

No False Witness

13 April 2008 – LD 43

Ps. 98: 1, 4

Ps.1: 1

Scripture reading: Lev.19: 1 – 18; 1 Kings 21: 1 – 16; Mt.12: 33 – 37

Text: LD 43

Ps. 15: 1, 2

Ps. 50: 8 - 11

Ps. 101: 1 – 6

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

When we look at this commandment then we can only pray with David:

“Oh, that many ways were directed to keep your statutes! Then I would not be ashamed when I look into all your commandments” (Ps. 119: 5, 6).

The fact is that we are put to shame also by this commandment, for who of us is able to bridle his tongue? As the apostle James says:

“...we all stumble in many things. 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).

While all sin starts in the heart it is especially with our tongue that we transgress this commandment:

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour”.

No instrument is as dangerous as our tongue, and no weapon can do greater damage. When false witness is given, the innocent suffers shameful dishonour and painful grief. The evil power and effect of false witness has been illustrated clearly, for example, in the murder of Naboth the Jezreelite. There we see how a false witness is ultimately nothing but a violent robber and a cruel murderer.

As with the other commandments, we find also in the ninth commandment that an extreme example of breaking the commandment is given. False witness that would lead to stoning the innocent to death is an extreme example of breaking the ninth commandment. But the commandment is not only about speaking the truth in a court case. This commandment deals with truth itself.

God Himself is truth. And since He saved us with this purpose that we may live in holy communion with Him, we are to walk in the truth, for God is truth. That will be the theme this morning:

Be truthful and live the truth, for God is truth

We will note:

1. Scripture's definition of truth
2. The command to speak the truth
3. The fallacy of innocent lies

In the first place we note

Scripture's definition of truth

In order to live the truth, and to speak the truth, we first have to know the truth.

What is truth? Truth is defined by the very being of God Himself. He is truth. This attribute of God is often called in Scripture His faithfulness. He reveals His truth and faithfulness in all His works, and most clearly in His Word. His Word is the very revelation of Himself and of His truth. He made a covenant with us and shows His truth and faithfulness in fulfilling His promises. And in His faithfulness He remains true to His own being: "I am that I am".

When the Lord Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life", He stated that He Himself is the fulfilment and the reality of God's promise. He is the truth. In Him we see the fulfilment and the glorious reality of God's faithfulness.

Scripture also reveals to us the nature of Satan. He is the father of lies. He stands in absolute contrast to God and to God's truthfulness. All untruth has its origin in Satan. Through His lie sin and death entered the world. When he launched his attack on God and on man, his weapon was false witness against God; his attack was on the truth and faithfulness of God. The serpent said to the woman:

"You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God..."

The tempter accused God of deliberate falsehood and deception. God made up a lie, he says, to protect His selfish and exclusive possession of the knowledge of good and evil. Through selfish deceit He deprives you of something real good, Eve! With this lie the Satan directed his attack not on the knowledge of God, nor on the power of God, but on the integrity and truthfulness of God. The serpent did not say that God doesn't know, or that He will not have the power to execute His word. The sting of the attack was this that the truthfulness of God was denied.

There we have the first false witness. It made man suspicious of God and of His truthfulness. By false witness God Himself was represented as untrue. And every false witness ever since has been ultimately attacking God in His truth and faithfulness. All lies and all untruth is in the last analysis against God and His truth.

But the false witness of Satan, which sets the pattern for all other false witness, was in fact also the instrument to murder man. It was when man distrusted God's truthfulness, that he lost his own truthfulness.

Man's faithfulness can only exist in total trust of God's faithfulness. Our truthfulness is determined by our trust in God's truthfulness, and our faithfulness is formed after His faithfulness.

Now you see the necessity of this commandment. We are made in the image of God. Just as He said: "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1: 16) so also: be truthful, for I am truthful. God restores us to His own image, and He will be satisfied with nothing less, until we will be fully restored to holy communion with Him. We shall be truthful, for He, our covenant God, is truth.

The arch-enemy of God and of His kingdom is the father of lies:

"...He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own recourses, for he is a liar and the father of it" – John 8: 44.

All untruth is of the devil. And all untruth stands in relation to that lie by which Eve was seduced. All untruth is against God and against His very being. Untruth is the trademark of godlessness and wickedness, while truth is the trademark of holiness and righteousness.

Now, this is true, first of all, with regard to our knowledge. If we want to live the truth, we have to know the truth. If we want to live in communion with

God, we have to know God. If we want to walk in His truth, we have to know the truth.

