



**March 9, 2017**  
**The Eighth Commandment**

[Read Luke 22:54-62](#)

We live in a time of the vicious vocabulary of vilification. In other words, name-calling has become the preferred method of public communication and commentary. I was surprised to discover that “snowflake” has become a term of hateful derision applied to younger political liberals, despite its history of very different usage.

(See <https://www.google.com/amp/s/thinkprogress.org/amp/p/aaf1a922f37b>)

On the other hand, “wingnut” is no longer just a term of amused condescension applied to incompetent inventors. Now it’s a term to describe so-called “right-wing nuts.” Current dictionaries are scrambling to keep up with the evolution of such name-calling in the public sphere.

The eighth commandment declares, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Luther tells this that we should not “tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations.” We do not get to define our neighbors by the names we apply. That is God’s business, not ours. “*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you,*” we read in Isaiah 43:1b, “*I have called you by name, you are mine.*” To define someone in another way is to break the First Commandment, to seek to take God’s place.

Our call is different. Instead of using verbal violence to vilify our neighbors, “we are to come their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” Labels that masquerade as names can be dangerous. The Nazis labelled Jews as “vermin” in the early parts of their genocidal madness. Reducing a person to a pest is the first step toward exterminating that pest. In Rwanda, the Hutus were urged on radio broadcasts to regard the Tutsis as “cockroaches.” Soon a million Tutsis had been slaughtered.

If we are to obey this commandment, we must monitor our speech. This is not in the name of some mythical “political correctness.” Instead we who follow Jesus understand that names matter. We understand that we are called to build up our neighbors with our words, not to tear them down (or apart). Martin Luther gives this summary in his *Large Catechism* (paragraph 285):

“Now we have the sum and substance of this commandment: No one shall harm his neighbor, whether friend or foe, with his tongue. No one shall speak evil of him, whether truly or falsely, unless it is done with proper authority or for his improvement. A person should use his tongue to speak only good of everyone, to cover his neighbors sins and infirmities, to overlook them, and to cloak and veil them with his own honor.”

What if we Lutherans became known as the people who keep this commandment well and fully? What difference would it make if we made a commitment to always construe our neighbor’s actions in the kindest possible way?

Let’s pray. Loving God, you have called us by name. That name is “Beloved.” Send your Holy Spirit to form our thoughts and words about our neighbors in the kindest possible way. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Do something:** Make a list of all the times today that you hear or say something that damages your neighbor through words—a name, a slur, a stereotype, a label. Make a commitment to remove such language from your speech and to point out such words in the speech of others.

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