My Problem with the Eighth Commandment

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:
Let Us Go Unto the House of the Lord

by Will Weedon

Summer, 2012

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Dear Issues, Etc. Journal Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the Journal, I admit My Problem with the Eighth Commandment. When the commandment say, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” where does that leave us in a world of liars, gossips and slanderers? Read on; by the time you’re done, you might have a problem with the eighth commandment too.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from Pastor Will Weedon, the new Director of Worship for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Believe it or not, there was a time when he had to look up “Lutheran” in the encyclopedia.

And, as usual, you’ll find a list of faithful congregations in the Find a Church section at the end of the Journal.

Enjoy this Journal.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host
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My Problem with the Eighth Commandment

by Todd Wilken

I have a problem with the eighth commandment. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

The eighth commandment violates my freedom of speech. It takes away my right to free expression. It censors me. It tells me that I can’t speak my mind, have my say, or toss in my two cents. It is a divine gag-order. I really don’t like the eighth commandment.

At first glance, it looks so easy: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” False witness is lying. So, if I don’t lie, I have the eighth commandment covered, right? If only it were so easy!

Jesus only seems to make my problem with the eighth commandment worse:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.” But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil.¹

Jesus says the eighth commandment isn’t merely about me lying or telling the truth; it is about everything I say. And Jesus is serious! Elsewhere, he has more to say about what I say:

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How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.²

My problem with the eighth commandment is that it forces me to hear myself as God hears me. The eighth commandment forces me to listen to myself, and in my own words, hear who and what I really am. Jesus says, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." According to Jesus, every time I open my mouth I open a siphon on my inward sin. The words I speak are the effluent of a reservoir of unspeakable things.

What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.³

The eighth commandment forces a showdown between what I say, and what God says. This commandment pits my word against God’s. It highlights the utter incompatibility between what comes out of my mouth and what comes out of God’s mouth. The eight commandment, like all the commandments, forces a showdown between who I am, and who God is.

Martin Luther explained my problem with the eighth commandment:

We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbor, but defend him, [think and] speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything.⁴
But I want to have it both ways. I want to fear love and trust God, but say whatever I want about my neighbor. That’s my problem.

Luther takes Jesus’ far-reaching approach to the eighth commandment. In his Large Catechism, he presses the necessity of protecting our neighbor’s reputation to what sounds like an extreme:

*No one is allowed publicly to judge and reprove his neighbor, although he may see him sin, unless he have a command to judge and to reprove. For there is a great difference between these two things, judging sin and knowing sin. You may indeed know it, but you are not to judge it. I can indeed see and hear that my neighbor sins, but I have no command to report it to others. Now, if I rush in, judging and passing sentence, I fall into a sin which is greater than his. But if you know it, do nothing else than turn your ears into a grave and cover it, until you are appointed to be judge and to punish by virtue of your office.*

For Luther, the eighth commandment provides protection for my neighbor --even if he is guilty and even if I know he is guilty. Luther says, if I have no command “to judge and to reprove,” I have no standing to speak about or against my neighbor --even if he is guilty and I know it.

If you’re like me, reading Luther’s words sends you on a frantic search for a loophole. I say, “Yes, but what if my neighbor does this? What if my neighbor does that? Am I to remain silent and say absolutely nothing?” But on this point, Luther is clear: between me and my neighbor, the eighth commandment permits no loopholes. “If you know it, do nothing else than turn your ears into a grave and cover it.”

In fact, in his Large Catechism, Luther continues for 14 paragraphs in that vein, discussing in detail how the eighth commandment forbids you to judge your brother’s sin “until you are appointed to be judge and to punish by virtue of your office.”
Those, then, are called slanderers who are not content with knowing a thing, but proceed to assume jurisdiction... This is nothing else than meddling with the judgment and office of God.  

I don’t want to hear this. I don’t want to confront, much less admit, how repeatedly and egregiously I have “meddled with the judgment and office of God.” Nothing triggers the impulse to excuse and justify myself like a healthy dose of the eighth commandment. But, there’s no denying it: between me and my neighbor, the eighth commandment permits no excuses or self-justification.

