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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 18.4.3.8 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: The Eighth Commandment

After protecting our lives, our marriages, and our property in the previous commandments, in the Eighth Commandment God protects our good name and reputation and that of our neighbor. This is what God said on Mt. Sinai, and Moses repeated this commandment later in the same words: **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”** (Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20).

It may seem that our reputation is not as important as the other things God protects, but that is not so, for it is written: **“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches”** (Proverbs 22:1), and: **“A good name is better than precious ointment”** (Ecclesiastes 7:1). False witness in court or plain lying or even telling the truth about someone in order to hurt them – all of these things contribute to the destruction of a person’s good name and reputation and are forbidden by this commandment.

We know the Eighth Commandment is part of God’s moral law for us today because it is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus said: **“Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies”** (Matthew 15:19). So also the apostle Paul made it very clear that false witness or lying is a product of the old man, not the new man of the Spirit. He says: **“Therefore, putting away lying, ‘let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,’ for we are members of one another”** (Ephesians 4:25). The quotation is from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, who wrote: **“Speak each man the truth to his neighbor; give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace”** (Zechariah 8:16). To the Colossians Paul wrote: **“Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him”** (Colossians 3:9-10).

Martin Luther explained the Eighth Commandment like this in his *Small Catechism* (the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 353):

The Eighth Commandment

You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray, or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

A person’s reputation is injured by false witness or any other unrighteousness in court, such as bribery, obstruction of justice, prejudice, and respect of persons (favoritism), whether committed by witnesses, jurors, judges, or attorneys. Old Testament law provides a few examples. **“You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness. You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; you shall not testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice. You shall not show partiality to a poor man in his dispute. ... You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute. Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked. And you shall take no bribe; for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous”** (Exodus 23:1-8).

When King Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard, Queen Jezebel instructed the leaders of Naboth's town to find two **"scoundrels"** to testify against him. They followed her orders, **"the scoundrels witnessed against him, against Naboth, in the presence of the people,"** and the end result was that **"they took him outside the city and stoned him with stones, so that he died"** (1 Kings 21:9-13).

A similar thing took place at Jesus' trial. **"The chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death"** (Matthew 26:59). When the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were unable to resist the testimony of Stephen concerning Jesus, **"they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God'"** (Acts 6:11). The end result was the same: They **"cast him out of the city and stoned him"** (Acts 7:58). But the final verdict will be God's. He says: **"A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies will not escape"** (Proverbs 19:5). **"A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies shall perish"** (Proverbs 19:9).

False testimony in court is called perjury. When God's name is used in false testimony, the Second Commandment is also transgressed. But other lies are also against the will of God. Potiphar's wife sinned against her husband, against Joseph, and against God when she claimed that Joseph tried to seduce her, when the opposite was actually the case (Genesis 39:7-20). Gehazi, Elisha's servant, gave Naaman the wrong impression of Elisha by the lies that he spoke (2 Kings 5:20-27).

A person's name can be ruined through a betrayal of secrets by a supposed friend or friends. We call it gossip when one person goes around speaking hurtful things about another. The Old Testament law stated: **"You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people"** (Leviticus 19:16). **"A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter"** (Proverbs 11:13). Samson's secret was that he was a Nazirite to the Lord, and a Nazirite was not permitted to cut his hair. The Philistine woman whom Samson loved was Delilah. But she treacherously revealed Samson's secret to his enemies, and this not only ruined his reputation but destroyed his life (Judges 16:15-30).

One of Jesus' own disciples, Judas Iscariot, betrayed Him to His enemies and revealed Jesus' hiding place. Judas told the truth about Jesus, but he told it in order to harm Him, and he died as a traitor (Matthew 26:47-49). Anything we say that defames our neighbor is a sin, whether what we say is an outright lie, a half-truth, an insinuation, or even the total truth, if our intention is to hurt him. David's son Absalom twisted the truth about his father in order to gain a following for himself and take away the kingdom from his father (2 Samuel 15:1-6).

The psalmist Asaph testified against such evil speaking: **"You give your mouth to evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son. ... I will rebuke you"** (Psalm 50:19-21). James, the brother of our Lord, wrote: **"Do not speak evil of one another, brethren"** (James 4:11). God judges the words that come from our mouths not only based on whether or not they are true, but also based on the intentions of our hearts in speaking them. Even when we think we are helping our neighbor, we may not be aware of our real intentions. The prophet Jeremiah wrote: **"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind"** (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

The father of lies is the devil himself. He lied to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Jesus therefore said: **"The devil ... does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it"** (John 8:44). David was possibly speaking about his traitorous adviser Ahithophel when he said: **"The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords"** (Psalm 55:21). As David had his Ahithophel, so Jesus had His Judas Iscariot. How smooth Judas' words were about helping the poor, when in reality he was thinking about gaining more money for himself (John 12:4-6)! Herod the Great used smooth words when he asked the Wise Men to let him know about the new-born King of the Jews. He said he wanted to worship this King, but really he wanted to kill Him (Matthew 2:7-8, 16). The Pharisees used smooth words in their efforts to trap Jesus into sinning in His words (Matthew 22:15-18). It is wise not to be influenced by flattery.

