**Guarding and advancing the reputation of others**

Text: 1 Peter 4:8

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**Scriptures:** John 21:15-19; Exodus 20:16; Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Peter 4:1-8

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 211, 32, 85, 503, 529

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD43)

**Theme:** Positively fulfilling God’s will, as expressed in the ninth commandment, involves loving our neighbours by doing what we can to guard and advance their good name.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

**Introduction**

There’s something of an epidemic of blaming others for the outbreak and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic at present. Some states and nations are pursuing legal action and politicians are defending their responses against mounting criticism. This verbal warfare is often characterised by attacking the reputations of others and presenting a narrative to put oneself in a favourable light. In amongst all of this, the ninth commandment is very likely being broken in various ways: false witness against others, twisting the words of others, condemning others without a hearing, or without just cause, gossip, slander, lying, and deceit

These aspects of breaking God’s good commandment “*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour*” (Ex 20:16), are highlighted in the Heidelberg Catechism (LD43A112). The catechism **also** helpfully identifies some ways in which we can positively keep this commandment, stating: “*I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it. And I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbour’s good name*”. Our focus in this sermon is on the second part of this statement: “*I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbour’s good name*”, as we consider the Word of God from our text in 1 Peter 4:8: “*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins*”.

You may already know that the phrase “*love covers a multitude of sins*” is a quote from Proverbs 10:12. (James repeats this in the last few words of his letter – James 5:20). You might be wondering “what exactly is meant here by ‘love covers a multitude of sins’”? We’ll consider the Biblical answer to this question under three headings:

1. Covering sin
2. Confronting sin
3. Loving sinners earnestly
4. **Covering sin**

A ‘cover-up’ is an attempt to conceal evidence of wrongdoing, error, incompetence or other embarrassing information. In a passive cover-up, information is simply not provided; in an active cover-up, deception is used. We all have a natural tendency to conceal evidence which if known by others would damage our reputation, that is our ‘good name’. Examples include: hiding a speeding fine police notification which arrives in the mail from your husband or wife; making sure nobody else in your ‘bubble’ sees you when you secretly eat some chocolate from the pantry and when, of course you are careful not to take the last piece! Patching up poor workmanship so it’s not obvious, rather than redoing the job properly so that it’s up to standard.

Concealment of errors, incompetence and wrongdoing is nothing new. For example:

* **Achan** hid a cloak, 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold which he had taken when Israel defeated Ai. In his sinful coveting, he physically concealed the evidence of his crime by hiding the items which would reveal his guilt in a hole dug beneath his tent (Joshua 7:19-21).
* **King David** concealed his sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah for almost nine months, until the prophet Nathan confronted David and the awful truth of his sins was revealed (2 Sam 12:1-15).
* **Gehazi**, Elisha’s servant, lied to his master in order to conceal his sin of not being truthful with Naaman in order to obtain a gift of silver, and clothing (2 Kings 5).

In our text, Peter writes that ‘*love covers a multitude of sins*’. This does not mean that concealing **our own sins** is somehow commendable, it is not! Proverbs 28:13 wisely states “*He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper*”. The Hebrew word which is translated ‘covers’ in Proverbs 10:12, which Peter quotes is also found in the two psalms which we sung and heard earlier in this service: Psalm 32:1 “*Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is* ***covered***”. Psalm 85:2 “*You forgave the iniquity of your people; you* ***covered*** *all their sin*”. Here the word ‘covered’ is used to mean not concealment, but forgiveness through atonement. The English word ‘atonement’ is a combination of “at” and “one(men)” meaning to be or to make one. It speaks of the payment needed to bring about reconciliation. In these Psalms it is the Lord who is acknowledged as being the One who forgives sin.

Divine forgiveness is grounded in the nature of God who is: “*merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty*” (Ex 34:6b-7). God’s covering of sin is connected to atonement; the means by which the Lord reconciles sinners to Himself by graciously forgiving them, whilst also acting justly by satisfying the need for the payment of death to be made (ref. Rom 6:23). It’s helpful to know that the Hebrew word translated ‘atonement’ has the basic meaning ‘to cover’ (e.g. in Lev 16). We see from Scripture that the atoning animal sacrifices of the Old Testament point forward to the ‘covering’ of sin by the blood of Christ (ref. Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17).

