



## 8 FENCING THE HEART

### THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

*What does this mean for us?*

We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way.

**D**o you think God knows your name? It might seem impossible. You are just one person—not only one in a million, but one in billions.

But God does know your name. In fact, when God made the decision to be your God, he gave you your name. It happened when you were baptized. As the pastor spoke the word and washed you with water, God joined your name to his. “Vance William” or “Erica Louise,” the pastor said, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Having given you your name, God is as concerned about it as about his own. You remember how God protects his name with the Second Commandment. In this commandment, God



is doing the same for yours. And God protects your name for the same reason: it is your handle. People use it to get hold of you, to speak with you and about you. A good name means freedom: the freedom to live and move and serve as you await God's new day. So God protects it.

### *The freedom in your name*

You don't have to look far to see the differences between a good name and a bad one. Classmates who have good names with your teachers, for instance, have an easier time of it. If there is any trouble in your classroom, the teacher will usually assume that those with good names aren't to blame. And when it comes time for grades, a student with a good name will usually get the benefit of the doubt. A bad name works just the opposite.

The kind of name you have makes a big difference with your classmates, too. Whatever causes it, when people get bad names they soon learn that there are some people who won't have much to do with them. If the word gets out that they do drugs, steal, or that there's something else wrong with them, people may avoid them.

The kind of name you have, then, is awfully important. It makes a tremendous difference in how well you do at school, what kind of friends you have, and the kind of opportunities you get.

The name you get now will follow you away to a job or a college, too, in your records and recommendations. And the name you get there will follow you the rest of your life.

No wonder, then, that God is so concerned about your name. It's not only a handle. It's a key. When your name is good, there are all kinds of freedom in it. It opens doors so that you can go places and do things; people accept, respect, and appreciate you. If your name gets bad, the doors close; there are places you can't go, things you can't do, friends you can't have or keep.

There's nothing the old self wants more in both you and your neighbors than to build up a name that people respect. If you can get hold of that kind of key, it can open the doors to all kinds of other tricks.



Jeffrey High

To get this kind of name, the old Adam or Eve takes shortcuts, trying to make a name for you by dragging down the names of others around you.

### *The name dropper*

One place the old self can do this is in law courts. When people are sued or accused of crimes, their names are at stake. If they lose, they will be fined, spend years in prison, or both. And the bad names they get will follow them for many years.

With so much at stake, the old self has good hunting in the courts. To drag down the name of another person there, all it takes is a few lies or half truths on the witness stand. The witness can claim a good name for testifying against a lawbreaker, and the victim pays the cost of it.

That is the first thing God forbids with this commandment: bearing false witness against someone in a courtroom or other places where authorities are searching for the truth. God forbids it not only to protect you and your neighbors, but to keep order in your community. Lying witnesses destroy the justice we need to live together peacefully.

But courtrooms are just the beginning. The old self can destroy names wherever people talk with one another, whether it is at school, in church or a restaurant, on the phone, or on



paper. And it has a whole arsenal to hunt with. One of the old self's weapons is slander, saying something false about another person that damages the person's reputation. Another is betrayal, passing along secrets or other information someone would prefer to keep private. A third is gossip, truths, half-truths, and rumors that put other people in a bad light.

All of these weapons are easily used. They strike quietly in little comments like "that teacher isn't fair," "that girl is stuck up," or "that guy cheats." But no matter how small they seem, these comments can do terrible damage.

In fact, whole sexes and races of people have gotten bad names from small comments. Men have taken away part of the good names of women by saying that they are less able than men. People of some races have lost much of their freedom because of these kinds of attacks. Once good names are lost, the freedom that goes with them is very difficult to regain.

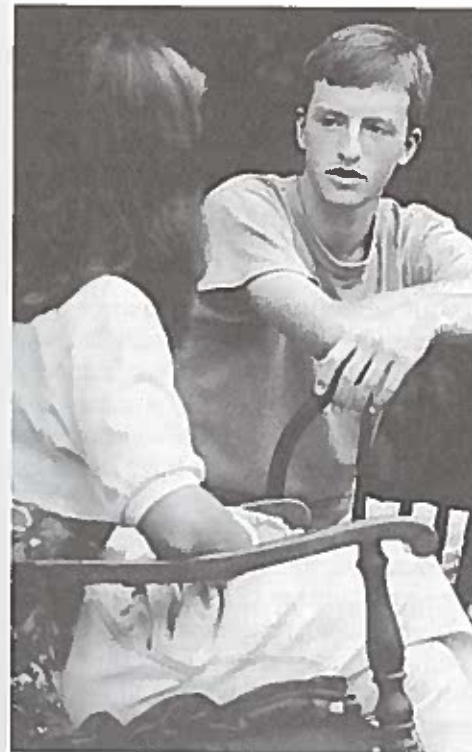
To protect our good names and our freedom, then, God has forbidden the old self to use any of these weapons or to do anything else that hurts somebody's name.

