

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 79—The Ninth Commandment, Qs. 76-78

Watson, “God set two natural fences to keep the tongue in, the teeth and lips; and this commandment is a third fence set about it, that it should not break forth into evil” against our neighbor.

The sins forbidden, WLC 145

- I. Uttering anything prejudicial or injurious to our neighbor’s good name. The wounds of the tongue are worse than those of the sword because the tongue damages in a way that no physician can heal.
 - A. Saying of him what’s not true, Ps 35.11; Jer 18.18; Mt 11.18-19; Acts 24.5; Rom 3.7-8.
 1. Watson, “He that raises a slander carries the devil in his tongue” because the devil is the accuser of the brethren.
 2. The slanderer injures three at once. He wounds him that is slandered, him that receives it (by causing him to think ill of his neighbor), and his own soul.
 3. The ruin of a man’s name can do more damage than the ruin of his shop or field because no reparation can be made for it. Watson, “a blot on a man’s name is like a blot on white paper that’ll never be got out, and can never be made white again.”
 4. Gossip is a terrible sin in which we spread rumors and lies about other people, Rom 1.19; 1Tim 5.13.
 5. We must remember that false witnesses will not go unpunished, Dt 19.18-19; Pr 12.19; 19.5. Never reckon that to be a small thing which lands the transgressors in hell, Rev 21.8; 22.15.
 - B. Putting what is or may be true of him in the worst light and upon the worst motives, 1Cor 13.5-7; Mt 11.19.
 - C. Speaking of his faults to another without any reason to do so and without any intention to benefit him by it, Eph 4.25, 29.
 - D. Listening to false reports and detractions against another.
 1. Watson, “He that receives a slander carries the devil in his ear” because the devil is the accuser of the brethren and the father of lies.
 2. Why is it that we have such a curious ear for the faults of others? Why is it that we find delight in hearing others talked about, slandered, and exposed? Our sinful hearts use the faults of others as a distraction behind which to hide our own. Keeping the attention on others keeps it off ourselves.
 - E. Seeking to build up your own reputation by pulling his down. When we purposely make our neighbor look bad in the eyes of others so that we’ll look better, it’s a grievous testimony to our heart’s selfishness and pride.
- II. Uttering falsehood, Ps 5.9; 7.14.
 - A. There’s nothing more contrary to God than a lie, nothing more contrary to a child of light than a lie of darkness, and nothing more imitable of the father of lies than a lie. Flee this sin, which is an abomination to the Lord, Ps 5.6; Pr 12.22; Acts 5.5.
 - B. Lying is a sin that reveals our innate slavery to the father of lies, Ps 58.3; Jn 8.44.
 - C. Our love for lies reveals our hatred of God and welcomes our eternal condemnation, Rom 1.25; 2Th 2.9-12.

The duties required, WLC 144

- I. We’re to be especially careful not to injure but rather to preserve our neighbor’s good name because this is one of the chief traits of a man of God, Ps 15.2-3; 34.13; Isa 63.8; Eph 4.25, 29; Col 3.9; Rev 21.8.
 - A. Henry, “defame no man, speak evil of no man, don’t make the faults of others the subject of your common talk, much less of your sport and ridicule, nor speak of them with pleasure, but, if you must, then only for edification.” In other words, we’re “to make the best of everybody and the worst of nobody,” 1Cor 13.7.

- B. Give no credit to a slander but rather frown upon it and so silence it, Pr 25.23. If you hear a bad report about your neighbor, try to disprove it if you can, and if not, then let it die with you and go no further, 1Sam 19.4-5; Acts 2.15. Put the fire out by giving it no more oxygen and cover your neighbor's faults with love and grace.
- II. Do unto your neighbor as you would be done by, Mt 7.12; Rom 13.10.
 - A. Desire, delight in, and further the good name of your neighbor as much as your own, Mk 12.31.
 - B. Be quick to look on the fairest side of his actions, take them in the best sense, and be as assuming of favorable explanations as malice is of unfavorable ones.
 - C. Assume the best motives for questionable actions, 1Cor 13.7, and go to him if offended, Mt 18.15.
 - D. Rejoice in his virtues and cover his failings with love, 1Pet 4.8. Leighton, "don't be like flies which love to skip over a man's healthy flesh and land on his sores."

Applications

- I. Be careful what you say. First ask yourself: it is true, is it kind, and is it necessary?
 - A. Whyte, quoting Plutarch, "Before you speak, address yourself and say, "What is this which I would say? What is this which presses so hard to be uttered? For what reason would this tongue of mine so fain be talking? What mischief shall I incur by holding my peace? We ought always to bear in remembrance, and have at our tongue's end, that saying of the philosopher that he had often repented of talking, but never once of keeping silent."
 - B. Whyte, "If wisdom's ways you wisely seek, five things observe with care: of whom you speak, to whom you speak, and how, and when, and where."
 - C. Study to know the fit seasons of speech and silence, Ecc 3.7. And when you do speak, determine that your audience will be built up by it, Eph 4.29.
- II. Don't judge another without full knowledge of the situation, full love in your heart for his wellbeing, and necessity upon you.
- III. Watson, "To avoid these sins, get the fear of God, because it'll cleanse both your heart and your tongue. And get love to your neighbor, Lev 19.18. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. It is the healer of division and the hinderer of slander."
 - A. Get your hearts possessed with the two excellent graces of humility and love because they'll curb your tongue from evil and train them for good. A humble heart delights to hear others praised for their good and a loving heart thinks no evil of a neighbor and is quick to cover his faults.
 - B. Memorize Pr 21.23; Ecc 10.20; Eph 4.25, 29; Col 4.6; Js 1.19, 26; 3.2-10.
 - C. Pray Ps 141.3; 19.14.
- IV. If you've been slandered or falsely accused and know your own innocence, don't be too troubled by it, but instead rejoice in the witness of your clear conscience before God. A good conscience is a wall of brass that can withstand a false witness. Watson, "As no flattery can heal a bad conscience, so no slander can hurt a good one."
 - A. And remember that God will one day clear up the names of His people, not only wiping tears from their eyes but reproaches from their names, Ps 37.6. Vindication will surely come so be patient and wait for it.