

11/10/13 -- The Ninth Commandment - You Shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: *Exodus 20:16; Romans 12:2-10; Mark 8:27-30*

Of all the commandments, the Ninth Commandment is the one I am most attracted to and most assertive about. I am sure each of us have our 'pet' commandment, though all of them are of equal weight. This one is mine and it probably says far more about me than anything valuable in the commandment itself. This disclosure on my part is to tell you that I have a hard time separating my reaction to the breaking of this commandment from the underlying truths of this commandment. There is an important psychological truth in everything we react to: what we react to most greatly in others is likely the part of ourselves we are least willing to examine. So I have saved this one for last. Next week, I will do a summing up of our exploration of the 10 Commandments.

The Ninth Commandment, on its initial reading, refers primarily to legal proceedings. It means, quite simply, when you are called by a court of law to testify with regard to the actions of your neighbor, do not lie in order to get a conviction against them. As with all the commandments, however, it always goes deeper. Most of us are never called to testify against our neighbor in a court of law. We all, however, bear witness to our neighbors. We watch them yell at their pets and their kids. We see them leaving in the middle of the night. We notice they never leave their home. We see, say, the repairman going over to the house every Tuesday at 10am, when Mr. Johnson is not at home, but Mrs. Johnson is. We have suspicions about the grungy man who visits the mother of his child who lives in the basement apartment of the neighbor down the road. We create an alternate persona for Jerry who borrowed the chainsaw 3 months ago and never returned it. We wonder all sorts of things about why the lights are on in that room, who is visiting whom and why. All of that happens in our neighborhoods.

The Ninth Commandment comes into play with all those events when we do one other thing in our neighborhoods - talk about our neighbors and what they are doing with other people. That is when we might participate in what is called "gossip, backbiting and slander" by at least some of you. Some of us are not above Oscar Wilde, who said, "*If you can't say anything good about someone, come over here and sit next to me*".

Before we go any further, though, let me give you a little background on the word *gossip*, which is the behavior most often pointed to when we think of breaking the Ninth Commandment. The word *gossip* comes from the Old English word *Godsibb*, which means *God-parent or God-sibling*. What is more, it was often an honor which was given to the midwives and women in attendance of the birth of a child, which was a very intimate time for all involved. As the child grew up, the responsibility of the God-parent was to attend to the spiritual growth of the child in the community. The God-parent, or *gossip*, was responsible for listening and bearing witness to the attitude of the community toward the child. Was the child being built up into a Christ-loving person? Did their behavior and the talk surrounding them support that? The *gossip* did what they could with others, with the family and with the child to increase the building up of the character of the child.

You didn't know that, did you? That is because, today, gossip does one thing and one thing only - it tears down and destroys character, particularly when it involves the private lives of individuals and families. Gossip is how we know the sins of others in our community and also how we stand in judgment of those in our community. Martin Luther says in his commentary on this commandment, "*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”* (Luther’s Large Catechism, par. 266). It is highly unlikely any of us will be appointed judge over our neighbor’s sins.

So if the negative expression of the Ninth Commandment is *not to bear false witness, not to gossip, slander or undercut the reputation of our neighbor*, what is the underlying spiritual law governing the command? It is *I will speak and seek only the best of my neighbor and will speak and seek to build up their honor and dignity in the community*.

This is the other reason I have saved this commandment until last - is this not the most difficult thing to do for another, especially those we hold in judgment and know all kinds of bad things about? How do I build up the dignity and honor of the ex-convict who has served his time who lives down the street from me? Will I hold him to his past for which he has paid his debt, or will I find ways to lift him up in the eyes of the community? It is so much easier to hold him to his past. What about Jane or John down the street? Doesn’t she or he cheat on her husband or his wife, breaking the Seventh Commandment all the time? And how bad is it when I find out about what the neighbors are saying about me? I, of course, can talk about others in judgment, but cannot be spoken of in the same way. And the cycle continues, tearing down any hope of community, peace, harmony and love.

Let’s be clear: this is not about talking about other people without them being there. It is about *how* we talk about other people when they are not present. Is your talk about this person or that person building up their dignity and honor in the community, or is it tearing it down? One way is Christ-directed and Christ-centered; the other is, as Luther says, the basest and most effective work of Satan.