God goes further, too. God commands us to care for our neighbors' names. That includes defending our neighbors when others speak ill of them, finding opportunities to say good things about them, and giving them the benefit of the doubt when they do something wrong.

To the old self, this seems terribly unreasonable. As the old Adam or Eve sees it, other people's faults and failings are an opportunity to make you look a little bit better. "You might not be so good," it will say, "but at least you're not as bad as that person." And it doesn't have to be a public comment. The old self can enjoy a neighbor's faults in silence, basking in that person's difficulties like a dog or cat lying in the sun.

But as Christ makes the new you, something different happens. Because God has given you your name and cares for you, you can see to it that other people's names are cared for, too. Then it's not just a matter of keeping silent when others' names are attacked, but a matter of seeing to it that their names are kept open and the freedom in their names is protected.

Jesus takes the protection of this commandment one step further by suggesting a way to handle differences that come



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between neighbors. Because we aren't in heaven yet, there are bound to be differences. Whatever causes them, these differences are a golden opportunity for the old self. To prevent the sinner in us from using these opportunities for the worst, Jesus has laid out three steps to take care of the problems.

The first step is to speak to your neighbor. "If another sins against you," Jesus says, "go and talk to the other about it. If the other listens to you, everything will be fine" (based on Matthew 18:15). That is the last thing the old self wants to do. Instead, it tells the whole neighborhood or, if it's more timid, at least some strategically placed friends. If the old Adam or Eve speaks to the neighbor about it at all, it is only after it's gotten all of the mileage it can out of the fault.

Jesus turns it around. If your neighbor says or does something that bothers you, that person should be the first to know. Then he or she can explain or apologize. If what bothers you isn't important enough to take the risk of talking to the person who caused the problem, the best thing to do is to keep quiet about it.

Telling your neighbor about something that offends you doesn't automatically mean a change, however. So Jesus has suggested a second step. "But if you are not listened to, take



one or two others along with you" (Matthew 18:16). It is at this point that the old self does something different, becoming a tattletale. After blowing it all over the neighborhood when the sinner in us finds some difference with the neighbor, it finds someone to tattle to—the teacher, the pastor, the police, or some other authority. If it can't get it's own way, it will try to use the authorities to accomplish its own purpose.

### *A second chance*

Instead, Jesus says, give your neighbor a second chance. Take one or two other people along with you and talk to your neighbor again. That way, the neighbor has another chance to learn that you are serious about the problem and want to have it solved. If the person still won't come around, you have the benefit of some witnesses who know that you have done everything you can to take care of the problem.

The third and final step is to tell the authorities. "If the other refuses to listen to them," Jesus says, speaking of the witnesses, "tell it to the church" (based on Matthew 18:17). If your neighbor won't listen to you after you've spoken to him or her privately and then come with witnesses, there is no alternative but to make it public—not by noising the wrong all over the neighborhood, but by speaking to the authorities. If it is someone in your congregation, take it to the pastor or the council. If it is someone in your class, talk to your teacher. If it is something for the police, speak with them. One of these authorities can then take the proper steps to make sure the problem is laid to rest.

You see what great care God takes to protect our names. God not only forbids betraying, slandering, and lying about one another, but commands us to speak the truth in love, loving our neighbors enough to keep quiet about their faults unless we speak to them directly.

God is so concerned about our names because of the freedom in a good name: the freedom to live and serve well, confident of people's acceptance and respect. God will protect your name and your neighbors' names to the end, keeping the earth ready for the day when the old self—with all of its name-dropping and name-destroying—dies forever.



**THE SECOND COMMANDMENT**  
 You shall not cover your neighbor's wrong.

*What does this mean for us?*  
 We can be slow and have that so that we do not  
 should be got our neighbor's possessions by  
 sinning, or by pretending to have a right to  
 them, but always help him keep what is his.

**THE THIRD COMMANDMENT**  
 You shall not cover your neighbor's wife,  
 or his man-servant, or his maid-servant, or  
 his ox, or anything that is your neighbor's.

*What does this mean for us?*  
 We can be slow and have that so that we do not  
 should be got our neighbor's wife  
 or his woman, his man-servant, his  
 maid.