

Speak Truth

Baptist Catechism

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Bible Text: Zechariah 8:16-17
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Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as we hear these words, these great words of hope of what you are yet to do for your people in the establishing of a city of righteousness and holiness, full of joy and gladness and cheerfulness and a love for the truth, we pray, Lord, that you would give us ears to hear that we might be people who love the truth, who live the truth, who speak the truth, and guard one another's name and reputation. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Please be seated.

I have two sermons to preach tonight back-to-back. The first one is really simple. The ninth commandment says, "Bear no false witness." Psalm 116:11 says, "All men are liars." Application: stop it. Amen. Let's go home.

We lie like we breathe. It just comes very naturally and we justify our lying with all sorts of metaphors and euphemisms. We talk about little white lies or we talk about lies of convenience. You know, the phone rings and someone asks for you and you say, "Tell them I'm not home," when you are because you just told them to tell them you're not home when you were home. You are lying. I have heard people try to use and I don't even remember where I was but very recently I was in some conversation with somebody where they were actually trying to use the lies of the Jewish midwives at the time of Moses as an example of how God condones lying in certain difficult circumstances. I really don't remember where that conversation was but it's just not true. 1 John 2:21 says that "no lie is of the truth." It doesn't say, "Well, if it'll get you out of trouble, it's okay to lie. Or if it might make somebody else feel better, it's okay to lie. Or it might actually save somebody's life, it's okay to lie." Psalm 31:5 says the Lord God is a God of truth. Titus 1:2 says God cannot lie. Oh, except for the white lies and the lies of convenience and the lies of necessity and the lies to make other people feel okay and the lies that might spare a life. Those lies God can tell, right? No. God cannot lie and no lie is of the truth and Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

There is a very condemning portion in John 8 that you're all familiar with where Jesus says to the Jews of his day, "You are of your father the devil and the lust of your father

you do. He was a murderer from the beginning and abides not in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own nature for he is a liar and the father of all lies," John 8:44." In the Bible repeatedly there are these two ways: there's the way of God and there's the way of the devil; the way of life and the way of death; the way of righteousness, the way of sin. You see it in terms of even in the garden after they fall and God says, "I will put enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman." You see it in Psalm 1 in terms of the paths that the righteous and unrighteous are on. You see it in Matthew 7, that there's a way that says this is the way of life but it leads to death, and there is a narrow way that leads to life that few find. You see it in Proverbs where we're warned that there is a way that seems right unto men but the end of it is death, but there is a way of life that proceeds towards God.

We've become quite comfortable with lying. We even make jokes about lying. When do you know a lawyer is lying? When his lips are moving. When do you know a politician is lying? When his lips are moving. And isn't it sad that we can tell those jokes, we can chuckle at them? Why do they not break our hearts? Because Psalm 116:11 says that all men are liars and we do lie. We lie in things that we say. We lie in things that we don't say. In Leviticus 5:1 it says that if you know the truth and you're called to testify, you don't speak, that you share in the guilt. You have, in fact, become a liar.

We are to be sincere about the truth. I love what the Heidelberg Catechism says about the ninth commandment and oddly enough of all the commandments, it just makes one statement. Most of the commandments it says what the commandment says and what does the commandment require, but not this one, it's simply what's required by the ninth commandment, "That I bear false witness against no man, nor falsify any man's words; that I be no back-biter, no slanderer; that I do not judge nor join the condemning any man rashly or unheard; but that I avoid all sorts of lies and deceit as the proper works of the devil unless I would bring down upon me the heavy wrath of God. Likewise, that the judgment and all the other dealings, I love the truth and I speak it uprightly and confess it. Also, that I defend and promote as much as I am able the honor and the good character of my neighbor."

