

You Shall Not Bear False Witness

Exodus 20:16

We resume our series on the 10 Commandments and take up the 9th Commandment today — you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Let's remember that God's law is **rooted** in **God's character**. When he commands us not to bear false witness, he is commanding us to conform to his holy character, which is truth. God does not merely tell the truth— he is the truth because he is holy. We know truth only in relation to who God is, because he is truth. One of the well-known “I AM” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John is in **John 14:6** (which most of you know from memory): **Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father, but by me.** Truth is a person, and in our generation we must be oriented, not merely to a set of facts, but to God himself so that we can clearly proclaim truth in a murky, disoriented world. Clearly we are in a day when truth is not tethered to who God is, so people imagine their own truth rooted in their own moral corruption. That makes it untruth— because they are disoriented to, and unhitched from God himself.

While it is certainly *bad* in our day, it is not unique to our day. The Lord himself was challenged on this in the hours just before his crucifixion as he was before Pilate. Jesus said he came “to bear witness to the truth, and everyone who is of the truth listens” to him. Pilate cynically responds, “What is truth?” It speaks to the profound darkness of the human heart that one can sit in the very presence of incarnate truth and remain disoriented to it. It is surely the same in our day and the cure for this moral blindness is the same as it has always been: to know who God— to see him, and behold his beauty, his holiness— to believe him, and bow before him who is truth. In that light, let us endeavor to know God, and conform ourselves to his truth.

Exodus 20:16 — You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

PRAY

I want to begin with just a straightforward walk-through of the Heidelberg catechism on the 9th Commandment. Then I'll come back and pick a few things to address in a more detailed manner.

I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard.

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Pausing there: Complete, unvarnished honesty with no guile is to be the standard of my communication. There are a number of ways to bear false witness, and the catechism captures some of the nuance. Not just an obvious whopper of a lie against someone, but the twisting of words. Be warned that social media was forged in the fires of hell to do exactly this. Misquotes, half quotes, misrepresented positions, claiming that they hold some reprehensible position because they have not explicitly said they don't. This and anything like it is a violation of the 9th Commandment.

Gossips stir up dissension, strife, and destruction by spreading information they should not, and so violate the ninth Commandment. Gossips are included in a long list of people hardened in unbelief in Romans 1:29. They do not see fit to acknowledge God, and are given over to their sin as they have lost sight of him. In spite of the fact that the Bible speaks very harshly, concerning gossip, there are some that assume this to be a standard sin, even in the church of the Lord Jesus. Beware, and guard your heart against the sin of gossip, which is a violation of the 9th Commandment and the truth that it requires of us.

Slander is akin to gossip, specifically damaging another's reputation. It involves damaging, false, and exaggerated statements. It may involve portraying an actual event in a way that suggests evil without ever having to prove it. "I noticed that she just happened to leave work early at the same time he did and they were both gone for a while."

Closing the first section is a warning that we violate the commandment if we draw conclusions or make assumptions before we know all the facts. We are to be just and wise in the way we live in the world and in relationships with others.

The catechism continues: I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works, under penalty of God's heavy wrath. We began by acknowledging that God is truth, and all truth proceeds from God's character. Conversely, all untruth, all lying proceeds from the father of lies, the devil. The first lie ever recorded is from Satan: Hath God said? How heartbreaking it is to me when I realize that I am never less like Christ and more like the devil than when I am not truthful or violate the 9th Commandment in any way. Jesus is truth.

Not only heartbreaking, but bearing false witness should terrify us. **Proverbs 19:5** teaches, **A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape.** **Revelation 21:8**

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includes liars in the list of those who suffer the second death and have their portion in Hell. The promise of punishment from God should motivate us to tell the truth.

There is a sense in which bearing false witness is tied to unbelief about God. That, too, should produce fearful repentance from lying. If I do not believe the truth of who God is, I will have no fear of departing from truth. That foolish fearlessness on my part is an act in unbelief. Beware: unbelief does not mitigate the punishment that stores up and proceeds against the one who will not turn from lies.

Heidelberg closes the answer by saying, “In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth, speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbor's honor and reputation.”

Truth is never compromised or shaded for better or for worse. God's character does not shape-shift, so that this one gets a righteous judgment grounded in truth, but that one gets a more lenient judgment just because God likes him better. Ephesians 6:9 tells us God is unflinchingly impartial; we are likewise to be impartial. We are to tell the truth in a thoroughgoing way.

Exodus 23 tells us we are not to spread false reports or join with those who are wicked or have malicious intent. (Pick your friends by this standard — It may be life or death for you.) Wickedness and malicious intent can easily be spotted if you are willing to see it. But going beyond the obvious, we are not to favor someone to whom we are sympathetic so as to shade the truth. We are not to be partial to a poor man in a lawsuit.

