

CHAPTER 15

Backed by Truth

The Eighth Commandment,

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”,

requires that we speak the truth always, but especially in matters involving the good name and honor of others. Truth is very important to us. If men were not truthful it would be impossible for us to live together.

When he was on trial before Pilate, Jesus said: “The reason I was born, the reason why I came into the world, is to testify to the truth. Anyone committed to the truth hears my voice.” “Truth!” said Pilate. “What does that mean?” (Jn 18:37–38) Evidently Pilate, who may at one time have been concerned about truth, about the meaning of life, about right and wrong, no longer cared, or had given up on it and decided there was no such thing.

But Our Lord had come as a witness to the truth. And Pilate could not help being impressed. This is perhaps what led him to make a few weak attempts to save Our Lord’s life; but, as we know, Pilate gave in under pressure and agreed to a lie by condemning Jesus.

We all know what harm can be done just by one lie. The Eighth Commandment tells us we must never tell even a single lie. But it also directs all our powers of communication. We are obliged to speak the truth and must never intend to deceive another when he has the right to the truth.

Lying

A lie is a deliberate attempt to mislead others. It is always sinful. We may not lie to get out of trouble, to cover up for a friend, or to get into a movie. Even if what we want is good, we may not lie to get it.

We can be strongly tempted to lie sometimes—it can seem so simple and so harmless. But we must always tell the truth to those who have a right to know.

Hypocrisy

A special kind of untruthfulness is hypocrisy, when someone pretends to be better than he really is or pretends to believe something he really denies just to impress people. Jesus condemned this sin many times. However, it is not wrong to be on one’s best behavior with those on whom one wishes to make a good impression.

Promises and Oaths

An important aspect of honesty is keeping one’s word. One makes one’s word true by living up to it. It is telling the truth about one’s future actions.

In taking an oath in a courtroom one promises to tell the truth with God as one’s witness. This is very serious. It is always a serious sin to

lie in an important matter, but to lie under oath before God is much worse. Such a lie is called perjury.

Another's Good Name

However, there are times when we may be telling the truth and still sin. We must always speak the truth if we speak at all, but sometimes it is more prudent or charitable for us to remain silent. There are even times when we must not tell what we know to be true, for to do so would be wrong.

We have a precious possession that we may take for granted: our good name or reputation. We may hardly think of it, unless it is endangered. But if it is hurt or lost we see how precious it is to us. "A good name is more desirable than great riches." (Prov 22:1) Regaining a good name once it is lost is very

difficult; just think how hard it must be for an ex-convict to find a job. To damage a person's reputation is a serious matter. Therefore, one must have a very good reason for revealing anything about a person which would hurt his good name.

As for ourselves, we should take care to be worthy of a good reputation—not by seeking fame and renown, but by loving God and our neighbor and by being known as faithful followers of Christ.

There may be times when we are called upon to reveal what we know about someone—for instance, in legal proceedings—but we must be very careful about what we do with damaging facts, even if they are true.

How much worse, then, is a damaging story which is not true! Irresponsible or malicious use of the truth to harm another is called *detraction* and is a serious sin. The use of lies



to hurt someone is called *calumny* or *slander* and is an even greater sin. There is a grave obligation to repair the damage done by any of these sins.

Rash Judgment

Besides being careful in what we say about someone, we must also be careful in what we think. There is a sin called *rash judgment* which is to judge another person's character on flimsy evidence. This does not mean that we may never make a judgment, but that we must be very careful about it. Otherwise someone may lose our esteem without a good reason. We should be very slow to judge.

Gossip

As a rule, we should not talk about the faults of others unless there is a good and important reason to do so. Gossiping usually consists of talking about the faults of others or exaggerating them. People who gossip may deal with facts, but they destroy another person's good name to satisfy idle curiosity. We must not be

willing even to listen to people who gossip about others.

Secrets

We must keep any promise we have made, including the promise to keep a secret. If someone tells us a secret, or if we find out something that must be kept secret for another person's good, then we must be silent about what we have learned.

Our power of speech is a precious gift, a gift that must not be used to hurt others! Jesus says:

I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. (Mt 12:36–37)

Words to Know:

slander	flattery	detraction
rash judgment	gossip	false witness

“Never let evil talk pass your lips; say only the good things men need to hear, things that will really help them.”
(Ephesians 4:29)

Q. 46 *What is forbidden by the Eighth Commandment?*

The Eighth Commandment forbids all falsehood and unjust damage to another person's reputation. This includes false witness, slander, lies, detraction, flattery, unfounded suspicion, and rash judgment.

Q. 47 *What does the Eighth Commandment order?*

The Eighth Commandment orders us to speak the truth responsibly and to avoid rash judgment of our neighbor's actions.

Q. 48 *What is a person required to do who has damaged his neighbor's good reputation by accusing him falsely or speaking badly of him?*

He who has damaged his neighbor's good reputation by false accusation or bad talk about him must repair the damage he has done, so far as he is able.