Shorter Catechism 76-78 "You Shall Not Bear False Witness" August 25, 2013
Proverbs 6
Psalm 64
3 John

Q76: Which is the Ninth Commandment?
A: The Ninth Commandment is, You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

When you stand before the judge,
you must tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

The central point here has to do with the lawcourt.
But the ninth commandment has a far broader application than the legal system.
The ninth commandment (as all the commandments)
has to do with what kind of person you are.
Are you a person characterized by "the truth."

Our Shorter Catechism suggests this broader application in questions 77-78

Q77: What is required in the Ninth Commandment?
A: The Ninth Commandment requires the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbour's good name, especially in witness-bearing.
Q78: What is forbidden in the Ninth Commandment?
A: The Ninth Commandment forbids whatsoever is prejudicial to truth, or injurious to our own or our neighbour's good name.

I'd like to start with how John talks about the truth in 3 John.

1). Walking in the Truth (3 John)
Third John could be described as the last of the Pastoral Epistles!
We usually reserve that description for 1-2 Timothy and Titus,
but it also describes 3 John,
a letter from the "elder" to "the beloved Gaius"
who is undoubtedly part of the same eldership.

First John outlines John's basic teaching.
Second John applies it to the elect lady (the city church, probably of Ephesus).
Third John helps us to see how the elders are to put it into practice.

a. the Beloved Gaius (v1-4)
[1] *The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.*

Verse 9 indicates that John has already written to the church (probably 2 John),

but he writes as well to Gaius –
a fellow minister in the church of the elect lady.

John addresses Gaius as "beloved" – which means more than a dear friend,
but as one who is loved in Christ – in truth.

No other term expresses so much in terms of Christian greetings.
John takes his own teaching to heart!
"Love one another" – means that John loves Gaius!

And John's love takes shape in prayer.

[2]Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.

John prays that your bodily health would correspond to your spiritual health –
an attitude that reveals a great deal about John's perspective on life.

And verses 3-4 help us understand what spiritual health looks like:

[3]For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. [4]I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Spiritual well-being is characterized by walking in the truth.
Proverbs speaks of the two ways – the two paths – of wisdom and folly.
Walking in the truth is the way of wisdom.
Walking in lies is the way of folly.

John blends together the theme of pilgrimage and the theme of wisdom
as he speaks of "walking in the truth."

Walking in the truth means to have a life that is characterized by truth.
For John, truth starts with Jesus –
truth starts with the incarnation of the Word.
And when the one who *is* the truth abides with you,
then truth begins to characterize you,

both in terms of confessing the truth
(Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh)
and living and doing the truth
(love and obedience).

Third John, then, describes what it looks like to "walk in the truth"

by bookending the two faithful walkers, Gaius and Demetrius,
with the wicked nonsense of Diotrephes in the middle.

b. Commendation of Fellow Workers for the Truth (v5-8)

[5]Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, [6]who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. [7]For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. [8]Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

Verses 5-8 begin by describing the situation in Ephesus.
There are strangers – traveling preachers – who have recently come through town.
This practice of traveling preachers is rooted in Jesus himself,
as well as Jesus' command to his disciples to go and preach.
(Think of missionaries today – both foreign and domestic)

Jesus had said, "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."
Jesus told his disciples, "Whatever town or village you enter,
find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart.
As you enter the house, greet it.
And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it,
but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.
And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words,
shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.
Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment
for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town." (Matt 10:11-15)

Third John tells us that some wandering preachers came to Gaius,
and he welcomed them;
they also encountered Diotrephes,
who rejected them;
they later came to John,
and now John writes to commend Gaius for his treatment of them.

How do you treat strangers?
Particularly, how do you treat wandering preachers?

Sodom and Gomorrah treated wandering preachers despicably!
But John says that how you treat those who have left all for the sake of Christ
lies at the heart of what it means to walk in the truth.

Now, the support here plainly indicates some sort of financial or material provision.
Missionary support in the first century was quite different from today!