All judgment is left to the proper authorities. And, Luther names them: “the civil government, preachers, father and mother excepted, on the understanding that this commandment does not allow evil to go unpunished.” So, the magistrate may judge the cases brought before him, the preacher may address the sins of his hearers, and parents may deal with the sins in the family. Apart from these exceptions, Luther says, “Thus you see that it is summarily forbidden to speak any evil of our neighbor.” No loopholes. But, if you’re like me, you’re still looking for one.

Luther’s genius here is his willingness to present the eighth commandment as is, with all of its accusing force focused squarely on my utter failure to keep it. Luther understood that the eighth commandment finds me guilty by catching me in my own web of words. Literally, my own mouth accuses me. I testify against myself. Under the eighth commandment there is no right to remain silent; my crime is that I haven’t remained silent.

“All this has been said regarding secret sins.” Luther continues,

_But where the sin is quite public so that the judge and everybody know it, you can without any sin avoid him and let him go, because he has brought himself into disgrace, and you may also publicly testify concerning him. For when a matter is public in the light of day, there can be no slandering or false judging or testifying; as, when we now reprove the Pope with his doctrine, which is publicly set forth in books._

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and proclaimed in all the world. For where the sin is public, the reproof also must be public, that every one may learn to guard against it.⁹

Is this perhaps the loophole I have been looking for? Is this a way that I can have the eighth commandment and still keep my freedom of speech, my right to free expression, speak my mind, have my say, or toss in my two cents? No, it isn’t.

Here Luther distinguishes between my neighbor’s private sin and his public sin, that is, my neighbor’s sin that I alone know, and his sin that everyone knows. But, isn’t a public sin just a private sin that someone has made public, and now everyone knows? No.

Luther’s example is the Pope and his false doctrine. Luther isn’t talking about the Pope’s private sins that have somehow ended up on the cover of the *National Enquirer*. Luther is talking about the Pope’s sin which he himself has “publicly set forth in books and proclaimed in all the world.” The Pope’s false doctrine is public because the Pope himself has made it public.

The failure to distinguish between private sin and public sin leads to two common misuses of the eighth commandment. The first attempts to treat private sins like public sins; the second attempts to treat public sins like private sins.

**Misuse One:** “Well, now that it’s public we can all talk about it.”

Here’s the scenario: My neighbor has sinned. At first it is private. That is, it is known by only one or several other people, who say nothing. But
then, someone spills the beans. Then before you know it, everyone knows.
My neighbor’s private sin has become public.

Let’s call that what it is: Gossip. Gossip is when I take my neighbor’s private sin public without proper authority to do so. It doesn’t matter how many people may already know; it is still gossip. It doesn’t matter if I read it in the newspaper or on the Internet; it is still gossip. It doesn’t matter if it is a celebrity, politician, sports star, my best friend or worst enemy; it is still gossip. If I hear it and repeat it, I’m guilty.

Luther points to Matthew 18:15, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” Luther says,

Here you have a precious and excellent teaching for governing well the tongue, which is to be carefully observed against this detestable misuse. Let this, then, be your rule, that you do not too readily spread evil concerning your neighbor and slander him to others, but admonish him privately that he may amend [his life].

But I object, I can’t go privately to every celebrity, politician or sports star I hear about. That’s true. That’s all the more reason for me to keep my mouth shut.

**Misuse Two:** “You should never publicly rebuke anyone for anything unless you first go to him privately.”

This misapplication of the eighth commandment is a favorite of those who would want to cover up public sins. Here is the scenario: My neighbor has sinned, and it is public because he has publicized his own sin (e.g., the Pope publishing his false teaching). But, when publicly rebuked for his sin, my neighbor cries foul, he plays the victim of gossip and slander, he invokes the eighth commandment, he cites Matthew 18.

Someone guilty of a truly public sin cannot use the eighth commandment or Matthew 18 to deflect public judgment and rebuke. The
“best construction” that can be put on public sin is public reproof. Just as the eighth commandment requires that I cover up my neighbor’s private sin with my silence and best construction, so the commandment requires that public sin not be covered up. In this case, “where the sin is public, the reproof also must be public, that every one may learn to guard against it.”

Still, public reproof of public sin doesn’t mean that it is open season on my neighbor’s reputation. Again, Luther’s example of the Pope and his false teaching serves us well. The Pope should be publicly rebuked for his false teaching, but that’s where the rebuke should stop. The public rebuke should be limited to the sin committed, everything else gets the best construction.

Even in the case of public sin, the goal of public admonishment is our neighbor’s repentance. That is, while public sin requires public reproof, it doesn’t rule out the private reproof of Matthew 18. In fact, if I publicly reprove someone for a public sin, I should at the same time approach him privately, if possible.

You can see why I have a problem with the eighth commandment, can’t you? It goes against every impulse I have. It doesn’t let me say what I want to say. It demands that I care more about my neighbor than my freedom of speech, my right to free expression, to speak my mind, to have my say, or to toss in my two cents.

The eighth commandment forces me to hear myself as God hears me. The eighth commandment forces me to listen to myself, and in my own words, hear who and what I really am.

The eighth commandment demands that I love my neighbor under the most difficult circumstances. It demands that I love my neighbor when my neighbor’s reputation is at stake. It demands that I have mercy on him. It demands that I love him.
Now, you can command mercy, but that won’t produce mercy. You can require love, but that won’t produce love. The only thing that produces mercy is Mercy. The only thing that produces love is Love.

It is no coincidence that Jesus himself was the victim of false witness, not only during his ministry, but especially at the end of his ministry. Mark’s Gospel describes the trial of Jesus as a parade of false witnesses:

Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” But he remained silent and made no answer.¹¹

That day, everyone knew that the accusations against Jesus were false, the witnesses, the judge, and Jesus himself. Nevertheless, it was false testimony that carried the day.

This is my real problem with the eighth commandment. It puts me among the false witnesses that day. When I “deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame” my neighbor, I prove to be the very kind of false witness who accused Jesus. When I fail to “defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything,” I take my place among Jesus’ accusers.

My problem with the eighth commandment is that

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it is right and I am wrong, it is true and I am false. I pray that this is your problem with the eighth commandment too.

Only then can we hear from the One, only, true witness. By his silence in the face of false witnesses, Jesus speaks in my defense. By allowing the false testimony against him to carry the day, Jesus testifies for me. To counter the true, right and just accusations of the eighth commandment against me and my sin, Jesus presents the witness and testimony of his sinless life. To counter the penalty required by the eighth commandment against me, Jesus presents his death as the penalty for all sin. This is the Mercy and Love that produces what the eighth commandment demands, but cannot produce. This is the Mercy and Love that produces mercy and love for my neighbor.

“Let God be true though every man were a liar.” God is true. Every man is a liar, except one. Jesus is true. He alone is true in a world of liars. He alone is my hope in the face of my problem with the eighth commandment.

1 Matthew 5:33-37.
2 Matthew 12:33-37; see also James 3:5-12.
4 Small Catechism, 1
5 Large Catechism, 265-266.
6 LC, 267-268.
7 LC, 274.
8 Luther slightly expands the exceptions later, saying: “Just so governments, father and mother, brothers and sisters, and other good friends, are under obligation to each other to reprove evil wherever it is needful and profitable.” (LC, 275)
9 LC, 284.
10 LC, 276.
11 Mark 14:55-61; see also 15:3-5; Luke 23:2.
12 Romans 3:4.
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Sports. I’ve never cared for them. But when John asked me to tag along to a game he was going to, I went. And there I sat, an eleven year-old youngster, bored out of my gourd, just waiting for it to be OVER. Something happened that day, though, that changed my life. Two other youngsters were sitting beside me, talking to each other, and one finally got up the nerve to talk to me: “Do you know what you need to know to be saved?” I hadn’t the foggiest clue what they were talking about. They were two young Roman Catholics, and they begin reciting to me the Apostles’ Creed. When I got home from the ballgame that day, I asked my mom:

“We’re not Catholic, right?”

“#?@!% no, we’re not Catholic. We’re Protestant.”

Off to my trusted friend, the encyclopedia. Protestant soon led me to Lutheran. And, the more I read, the more intrigued I was.

“Mom, what do you know about these Lutherans?”

“Our neighbors, the Olivers, are Lutherans. They go to that church up on Georgia Avenue.”

So off I ventured one Sunday morning to check out the Lutherans.

My parents were nominally Methodist, but only went to church when we were back in Richardsville Virginia visiting family. They hadn’t even bothered to have me baptized. So my exposure to church did not prepare me for what I encountered at the Lutheran Church of St. Andrew in Silver Spring, Maryland. It was culture shock all the way around: beautiful
vestments, beautiful organ music, beautiful choir music, beautiful congregational singing, beautiful sanctuary. You might be noticing a pattern: beautiful. And, it truly was, from start to finish.

I was totally lost trying to page around in the hymnal and figuring out what they were doing, but I was also totally intrigued. I asked about Sunday School, and they asked how old I was and put in the capable hands of Mrs. Blakely. Almost her first question was: “Have you been baptized?” When I told her I had not, she marched me off after class to the pastor and told him: “This young man needs Baptism.” It was only a few weeks later that I was baptized into Christ. The month was June, and I still remember them pouring the water into the font before the service, and my brother leaning over to whisper: “That’s for you, dude.” That day I was embraced in the saving flood, my sins washed away, God’s holy name named upon me, and I was henceforth HIS problem child.

Then it was on into Confirmation, with instruction on Sunday mornings and on Wednesday evenings. There were several lay catechists who worked with the seventh graders, and the pastors focused on teaching the eighth graders. The more I learned, the more I loved it. I learned from the Catechism to make the sign of the cross (and I noticed that there were some folks in the church who did, but not many) --I figured I ought to do what was in the Catechism! I remember sharing all I was learning with my cousin, George, a member of that Methodist Church in Virginia. From all I was learning, what intrigued me most of all was the liturgy, the time together singing, praying, receiving God’s gifts. There was a reverence there, and also a palpable joy. We were in the presence of God, and we knew it. It shaped
everything about what happened when we walked through those doors, and written above them were these words from Psalm 122: “I was glad when they said to me, Let us go into the house of the Lord.”

I continued quite happily a Lutheran teen, but toward the end of my teen years I became quite involved with the Charismatic movement (there were some Charismatic folks at St. Andrew), and gradually drifted from the Lutheran Church. Then my dad came down with cancer. It was bad. He was diagnosed in August, and dead by January. It was a horrific fall. And, all that time, the worship life at so many of those other churches I was visiting began to ring so empty to me. I couldn’t pretend being up and happy. It hit me, though, that I knew where I could go and pray: “Lamb of God, have mercy...grant peace.” I knew where I could kneel and receive the Body and Blood of Him who defeated this horrible enemy of death. I knew where I could hear again and again the message of forgiveness --a message I needed so much as I doubted and was uncertain of God’s goodness in the face of what was happening to my dad.

I returned to the Lutheran Church then, and even began to wonder if perhaps I might not become a pastor of this Church, if I might not be privileged to bring to others that same Gospel that brought a bruised teen’s heart such comfort in the midst of heaviness and sorrow. And well, here I am! My love of the liturgy and appreciation for the way it enables us to face hardship, doubt, fear, suffering --not to mention celebration, thanksgiving, and joy-- has only grown. The beauty of our Church’s liturgy, hymnody but above all of her preaching is what drew me to the Lutheran Church at the beginning and it is still one of my heart’s joys.
I still hate sports, by the way. Yawn. But now when I’m stuck in a situation where I have to endure such, I can secretly in my heart sing the liturgy and hymns that hold out to me the Gospel I have come to love so dearly --and no one is the wiser. And, thanks be to God for two Roman Catholic lads who long ago set me on this journey and brought me home to Wittenberg.

Pastor Will Weedon is the Director of Worship and Chaplain of the International Center for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.
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<td>Rev Ben Ball&lt;br&gt;Rev Joel Brondos&lt;br&gt;Rev Walter Otten&lt;br&gt;9035 Grant&lt;br&gt;Brookfield IL 60513&lt;br&gt;708-485-6987</td>
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<td>Rev Richard Heinz&lt;br&gt;4939 West Montrose Ave&lt;br&gt;Chicago IL 60641&lt;br&gt;773-736-1112</td>
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<td>Rev David Bretscher, 12397 Natural Bridge Rd</td>
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<td>St. John's Lutheran, Rev Brian Noack, 48 Greene Ave, Sayville, NY 11782</td>
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