The willingness of God to cover the multitude of sins of His people through the sacrifice of Christ is motivated by His great love: "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). Brothers and sisters in Christ, “*We love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). Our motivation to keep on loving others earnestly is firstly to be motivated by the great love of our Lord who has graciously acted to forgive our sins through the atoning work of Christ on the cross. Love for our God is the reason to actively obey the ninth commandment by doing what we can to guard and advance our neighbour’s good name.

We have many opportunities to do this when we can lovingly overlookoffences which others commit against us, knowing that the time is coming when everyone will be judged perfectly by Christ. Nothing will be concealed on that day (e.g. Eccl 12:14). Overlooking some of the sins which others commit against us is an aspect of patiently ‘*bearing with one another in love*’ (Eph 4:2).

Overlooking offences against us is wise in some circumstances. Proverbs 19:11 states that “*good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense*”; Proverbs 12:16 notes that “*the vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult*”; In 1 Corinthians 13:7 we read that: “*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*”. Overlooking offences against us is wise in some circumstances. However, there are other circumstances when confronting sin is necessary. This brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Confronting sin**

There are situations when confronting sin in someone’s life is the right way to keep loving someone earnestly.

* When Achan was trying to conceal his sin, Joshua’s diligent action exposed what he had done
* When King David thought that he had got away with adultery and murder, Nathan came to him and said, “*you are the man*” (2 Sam 12:7)
* When Gehazi was questioned by Elisha, his sin was known.

**Love can overlook many sins, but should not do so with all.** There are situations in which the most loving action is to address sin, to make known to the other person that you have been offended by his words or deeds, and to give her the opportunity to repent and seek forgiveness. For example, the Word of God teaches us that:

* We are to go to a brother or sister who sins against us alone (Matt 18:15). If they do not listen, then we are to take one or two witnesses with to establish the truth (Matt 18:16). If the person has sinned and is still unrepentant, then the church is to become involved in corporate church discipline (Matt 18:17).
* We are to warn those who are lazy (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
* We ought not to participate in unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead to expose them (Ephesians 5:11).

How can you determine whether an offense should be overlooked, or addressed? Here are some practical suggestions to consider:

* **Examine your own motives**. Ask yourself ‘why do I see the need to confront this offence against me?’ Is my motive anger or am I seeking revenge? Do I harbour a grudge against the other person? Do I take perverse pleasure in confronting others?
* **Examine your own life**. Ask yourself “are there sins which I need to confront in my own life? Remember that Jesus said “*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye*” (Matt 7:3-5). This does not mean that we must wait until we are entirely without sin before we confront transgressions in others (if that were the case, we could never address anybody else’s sin). However it does mean that we should confront our own sin before turning to the sin of others.
* **Examine the Scriptures**. Has the person who has offended you or committed another offence actually sinned? Is there a clear violation of Biblical law that you can accurately identify? In order to conduct this necessary examination, we need to know and understand the Word of God. At times we can have expectations of other people which are not Biblical requirements, but merely our preferences for how we would like to be treated. Not all perceived offences are sins.
* **Examine the frequency**. Some offences and sins which others commit against us can be overlooked if they are occasional, infrequent and out-of-character. For example, when we are tired and/or stressed there is a greater likelihood that we may become unrighteously angry (Eph 4:26), have ‘*corrupting talk come out of our mouths*’ (Eph 4:29) and/or look only to our own interests and not the interests of others (Phil 2:4). Love can cover some occasional out-of-character sins, however, if these are not isolated incidents but regular patterns of ungodly behaviour, then the most loving response is likely to be bringing these regularly occurring sins to the attention of the sinner.
* **Examine the sinner’s circumstances.** It is wise to seek to understand a person’s situation before confronting them about sin. The particular pressures facing somebody such as their health, marital or family situation, employment or ongoing grief and sadness do not excuse sin, but an awareness of these helps us to respond to them in love with understanding. A careful examination of someone’s circumstances (in so far as you are aware of them) helps to inform if, when, and how to speak with them about sin in their life.
* **Examine the wise counsel of others.** It may be wise and valuable to seek the counsel of other mature Christians before pursuing confrontation. Be careful, however, that this is not simply an opportunity to gossip and vent your own feelings to them, after which you will feel better and let the matter drop without having to go through the personal pain of godly confrontation motivated by love for the other person.