This is eternal life, that we know the only true God (Jh.17: 3). Now, Christ said that He Himself is the way and the truth and the life (Jh.14: 6).

“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, but walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” – 1 Jh.1: 6.

To know God is to know the truth. To live in fellowship with Him, is to practice the truth. And to live in His truth – that is life!

Brothers and sisters, to live and to practice the truth, simply means to live in fellowship with God as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word. As Christ prayed to the Father: “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” – Jh. 17: 17.

God revealed Himself to us in His Word, and therefore His Word is the revelation of truth.

However, truth does not relate only to knowledge. Truth is something that we practice in thought and word and action. Because we know the truth, therefore we live the truth.

Within this context we will now look at the commandment to speak the truth. That is our second point:

Speak the truth

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour” (Ex.20: 16).

“You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness” – Ex.23: 1.

“Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous...” – Ex.23: 7

“...speak each man the truth to his neighbour; give judgement in your gates for truth, justice and peace; let none of you think evil in his heart against your neighbour; and do not love a false oath. For all these are things that I hate, says the LORD” – Zech.8: 16, 17.

Or, as the command comes to us in Eph.4: 25:

“...putting away lying, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbour’, for we are members of one another”.

Because God Himself is truth, all lies are cursed.

Brothers and sisters, let us now apply this teaching to our own lives with some practical examples.

The ninth commandment does not deal only with false witness in a court case, but also with our daily conversations.

For some reason we like to discuss other people. This is a most dangerous thing to do! For the moment we start to discuss other people, we tend to evaluate them and to judge them. We tend to sort other people in certain categories in order to place ourselves in a certain relation to them – either positive or negative. And we like to label people and to tag them. It is exactly then that this commandment is most often transgressed. For we tend to do this in a careless manner, to judge others rashly and lightly, as if the honour of their name could be played around with.

Brothers and sisters, when we misrepresented someone, or if we judge him lightly and unheard, we rob him of his good name. And as proverbs says:

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches...” (Prov.22:1).

And if someone's name is his most precious possession, then with a few doubtful words you rob your neighbour of more possessions, than you would be able to do by breaking into his house with violence. False witness does more harm to a man, than if you would tear him loose of all his possessions.

Yet we are all guilty of doing this! It is amazing with what carelessness we tend to discuss other people. You will hardly find anyone who is not infected with this horrible disease.

Scripture warns us:

“In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” – Prov. 10: 19.

It is sinful to leave our mouths open without restrain. We still have a sinful nature, and therefore we constantly have to check our tongue and restrain it, or else we abound in sin.

Brothers and sisters, God does not only hate all gossip and slander, he also hates the ear that listens to gossip. In this also we are guilty.

“The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body” – Prov. 18: 8.

By nature we like to discuss others and to listen to the stories of talebearers, but Christ has died to sanctify also our tongues and our ears. He gives us a new heart to flee from these things, and to show love to our neighbour in all truth and faithfulness.

Let us in all truthfulness protect the name of our neighbour.

Who of us are not guilty? Let us confess our sin before the Lord, and flee from it.

No slanderer will inherit the kingdom of God – 1 Cor. 6: 10.

“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless” – James 1: 26.

“...the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell” – James 3: 6.

We do not have to quote any more of these texts as you are well aware of them. Yet, we are often so careless, hurting our neighbour, robbing him of his good name, backbiting, slandering, murdering our neighbour with twisted and deceitful words, misrepresenting someone, and rashly condemning one another.

It is a true description of the natural man when the apostle Paul quotes David and says:

“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” – Rom.3: 13, 14.

Let us acknowledge our sin and confess it before the Lord, that He might forgive and cure us from this snare.

Sometimes love will require of us to keep silent even when we have all the facts correct.

“A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter” - Prov.11: 13.

“He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends” – Prov. 17: 9

“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins” – Prov.10: 12.

Yes, sometimes love requires of us to keep silent and to conceal a matter. Even if all your facts are correct, you may still not be a talebearer.

“You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people...” – Lev. 19: 16.

Brothers and sisters, at the same time we also have to guard against a misunderstanding of this commandment. It does not say: “You shall not bear witness against your neighbour”, but it says: “You shall not bear **false** witness against your neighbour”.

While it is true that love covers and conceals the sins of others, this does not rule out church discipline.

Christ testifies against the scribes and Pharisees when He calls them hypocrites, whitewashed tombs, serpents, brood of vipers. He indeed gave strong witness against them. In the same way the apostles gave clear witness against the false teachers. The apostle Paul says:

“...their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who strayed concerning the truth...” – 2 Tim.2: 17.

