

This is such an important matter that we must say a little more about it. Our Lord gives us His advice in Matthew 18, because He wants all people to come to repentance and to be saved. He wants to use you and me to bring obvious sinners to such repentance. It should really be unthinkable for us to refuse help to a brother or sister under these circumstances. If our neighbor were drowning or if he had suffered severe injury in an automobile accident, we surely would not go on our way unconcerned; we would try to help as much as we can, unless, of course, he is really well cared for. Well, then, it is surely much more important that we pause to help him when he is in spiritual danger.

Jesus outlined the perfect method for helping such a person in the previously quoted Matthew 18:15-17 passage. If he has sinned against you or if you know about his sin and you feel that he has not repented, then go to him privately. Humbly show him God's wrath over sin, then lovingly show him God's mercy in Christ. He may listen, and if he does, then rejoice with the angels in Heaven over the sinner whom God has brought to repentance (Luke 15:7), but rejoice privately; do not tell others, unless that becomes necessary. The prophet Nathan in his dealing with David furnishes us with a fine example for dealing in such a manner (II Samuel 12:1-25).

It's possible, of course, that the unrepentant sinner may refuse to listen to you. He may haughtily tell you to mind your own business; he may even become violently angry. That is the way Herodias, the unlawful wife of Herod, felt toward John the Baptist, who had rebuked Herod for taking his brother Philip's wife.

Because of this admonition Herodias hated John the Baptist so intensely that, given the opportunity, she had this great prophet of God beheaded (Matthew 14:3-12).

What is one to do if the sinner, like Herodias refuses to repent? You must then take one or two others with you, perhaps someone who knows him well, again lovingly and humbly to show him his sin. You may even go to him several times, if you think that this will help. Finally, if he does not listen to several of you, then you must bring the matter to the church meeting for disposal. The congregational members ought also to make every effort to show the sinner the wickedness of his ways, seeking to regain him as a child of God. If that fails, you must for his soul's welfare excommunicate him, that is, put him out of the church, telling him that if he persists in his wickedness, he will surely lose his soul.

Throughout the entire procedure one must be continually motivated and guided by love. One must never be moved by a better-than-thou spirit, by a desire for revenge, or by a wish to condemn someone. Even if a person must finally be excommunicated from the church, that too should be done only to show him the seriousness of his sins, with a prayer that the Holy Spirit might lead him to repentance and back to the church of Christ.

One must not, of course, apply Matthew 18:15-17 legalistically. One must not compare this admonition of our Lord to a baseball umpire's "one, two, three, you're out." One might repeat step one and two several times or one might wait for a time to let the Holy Spirit work on the person's heart without, of course, becoming wishy-washy about the entire matter.

Yes, indeed, brotherly admonition is a part of our obligation to our neighbor, according to the Eighth Commandment.

## **2. A public sin must be publicly rebuked.**

Dealing with a public sin, on the other hand, is somewhat different from what has been written in the previous paragraphs. Dr. Luther had many experiences with such public sins by enemies of the Gospel, who during his day were spreading their false doctrine far and wide. To attempt to counsel every one of those individuals would have been a physical impossibility. Therefore to protect the innocent from being led astray and to answer the critics of the Gospel publicly, he wrote many books and other papers. They were published and widely read, as was the case, for example, with the 95 Theses. He therefore gave this sound advice:

Where the sin is so public that the judge and the whole world are aware of it, you can without sin shun and avoid the person as one who has brought disgrace upon himself, and you may testify publicly concerning him. For when an affair is manifest to everybody there can be no question of slander or injustice or false witness. For example, we now censor the pope and his teaching, which is publicly set forth in books and shouted throughout the world. Where the sin is public, the punishment ought to be public so that every one may know how to guard against it.

In this matter the Great Reformer was simply following the example of our Lord who not only warned His disciples against the false teachings of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees (Matthew 16:6, 12), but also publicly denounced them before the multitudes: "They say, and do not . . . all their works they do to be seen of men . . . (they) love the chief seats in the synagogues" (Matthew 23:1-6). Since the sins of these people were public, they also required a public rebuke.

In a similar manner we can and should publicly rebuke the proponents of abortion, homosexuality, lesbianism, and the like, since their wicked stand is a public one. (If we have the opportunity for counseling with such people privately, so much the better. That type of private admonition is possibly more apt to win a person than is a public denunciation. )

Likewise, false doctrine is so widespread today that one would have an impossible task in trying to meet with each such heretic personally and privately. The best that one can do is to point out those errors to one's fellow believers, to warn against such false doctrine, and to defend the truth, as it is written in Scripture.

