

We're probably all familiar with the Famous American Fibs:

- The check is in the mail.
- I'll start my diet tomorrow.
- Give me your number and the doctor will call you right back.
- One size fits all.
- Leave your resume and we'll keep it on file.
- This hurts me more than it hurts you.
- I just need five minutes of your time.

And while the Eighth Commandment is about such annoying little false testimonies, this Commandment is ultimately about something far, far worse—it's about gossip, it's about slander, it's about libel, and defamation, and smearing. See, we've all heard it said that knowledge is power, and having dirt on somebody, for some strange reason, gives people a power trip. Maybe it's because they want to feel better about themselves, or they want to get even, or just want to have leverage over someone else, but spreading such damaging knowledge about others—whether it's true or not—does some real serious harm.

I remember coming across something recently, and it's stuck with me ever since—"gossip is reputation theft." Reputations, after all, are very valuable—*invaluable* even—and there's a high price to pay when they get hijacked. "Over and above our health and our wealth, even our wife and our life," Luther points out, "is the treasure of a good and honorable reputation. Without it," says Luther, "it's unbearable to live out in the world in open shame and contempt." Reputations are incredibly fragile, and even more difficult to repair.

Now, I don't have to tell you that—I'm sure in one way or another, all of us know this firsthand. At some point in our lives, you and I have been on the receiving end of backbiting, backstabbing, and just plain being talked about behind our backs. We know how it hurts, how tough it is to live down, how it can ruin our lives.

And many of us this morning still wear the scars. For some of us, it's been enough to make us develop an inferiority complex—we did something stupid and all the teasing and the secrets still make us feel inadequate even today. Then there are others of us who now have trust issues—because we opened up to someone and they went and let the cat out of the bag, we're afraid to ever bare our souls to another human being again. And still others of us live in constant fear that eventually those skeletons in our closets will see the light of day, and we'll be forced to relive the whole shameful mess yet one more time. You and I know for ourselves what it's like to be the victim of some vicious rumor, and how this Commandment has been put in place for our protection.

But still, let's not kid ourselves. There was a pastor one time who told me this story. Apparently, in his congregation, there was this one busybody who really had it out for him. Sure, she'd be all smiles when he was around, but as soon as he left the room she'd be lying about him through those very same teeth. Well, the Sunday came when the Bible readings were about gossip. So, "Here's my chance!" that pastor thought, "I'm really gonna let 'er have it!"

Well, the whole sermon he was making sure not to glance in her direction—he didn't want to embarrass her, of course—but that didn't stop him from aiming every word at her slanderous heart. He wasn't trying to be a bully about it, but just wanted to give her a wakeup call. So, after the service, as the members were filing out of the church to shake hands with the pastor, here she comes walking up to him. She stops right in front of the pastor, grabs his hand, and says, "Pastor, that was an excellent sermon!" "Yes!" the pastor screamed inside, "I finally got through to her! Maybe now she'll amend her ways!" But his excitement quickly deflated when she leaned in and whispered, "Lord knows there are people in this church who needed to hear that."

Let's not you and I pretend to only play the part of the victim. Like that lady in the story, Lord knows we can dish it more than we can take it. I'm sure we've all done our fair share of backbiting and backstabbing and talking behind other people's backs too. I mean, here in this morning's Gospel—Matthew 18—Jesus gives us three easy steps toward conflict resolution, yet we so rarely follow a single one of them.

Jesus says, before you go and open that big mouth of yours, y'know talk to everybody *but* the person you actually have a problem with, first go to them in private and let them know how you feel. Of course, don't go in there charging like a raging bull ready to tear things up, but go patiently, calmly, gently, always with the hope of reconciliation. Now, most of the time this'll be all that it takes—you'll say, "That thing you did really made me feel bad," and they'll say, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I never meant to hurt you," and then you'll say something like, "Thank you for understanding. I'm glad we could work this out." And there you have it, problem solved, case closed. You might even find that talking out your problems like this actually brings you closer to that person than ever before rather than pull you further apart.

