

Apologia: Thou Shalt Not Fib – The Eighth Commandment

By Rev. Zach McIntosh

Introduction:

Confession is good for the soul. So, in a time of private confession before God, ponder these questions. Have I ever been stopped by an officer for driving too fast and, when asked the question, “Do you know how fast you were going?” have I ever responded by saying, “No,” even though I knew full well that I was driving like Jeff Gordon on steroids? Have I ever walked into a meeting 20 minutes late and said something like, “Sorry I’m late. Traffic out there is terrible!” even though I knew full well that traffic out there is not terrible? Indeed, the reason I was 20 minutes late is because I woke up five minutes ago after passing out on the living room sofa watching Oprah.* Have I ever stretched the truth, told half the truth, rearranged the facts, or told a tale about “the one that got away”? Because if I have, then I confess that I have broken the eighth commandment. And if I have just belligerently maintained that I have not done any of these things, ever, then I confess that I am now breaking the eighth commandment.

* This lighthearted confession is adapted from Rev. John Ortberg’s sermon titled, “What Jesus Really Taught About Truth,” preached March 22, 1995 at Willow Creek Community Church.

Scripture Connect

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). Such are the words of the eighth commandment. In order to better understand this mandate, it is helpful to briefly unpack two of the key words in it. The first word is “bear.” The Hebrew behind this word is anah which is often translated, “to answer.” The Lord commands, “You shall not give a false answer to your neighbor.” Sometimes, this can be difficult. For example, married gentlemen, if your wife approaches you one evening, all gussied up and ready to go out on the town, and she asks you, “Does this dress make me look fat?” my guess is, if you don’t want to sleep on the couch that night, you would respond, “No, darling! You look so thin in that dress I didn’t even notice you were there.” Now, this may be a safe answer, but is it true? This is part of the eighth commandment: to give a truthful answer even when it may be unpopular, unwanted, or troubling. To cast this admonition in a more serious context: What if one of your youth asks you, “Do you really believe that all people who don’t believe in Jesus will burn in hell for all eternity?” The eighth commandment answer to that question, if you are orthodox, is, “Yes, I do.” Now, you will probably want to augment that answer with words of love and concern for the lost, but a truthful answer will still contain an affirmation of hell’s reality.

The second key word in this commandment is “false.” In this instance, it is important to note that this word covers not only the content of a statement, but its motive. In other words, although the content of a statement that I make may be objectively true, if I make it with malevolent intent, then I am breaking the eighth commandment. Thus, this commandment would prohibit gossip. As the teacher in Proverbs warns us: “A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much” (20:19). So, although it may indeed be factually true that Sally was caught French kissing Johnny under the fifth street bridge two hours past their respective curfews, this does not mean that I need to recount in breathtaking detail every moment of that fateful episode to my friends using my best tabloid-like tenor. For then, I am breaking the eighth commandment.

Doctrinal Quotation

Martin Luther comments on both of the aforementioned points in his exposition on the eighth commandment in the Large Catechism. Concerning the giving of truthful answers, even when they may be unpopular or unwanted, Luther comments, “Wherever there are upright preachers and Christians, they must endure having the world call

them heretics, apostates, even seditious and desperate scoundrels” (LC, par. 262). Such is the burden of being a truthful bearer and sharer of God’s Word. For sometimes truthfully proclaiming God’s Word is unpopular, unwanted, and even flatly rejected and ridiculed. As to the eighth commandment’s prohibition of gossip, Luther’s commentary becomes quite colorful: “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 roll in manure and root around in it with their snouts.... Therefore God forbids you to speak evil about another, even though, to your certain knowledge, that person is guilty” (LC, par. 268, 269).

Application

Truth telling in today’s context is becoming increasingly difficult. In fact, it is becoming increasingly accepted, and even awkwardly ethically justified, that a person will, and in some cases should, “bear false witness.” Much of this acceptance and justification is the result of a watershed work written in 1966 by an Episcopalian priest named Joseph Fletcher titled, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. In this tome, Fletcher argues that only one thing is inherently good: love. Therefore, all of our actions must be evaluated on the basis of whether or not they are “loving.” Thus, if giving a truthful answer to someone hurts them in such a way that is not perceived as “loving,” a false answer is to be preferred. Indeed, Fletcher actually gives examples of potentially deceitful practices and then implicitly justifies them, all in the name of love.

The approach of Fletcher flatly contradicts Scripture on two fronts. First, much more than “love” is inherently good. Indeed, Scripture reminds us that all that God has made is good: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God is the source of inherent goodness, not some arbitrary definition of love. Second, love and truth need not ever be mutually exclusive. This is why the apostle Paul writes, “Love...rejoices with the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:6). In short, there are no excuses for breaking the eighth commandment. God’s Word and statutes stand -- yesterday, today, and forever.

Conclusion

The perfect keeper of the eighth commandment, of course, was Jesus. In fact, not only did Jesus keep this commandment, he embodied it. “I am...the truth,” Jesus said (John 14:6). With these words, Jesus claims that he, in his very ontological being, is this commandment. Thus, all of our actions and words and thoughts should be measured by the truth who is Jesus. It is important to remember, however, that Jesus is not mere bare truth who exists only to condemn our falsehoods. No, the truth who is Jesus is much more than that. For the truth who is Jesus not only censures our lies, he also forgives them. And it is this truth -- the truth who is Jesus -- that we are commissioned to carry. Carry it to your kids. Carry it to the world.

thESource is published on the Web by LCMS District & Congregational Services-Youth Ministry. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1333 South Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295; 1-800-248-1930; www.lcms.org. Editor & Designer: Sherrah Holobaugh Behrens. VOL. 6 NO. 3 March 2009.