When I was in Chaplain training at the hospital, I worked with a Lubavitch (Orthodox) Rabbi named Levi. Levi and I became good friends. He was a sprightly fellow and outspoken. When he was growing up, he had taken a lot of verbal abuse from bigots and bullies. He heard the words “You people...” and “Your kind...” often used in abuse and degradation. In Chaplain training, we would meet everyday in a small group and go over our visits from the previous day. It was pretty intensive - a lot of personal questions about motive and personal issues. Sometimes, after Levi spoke, I would begin my sentence with the words, “You people...” or “Your people...” Everyone would cringe. Soon, I realized how uncomfortable everyone would get when I said those words, so I did it more. It didn’t bother Levi, though, because every time I said those words I always said something very positive and affirming, “Your people...argue very well. We could learn a lot from studying that.” Or, “You people...have a very deep understanding of the grace of God.” Further, when Levi came up in conversation when he wasn’t there, I always made sure I was doing the same thing. With Levi, I was very conscious about it, even though he could take care of himself, because he came from a very insular, minority religious background and he was a target of supposedly more ‘inclusive’ and ‘open’ traditions.

What do we say about other people when they are not there? What is being said about you when you are not present? This is Jesus’ question to the disciples today: “*Who do people say that I am?*” What are ‘they’ saying about me? Well, some say you are the crazy guy who lived in the woods and ate crickets and honey and baptized people in the Jordan. Some say you are the beginning of the end times because you are Elijah. Some say you are a prophet. What people say about Jesus matters, because it also suggests what they are thinking as well. Now, these things aren’t very negative, certainly from our modern perspective; but they aren’t exactly positive, either. John the Baptist was beheaded and most of the prophets of Israel were killed by the Israelites themselves.

Then Jesus asks, “Who do *you* say that I am?” What are *you* saying about me with the other disciples and in public? Peter answers, “*You are the Messiah.*” Jesus orders the disciples not to say anything to anyone, which is fodder for a whole other sermon, but we have some clues in Peter’s answer about how we are to begin thinking about Christ and about others.

Peter answers Jesus with Sacred Speech. If gossip, slander and backbiting are ways of tearing others down in the community, where will we get clues about how to build others up in the community? What kind of language will we use? What attitude allows us to speak toward the honor and dignity of our neighbor in the community? We get our clues right here in the act of worship, where we spend an hour or so using Sacred Speech every week in order to build and sustain a community built on the love and trust in Christ we all covenant to share with one another. As with Peter and the other disciples, we are called, as followers of Jesus Christ to *see the presence of the Christ*. We learn to do that when we gather to worship with one another. We learn to see the presence of Christ in the words we share in prayer, the songs we sing together, the comfort we give to each other in our ministry, the hearing and interpretation of the Word and the practice of simply making space for God and Christ to be present in our lives. Then we look at ourselves and our lives to find where God and Christ were present for us.

In a couple weeks, Advent is beginning. In the time of Advent, we are waiting and looking for the coming of the Messiah. What is it like? What do we *say* about the coming of the Messiah in our lives? How does what we say about Christ change the world? Does what we say change the world *and point us toward Christ*? Or does what we say about one another point us and our neighbor away from Christ? We are, in worship, learning the Sacred Speech of loving God, and in learning to love God, we learn to love our neighbor. It is where we learn, as Reinhold Niebuhr says, “*the increase of the love of God and neighbor*”. Here, we learn, as Luther says, to “*become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians...*” (from *The Freedom of a Christian*).

Our talk about others is an act of intimacy. As Christians, we are baptized into a life in Christ and I believe, among all the things Jesus does for us in his life, death and resurrection, that Jesus Christ restores to us and to all of creation the dignity and honor we were meant to have upon our creation. “*...what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor*” (Psalm 8:4-5). Does our talk about others reflect what God would have for us - glory and honor? This is the essence of Sacred Speech - the honoring of the dignity which God would bestow upon each and every one of us because of the love shown us through his Son Jesus Christ. This is what the Holy Spirit calls us to. It is a high calling.

It is the calling Paul makes upon the Romans when he says to them, “*...be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect...(do) not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think...we, who are many, are one body in Christ...Let love be genuine...outdo one another in showing honor*” (Romans 12:2-10). This is how we build a community of trust. This is what Sacred Speech trains us toward - the restoration and acknowledgment of the honor and dignity of self, neighbor and stranger alike. What if, rather than looking for the worst in others, regardless of what they have done or even are doing, we looked for what was good and acceptable and perfect? What if our speech about others began to be influenced by the sacred speech we use during our time of worship? What if we reclaimed what it meant to be a *gossip*, one who was concerned with the dignity, honor and building up of those whom we cared about, and even those whom we do not?

Then, perhaps, we would begin to get what is really underneath the Ninth Commandment. Then, we might not be likely to bear false witness against our neighbor. Then, we might begin to be a Christ-like witness for the well-being of all whom we encounter and to live in a community where our words and our speech begin to mirror the honor and dignity given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.