But if at first you don't succeed, says Jesus, then try, try again. This time, still go with the goal of making peace, but now bring with you 2-3 eye witnesses, people who were actually there, who can bring an objective viewpoint. The point is, maybe the guilty party just needs to hear it from somebody else. But, of course, if *that* doesn't patch things up between you two, then, Jesus says, *only then* can you go public. Now again, this isn't an invitation to follow your first instinct, which was to tell everyone what they did to you to elicit sympathy and make the other guy look like a monster. No, you should still have a heart for making peace, so out of deep seated concern you bring the case to the group and say, "Would y'all help me mend fences with so-and so?" But, if after all that, those three easy steps for conflict resolution, it *still* doesn't work out—which is honestly kind of hard to believe—absolutely the last, last, *last* resort, Jesus says—and you can almost hear Him sigh as He says this—is to just leave them to themselves and pray that one day they'll come around. I mean, you tried. You did everything you could. You followed proper protocol. So, just shrug it off and move on. Your conscience is clear. All guilt is on them, not you. So don't you dare carry it on *your* shoulders anymore! Don't let them continue to hurt you.

Now, who of us here consistently does that? If we now took a show of hands, chances are good that nobody in this room would have theirs up. Which then tells me that we all have a serious problem. You and I have disobeyed Jesus, we've hurt Him, we have even wronged His friends by talking bad about them. And if ever there was just cause for someone to go and air *our* dirty laundry to the world, it would be Jesus going and telling everyone what a big gossip you and I are. "Secrets, secrets are no fun. Secrets, secrets hurt someone. Whisper, whisper as you may. All your friends will go away." But Jesus doesn't do that—He's not like us.

No, Jesus actually practices what He preaches—every time. He follows His own three easy steps. And, we come to learn, He's been following them this whole time right under our noses. As you've been sitting here this morning, He's come to you, *you*, personally and privately. Sure, He's brought two witnesses, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, but He speaks to you one-on-one today. In His Word, with His Law, He convicts your conscience, to help you see what you've done wrong. And He does this not to hurt you, not to lay into you, but to make peace with you. Will you make peace with Him?

See, over and over, whenever you just couldn't help yourself but just had to let something bad about your neighbor slip, He was right to be angry with you. You were doing great harm to Him and the planet He came to save. This is supposed to be a place of life, and light, and love—but you and I have been destroying it with our dark disdain. And every time Jesus would tense up, ready to lash out at us, as He'd raise His hands in fury, Jesus would . . . see the holes where the nails had been, and He'd be taken back to the cross. It was there that He had every opportunity to say to God, "Look, *look* what they've done to Me. They've mocked Me, they've spit on Me, and they've hung Me out to die. See what they've even done to My friends, My disciples; they've made them go running scared." But that's not what Jesus said, not even close. No, when He had every possible reason to gang up on us and make our lives a living hell for what we've done, this is what came out of His mouth—"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Turns out, if you think of yourself as just a sinner this morning, you're not working with all the facts. You're not just a gossip, not just someone who's given false testimony against your neighbor. No, if you think that then you are actually

giving false testimony against yourself. It might sound like that's what this morning's been about, but it's not at all—that is not the truth, the whole truth, nor nothing but the truth. That is actually a truth that is taken too far.

In the church we have a word for that—heresy. It would be like saying that Jesus is fully God . . . and just leaving it at that. True, yes, but there's more to the story—that's called Docetism. Or to say Jesus is fully man . . . but still not saying more. Again, true, but that's not the whole story either—that's Arianism. Jesus is paradoxically both fully divine and fully human at the same time. To believe that you are just some big hopeless disappointment to God is the biggest heresy you could ever commit—let's call it Bihopelessdisappointmentism. And it would fly in the face of everything Jesus ever did for you. No, the real truth is, thanks to Jesus, paradoxically you couldn't be more perfect.

When Jesus reminds you today of the Eighth Commandment, to follow His three easy steps, to live as He does, He's only reminding you of who you really are. You are just like Him—holy, blameless, righteous. And so what you do is to match up with who you are—to do otherwise would be to live a lie. But regardless of what you could possibly do, nothing will ever change who you are. In Christ—in His forgiveness, in His grace, in His mercy—He could never hold anything against you, but looking at His nail-pierced hands He's reminded of how He has made you perfect in every way. And in just a few moments, He'll tell you as much Himself. As He visits you privately, personally, one-on-one, in His true body and blood, He'll come to make peace with you again—"The peace of the Lord be with you always," He'll say. And you will know exactly where you stand with Him.

When I began this sermon, I shared with you the Famous American Fibs, but before we come to a close, I'd like to remind you of the Famous Christian Truths—

- "God demonstrates His love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).
- "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us" (1 John 3:16).
- "Greater love has no one than this, that He lay down His life for His friends" (John 15:13).
- "[Nothing] can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39)
- "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son" (John 3:16).
- "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).

. . . And that's no lie!