

## The Eighth Commandment

a sermon by Rev. Michael D. Gladish  
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The eighth commandment is, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:15-16). Since this law was written originally in Hebrew it is interesting to see it stated in various ways in English. One version (NIV) has “You shall not give false testimony...” in place of “bear false witness,” and another (Liv.B) has “You must not lie.” From the Latin of the Writings in explanation of the commandments (AC 8907) we also get, “You shalt not answer as a witness of a lie against your neighbor,” something quite different again and in a way more literal than other versions, but still with the same obvious meaning.

Of course, the old translations always had “Thou shalt not...,” and in the old version of the *Arcana*, “Thou shalt not answer against thy neighbor the witness of a lie,” which brings out the important point that God is addressing us as individuals, not as a group (One of the beauties of the Old English is the distinction between “thou,” which is a singular form of the personal pronoun, and “you,” which is always plural. We don’t get this in modern English and so may well miss the point that this communication is intended to be very personal, not just a set of laws for the masses.). In a sense God doesn’t want us to be concerned about what everybody else is doing, He wants us to pay attention for our own good; He is concerned about each one of us.

### The Natural Sense of the Commandment

This fact comes across with particular power when we consider the commandments in light of the spiritual sense, where the emphasis is on our personal convictions and internal attitudes. We’ll come back to that in a moment, but first, let’s remember that the natural sense isn’t just about criminal law. “In a wider natural sense this commandment forbids all kinds of lying and hypocrisy in public life with evil intent; also, criticizing and slandering one’s neighbor so as to undermine his honor, name and reputation, on which the whole of a person's character depends. In the widest natural sense it includes using trickery, guile and deliberate wrong-dealing against someone for various causes, such as enmity, hatred, revenge, envy, rivalry, etc. These evil actions contain *bearing false witness* hidden within them” (TCR #321).

The spiritual sense takes us to another level, but even before we get there let’s notice that the definition of false witness involves *deliberate* guile, *deliberate* evil intent. In cases where we make what we might call “honest mistakes,” saying things we *believe* to be true even when they’re not, we are NOT committing false witness – any more than killing someone by accident constitutes murder. Even so, this does not absolve us of the responsibility to vet what we read or hear, and to be careful about what we accept, believe and repeat. The thing is, that takes time and can involve a lot of work, not to mention emotional detachment, which is also hard, so these issues speak to the importance of real humility and restraint in how we speak. In any case it’s critical that we recognize, acknowledge and address this challenge.

Speaking to that point, you will recall the Lord’s well-known prescription for resolving difficulties between “brothers:” He said, “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 you...” then there are other steps to take (Matt. 18:15-20). On the face of it this first step sounds like an accusation, and it can be interpreted that way, but in fact the original Greek word

for “tell him” also carries the sense of *examination*, or scrutiny. “Look,” you might say, “Can we talk about this? Can we consider the implications here?” The principle is one of charity, which is why the word, brother, is used, since that word in Scripture always represents what is good. The term, neighbor, is used in the same way. There’s no point in making a big scene over some perceived offense when it could all come down to a simple misunderstanding, or lack of information.

In the context of the eighth Commandment the issue is false testimony against a neighbor, ***that is, against something good***, so when we bear false witness against the neighbor it’s not just a sin against the person, it’s a sin against good, either the good in that person or the good of the Lord’s own love in ourselves. But how can you know whether what you hear, feel and believe is good or evil, true or false? THAT’s the hard part, and that’s why careful examination and fact-checking on the issues is so critical. In short, if you don’t know, don’t tell, and if you’re concerned about something do your homework.

For example, if you hear something about a person that seems bad or dangerous, of course caution is in order. But until the matter is confirmed it is inappropriate to talk about it – except perhaps for the purpose of inquiry. Remember Shem and Japheth walking backwards to cover their naked father, Noah. In the spiritual sense this is all about making excuses for those who mess up, and overlooking their evils as much as possible (AC #1079).