We shall cite just one example. In 1977 there appeared a book written by a number of British theologians with the title *The Myth of God Incarnate*. In it these misguided authors denied the fundamental truth of the Christian faith, that Christ, who always was God, became man that He might save mankind. To follow the three steps of Matthew 18:15-17 with each one of those authors would no doubt be impossible. But one can warn the faithful against such abominable heresies.

## **F. What blessings does God promise to those who keep this Commandment?**

Only one Commandment, the one we call the Fourth, has a direct promise connected with it. It “is the first Commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth” (Ephesians 6:3, NIV; see also Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16).

Yet, the keeping of all Commandments carry a blessing with it, as Dr. Luther explains so well in his explanation of the Conclusion to the Ten Commandments: “He promises grace and every blessing to all that keep these Commandments.” One could also quote the words of Moses in his farewell address: “If you will really listen to the Lord your God and carefully do everything He tells you in His Commandments that I now order you to keep, the Lord your God will place you high above all the other nations in the world, and all the following blessings will come to you and overtake you because you listened to the Word of the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 28:1, 2 Beck). Various other Bible passages bring us similar promises (see, for example, Deuteronomy 5:29; Revelation 22:14).

All of these promises apply; of course, to the Christian who out of thankfulness and love toward God strives earnestly to do His will. In addition to what has been said in the previous paragraphs, the Bible also mentions specific blessings that come to us from God as the result of keeping the Eighth Commandment. Consider, for example, Psalm 15:1-3 in Beck’s translation:

(Congregation:) Lord who may come to stay in Your tabernacle? Who may live on Your holy hill?

(Leader:) If you live perfectly, do what is right, and tell the truth from your heart. If you don’t use your tongue to do wrong to others or insult your neighbor.

We have previously cited Luke 6:37: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” I Peter 3:10-12 has this striking message: “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (NIV).

We do well also to remember such Bible stories as David’s kindness to Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth (II Samuel 9), a blessing that certainly came at least in part from Jonathan’s defending David and speaking well of him. The harlot Rahab and her entire family were spared in the destruction of Jericho (Joshua 6:23-25), not because she lied about them, but because she refused to betray them (Joshua 2).

All of those many divine threats (see II, C, 4, d) and precious promises ought to move us earnestly to strive to keep every part of the Eighth Commandment with the ability that God gives us.

## **IV. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF OUR LORD IN THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT?**

### **A. Jesus gave us the perfect example for keeping the Eighth Commandment.**

Jesus is the Way, the Truth., and the Life (John 14:6); “For this cause,” Jesus said, “came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth” (John 18:37). That quality of truth was so outstanding in the life of our Lord that St. John could write, “We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Like every other part of His life, our Lord’s speech was always perfect. He

spoke when it was necessary; He was quiet, when His words would have been in vain; He defended people at various times, He rebuked public sin, He admonished individuals privately; He placed His tongue and His lips completely into the service of mankind.

Thereby our Lord gave all of us the perfect example of the way in which we are to serve all mankind with our speech. Just study Jesus' words as written in the four Gospels and you will soon learn how to talk with and about your neighbor.

### **B. Jesus' righteousness is reckoned to our account.**

When we learn what God forbids and all that He requires of us with His Eighth Commandment, when we understand how far short of that perfection we have been, and, above all, when we realize that just one sin against this Commandment is sufficient to condemn us forever, then we must surely become terrified because of our wrongdoing.

What can we do then? Is there an escape for us? Oh, yes, indeed there certainly is. It lies in the way the publican prayed in the Temple, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). What a comfort to know that all who do this sincerely receive from our Lord Jesus that forgiveness which He alone prepared. With that forgiveness we, like the publican, "can go down to (our) house justified" (Luke 18:14).

You see Jesus' perfect holiness has been reckoned to our account. He kept the Eighth Commandment for our sakes and now we have been "made the righteousness of God in Him"; and He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross of Calvary. That is the way in which we are saved.

For this salvation, prepared for us by the Lord Jesus, we shall surely praise our God in all eternity. Within the glory of heaven we shall use our tongues and lips, joining the Seraphim in their "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:3). And if George Fredrick Handel could write such an inspiring setting to "Worthy is the Lamb, " what do you suppose that the heavenly chorus will sound like when they sing those same words? They are written in Revelation 5:12, 13: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in Heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb forever and ever." That prospect should move us to say and to sing, "Oh that we were there." Meanwhile we need to pray regularly with the hymn writer:

Oh, let me never speak what bounds of truth exceedeth; Grant that no idle word from out my mouth proceedeth; And then, when in my place I must and ought to speak; My words grant power and grace lest I offend the weak. Amen. (The Lutheran Hymnal 395, 3).