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You Shall Not Bear False Witness Exodus 20:16

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About a month into my first semester of seminary I was eating dinner with a group of friends. It was the day the O. J. Simpson murder trial came to end and the verdict was read. Most of the group were Canadian. I was the sole American. We'd all long since lost any interest in the trial. Our expectations were low. We knew how things worked. But then there was Thomas. He was from Germany. He'd just arrived in North America. He knew a little bit about the case, but hadn't been following it. The rest of us were talking about something completely unrelated when Thomas sat down. And the first thing he said was, "Wow. O. J. didn't do it. How long do you think it'll take them to find the real killer?" And we all just sat there looking at him in stunned silence. Then they looked at me, expecting the American to explain. It was my country, after all. And I said something like, "Dude. They got the killer. Everyone knows O. J. is guilty. They're not going to look for someone else." But in his naivety, Thomas said, "But the court found him not guilty. How can that happen if he's guilty and everyone knows it." And that started a discussion about the corruption of the American justice system. People with power and people with money all-too-often escape justice, whether it's through loopholes or through corrupt lawyers who work the system or any number of other ways. Thomas just sat there looking utterly appalled. Later, he said something about how shocked he was. The US was supposed to be better than that. As an American, I was kind of surprised that he wouldn't already know this. It's not like O. J. was the first rich person or first celebrity to escape justice. When he was found liable in civil court, I found myself thinking back and wondering what

Thomas would have thought of that: not guilty in criminal court, but guilty in a civil suit. Things like this are a black mark on the justice system.

And this is exactly what the Lord expected his people to avoid. They were to be a light in the midst of the nations. As the prophet Micah proclaimed to Israel, the Lord required of them as his people to love kindness and to do justice. Her failure to do either of these things eventually led to her exile—her removal from the Lord's land. And so this is what the ninth word or ninth commandment is getting at. Look at Exodus 20:16

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

I always found this one confusing when I was a kid. As I learned it in Sunday School, it meant simply "Don't lie". What does it mean to "bear false witness" against a neighbour? It's a much narrower category than just saying "Don't lie". It's about what you say in the courtroom. It's easier to understand the reason for this narrowing of focus when we remember that the Lord's concern was for Israel as a people, for Israel as a covenant community, not so much the piety of each individual person. It's not that the individual isn't important. The community is made up of individuals, after all. But it was the covenant community as a whole that the Lord established to bear witness to him and so it was the covenant community as a whole on which the Lord's reputation depended. That's why the focus here is on what we might call the reputation of Israel's system of jurisprudence rather than on the individual. Israel's reputation for holy justice could survive the individual here or there who tells a lie, but the reputation of the nation stands or falls on whether or not the nations see a people as a whole who stand for truth and justice.

Think of it this way. A man can commit a murder and then stand up in court, lie through his teeth, and claim he didn't do it. That man is not a threat to the reputation of the nation. But when that nation's system of jurisprudence allows truth to be sacrificed on the altar of

power, money, and corruption, it calls into question the whole nation's commitment to truth and justice. The more often it happens, the more the nation's reputation is undermined. And in Israel's case, because she was called to represent the Lord and his good rule, it wasn't just Israel's reputation at stake, but the Lord's, too.

So that's one reason why we have this command not to bear false witness against a neighbour instead of a simple command, "You shall not lie". But the bit about one's neighbour is also important. Every lie is told to someone. Every lie is told to a neighbour of one kind or another, but as Jesus reminds us, the second table of the law is a reminder to love one's neighbour as oneself. And so the focus of this eighth word is placed on the sorts of lies that actively and deliberately do harm to our neighbour, his property, his life, and his reputation. There are all sorts of lies. There are lies we tell to make ourselves sound bigger or better than we really are. There are lies we tell to get ourselves out of trouble. But when the Lord tells Israel not to lie, he zeroes in on the lies we tell to hurt and to destroy our neighbours. Again, it's not just a matter of personal piety. The big picture here is the witness of the whole people of God. Is Israel a people who value and place a priority on the truth? Is Israel a people who value and place a priority on justice?

