



## **Defend Your Neighbor**

One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Deuteronomy 19:15

The law which Moses set down for the Israelites was an important hedge against the evil that sin brought into the world. But many of these laws take on deeper meaning in light of the New Covenant relationship with God and with each other that Jesus taught us while He was with us. Instead of having to live in a world based on using the law against each other, we have been taught to love the Lord our God above all things and love our neighbors as ourselves. Love is the fulfilling of the law.

So what is the point of this law from Deuteronomy? In part, it was meant to govern how the courts should function in determining guilt. But the deeper meaning for us today that comes from God's guidance in the whole Bible seems well brought out by Martin Luther's Catechism, in his explanation of the Eighth Commandment:

### **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.

We all hear negative stories or gossip about others. Isn't it easy to find ourselves thinking poorly about others because of some second-hand report we have heard? Often our first tendency is to believe what we are being told by a single person. Even if we have reason to suspect that the story is no lie because we generally trust the speaker, how can we know what is the whole truth about someone else if we do not seek testimony from more than one witness? You never know when the view of one person might have been obstructed, whether that was an obstruction of the vision of the eyes, or of the vision of the heart. Even a well-meaning person might not actually know the whole story.

Before we react to some accusation we are hearing, our first thought should be about how we can be most kind towards the subject of the report. Certainly, we should be cautious about passing along the news until we have confirmation from more than one source – or, probably better, we ought to carefully consider whether it's really necessary to pass along negative stories and gossip at all. How will that help anyone? We don't need to pass along some tantalizing story in order to make ourselves seem entertaining to our friends. In fact, we will probably gain more respect from everyone if we develop a reputation for being cautious of what we say about others.

More importantly, what about the subject of the gossip? Maybe we can think of a way to suggest a positive slant on the story to the person who has first brought it to us. A response that shows love and respect towards others may touch the hearts of the people who are passing along gossip, so that maybe they will think twice before they show this negative side of themselves that is not at all loving or caring. We all want to be loved and appreciated, so encouraging others by our example to act out of respect for each other is contagious.

If the law must be used to protect us from someone who has done wrong, then it will work its purpose once the real truth comes out. Meanwhile, rather than seeking to accuse someone by the law, wouldn't it be more Christ-like for us to live in love with each other? Let's pray that the Holy Spirit will move our hearts towards compassion, so that instead of ever being part of bringing someone down, we will find the inspiration to lift them up and defend them.

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