To take a different sort of example, consider the insurance industry. We tend to think that if it’s covered by insurance a claim isn’t going to cost anything, and so in many claims there’s a great temptation to exaggerate the value of a loss, and get more than we deserve. But then what? – everybody’s rates go up, insurance becomes very expensive, and then honest people begin to suffer either by not being able to afford coverage or by subsidizing the abusers. This is particularly hurtful in the health care industry where doctors and drug companies have to charge everyone a lot more money for their services than they normally would so that they can pay for malpractice insurance and legal fees to fight fraudulent or exaggerated claims against them.

### The Spiritual Sense

Anyway, all this leads us pretty directly to the *spiritual sense* of the commandment, which, we read, means “to persuade people that what is false *in faith* is true, and that the evil *of life* is the good of life, and the reverse, but (again) to do this *purposely, and not from ignorance*” (TCR #322). At this level we’re talking about ***faith*** and spiritual life – which we draw from the Word, preaching, teaching and conversations with others about such things (DP #154). The simple fact is that we do influence one another, and so we need to be careful about what we accept – and repeat, especially in spiritual matters. For if false witness on the natural level is bad, this is much worse, since it has the effect of really damaging the heavenly potential of those involved – not only our intended victims but us, ourselves, who commit that sin.

Again, examples can illustrate. If we consider someone else’s faith in God to be irrational or even silly, it can be very tempting to want to argue and expose the weakness or fallacy of that faith. But to do so without a clear indication that the person wants that sort of help could be very destructive and cause him or her to become cynical about any faith. In this illustration, by the way, you can see the clear correlation with the commandment against (spiritual) murder. We’ll come back to this in a moment.

Meanwhile, we might sincerely worry about people who believe in salvation by faith alone, thinking that they *need* our help to correct that doctrine. Well, maybe so, and maybe not! Many people who accept that doctrine in principle intuitively recognize that what they do in life matters, and so may not need correcting at all. In fact their faith often seems to be clearer and stronger than our own in terms of keeping them focused on the saving power of the Lord. Again, we need to be careful.

### The Celestial Sense

Finally, “in the highest or *celestial sense*, to bear false witness means to blaspheme the Lord and the Word, and thus to banish truth itself from the church” (TCR #323).

OK, so what is blasphemy? The word has a sort of medieval ring to it, but it means, quite simply, to speak – or think – irreverently, scornfully or contemptuously about the Lord, and about what He has revealed in the Word. This, too, can be challenging for us, especially when we have doubts – for any reason – about what we have been taught. In fact the literal sense of the Word is so full of statements and ideas that we today consider almost repugnant, the temptation to make fun of them can be almost irresistible. But if we *assume* there is an important, spiritual reason for them to be written the way they are we will resist that temptation, and instead consider seriously what that reason could be. We call this “the affirmative principle,” a disposition that ultimately leads to genuine intelligence and wisdom (AC 2568), whereas blasphemy just separates us from the Lord, and makes us miserable. It can also very quickly lead to profanation, a deplorable, dehumanizing state of mixing truth with evil, and falsity with good (DP #226, 229).

### Self-Deception as a form of False Witness

As dreadful as it is, we can do this by all sorts of misrepresentation and manipulation of the teachings of the Word – including the Heavenly Doctrines – to serve our own purposes or to prove points we have already determined from some self-centered or worldly loves. We can do it by arguing, reasoning, even just thinking along lines that are hurtful or destructive of innocence or of another person’s feelings. And worst of all, because it influences everything within and around us, we can do it by simply lying to *ourselves* about our way of life, convincing ourselves that it’s O.K. when it's not O.K. This is the sin of self-justification, almost always associated with the sin of deceit, and it is extremely hard to break. Let us therefore beware of any personal conflicts of interest as we honor the commandment about false witness.

### Relationship to Other Commandments

One of the powerful things about the Ten Commandments is the way they all interconnect. Every one bears some relation to the others, and the eighth Commandment is no exception. Consider, for example, what is said about the seventh Commandment, which forbids theft:

"In the natural sense... this extends also to all forms of imposition and unlawful gain, usury and exaction, as well as to the payment of stated contributions and taxes, and the discharge of debts. Workmen transgress against this commandment who are dishonest and fraudulent in performing their duties; merchants who practice deception in regard to their goods in respect of weight, measure and the accounts they render,” (and so on, TCR 317).