And, once again, it comes down to faith. Think back to the preamble in verse 1: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." I am the Lord who revealed the truth about Pharaoh's false claims of divinity. I am the Lord who brought justice to bear on Egypt and freed my people from their bondage. As my people you ought to value truth and justice and you ought to trust me enough to live them out for yourselves.

The emphasis here also makes more sense when you remember just how many crimes in Israel were capital crimes and just what they had to rely on in court. In Canada we have no capital crimes. Most Western countries limit the death penalty to premeditated murder. But in Israel there were more

capital crimes than we have time to list this morning. And they didn't have modern forensic science and DNA testing. A conviction rested on the testimony of witnesses. And so in Deuteronomy 17:6 we read:

On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.

When someone's life was on the line, the word of one witness was not sufficient evidence. There had to be multiple witnesses to corroborate the accusation. St. Paul brings this same principle to bear in the church. He writes to Timothy:

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. (1 Timothy 5:19)

But the Lord also gave Israel laws meant to discourage false testimony. In that same passage from Deuteronomy it's also written:

The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. (Deuteronomy 17:7a)

Execution was typically by stoning and it was the witness on whose testimony the verdict depended who was commanded to throw the first stone. It's one thing to lie and see a neighbour convicted. It's a whole other thing to be the executioner. This drove home the full gravity of one's testimony in a capital crime. But that wasn't all. Here's what we read in Deuteronomy 19:16-20,

If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your

midst. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you.

The focus here is on the person who witnesses falsely so that a neighbour is punished. The Lord says that if you're caught doing that, the punishment that you sought for your neighbour is now *your* punishment. If you accused him of a capital offence, you now reap the death penalty yourself. If you accuse him of stealing your livestock in a malicious scheme to extort livestock from him, your livestock is now *and*, if you can't pay up, you're the one who gets sold into slavery. I think this also covers what we would today refer to as "frivolous lawsuits": trying to scam money from an insurance company, from a doctor, from a neighbour by claiming some sort of phoney or trumped-up injury and things of that nature. In Israel, you get caught doing that and you're the one paying up.

The book of Proverbs, in particular, stresses the importance of truth and justice. Like the *torah*, Proverbs also stresses truthfulness primarily in the context of the court. Again, it's not that individual piety isn't important, but that the reputation of the whole people of God is most important.

Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit. (12:17)
A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape. (19:5)
A worthless witness mocks at justice, and the mouth of the wicked devours iniquity. (19:28)
A false witness will perish, but the word of a man who hears will endure. (21:28)
Be not a witness against your neighbor without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. (24:28)
A truthful witness saves lives, but one who breathes out lies is deceitful. (14:25)

What we see as we gather up everything the Old Testament has to say about this subject, is that God's people ought to value truth and justice as much as he does. Israel's faithfulness to truth and to justice reflected the Lord's faithfulness to truth and to justice. The Lord established his people in part so that the nations would see him at work in their midst.

As with the last several commandments, this one isn't hard to transpose into the New Covenant. The New Israel ought to be just as concerned about truth and justice as the old Israel and for the same reason. Jesus reiterated this command when he was confronted by many of his own people who played loose with their word. Here's what he says in Matthew 5:33-37,

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

Now, Jesus isn't saying not to take or make oaths. The problem he saw was one in which people would make oaths and swear by certain things as if what you swore by made the oath more or less binding. You know, swear to God and you really meant it, but swear by your own head and, well, no big deal if you break it. Jesus says, 'No. Keep your word whether you swear an oath or not. Let your yes mean yes and your no mean no. Be so consistently honest that people know they can trust your word.' Brothers and Sisters, that's what the Lord has wanted of his people from the beginning.