There are no international banks.
There are no ATMs!
If you want to provide support and provision to someone who is elsewhere,
then you need to send it personally.

For this reason missionary support tended to be somewhat ad hoc –
and missionaries only went as far as their support network would allow.
(This seems to be part of the reason why Paul always traveled with a team!
Some [or all] members of the team would work in order to provide for
those who would preach!)

So when a traveling preacher came to town,
this was probably your one chance of providing for him!

Perhaps we're a bit more organized in our missionary efforts.
Given the advances in communication and transportation technology
we can move people and resources a lot more quickly!
We can also check up on people a lot more quickly!
When a wandering preacher comes to town,
we can find out very quickly if he is who he says he is!

John commends Gaius for his concern and care for the wandering preachers –
and says that as we support them,
we become fellow-workers with them.
In other words, Gaius has faithfully implemented the sort of love and truth
that John has inculcated through his preaching and teaching.

What does this mean for us?
It means that we should support missionaries.
When we provide support for missionaries (both "home" and "foreign" missions),
we are bearing witness to the truth –
we are fellow workers for the truth –
we are walking in the truth!

And John rejoices when he hears that his "children" are walking in the truth.

But not all speak and love according to the truth.

c. Condemnation of Diotrephes Who Likes to Put Himself First (v9-10)

[9]I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. [10]So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

Verse 9 states that John had already written something to the church
(probably 2 John – but possibly 1 John as well),
but that Diotrephes refused to listen.

If you look back at 2 John, you can see precisely what Diotrephes would have rejected.
"Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ
does not have God." (v9)
Diotrephes is an innovator – one who goes on ahead –
that is simply another way of saying 'who likes to put himself first,'
and 'does not acknowledge our authority.'

John assumes that Gaius knows exactly what Diotrephes is doing,
so he doesn't give us much in the way of detail.
But from what we know, we can say a little:
Diotrephes appears to have significant position in the church.
He is clearly an elder along with John and Gaius.
He speaks wicked nonsense about John.
He refuses to welcome the traveling preachers,
and even worse, he puts those who do welcome them out of the church.

Little has changed since the first century!
We still have Diotrephes with us –
ministers who put themselves first.
Jesus said that the one who would lead
must be the servant of all,
since Christ himself came not to be served, but to serve,
and give his life as a ransom for many.
But John also says that if he comes, he will seek to put a stop to Diotrephes' evil.

d. Commendation of Demetrius the Good (v11-12)

[11]Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. [12]Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

And so, in verses 11-12 John contrasts Diotrephes with Demetrius.
Verse 11 provides the basic contrast:
Whoever does good is from God
Whoever does evil has not seen God.
If you want to know what evil looks like,
look at Diotrephes – but don't imitate him!
Don't seek to be first!
If you want to know what good looks like,
look at Demetrius!

But don't just "look" at Demetrius –
imitate him.
Paul will say, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" – (2 Thess 3:7-9)
and Hebrews will encourage us to imitate those who taught us Christ (13:7).

The Christian life is not just about "doing good,"
but imitating those who do good.

What is the difference?
"Doing good" could possibly happen in isolation.
"Imitating good" cannot possibly happen in isolation!
Imitation requires a closeness – a level of interaction –
that permits you to see what a man's life looks like.

Who do you imitate?
Who do you most resemble?
Probably your parents –
because you have seen so much of how they do things.
My parents divorced when I was 13.
I learned very quickly that what I had *thought* was a good marriage,
in fact, was not.
And so I spent the better part of the decade of the 1990s
looking for marriages that I wanted to imitate.

You can learn a lot from books –
but there is no substitute for the personal reality of a godly life.

Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good.
Imitate Demetrius!
John says that Demetrius has a "good testimony" from everyone around John –
and indeed, from the truth itself.

This is an interesting way of saying things!
The truth – as it is in Jesus – commends Demetrius!
And so John adds his own commendation,
because "you know that our testimony is true."