Most of you may not remember a man named Chuck Colson, and for those who remember, he was a man in the administration for Richard Nixon and the whole Watergate affair and the break-in, and Chuck Colson ended up going to jail because of some of what happened and he went to jail, in part, for defending Richard Nixon. While he was in jail, he got converted and he came out and he started a ministry called Prison Fellowship and did a lot to try to bring the Gospel into the prisons. But he was attending some university somewhere to speak as people like that tend to do, and he was being heckled as he got to the podium, he was being heckled for his involvement in the Watergate cover-up, but most importantly, he was being heckled because he defended Richard Nixon and he was asked, "Why did you defend Nixon?" And he said, "Because he was my friend," and that disarmed the hecklers. Who wouldn't want a friend who would defend you and protect you and to speak well of you even when there's all sorts of objective reasons maybe not to?

Now the ninth commandment tells us that we shall not bear false witness against our neighbor and Question 82 says, "The ninth commandment requires the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and our neighbor's good name, especially in witness bearing." I picked Zechariah 8 to look at in part because it's cited by our Catechism, but I thought it played such an important role in kind of showing something of God's attitude. Speaking about the exile at the beginning of the chapter and how God would eventually take all of Israel out as he had promised he would for violating the commandment, and that there was a part of it that was because of the lying and the injustice that was going on in Jerusalem. We know that the breaking of the Sabbath. We know that idolatry was also a part of it and it says in verse 8 that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion to each one and do not oppress the widow and the orphan, the stranger, the poor, and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another." The reason why the word of the Lord has to come to Zechariah to speak these things is because these are the things that the people of God were doing, the covenant people. Their response is in verse 11, "But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing." Listen to this, "They made their hearts like flint," verse 12, "so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through former prophets, therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts." And you know the Lord of hosts is a title, the Lord Almighty.

How would you like to have the Lord Almighty send great wrath to you because you in your devising evil for your neighbor, in your practicing of injustice and the devising an evil in your hearts against your neighbor, that you so harden your heart that when God's word is read to you, you can no longer hear it? It's not that you can't hear it audibly. I'm getting harder of hearing all the time. I sense especially in my right ear more and more it's just not doing what it should do. That's not the kind of hardness of hearing that he's talking about here. It's the kind of hardness of hearing that when you are bound in sin and the word of God is confronting you and you cannot and you will not listen. You self-justify. You self-deflect. You self-rationalize. You protect yourself and your cohorts. There is a reason why, there's an explanation why I can lie and I can do evil towards my neighbor and what a sorry state that is in.

In the many years I've been in the ministry, the people who I found who are the greatest Bible exegetes and the ones who are most careful to craft and handle each and every word are those who are about to have church discipline put upon them. It's amazing how insightful in Scripture they can become. They're violating it all over the place, you've gone to them in private, you've gone to them with two or three witnesses, and now they will come and with their exact exegesis and hermeneutic, they'll show you every sin in your life. What are they doing? They're shutting down the word of God. They will not hear it and they just cause it to deflect back upon you. It's amazing how hard we can become and how self-justifying and how good we can feel about it. I guess that's part of what makes me uncomfortable with this whole thing is how good I have felt as I have spoken evil of a brother because I know I would only speak evil of a brother if he really deserved it, right? Rather than speaking for the neighbor's good name.

There was a story that I was told, or actually read. Let's see if I can bring it up here. I don't think I brought it over with me. It was told that Peter the Great when people would come to him and start to say, "Did you know about So-and-so," and they'd start to give an evil report, he would just quietly listen for a while and let the person go on and on, and then he'd eventually interrupt and he would say, "Okay, now you've told me what's wrong with the fellow, but apparently you spent a fair amount of time with him, I'd like you to now begin to tell me the things about him that you admire." And usually the conversation was over.

