

How to deal with one another in light of the 8th Commandment

Luther defines the 8th commandment saying, *“You shall not bare false witness against your neighbour. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbour, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way,”* (Small Catechism).

The pivotal point in Luther’s definition is in the last part, *“explain everything in the kindest way,”* or better understood, *“put the best construction on everything.”* If we listen to gossip and the lies spread about our neighbour, then we will approach them with the intention, not of improving their life, but of revealing their sinful condition in pharisaic pride.

I mention these things as a parish Pastor. Gossip and slander are poison for any congregation or church body. The moment a reputation is ruined, it is ruined forever. Forgiveness of sins doesn’t eliminate a bad reputation from the minds of the assembly. There is only one solution to this problem and it is the preaching of God’s commandments.

Luther clarified the 8th commandment and its destruction of gossip saying, *“To avoid this vice, therefore, we should note that none has the right to judge and reprove a neighbour publicly, even after having seen a sin committed, unless authorised to judge and reprove. There is a very great difference between judging sin and having knowledge of sin. You may certainly know about a sin, but you should not judge it. I may certainly see and hear that my neighbour sins, but I have no command to tell others about it. If I were to interfere and pass judgment in him, I would fall into a sin greater than that of my neighbour. When you become aware of a sin, however, do nothing but turn your ears into a tomb and bury it until you are appointed a judge and are authorised to administer punishment by virtue of your office,”* (Large Catechism 8th commandment paragraphs 265-266). Luther states that our ears should become like tombs for gossip about our neighbour until we are in a God appointed position of judgment. But why? Why must we remain silent in the face of sin? What is the point? Shouldn’t we protect the weaker brother in the case of open sin? Luther answers the question as to the private nature of the 8th commandment saying, *“Let this be your rule, then, that you should not be quick to spread slander and gossip about your neighbours but admonish them privately so that they may improve. Likewise, do the same when others tell you what this or that person has done. Instruct them, if they saw the wrongdoing, to go and reprove the individual personally or otherwise to hold their tongue,”* (Ibid 276).

The negative aspect of the 8th commandment is to not slander your neighbour or hurt his reputation. This negative is preached in order that the positive nature of the commandment may be carried out in the Christian life. The purpose of this commandment is to silence our poisonous tongues in order that we do nothing except defend our neighbour and seek his improvement. Luther concludes his thoughts on the 8th commandment saying, *“Thus in our relations with one another all of us should veil whatever is dishonourable and weak in our neighbours, and do whatever we can to serve, assist, and promote their good name. On the other hand, we should prevent everything that may contribute to their disgrace, It is a particularly fine, noble virtue to put the best construction on all we may hear about our neighbours (as long as it is not an evil that is publicly known), and to defend them against the poisonous tongues of those who are busily trying to pry out and pounce on something to criticise in their neighbour, misconstruing and twisting things in the worst way,”* (Ibid 288-289).

The last paragraph in the Large Catechism is a great warning from Luther that says, *“There is nothing around or in us that can do greater good or greater harm in temporal or spiritual matters than the tongue,*

although it is the smallest and weakest member.” The tongue kills and makes alive in the proclamation of the law and the gospel. (See also James 3).

Let us heed these warnings from Luther concerning how we deal with our neighbour. Luther does not say that we should compromise or ignore sin, but that we should live with our brothers and sisters by veiling them in the blood of Christ. Let us always seek our improvement in our Christian life, but also let us humbly approach our fellow believers in Christ in order that they may be improved, not provoked to wickedness and further gossip. Fellowship exists only in the forgiveness of sins, purchased for us by Christ on the cross and delivered to us in the means of grace. Let us cling to Christ and silence the devil’s lies. Let us seek one another’s forgiveness and therefore walk together in the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ.