

## **“The gift of 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment.” Exodus 20:1-17**

**“And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. “Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. “You shall not murder. “You shall not commit adultery. “You shall not steal. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour’s.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today we have for our meditation this delightful topic. The Commandments of our gracious and merciful Lord. Too often we fail to appreciate what an enormous gift they are.

Our God is God the Creator, and He is the Giver of every good gift. What else does He do? He gives us His instructions, His own Commandments, to teach us how to receive His gifts properly and also to protect His gifts.

The list of His gifts is incredible and heart-warming. We will only quickly skim it and then we will focus on one of those gifts in particular trying to appreciate how important it is, and how carefully we need to protect it.

Now the amazing gifts of our Triune God. With the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment God protects the greatest of His gifts. That is, Himself. Just reflect on this, the Triune God speaks to you and says:

“I know you as you are. Your heart and thoughts and life. Still, I want to be your God, and I want you to know that I am your God. I want to be with you and to bless you and to protect you from every counterfeit god who may want to exploit you and rob you of true life and joy and peace! Just come to me!”

2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment protects God's name. Or we could say our access to the Triune God. Imagine, He has given us permission to speak to Him directly, and He has promised to listen to our prayers. Not one will be missed.

3<sup>rd</sup> Commandments protect the gift of rest. Yes, we are created for very active lives, to participate in God's work of creation and ordering, keeping and working His garden, therefore we all need to rest.

He Himself makes provisions for our rest, for physical rest, intellectual, emotional and most importantly – for spiritual rest, as He invites you every Sunday to be with Him as He renews us with His holy presence.

4<sup>th</sup> Commandment protects the gift of order and peace. 5<sup>th</sup> the gift of love and wellbeing. 6<sup>th</sup> the gifts of marriage and sexuality. 7<sup>th</sup> the gift of earthly possessions. 8<sup>th</sup> commandment protects the gift of good reputation and truth, and our lives in community.

9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> protect the gifts of contentment, gratitude and joy as we live by God's grace and under His generous provision day by day. Wonderful gifts, and often we can appreciate them the most when some of them are in danger.

**Today we will closer reflect on the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment.** “You shall not bear false testimony against your neighbour.” Remember, the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment protects our reputation, truth and our lives in community.

It is rather obvious that good reputation is much needed for us to be able to live among others and to flourish. Imagine if someone falsely gossips that you are a liar, or a thief or an adulterer, or sluggard, or whatever – how seriously it can damage not only your reputation, but also your life, work, your relationships.

This issue is also very important for Christian community. Almost every letter in the NT mentions this problem – gossiping. As one of my Seminary professors said: “It is gossiping that destroys the Church the most.”

Sometimes in our short-sightedness we may not think it through – how incredibly far reaching and destructive this impact of our tongues may be. As James wrote: “For every kind of beast [...] can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.” (James 3:6-8)

Just the last week I spoke with a fellow pastor and he shared the recent disaster that such false testimonies have brought upon a wonderful international mission initiative, where he is involved – damaging reputation, causing financial problems, dragging those poor missionaries through hell and back... sad story.

But that is true not only on international scale – no congregation, no any individual Christian is fully protected from gossips. But think about this – who in the Church would be the most likely objects of gossiping and false testimonies? Yes, of course, pastors. Why? For one, it has the spiritual dimension to it.

Whom would Satan try to attack the most? Of course, those who are entrusted with the task of rescuing people from under his power by means of the Gospel and Holy Sacraments. But there is also other explanation.

No pastor will be liked by everyone. We wish we would. But if you do not like someone, you won't like anything they do. That's how it is. Then, if you hear something, true or false, that seems to support your dislike, it may sound like a "good news" that have to be shared with everyone.

Now, let's see, what the possible consequences of such gossiping can be for the Church. We may share such false testimonies with other members. We may share them with our extended families and friends, who may or may not be Christians. A little word here, a little word there, what a big deal!

But ... it is a big deal. If such gossip is spread among the members of the congregation – how will they look at their pastor? The seed of distrust and suspicion is sown. The pastor may be preaching and members may be listening in anger: "What a hypocrite! Remember what he said, or did, or didn't do!"

Which means that the pastor's ministry may suffer significantly. Now, if such gossip is spread among those who don't belong to the Church, that is such a wonderful tool for Satan: "Did you hear this? See what these Christians are like! See what this pastor is like! You better keep away from that place for good!"

How could these people be ever invited to that congregation? We may as well forget about outreach efforts. Besides gossips seem to have wings, they really get around, and ... they often they reach the ears of their objects as well.