If you have assessed your own heart, the offender, and the offence, and you believe that confrontation is necessary, pursue forgiveness and reconciliation in the way Jesus outlines in Matthew 18:15-17.

It is the glory of a person to overlook an offence (Prov 19:11); it is a foolish and prideful man, woman, or child who believes that every little offence is worthy of confrontation. Such a person does not understand the importance of guarding and advance their neighbour’s good name, which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Loving sinners earnestly**

Peter writes as an apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:1) in the ‘last days’; the time period in which we also live, between the first and second coming of Christ. He says in chapter 4, verses 7 and 8 “*The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins*”. The word ‘earnestly’ here in the original Greek language literally means to stretch out and be extended to the limit. This word was used in athletics to mean “striving with all of one’s energy” and described a runner who was moving at maximum pace with taut muscles straining and stretching to the limit.

To keep loving one another with the same type of sacrificial, selfless, enduring, patient, kind, merciful, love that God extends towards us in Christ requires intense effort, persevering energy and earnest resolve. Too often people like you and me fall into one of two categories: Either we overlook offenses which we should confront, or we confront offences which we should overlook

The Scriptures wisely do not provide us with the right approach for each and every situation in life, but give principles which we must prayerfully and carefully apply with the help of the Holy Spirit. Our natural ‘preferred approach’ will tend to depend on our personality, past history, and the identity of person who has offended us. We need to be guided, not by these factors, but by the Word and Spirit. Keeping on loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins is not a ‘paint-by-numbers’ activity, but a prayerful, careful, wise application of the principles of Scripture to the specific situation in which we are placed in God’s providence.

In our text, Peter is exhorting his readers to be self-controlled and sober-minded and to keep loving each other earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Remember that Peter himself experienced the self-controlled, sober-minded, earnest love of Christ is a unique way after the Lord’s resurrection, as we read earlier from John 21:15-19. Here we see our how our Lord upheld the ninth commandment by guarding and advancing Peter’s name. Notice how masterfully Christ did this with the disciple who had vehemently denied Him three times after he was arrested. Remember how, in the words of Heidelberg Catechism LD43, Peter did not ‘avoid lying and deceit’. He did not ‘love the truth, speak it candidly and openly acknowledge it’.

He broke the 9th commandment. He sinned against the Lord. He said of Jesus, to whom He had pledged “*Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you*” (Matt 26:35), “*I do not know the man*” (Matt 26:74). On the other side of the cross, after they had finished breakfast together, the Risen Lord Jesus spoke to Peter, asking him three times “*Do you love me?*’. Jesus overlooked Peter’s sin in the sense of not directly mentioning his lies, yet He did address the underlying issue of Peter’s loyalty; confronting the heart issue: Peter’s love for Jesus. The thrice repeated question “do you love me” would likely have been a very painful reminder to Peter of his threefold denial. Jesus was aware of Peter’s weaknesses, and rather than crush his disciple who had failed, He earnestly built him up and thereby restored him with the commissioning words: “Feed my lambs”, “Tend my sheep”, “Feed my sheep”, “Follow me”.

We know with certainty that this is what Peter, whose good name had been guarded and advanced by Christ, went on to do. Today, through the inspired Word of God, there is a sense in which Peter has fed us, Christ’s sheep, with the call to do what Jesus graciously did for him: “*keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins*”.

It is not just politicians seeking to shift blame for unfavourable outcomes who may be guilty of breaking the ninth commandment in various ways: false witness against others, twisting the words of others, condemning others without a hearing, or without just cause, gossip, slander, lying, and deceit. People like you and I do so too. Probably more often than we care to admit. Like Peter, we need the restorative grace of Christ who has covered the sins of many by dying in the place of many on the cross and who gently and firmly confronts sin, through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:18).

Brothers and sisters, Christ keeps loving us earnestly and His love covers the multitude of our sins. In light of His great love, we are called to keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. As we do so we fulfil the ninth commandment, give glory to God and bless our neighbours whose good name we earnestly guard and advance.

AMEN