

# Back to the Basics

The Ten Commandments Pt. 8

## The Eighth Commandment

**You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.**

*What does this mean? 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.*

Righteousness is right living before God, knowing right from wrong and doing the right. Justice is righteousness lived out in the public sphere, or community righteousness. To have justice, you must have a fair judicial system. This cannot be accomplished without truthfulness in the court of law. That's why lying on the witness stand (giving false testimony, or perjury) is punishable by jail time. Lying about someone (whether in a court of law or not) destroys the reputation of two people—the one being lied about and the one doing the lying. Without a good reputation, one cannot be trusted. Without trust, society falls apart. Hence, this Law is about more than just lying on the witness stand. It's about protecting the good reputation of a person and maintaining trust in the community.

### What does God forbid in this Commandment?

God forbids us to tell lies about or lie to our neighbor; this includes withholding the truth from him/her. **Proverbs 19:5** says, *A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape.* Some people are good liars, that is, good at telling lies and making them sound true. They may fool people for a time. But in the end, the truth always comes out. Besides, this verse is talking about how falsehoods cannot get past God. He always knows.

God also forbids us to betray our neighbor, or to reveal his secrets. **Proverbs 11:13** says, *Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.* This strikes right at the core of gossiping. What about when someone has done something illegal and you know it? Shouldn't you protect others by telling them? If this is something you know first-hand and it's that serious, the proper course of action isn't to tell others. Tell the police. If it's not something you want to tell the police, bury it. If it's something you heard from a "credible source", it's still gossip. Don't listen to it.

Finally, God forbids us to slander our neighbor, that is to hurt his reputation. **James 4:11** says, *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.* Usually, this is done out of anger, or to get back at the other person. We say something that may or may not be true to bring shame upon our neighbor, to hurt him. Have you ever wondered what a political campaign would look like if it stuck to this Commandment?

### What does God require of us in the Eighth Commandment?

God requires us to speak up for our neighbor, defending him/her from false accusations. **Proverbs 31:8-9** says, *Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.* It's not enough to not engage in gossip, we are to speak up when we hear falsehoods about our neighbor and come to their defense.

God also requires that we praise our neighbor's good actions and qualities. Jonathan spoke well of David (**1 Samuel 19:4**). The people of Capernaum spoke well of the centurion (**Luke 7:4-5**). Jesus spoke well of the woman who anointed Him (**Mark 14:3-9**). An exercise that might help us in this area is to make a list of people we have trouble saying nice things about. Each day, in our devotions, we thank God for something about each person.

Finally, God requires us to put the best meaning on everything, that is, explain our neighbor's actions in the best possible way. This is possibly the most difficult thing to do. When someone disappoints us by say, failing to follow through on a promise, we are tempted to think the worst. They just don't care. They lied to us. But it's also possible (and probably more likely) that something came up they couldn't help that prevented them from keeping their word. Remember the words of St. Paul: *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things* (**1 Corinthians 13:7**).

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*The Lord bless you and keep you.*

*The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.*

*The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.*

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