Then that member or that pastor gets to hear what some of his or her dear fellow brothers or sisters in Christ have been saying behind their back. Their spouses get to hear it, their families get to hear it.

Just think about this – how would that family feel attending the next service, knowing that some of the people who smile and seem to be so friendly, have been gossiping. Will they feel at home in the midst of that congregation?

Or think about that pastor – how will he stand before the congregation to preach the Gospel knowing that some of his fellow-saints, for whom he prays and cares, have done such thing. How will that impact his ability to serve?

I hope that we begin to see that this is not a small matter; the consequences of such gossiping can be so far reaching and so damaging for the Church, destroying our trust internally, and also our credibility externally.

I really hope this illustration helps us to appreciate more the gift that the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment protects, and the goodness of our Lord, who cares for us and for our lives together, and for the community of His beloved saints.

**But what can be done, if such gossiping does happen**, and, unfortunately, I don't think that any congregation is immune to it. Two simple things. **First – awareness and second – forgiveness.** First about awareness.

We need to understand as clearly as possible, that such gossiping is hurting the body of Christ, it is hurting our dear Lord Jesus and His efforts to gather His scattered brothers and sisters into His Father's house.

It is hurting His Church, the wonderful fellowship of God's saints. Satan rejoices if he can use Christian tongues to cause harm to the Church, that's like a dessert for him. To destroy the Church from inside. I can't possibly imagine that any Christian would want that.

Once we are aware of the possible dangers of such gossiping, I would hope, that we practice diligently the teaching of the Small Catechism: "We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbour, but defend him, [think and] speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything." Or if what we hear sounds serious enough, we should actually try to find out what the truth in that matter is.

But what if such sin has already been committed, then what? It's simple. The same as with every other sin. Remember, the second thing? Forgiveness. Now listen carefully for this is very, very important. Think about this for a while – what is harder – to forgive or to ask for forgiveness?

I would guess that usually to ask for forgiveness is much harder. Do you know why? The answer is very simple. Because we actually don't believe the Gospel. We don't believe it with our hearts. It is easier to forgive, because then we are the good ones doing the forgiving to those who are not so good.

But what if we have sinned, what if I need to ask for forgiveness? That would mean to admit that I am ... not that good, not that moral, not that righteous, that I am not that perfect, that I have failed, that I have done something that I now feel ashamed and embarrassed of.

But if we truly believe that we are sinners, forgiven, accepted and loved as we are by our gracious and loving Father, we shouldn't feel that way. This is the Gospel, that our God knows our hearts, He knows our thoughts.

He knows everything we have done. He knows every single time when we have sinned, every single time when we have failed to be good, every time when we have let Him down and have hurt our fellow humans. He knows all of that and yet... He forgives us and He embraces us. He forgives you. Please, hear it!

Jesus Christ forgives you all your sins. Every one of them. Do you see what it means? We don't have to be perfect. If our God accepts us as we are, we can accept ourselves as well, we can admit that "yes, sorry, I have failed again".

This is what the Gospel gives us. This wonderful freedom to be who we are. Forgiven sinners. Imperfect. As Jesus has already forgiven me everything, I am free to admit also to my fellow humans, that “yes, I have sinned against you, dear brother, or sister, please, forgive me!” This is what the Holy Spirit empowers us to do. This is how God’s forgiveness transforms us.

We don’t need to hide, or to pretend, or to try to appear more holy than we are. No! We are free to be imperfect and loved as we are. This is what Jesus wants to assure you every time when your pastor says: “On behalf of Jesus Christ and by His command I forgive you all your sins”.

This is what Jesus wants to assure you, every time when He gives you His holy and precious body and blood: “Take them, eat and drink, for the forgiveness of all your sins!” That is what the Gospel is about.

God’s undeserved grace and forgiveness that takes away our need to pretend we are better, and enables us to live as people who are not only free to forgive, but also free to ask for forgiveness and then gladly to do what we can to amend the damage that our sin has caused.

When that happens, the Church comes alive, the angels and heavenly hosts rejoice, and the Church experiences the fullness of divine joy, for by God’s grace we have triumphed over sin, and in the power of the Holy Spirit we have restored what was broken. That is what the communion of God’s saints is about.

I pray today that the Commandments would show us clearly what we have done wrong. I pray that the Holy Spirit would bring the freeing Gospel message into the depth of our hearts, to assure and ascertain us of God’s favour, and would enable us to live as people humble in our confession and generous with our forgiveness. For this is who we are redeemed to be.

This is who you truly are.

Amen.