Counting Down the 10 Commandments:

The 8th Commandment: Thou Shall Not Bear

False Witness Against Thy Neighbor

Based on Mark 3:20-30 & Matthew 18:15-20

For our Midweek Lenten Sermons, we will be counting down the 10 Commandments. The Ten Commandments are God’s Law, and God’s Law tells us what we are supposed to do. The Law is written on our hearts, and our consciences bear witness to the truth of these commandments. And there are two responses to the knowledge of God and his law, one is to suppress it, the other is to face it and repent and flee to Christ for mercy.

And so today, and throughout these Midweek Lenten services, we are going to repent. But remember, repentance is not something you do, it’s something the Holy Spirit does, through the hearing of the Word of God and believing it. For this Lententide, we will be hearing the word of God in a countdown of the 10 Commandments, because in hearing the Law, God produces the repentance and faith that all our good works and noble intentions can’t muster in the least.

One thing to remember about the commandments, there are summarized in two, **1. Love God with all your soul, heart, mind and strength, and 2. Love your neighbor as yourself.** Friends, this means that there is nothing we do that is not to be informed by God’s law. A mistaken view of the 10 commandments is that God has roughly only 10 rules. I have to keep those rules, and if I do, then I can do whatever I want. That is wrong. There are not 10 rules, but 1 rule, love. And this love is not some starry-eyed romantic feeling, love is charity, it’s self-giving, self-sacrificing thing.

And so when in the Small Catechism, Martin Luther explains the 10 Commandments he does so with reference to the law of love, that is, the law of self-sacrifice. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:7, **“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”** An 1 Peter 4:8, “**Love covers a multitude of sins.**” These Ten Commandments are nothing other than examples of how to love your neighbor.

And the 8th commandment too deals with how we are to love our neighbor, specifically, how we are to talk about him. “**You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor**.” This means that “We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.”

The eight commandment forbids us from telling lies about our neighbor, but not only that, even when we know the truth, Paul reminds us in Ephesians that we are to speak the truth in love (4:15). This includes, then also, any and all attempts to harm your neighbor’s reputation. We call this gossip. **This means that you sin if you say things about your neighbor that you only assume to be true, no matter how convinced you are of it, you should not say it**. Why would you, to elevate yourself by putting them down? To be the root of the community grapevine? If the only thing you’ll gain by talking about someone is a feeling of self-satisfaction, and the bully pride of knowing you’ve taken them down-a-notch, just hold your tongue. More than that, even if you have the evidence, and you know somebody’s shameful secret and it’s true, don’t share it so that you can be the one who provides of the hottest conversation topic around the water cooler. Proverbs 11:13 says, “**Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered**.” Even if you know the truth about somebody, don’t spread it around simply for the sake of harming his reputation. That is not the work of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, God gives to everyone the gift of a good reputation. Today they use the word “right”, the “right” to a good reputation, but “gift” is better. God gives to everyone ***the gift*** of a good reputation, and if you harm that reputation senselessly or carelessly, you are *murdering and vandalizing* the reputation that God gave them. James 3:5 says, “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.” The small fire is gossip and slander, the forest it sets ablaze is one’s reputation. Don’t use your tongue to commit arson. Your neighbor’s reputation is his property, help hip protect it. Defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest possible way.

A good reputation is easier to destroy than maintain. That’s why pastors are called to be “beyond reproach”, that is, they are to have a good reputation. **You know, for some people and some cultures, a good reputation is more important than anything else**. I have been told that the Japanese culture is built around the idea of honour and shame, which are more serious than life and death. Many people would rather die than live with the shame of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ fill-in-the blank.

And ladies and gentlemen, God is no ogre. We all carry around in our bodies the shame of sin, and though we are to acknowledge it, he allows us to hide it, and helps to protect our reputation in spite of our sin. When Adam and Eve first sinned, God caught them, and he rebuked them for because of their negligence, they could not live in paradise anymore. **He caught them, he rebuked them, and then what did he do? He made them clothes out of animal skins, for they were naked and exposed.**  Their shame would make life unbearable in this world already cursed with thistles and thorns; so God provides them a way out, makes them clothes, protect and preserves their dignity and reputation. But he does so at a cost, doesn’t he? Did you ever notice that the first death recorded in the bible was the death of the animals used to make Adam and Eve’s clothing from skins. **These animals died at the very hands of God himself; he sacrificed these, his own beloved creatures in order to cover the shame of Adam and Eve and preserve their reputation**, even though they deserved to bear the shame eternally.