But that's part of what the commandment is calling us to do. It's not just negative. We don't lie, we don't devise evil, but as it says in Zechariah 8:16, "'These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,' declares the LORD." In the context, what Zechariah is saying is God has brought his judgment, he's brought his judgment so severely that when he starts in the beginning of chapter 8 to speak about what he will do in terms of recovering the people of God and how he will bless the remnant of the people of God, in verse 6 it says, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'If it is too difficult in the sight of the remnant of this people in those days, will it also be too difficult in My sight?' declares the LORD of hosts." God begins to lay out a plan of blessing and encouragement and hope and the people's response is, "No way. No way could that ever happen. That's just impossible." God, the Lord of hosts, the Lord Almighty says, "Okay, what I'm speaking to you, you can't even begin to envision it, does that make it too difficult for me?" And he begins to rehearse what he will do and the cities will be full of people again, the heavens will open and the dew and the rain and the crops will begin to produce, and he encourages them twice not to be afraid, and the blessing of God is going to come just as certain as God has relentlessly pursued Israel in judgment, he will now with the same unrelentness come to bring blessing to Israel and what is our response? Verse 16, to speak truth one to another.

If Psalm 116:11 is true, then we all are liars. If Romans 3:23 is right, we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. If it is true that none of us have loved God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and we certainly haven't loved our neighbor as ourselves, exactly what is it that you will say negatively about somebody else that is not also true of you? And as Christian men and women, God didn't save us because we're good, he didn't save us because we're righteous, he didn't save us because we're truth-tellers, he didn't say, "Oh, there's that Leroy, man, he is such a truth-teller I've just got to save him. There's Jordan, she's just so good to her neighbors I've got to save her. There's Johnny. Well, there's Johnny..." That's not the way he serves. We're all dead in our trespasses and sins, right?

So rather than looking for ways to expose other people, I'm not saying there isn't time to deal with sin but it's always privately, and even in Matthew 18, you go in private, and then you go in private again but with a couple of witnesses, and then you tell it to the church. The last place a man's sin or a woman's sin should ever appear is on Facebook or the internet or Twitter or anywhere else, the local paper, and those who put that stuff out

there are guilty of an abomination of the Lord. Sin is dealt privately and the sin in the church is dealt privately in the context of the local church unless there are reasons like the crime is such that it's a public crime and has to go into the courts and that sort of thing. But we need to protect and preserve because we are all sinners, we are all liars, we have all fallen short of the glory of God, we all do not love God with all of our heart, we have not served our neighbor as ourselves, we have not done unto others as we would have them do unto you. We have lied and we have sinned and what we ought to do in Zechariah is look what the Gospel promises are. God has promised his church blessings and there will be a day in which we will be in a new heaven and a new earth and where there are no more liars, no more adulterers, no more effeminate, no more murderers, no more idolaters. God will wipe every tear from our eye, meaning he will set everything straight. He will avenge all of the evil and he's laid all of our evil upon his Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ so every one of your lies and every one of your sins, he paid a price for that you would never have to pay, therefore, our primary thing that we ought to be doing when it comes to the ninth commandment is not exposing people or misrepresenting people but learning to encourage one another to be truth-tellers, learning to come and to speak the truth to one another in love to encourage one another in righteousness, and we ought to be each one's greatest encourager or fan in wanting to spur one another on, as the writer of Hebrews says in chapter 10, to love and good deeds. Rather than being afraid of one another, we ought to know that the one place we can go is our local church and say, "Brothers and sisters, this is what I am and this is what I've done," and find people who are taking those words seriously wanting to help us deeply and encouraging us to move forward, not encourage us to remain where we were, but to grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ. The ninth commandment calls us to be promoting the truth between man and man, and to consider the good name of our neighbor, and our neighbor's good name, our neighbor is a sinner. Our neighbor is a liar. Our neighbor has fallen short of the glory of God.

So we need to be very careful about how we handle the truth. As I said earlier, God is the God of truth. He cannot lie. Do you want to be like God? Then do not lie. Zechariah 8:16 is quoted in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:25 when he says, "Therefore, lay aside falsehood, speak truth one to another with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity." We are to lay aside falsehood and we are to speak truth to one another and with our neighbor because we are members of one another.