As I've been preaching these sermons through the Decalogue, I've been reading through what the confessions and catechisms that came out of the

Protestant Reformation have to say about them. The Heidelberg Catechism caught my attention this week. It asks, “What is the aim of the ninth commandment?” And here’s the answer:

“That I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one’s words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing.

Rather, in court and everywhere else, I should avoid lying and deceit of every kind; these are the very devices the devil uses, and they would call down on me God’s intense wrath. 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.”

First, never give false testimony in court. Most of us will probably never be faced with that situation, but if we are: speak the truth and further the cause of justice.

Second, twist no one’s words. Now we’re probably getting closer to home. We’ve probably all done this. If we haven’t we’ve all certainly felt the sting of having our words twisted. More than once someone who wasn’t here on a Sunday has said, “So I heard that you said such-and-such in your sermon.” Sometimes they’re upset and say something like, “How dare you? Do you really believe that? That’s crazy?” But I never said anything like that. Usually, I said just the opposite. But someone’s gone and twisted my words, spread it around, and the damage is done. Nevermind that the sermon is posted online and what I said is easily verified. All too often we’d rather believe the worst.

And that leads into the third point the catechism makes about gossip and slander. Proverbs 18:8 says:

**The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels;
they go down into the inner parts of the body.**

Doesn’t that describe gossip well? Someone whispers some juicy bit of information to us and it makes us feel so good. Sometimes it makes us feel good because it’s some bit of insider information and now we’re amongst the privileged few to be let in. Usually it’s some bit of information that makes us feel oh so superior to the poor shmuck guilty of—well—whatever rumour says he’s gone and done. Sometimes that bit of information is false. Sometimes it’s true. But you’ll probably never know, because that’s the point with gossip. Gossip doesn’t really care about the truth. Gossip’s about making us feel good at the expense of someone else.

I understand that there are grey areas. A lot of gossip masquerades as prayer requests and requests for advice. “Did you know such-and-such about So-and-so? Pray for her.” Friends, stop and think before you share. Maybe we really do need to pray about the situation. But is that really the motive in telling others about it? Or is the real motive the desire to build ourselves up at another’s expense? Stop and ask yourself if the person you’re talking about would be upset if he or she knew what you were sharing. If she’d be upset with what you’re doing, there’s a good chance you’re gossiping. Stop and consider that in Romans 1, St. Paul lists gossips in the same breath as murders. Gossip murders another person’s reputation.

Then there’s slander. Paul mentions that right along with gossip and murder. Slander is when we knowingly and deliberately say something false about another person. It’s outright character assassination. Friends, there is no room for slander in the Christian life. None at all.

Finally, there’s the flip side of gossip and slander. What if you’re the person on the receiving end? The catechism says, “*That I never...join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing.*” What came to mind first as I read these words were the events at this year’s March for Life in Washington. Do you remember the high-school kids who ended up on the news, condemned for

getting in the face of an elderly native man who was playing his drum. One kid in particular was raked over the coals. People talked about the smirk he wore and one commentator asked if we’d ever seen a more punchable face. What these kids did to this poor man was despicable.

But one thing I’ve learned—and it comes from taking the Bible’s advice seriously while watching the media repeatedly trip and fall—is that it’s wise to wait a bit before jumping on the bandwagon of outrage when these things happen. Proverbs 18:5 says:

**The one who states his case first seems right,
until the other comes and examines him.**

And we see this truth played out over and over. This was a perfect example. The first videos released were incomplete. As more footage turned up we discovered that these kids were the ones showing restraint and that it was the man with the drum being confrontational. The boy wasn’t smirking. It was a look of awkwardness as he tried not to respond to another’s provocation. The more information that came out, the more we realised that the initial narrative we were given had pretty much everything backwards.

Brothers and Sisters, if we are committed to truth and to justice, we need to be people with level heads, people who are slow to condemn, people who are patient and who wait for the facts. Truth demands it of us.