He does not waver to call the false teachers by the name, and to describe their message as a cancer. And in the same way also the other apostles acted, bearing witness when needed.

And thus we need discernment when to speak and when to keep silent.

But as we are all inclined to speak, rather than to keep silent, we ought to restrain ourselves and guard against condemning someone rashly or unheard.

Even in our minds we may not cherish “evil suspicions” against someone, while the facts are lacking.

God has called us to peace that we may live with Him and with our neighbour in love and in truth and in righteousness. While we are forbidden to bear false witness, we are positively commanded to protect the name of our neighbour as far as truth allows.

Let us not twist one another's words, let us not misrepresent one another, let us not rashly condemn one another, let us not swallow the tales of talebearers like tasty trifles, but flee from these things as they come from the father of lies. For these things burn like a fire and are lit by the devil himself.

In the third place we note...

The fallacy of innocent lies

How easily do people tell lies and reckon it to be an innocent game. Sometimes the names of others are hurt by jokes, and they sigh under the sporting of others.

Or sometimes an untruth is told without blushing – for, was it not a harmless and innocent lie?

No, there is no such thing as an innocent lie. All lies are from the devil himself. All untruth and all misrepresentations are a fire from hell.

There are a few texts in the Bible which people often misuse in order to excuse what they call “innocent lies”. I will mention only two examples.

The Lord sends Samuel to anoint one of the sons of Jesse in the place of Saul. Samuel is afraid of Saul and he says:

“How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me”.

And the LORD answered him:

“Take a young cow with you, and say, I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Then invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; you shall anoint for Me the one I name you’” – 1 Sam.16: 2, 3.

Now, some use this text to say that you may tell a lie in case of emergency to save a life. If the worst comes to the worst, if needs arises, then in the last resort you may tell a lie, they say. And look, they say, the Lord even taught this to Samuel! Brothers and sisters, this is however a twisting of Scripture. And all though this may seem harmless at first, it soon becomes a snare, as people cover themselves more and more in lies, trusting in lies to cover them.

What the Lord told Samuel to tell Saul, was no lie, but fully in accordance with the real facts. When we read on then we see that Samuel went and that he

has indeed done exactly what the Lord told him. He went and sacrificed the heifer. Now, what we do learn from that passage is that in certain circumstances part of the truth may be concealed when someone has no right to hear the full story. Saul had no right to hear the whole story, as he has become an enemy of God and of His servants. Concealing a part of the truth was in that circumstance allowed, but it was not a twisting of truth.

God did not put a white lie in the mouth of Samuel. Someone may think that this is making fine distinctions. Well, Biblical ethic is indeed built on fine distinctions. The distinction between right and wrong, true and false, is often not a cliff but only a razor's edge. It is a gross mistake not to make careful distinctions.

The fact is that the Lord did not teach Samuel to cover himself with a lie, but that He made provision for a part of the truth to be concealed from Saul.

In another circumstance it would be wrong and sinful to conceal a part of the truth, as we have to deal openly with each other. It is clear however, that the Lord does allow us to conceal certain facts from our enemies, in order to preserve life and peace.

Samuel was not taught by the Lord to tell an innocent lie.

I will mention one more example: Rahab the harlot. Some say that if she did not tell a lie to cover for the spies, the spies would have been killed. While she is recommended for her faith, they reckon that her lie has been justified by the Lord. This is however confusing the matters.

In the first place Scripture nowhere recommends her for telling a lie, but only recommends her faith in receiving the spies and sending them out another way than the soldiers were looking. As for her lie, that was not the cause for her success. Often we think that only a lie can save us, "Only a lie can save me in this situation!", but that is never true. Rahab would indeed be allowed to conceal certain facts from the king of Jericho, but it was sinful to tell a lie. The purpose does never justify sinful means. The Lord would be able to give

a good outcome without her lie. And if her faith was perfect, she would have trust God also for that.

We may never trust in lies to cover us, but trust God and speak nothing but the truth, although – as we have seen – it is lawful and right to conceal some facts from the enemies of truth.

Brothers and sisters, this is the life unto which God has called us. Through our Saviour, Jesus Christ, He restores us to His own image. We shall walk in the truth, for God is truth.

Nothing is more sacred than the truth. Lies are the trademark of wickedness. All untruth has its origin in the father of lies.

Dear congregation, we know the truth, for God has revealed Himself to us in His Son Jesus Christ, and Christ Himself is revealed to us in His Word.

God's truthfulness and His faithfulness have been revealed to us, that we may live in it.

Amen.