God was responsible for the first death and sacrifice in the bible, and he was also responsible for the last…and both were for the sake of his imaged creation…mankind whom he loved. The Psalmist writes, “**What is man, that thou are mindful of him, and the Son of Man that though carest for him?**” The final sacrifice offered by God was his own son, who was betrayed, falsely accused, convicted and afflicted, mocked with a crown of thorns and reed scepter, and stripped naked to hang naked on a cross for public display. Adam and Eve, God covered their shame, but it still had to be dealt with. Because Jesus was naked on the cross and shamed; Adam and Eve and you and me, can live a life clothed in him, shameless and blameless, not because we are without sin and shame, nor as though we have anything to boast of in ourselves, but because as Colossians 3:3 says, **We have died and our life is now hidden with Christ.**

One thing you should remember this Lent, dear Christian friends is that you are already dead. All your ambitions, your goals, your personal beliefs and preferences, your opinions about what will make this world a better place, your glory, your wit, your brilliant plans**, your clever schemes, your attempts to make a difference, your personal touch, your favourite colour, your unique perspective, the way you were raised, the people who influenced your life**, your awards and trophies and other honourific memorabilia you’ve happened to compile in this life of yours,… **your kind nature, your extra effort, your “can do” attitude, it’s all worthless, cause you are dead.** You may carry around some souvenirs, but that is your old-self, and if it has no connection to Christ it is dead branches on new tree. Paul says in Romans 6, **that when you were baptized, you died in Christ so that you can now live in him**. Jesus says in Mark 8:35, “**but whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it.” In Christ you are a new creation**.

One more thing to mention for tonight, and that is the sin against the Holy Spirit, also called “blasphemy against the holy spirit.” Blasphemy is simply bearing false witness against God, and when it’s done against the Holy Spirit, it is an eternal sin. Man cannot do this directly against the Father because no one has seen the Father except Jesus (John 6:46). No one, cannot do this against the Son because, though the son is God, he reveals himself to us in humanity, in humility, in servant hood. But the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is possible, because he worked and continues to work in this world in power and in glory through the Word of God. You can directly and knowingly bear false witness against the Holy Spirit, and that is an eternal sin. And the truth is, there’s no coming back from that one.

In Mark 3, Jesus was casting out demons. And the Pharisees, in their jealousy and arrogance, challenge Jesus' power. And so they slander him. They bear false witness against him and conclude, "**It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons**."

Now Jesus first, points out how ridiculous it is to say that the devil casts out the devil, but then gets to the heart of the matter. "**Careful," he says, "aside from making ridiculous arguments you are committing blasphemy**." And you can blaspheme me, and be forgiven, but there is no forgiveness for bearing false witness against the Holy Spirit. There is no forgiveness for seeing the Spirit's work, knowing it's the Spirit's work, and then calling it the work of demons in order to suppress the truth. There is no coming back from that, for “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin, for they were saying he has an unclean spirit.”

This Lententide is also a time to keep perspective. **We need to remember that we don’t air out people’s dirty laundry for the scandal of it; for some forbidden tabloid-pulp thrill of secret knowledge**. We live in a society that’s becoming more and more shameless all the time, and its unbelievable how desensitized we’ve become to sin. People are happy enough to air out their own dirty laundry *and then tell you not to judge them for it*. But you have to judge them, especially within the church. St. Paul writes to the church in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, “**For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.**”

None of us are to kill another person’s reputation. But if someone is acting shamelessly, they are killing their own reputation. **And just as you would endeavor to stop someone from committing suicide, you should stop them from killing their reputation.**  Because shame takes you farther away from God. And friends there is an eternal sin, a point where someone is so far gone that--it’s not that God won’t forgive them if they repent--it’s that they are incapable of repentance. Their consciences are seared and hearts are darkened. **They would even knowingly bear false witness against the Holy Spirit without so much as a blink, because their consciences are seared…deadened by death**.

You save a person from shame, from committing reputational suicide, by judging them, rebuking them before it’s too late. **And you do so not with your own personal evaluation of things or knack for reaching people, but with God’s Word**. That’s why he gave us his Word, to rebuke, exhort, and to encourage. If someone is shamelessly sinning either by open moral licentiousness or by openly denying God’s Word and it’s power…That’s not bearing false witness, that is speaking the truth in love.

I have to say this today because we are in a society that says it’s wrong to judge. Ironic isn’t it, “**It’s wrong to judge**.”…isn’t that itself a judgment? “**Don’t tell me what to do**” ---Hmmmm…Isn’t *that* telling *me* what to do? Anyway, aside from it being a ridiculous argument, the “don’t judge” attitude also dangerous. It is not slanderous to tell somebody that they are wrong. In fact, God requires us to confront people with their faults, because there is nothing more unloving than to stand idly by while your friend or your neighbor dies in his unrepentant sin. And so if you don’t judge your brother or sister in the church, you have sinned.

Repent. And if you fail again, repent again and don’t worry. **Because you win the ballgame, not by having the best batting average, but by staying in the game.** So to you are saved, not by your success rate in keeping the law, but by staying in Christ. Hearing his word, and receiving his Sacrament, for he already batted .1000 and pitched a perfect game for the church. If you find that you’ve sinned you don’t have to despair, because you’ve died and your life is hidden with Christ. He already bore your shame; he already confessed to your sin, and he already suffered your punishment, and you already wear his robe of righteousness. The world can’t see it and so they mock you and think you’re the one who’s naked, but God can see it and the only approval you need anyway is in His eyes alone. For when you were baptized you were clothed with his Son so that, wearing that Baptism, he can look down upon you and say the same thing he said to His beloved Son…”With you I am well pleased.”