The tongue is a very small member of the body, but it can do much damage. Words that escape from our mouths can never be put back in. Therefore the wise Solomon wrote: **“Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few. ... A fool’s voice is known by his many words”** (Ecclesiastes 5:2-3). It was James in particular who directed his attention to the sins of the tongue. He said: **“The tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ... No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison”** (James 3:5-8). Martin Luther had this to say about gossip in his *Large Catechism*: *“Learning a bit of gossip about someone else, they spread it into every corner, relishing and delighting in the chance to stir up someone else’s dirt like pigs that roll in manure and root around in it with their snouts”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 422).

Proverbs teaches us that God hates the lying tongue: **“These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren”** (Proverbs 6:16-19).

We should not delight in the evils that befall others. Proverbs says: **“Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles”** (Proverbs 24:17). The sin of false witness begins, as all other sins, in the heart. Thus, even to think evil concerning our brother is already a sin. It is written: **“Let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor”** (Zechariah 8:17).

There is something we can do in love when we become aware that our neighbor is in danger of losing his faith in Christ through continued sin. We should not ignore our neighbor’s sin, for that will not help them fight against it. The book of Leviticus says: **“You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him”** (Leviticus 19:17). If we are not willing to talk to them about their sin, we should not dare to talk to anyone else about their sin, that is, we should not gossip about them. Our Lord Jesus has told us what we should do. **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”** (Matthew 18:15-18). It is very difficult to talk to someone else about his sin. Pray for the right words. **“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a wise rebuker to an obedient ear”** (Proverbs 25:11-12).

In cases of public or open sin, it is not always necessary to talk to the sinner in private. It may be necessary at times to rebuke the person publicly. For example, John the Baptist spoke openly about the adultery of Herod Antipas, since he had openly stolen his brother’s wife (Luke 3:19). There was a time when the apostle Paul publicly rebuked Peter for what he was doing in public. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“When Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed. ... When I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all”** (Galatians 2:11-14). Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear”** (1 Timothy 5:20). Paul openly testified against false teachers, writing to Timothy: **“Their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth”** (2 Timothy 2:17-18).

Not all uses of the tongue regarding the neighbor are sinful. Luther’s *Small Catechism* mentions these three right uses of our tongues: *“We are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 353). The proverb says: **“Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy”** (Proverbs 31:8-9).

We should defend our neighbors against false accusations, especially those who have no one else to speak in their behalf. When Jesus' disciples found fault with Martha's sister Mary for anointing Jesus' body with precious perfume, Jesus defended her: **"Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me. ... For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her"** (Matthew 26:10-13). When King Saul accused David falsely, Saul's son Jonathan spoke well of him and saved David's life. It is written: **"Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father, and said to him, 'Let not the king sin against his servant, against David, because he has not sinned against you. ... Why then will you sin against innocent blood, to kill David without a cause?' So Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan, and Saul swore, 'As the LORD lives, he shall not be killed'"** (1 Samuel 19:4-6).

Love for our neighbor will lead us to do what the apostle Paul says: **"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers"** (Ephesians 4:29). We should build up our neighbor's name and reputation rather than tear it down. Peter wrote: **"Above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins"** (1 Peter 4:8).

When the high priest Eli saw the godly woman Hannah praying silently with great anguish of heart, he did not interpret what she was doing in the best possible light. Rather he put the worst construction on her actions, saying to her: **"How long will you be drunk? Put your wine away from you!"** (1 Samuel 1:14). But we should not jump to the worst possible conclusions. That is not what love does. What does love do? **"Love does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"** (1 Corinthians 13:5-7).

Have any of us obeyed the Eighth Commandment and used our tongues without sin every moment of our lives? Of course not. James wrote: **"If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ... But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison"** (James 3:2-8). There are no such perfect man or woman among us. It is easy for us to find fault with others and point out their sins to them and to the world. But every time we accuse someone else, we are accusing ourselves, for we are guilty of the same sins as they. The apostle Paul says: **"You are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. ... And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?"** (Romans 2:1-3). **"There is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness"** (Romans 3:12-14).

It should be clear to us all that we have sinned against the Eighth Commandment and therefore deserve temporal and eternal punishment. Our only hope is Jesus Christ, who did keep this commandment perfectly in our behalf. He Himself said: **"For this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth"** (John 18:37). He always spoke the truth with love in His heart in all of the many situations in which He was placed. He was able to challenge His enemies with the question: **"Which of you convicts Me of sin?"** (John 8:46).

Only Jesus has kept this commandment perfectly, even as He has kept all the commandments perfectly. We are saved by His perfect life of obedience as well as by His being punished for our disobedience when He suffered and died on the cross. Only by faith in Him and love for Him can we even begin keeping this commandment. The apostle Paul encourages us with these words: **"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ... that we, ... speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ"** (Ephesians 4:1, 15).

Questions

1. What is God protecting by means of the Eighth Commandment?
2. How do we know that the Eighth Commandment is part of God's moral law?
3. In what ways do people sin when they are involved in a court of law?
4. What happened at the trials of Naboth, Stephen, and Jesus?
5. What is a talebearer? Give some examples.
6. In what way were Ahithophel and Judas Iscariot similar to each other?
7. With what other small things does James compare the tongue? (James 3)
8. What should we not do when we become aware of someone else's sin?
9. What should we do when we become aware of someone else's sin?
10. When is it proper to reprove someone in public, rather than in private?
11. What is the proper use of our tongues? Give some examples.
12. What kind of persons are able to use their tongues properly always?
13. Name any persons you know who always use their tongues in love.
14. What is the only way you and I can be saved from eternal punishment?