In a similar vein, it also strikes me how easily we can be to break this commandment by repeating or propagating gossip and slander—particularly these days on the Internet and with social media. For some reason people are prone to thinking that if it’s on the Internet, it must be true. Often, if it reinforces our thinking about a person—particularly a politician—or about a political or social issue, we click “share” before asking if what we’re seeing is true or not. Friends, don’t do that. Slow down. Take a breath. As

they say, “Google is your friend.” Do a little research. And then share it when you’re reasonably certain what your sharing is true. Again, as Jesus’ people, we are people committed to the truth.

Finally, there’s the pressing issue posed by our culture’s tumble into Postmodernism and relativism. Our culture is quick to sacrifice truth on the altar of feelings. We’ve reach a point that only a couple of decades ago most people would have thought absurd. “Truth” is private and it’s whatever we want it to be. We remake God in our own image or we deny God and call it “truth”. We rewrite history and call it truth. We write out own personal codes of ethics and call it truth. Today a man can call himself a woman and claim it as truth. Someone claims that $2+2=5$ and if you’ve got the nerve to point out that, no, $2+2=4$, social pressure will be applied. No outrage will be spared. You’ll be condemned as a hater or who knows what else. Those of us over thirty or forty probably just roll our eyes, but I fear for our children. We live in a society where “niceness” is increasingly the single greatest value. Everyone just wants to be liked and affirmed. (That’s another social problem, but I won’t get into it this morning.) And I fear for our children who have been instilled with these Postmodern values. When our greatest desire is to be accepted and when society’s first value is niceness, imagine the pressure our children face when they take a stand for truth. We need to be cognisant of these issues and we need to be preparing our children to face them. In kingdom perspective, there’s more to life than being accepted by a morally and philosophically bankrupt culture. We are people of the truth.

This was really driven home to me this week. The New Testament repeatedly speaks of truth. I was thinking about this and thought I’d use my Bible software for once and do a search for “truth” in the New Testament. I wanted to see, all in one place, the New Testament’s various uses of this word “truth”. I knew there would be a lot of hits, but even still I was struck by just how many. There were dozens of verses

that I knew, but hadn’t thought of in this regard. I was thinking in terms of John’s gospel and epistles especially, but it’s all through the New Testament.

Consider that Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Jesus is the truth. But Jesus also describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth (John 15:26; 16:13). John writes that John the Baptist was sent to bear witness to the truth (John 5:33). And in passages too numerous to list, the good news that in Jesus the Lord has fulfilled his promises and the good news that Jesus, crucified and risen, is Lord—that’s also “the truth”. And so as Christians we are truly people of the truth. We are people who know and live the truth that God is faithful and that in his faithfulness he has sent his King. We know and live the truth that this King is Jesus, and that he has died and risen and given his Spirit to make his people new. Brothers and Sisters, you and I are stewards of the truth. We’re stewards of the greatest truth there is, the truth about Jesus. The Lord has entrusted us with it, not just for our sake, but *for the sake of the world*. But we cannot be stewards of that truth, we cannot be faithful witnesses to that great truth, without also being good stewards with the truth in general and with all the little truths that surround us in everyday life. Whether it’s our neighbours telling lies to get ahead or our whole culture denying the truth about humanity, the truth about God, or the truth about Jesus, we stand must stand for truth. When everyone else insists that $2+2=5$, no matter the pressure, we are the people committed to the truth and who stand firm and declare that $2+2=4$. And we are the people who love our neighbours as Jesus has loved us. Because we love them we steward the truth. One day, through our witness, they may know the truth about Jesus, this good news we call the gospel.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, forgive us for our careless and unloving speech. As we hear your word read this morning and as we come to meet your Word Incarnate at the Table, remind us of your truth. We have been forgiven and made new by your Son, who is truth and you

have poured your Spirit into us, who bears witness to the truth. You have made us people of the truth. Give us grace and teach us to really be the people you have made us. Give us the faith to stand firm on your truth even when doing so has a great cost. And, we ask, cause our witness to bear fruit in the world around us, that others might know the truth as well. We ask this through Jesus our Lord. Amen.