You can see an example of a letter of recommendation in John's words about Demetrius.
If we are to bear *true witness* about others,
then we need to praise and commend those who do good.
It's not enough to *avoid* bearing false witness.
If we do not bear *true* witness to the good,
then we are only half-truth tellers.

Remember, Jesus said, "I am the way, the *truth*, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)
Jesus *is* the truth.
To be a truth-teller is to be one who speaks of Jesus.
To walk in the truth is to walk by the Spirit of Jesus.

So the first thing that we should see with respect to the ninth commandment,
is that we must bear witness to the truth of Jesus–
we must bear witness to the gospel of Christ to those around us,
and through our support of missions–to the ends of the earth.

2) Whatsoever Is Prejudicial to Truth: Psalm 64 and the Verbal Ambush
But those who walk in the truth often find themselves
the target of the verbal ambush of the wicked.
That is where Psalm 64 starts, which we sang earlier.
Remember Diotrephes?
He is a good example those who "whet their tongues like swords."
Have you experienced this?
I once sat in a room full of men who were plotting the downfall of their brother.
It was a truly horrible place to be.
They were whetting their tongues like swords,
preparing to destroy a man:
aiming bitter words like arrows, they had their prey within their reach.

Then they spring their verbal ambush.
Through slander, lies, or half-truths, they destroy their prey.
The tragedy is that this does not only happen in the world,
it happens in the church.
It happened in the OT church, as David testifies.
It happens in the NT church, as John testifies.
But that is because the wicked can easily get into the church.
After all, as Christians we are to be truth-tellers,
and we are always to be ready to believe those who confess Jesus as Lord.
Clever liars may be able to enter the church through deceit and trickery.
Sad to say, sometimes they may even make it into the ministry or eldership.
And yes, there are some times when otherwise godly men and women
temporarily fall into grievous sin, and speak evil of their brothers and sisters.

The verbal ambush is indeed a grievous sin.
Whether it is slander or gossip behind their back,
or cruel put-downs to their face,
there is no truth to the old adage, "sticks and stones can break my bones,

but words can never hurt me."
Words can indeed hurt.
The tongue can destroy swift as an arrow to its target.

Beware, brothers and sisters,
lest you use your tongue in a verbal ambush.

I would call your attention again to the catechism's language:
The Ninth Commandment forbids whatsoever is prejudicial to truth,
or injurious to our own or our neighbour's good name.
Notice the "or."
Some say that as long as you are speaking the truth,
you cannot be guilty of slander.
That is a pernicious lie.
The ninth commandment not only forbids whatsoever is prejudicial to truth,
but it also calls us to protect the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own.
It may be true that your neighbor is having an affair,
but it is still wrong to tell everyone in the neighborhood about it!
(Though you may need to tell his or her spouse)
The best rule of thumb to avoid gossip is to keep in mind,
"Is this information necessary for this person to be able to help the situation?"
And it is *never* appropriate to pass on gossip under the guise of a "prayer request."
To do so is nothing less than a verbal ambush.

Do not ask others to "pray for my neighbor..."–instead pray yourself!
David reminds us what happens to the verbal ambushers:
"God shoots his arrow at them;
they are wounded suddenly." (v7)
Just as they shot suddenly at the innocent (v4),
so now they are shot down by the archer of heaven.
Without warning they are brought to ruin,
"with their own tongues turned against them."
This is, after all, the universal experience of sinners!
Invariably, sin turns back upon itself.

Diotrephes refused hospitality and sustenance to the missionaries who came to his church.
No doubt when he reached the pearly gates,
he was denied hospitality as well!

If you bear false witness against your neighbor,
your slander will in the end come back upon your head.

Now there are some real difficulties here.

There are times when you need wisdom
to discern how to speak properly and usefully.
So let us turn to our OT reading, Proverbs 6.