I haven't used this illustration in a while but you'll probably recognize it right away. I don't think I've used it for a while. The Greek word for the devil is diabolos. Have I used this recently? Diabolos. You come to the word "devil" in the Greek New Testament and it's diabolos. If you put it in the plural, nominative plural, it would be diaboloi, so if it's translated in the singular, diabolos, devil, you would expect that diaboloi would be translated devils, right? To the best of my knowledge it is never translated devils in the New Testament. Do you know what diaboloi is translated? Gossip. When we are into gossip, you don't have to be even speaking falsities but like again as our Catechism says, the ninth commandment is not just about not lying or bearing false witness, it's about

protecting the honor of our neighbor's good name. Gossip is simply, it can be true, "But let me tell you about old Brother So-and-so. You really need to know about old Brother So-and-so." Then we couch it in spiritual language, "I need to tell you about old Brother So-and-so. Now don't tell anybody but this is just so that you'll know how to pray."

But Zechariah is that look at the Gospel hope that we have, that our sins have been atoned for and God is going to place us in a new Jerusalem that is going to have so much of the fullness of the Lord of hosts that even the nations will send and 10 men will cling to the robe of one Jew and say, "Let us go with you! Let us go with you because we have heard and come to know that God is with you!" That's our destiny. That's our hope in the Gospel. Not just our sins are forgiven but that we will be conformed to the image of Christ; that Christ will come, John 14, and he's going to take us to his Father's house where this room is there for us, and we will behold the glory of the Lord and we will dwell forever in the house of the Lord, and what all of that means, the response is speak truth to one another and Paul's application is lay aside all falsehood, speak truth to one another and to your neighbor and don't give any opportunity to the devil. Don't become little diabolos, turning a plural in Greek into a plural in English. Is that legitimate to do? Anyway, little devils. We protect. We preserve.

Let me just close with a couple applications. 1. I was listening, I was re-listening to Dr. Godfrey's presentation in the church history that most of you heard in Sunday school on the church and Islam, and he quoted from a man who used to be one of the lead men for reaching out to Muslims for the Christian Reformed church, and he had written in a book or an essay somewhere I tried to find and didn't locate it yet, that the Muslims will not take Christians seriously until they start to live differently than the general trend of American society. And how would we tend to do that? It would be very simple: keep the Ten Commandments. And the Bible doesn't tell us that we can't keep the Ten Commandments, the Bible tells us we can't keep the Ten Commandments enough for salvation. There's a big difference between not being able to do the commandments at all or not being able to do them enough to satisfy the perfect holiness and righteousness of God. We can keep the commandments, we just can't keep them for salvation. We cannot keep them to earn God's blessing and in our Confession the chapter on the law tells us that they are our guide for life.

So first of all, if we really want to be a unique people, then we need to live according to the law of God to the degree that we're able to do that in this age. Not to gain salvation but as the people of God, where we organize our lives around God and we don't create images of him, and we don't take his name in vain, and we keep the Sabbath day holy, where we honor our father and mother and all who are in authority, and we prize life, and we protect life, and we defend life, we don't take it, and we don't commit adultery, and we don't steal, and we don't bear false witness, and we don't covet.

Secondly, the second application: when somebody comes to you and says, "I'd like to tell you something but you need to keep this confidential," you may want to ask them a couple of questions about what they mean by confidential and why, but probably most of the time when they tell you that, that's a good red flag for saying, "No, please do not talk

to me." "Let me tell you about Brother So-and-so but you've got to keep this confidential." Maybe the next words out of your mouth is, "If I can't tell anybody, then maybe you shouldn't be telling me."

The third application: that when someone comes to tell you something about a brother or sister, one of the things, questions you should ask yourself is this, "Am I part of the solution?" Maybe you need to ask, "Are you part of the problem?" But you should definitely ask, "Am I part of the solution?" If I'm not part of the solution, then I don't need to know. So you come and say, "I need to talk to you about Brother So-and-so." Am I part of the solution? Are you looking to me because I...? "Well, I need your input." No, no, no, no, that might be okay but am I really part of the solution? If I'm not, please do not tell me.

