

Palmarum – Palm Sunday

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

Over and above our own body, spouse, and temporal possessions, we still have another treasure—honor and good reputation. We cannot do without these. For it is intolerable to live among people in open shame and general contempt. Therefore, God does not want the reputation, good name, and upright character of our neighbor to be taken away or diminished, just as with his money and possessions. He wants everyone to stand in his integrity before wife, children, servants, and neighbors. In the first place, we must consider the plainest meaning of this commandment, according to the words “You shall not bear false witness.” This applies to the public courts of justice, where a poor, innocent man is accused and oppressed by false witnesses in order to be punished in his body, property, or honor.

Now, this commandment appears as though it were of little concern to us at present. But with the Jewish people it was a quite common and ordinary matter. For the people were organized under an excellent and regular government. Where there is still such a government, instances of this sin will not be lacking. The cause of it is that where judges, mayors, princes, or others in authority sit in judgment, things never fail to go according to the way of the world. In other words, people do not like to offend anybody. They flatter and speak to gain favor, money, prospects, or friendship. As a result, a poor man and his cause must be oppressed, denounced as wrong, and suffer punishment. It is a common disaster in the world that in courts of justice godly men seldom preside. ...

“False witness,” then, is everything that cannot be properly proved. No one shall make public or declare for truth what is not obvious by sufficient evidence. In short, whatever is secret should be allowed to remain secret, or, at any rate, should be secretly rebuked, as we shall hear. Therefore, if you meet an idle tongue that betrays and slanders someone, contradict such a person promptly to his face, so he may blush. Then many a person will hold his tongue who otherwise would bring some poor man into bad repute, from which he

would not easily free himself. For honor and a good name are easily taken away, but not easily restored.

So you see that it is directly forbidden to speak any evil of our neighbor. However, the civil government, preachers, father, and mother are not forbidden to speak out. This is based on the understanding that this commandment does not allow evil to go unpunished. Now, in the Fifth Commandment no one is to be injured in body, and yet the executioner is excluded from this rule. By virtue of his office he does his neighbor no good, but only evil and harm. Nevertheless he does not sin against God’s commandment. God has instituted that office on His own account. God has reserved punishment for His own good pleasure, as He threatens in the First Commandment. In the same way, although no one has a personal right to judge and condemn anybody, yet if those who serve in offices of judgment fail to judge, they sin just as surely as a person who would act on his own accord without such an office. For in matters of justice necessity requires one to speak of the evil, to prefer charges, to investigate, and to testify. ... [Therefore] governments, father and mother, brothers and sisters, and other good friends are under obligation to one another to rebuke evil wherever it is needful and profitable.

A BRIEF ADMONITION TO CONFESSION

All the pope did was to drive people in crowds to Confession, with no further aim than to let them see what impure, dirty people they were. Who could go willingly to Confession under such circumstances? We, however, do not say that people should look at you to see how filthy you are, using you as a mirror to preen themselves. Rather, we give this counsel: If you are poor and miserable, then go to Confession and make use of its healing medicine. He who feels his misery and need will no doubt develop such a longing for it that he will run toward it with joy. But those who pay no attention to it and do not come of their own accord, we let them go their way. Let them be sure of this, however, that we do not regard them as Christians.

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