3) The Maintaining and Promoting of Truth: Proverbs 6 and the Wise Tongue

Proverbs 5-6 say a lot about the tongue.

Listen to Proverbs 5:1-6 – and listen for the language of the lips, the tongue, the ear.

In Proverbs 5, the father says to his son:

"My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding,
that you may keep discretion, and your lips may guard knowledge.
For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil,
but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol;
she does not ponder the path of life;
her ways wander, and she does not know it."

This is one source of John's blending of the language of walking in the truth.

There is a sense in which the ninth commandment holds the key to all the others:

To whom are you listening?
Whose witness directs your path? (Read v7, 13)

Do you listen to the voice of the Father?
Or will you say at the end of your life,
"How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof!
I did not listen to the voice of my teachers
or incline my ear to my instructors.
I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation." (5:12-14)

Chapter 6 then turn explicitly to the sins of the tongue.

Verses 1-5 speak of what to do when you find that you have spoken amiss.

The example is if you have entered a business contract unwisely.

But the lesson holds for any verbal mistake.

If you are snared in the words of your mouth–
if you can see that what you said is going to get you in trouble–
then plead with your neighbor to release yourself from that snare.
Don't wait!
If you lied to your parents,
don't think that you can find a different way out!
Correct your error.
Speak the truth–even if it is costly–
because a falsehood will cost you much, much more.

Verses 12-15 remind us of Psalm 64–the one who waits in a verbal ambush.

"A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech,
winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, points with his finger,
with perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord…"

Speak straight.
Do not allow your speech to wiggle.
Don't just tell Joe part of the truth, and Mary part of the truth.
Speak straight.
Lay it on the table and trust God to use the truth for his glory.

We often get so fixated on the situation that we forget that we're not in control!
All of your verbal machinations are not going to be able to control the situation anyway!
Speak the truth in love–
in other words, speak the truth for the sake of others–not for your own sake–
and your tongue will be a blessing to your neighbor.

Verses 16-19 then set forth seven abominations:

1) haughty eyes–
thinking that you know better than everyone else is usually where it starts, right?
2) a lying tongue–
3) and hands that shed innocent blood (there's our verbal ambush)
4) a heart that devises wicked plans,
5) feet that make haste to run to evil
6) a false witness who breathes out lies,
7) and one who sows discord among brothers.

Notice that the first six are all part of the body:
eyes, tongue, hands, heart, feet, breath
All of which work together to sow discord among the brethren.

This formula "six things...even seven"
is generally not used to categorize disparate things,
but things that all fit together.

How you use your eyes, tongue, hands, heart, feet and breath
says an awful lot about you.

Proverbs 4 concluded with a similar concern for the body:

"Guard your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.
Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you.
Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.
Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil." (4:23-27)

There is a proper use of the body, and an improper use.
Speak straight.
(Or as Paul puts it, speak the truth in love)
Look straight ahead
for where your eyes lead, your feet follow.
And walk straight–
and above all, "guard your heart" for from it flow the springs of life.

Conclusion

If you are walking in the truth,
abiding in Christ's teaching,
then you will be one who sows harmony among brethren,
because his truth invariably produces peace.

And the solution to sins of the tongue is found by looking to the Truth–who is Jesus Christ.
After all, where did the first sin come from?
A lie.
Satan, in the garden, lied to Eve–she believed the lie,
and from that lie has stemmed all the misery of human existence.

Where did righteousness come from?
The truth.
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
And the Word declares, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."
God dealt with Satan's lie by sending the truth.
And from that truth has stemmed all the joy and hope of the new creation.

Every time you sin, you are believing a lie.
The solution to sin, therefore, is rejecting the lie,
and believing the truth as it is in Jesus.
You must ask yourself, "what lie am I believing?"
And "what truth am I forgetting?"
All sin stems from lies and produces misery.
All righteousness stems from truth and produces peace and joy.

Therefore cling to the one who is our righteousness,
who is the truth,
and in whose presence is fullness of joy,
even our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.