We could list dozens of other examples of theft, from poor workmanship in manufacturing to the misuse of expense accounts or the deliberate waste of company time. In each case we could see a variety of economic and social consequences, but, to the point, in every case we would see how the sin of theft necessarily implies the sin of false witness. For even if no words are ever spoken, theft involves a misrepresentation of the facts. And so it is with all the other commandments, which is one reason why we are taught that to sin against one is to sin against them all – and to obey one from set purpose is to obey them all (BE 113, CL 528 & TCR 523).

#### Correlation with the Lord's Prayer

Not surprisingly, then, there is a direct correlation of all these core teachings with the ten petitions of the Lord's Prayer, in which we ask for His help to overcome the specified evils. In the case of the seventh and eighth Commandments, they line up nicely with the phrases, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," the temptation being to steal, or claim for ourselves what belongs to others, and the evil being the self-love or love of the world what motivates us to commit false witness.

In the end the eighth commandment, like all the others, calls us back to the fundamental principle of who is in charge, who we respect, who has real power, and who can change our lives for the better. And in this we are reminded constantly, everywhere in the Word, that it is not ourselves but the Lord. That is why we must learn what He teaches and study to understand it, then examine ourselves and pray to Him for the determination, patience and forbearance, the inspiration, the affirmative attitude, the help and support that only He can give.

Anyone (unless he or she is really unbalanced) can keep from telling an overt lie. But on a deeper level only the Lord alone can withhold us from the *internal* sin of false witness because this involves our selfish loves and our worldly natures, which prevent us even from trying to do better. So the Lord urges us, speaking personally with us and pleading with us, to hear and do what He says because He says it, shunning the evils of false witness along with all the other commandments as sins against Him so that He can improve our lives from within, thereby taking away not only the outward expression of sin but even the thought and intention of it so that we can rest and find peace and be truly blessed, not only in this world for a very short time but to eternity in the spiritual world. So we will not just DO well, we will BE well, and the kingdom of heaven will come.

Amen.

Lessons:       Genesis 9:18-29  
                   Children's talk on being truthful AND "covering up"

*Matthew* 18:1-5 and 15-20

*Apocalypse Explained* #1019:2, see next page.

*Apocalypse Explained #1019:2*

The eighth commandment of the Decalogue, “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” shall now be explained. “To bear false witness” signifies in the sense nearest to the letter to lie about the neighbor by accusing him falsely. But in the internal sense it signifies to call what is just unjust, and what is unjust just, and to confirm this by means of falsities; while in the inmost sense it signifies to falsify the truth and good of the Word, and on the other hand to prove a falsity of doctrine to be true by confirming it by means of fallacies, appearances, fabrications, knowledges falsely applied, sophistries and the like. The confirmations themselves and the consequent persuasions are false witnesses, for they are false testimonies. From this it can be seen that what is here meant is not only false witness before a judge, but even a judge himself who in perverting right makes what is just unjust, and what is unjust just, for he as well as the witness himself acts the part of a false witness. The same is true of everyone who makes what is right to appear crooked, and what is crooked to appear right; likewise any ecclesiastical leader who falsifies the truth of the Word and perverts its good. In a word, every falsification of truth, spiritual, moral, and civil, which is done from an evil heart, is false witness.

Amen.

A Prayer for this service:

O Lord, inspire us, we pray, with a clear understanding of our responsibilities for our own happiness and peace. Teach us through the conscience You have given every one of us to stay on a straight path of thinking and doing what is right for its own sake, not for ourselves but for You. So when we confront any evil or disorder, Lord, help us to understand how we can speak the truth with love and patience, trusting in Your Divine Providence but still taking full responsibility and co-operate with You to make things right.

Take away our excuses, Lord, and show us the power of real humility as we confront the evils of our own pride and selfishness, turning to You, Your love, Your wisdom and Your power to provide for our true blessings in this world and the next.

Amen.