Then my last application is that what we say to one another in private may or may not be what we say to people in public. The man who performed the wedding for my dear bride and I, Larry F., I learned a lot from Larry F. and almost all if not all of it was very very good, but one of the things that I learned from him is when it came to his staff, he never had a negative thing to say about those working for him. I was a youth pastor but when he'd speak about me, I was the greatest youth pastor in America. He would just blow my trumpet and I was really good. Maybe that's lying, I don't know, but he would always affirm his staff. Now I had some private conversations with Pastor F. where he needed to address issues in my life and he let me know that, you know, "Don't do that and don't do this and next time, make sure you consider that." And I got my fair share of corrections but I was never corrected in public. Always private.

Maybe my last application, did I already say last application? Well, this is last application part B. As I learned from Pastor F., mothers and fathers, learn to do that in your home. If mom and dad have a disagreement, don't call each other names in front of the children. Go some place privately, then you can say, "I've got something I need to say to you." Especially when the children are younger, they don't have any way of processing this stuff and what you say is affecting how the children will view mom or dad or both, and we are called to help them to honor the father and the mother, and if the mother will not honor the father in the way she speaks, and the father will not honor the mother in the way he speaks and the way they treat one another, why would the children honor the father and mother? Did you not just disciple them into not needing to?

So just as Pastor F., always had a public good word for us and privately he would address us, so in our lives whether in our homes, our marriages, or in our church, Matthew 18, you go in private and you speak in private. You win your brother in private. Why? Because of the ninth commandment. It's not just that we are not to bear false witness to one another, but we are to be about promoting truth between man and man and we are about promoting and protecting our neighbor's good name.

Just in closing, there is this story, the great Italian poet, Petrarch, a 14th century poet who lived with Cardinal Colonna and the Cardinal had a rather large household and Petrarch was, I guess, had the Cardinal maybe as his sponsor or his person supporting him in his

art and there came a time when there had been a rather violent quarrel in the household, don't know any more about it than a violent quarrel had happened, and Cardinal Colonna called the whole household together and he assembled them and the way the story goes, as he obliged each one of them to take a solemn oath on the Gospel and declare the whole truth, try to get to the bottom of what had happened. One by one everyone in the household had to come and swear on the Gospels that they were telling the truth, even another man in the household named Bishop of Luna had to put his hand on the Bible, and when it came time for Petrarch to come in the order of the line, he presented himself to take the oath, Cardinal Colonna said, "As for you, Petrarch, your word is sufficient."

And that's the kind of men and women that we ought to be, that we are so about the truth that if I came to you or you came to me and you had to ask straight up, "Did this happen? Or what happened?" And you were to say to me this, or I said to you that, that that would be the end of it because we are such men and women of integrity not only in telling the truth but not in bearing false witness or incriminating other people's names that we are to say, "This is what happened or did not happen," that no one would even question our word on that because we have a history with us as being men and women who tell the truth, who do not lie, who do not bear false witness, and promote the general welfare of the name even of their enemies, and when we live like that, we will stick out in the midst of a country and a culture that is doing even now in Washington some of the things that you're all aware of in the news. It won't be that hard to be a light in the darkness.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your grace that is greater than all of our sin and, Lord, we acknowledge that we are all sinful men and women, we have fallen short in so many ways, and we have the sin as the writer of Hebrews says, that we so easily get entangled. Lord, we pray that you would give us great patience with one another. As Paul says in Ephesians 4, give us forbearance with one another, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit. May we lay aside every falsehood. May we consider what is good about another person and not just what is wrong. And may we be men and women of such integrity that if we were to say yes or no, that people could bank on that. Lord, we pray for the grace to live according to your law, not to gain salvation, not to earn salvation, but to know that because your word is true and law is right and it is the standard by which you would have us live. Grant us these things for the sake of Christ in whom we pray. Amen.