Suppose an old man goes shopping in the Megamart. There's a spill they just mopped it up, and the floor is still wet. Over the top of the onion display you see that old man suddenly fall. As you move toward him to help, you see that the yellow “Caution! Wet Floor” sign. You have to all but step over 2 of those signs to help him up. He sues them, and you are called as a witness in the lawsuit. That old man who's never had two dimes to rub together is suing for \$100,000 to cover his medical expenses. You know that \$100,000 is a drop in the bucket to Megamart, but it will greatly help him. The old man's claim is that Megamart was negligent and didn't warn about the hazard. But you know that the old man had to walk through three yellow signs to get into the slippery area. You are not to shade the truth in any way to be partial to that old man. We are to be truth tellers through and through.

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So far we've seen the Old Testament law that should strike fear in us. But there is great help and hope in light of the gospel of Christ as we move into the New Testament. It is not simply a warning against lying, but wonderful grace and love in sharing truth. With the help of the Spirit of Truth in us, we are to **speaking the truth in love** — Ephesians 4:15. If you are old enough to fight with your sibling, you are well aware that there is a way speaking the truth that is not in love. Following our understanding that Jesus is truth, as we are adopted into Christ, and enter him by faith, we become of the truth, just as our Savior is. And we are also people of love, because God is love. (1 John 4) The more we grow in Christ, the more we know of Christ, the more we are conformed to his image, the more the truth should be incorporated in our speech — incorporated in such a way that both love and truth flow together. If we are given a new heart when we come to Jesus — and we are — then the new heart has a new exhaust pipe, if you will. What comes from the mouth flows from the heart, as Jesus says, so our truth-telling in love is an indicator that our heart belongs to him.

We Are to Be Truth-Tellers in a Lie Loving Age: Our generation cries out for social justice, but can't seem to find it. **That's because God's truth—which is the only truth— is the only basis for justice.** When we reject God, we jettison justice. That seems so obvious a statement that it is almost unnecessary to say it.

The Old Testament law solidly connected justice and truthfulness, taking into account both the lies a wicked human heart can produce, and misinterpretations or mistakes we make in our experiences. Under the Law, any accusation had to be established on the testimony of two or three men. But we live in a Romans 1 era of suppressing the truth, embracing delusion and deception. Across the West, falsehood has gripped the power structures of our culture and is causing massive injustice to occur. We have a sitting Supreme Court “justice” who cannot define what a man or a woman. Be certain that in the absence of this truth there will be nothing but injustice that comes from that woman. And she has a lifetime appointment, which means this will be a lifelong battle for believers.

Teachers in both Great Britain and the United States have been terminated and been denied the ability to provide for themselves and their families because they refuse to say that a boy can become a girl, and vice versa. In Great Britain, a man has famously been put in jail for saying that a boy cannot be a girl This is gross injustice rooted in a violation of the ninth commandment.

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Truth and justice are linked in our legal system when it functions properly. When truth becomes unhitched from justice, the only thing left is injustice. If we are to ever recover justice in the nation, it will be because God's people obey the 9th Commandment and tell the truth.

I've mentioned just one issue of transgenderism, but there is a plethora of social issues where bearing false witness is not only destroying justice, but corrosively dissolving the fabric of society.

- Abortion is not birth control; it is the extermination of a human. That's murder.
- Marriage is one biological man and one biological woman for life (with limited escape for infidelity). Marriage is what God established, and he defines it. A man cannot marry another man, nor a woman, another woman.

It is necessary that we tell the truth on these matters, it is loving, since continuing to choose falsehood will lead to eternal condemnation — and it is God glorifying to do so. If we do not begin to keep the positive aspect of truth-telling that this commandment requires of us, what kind of world will we have when our newborn Katie hits adulthood?

Is there ever a time not to tell the truth? There are rare exceptions we see in the Scripture. Not everyone is entitled to know every truth I know. I am not obligated to transparently communicate truth to people who will use it for evil.

Suppose we were given a 5-minute warning that murderous terrorists were about to besiege the place and we hid our children in some secret place in the building. When they come in and demand to know where our children are, we do not enter into their wickedness and tell them where they are so that they could kill them. God's commandment of truth telling, which is for our good, does not require us to enter into, or become complicit with evil.

In **Exodus 1**, Pharaoh required the Hebrew midwives to kill Hebrew baby boys as they were born. In **Exodus 1:17** the event unfolds: "But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families."

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So we have a couple of ways to determine in those extreme and limited instances if it is appropriate not to provide the truth, and they are both connected. **First**, does telling the truth involve violating one of God's commands? In the case of the midwives, it would've required them to murder. And even though the 10 Commandments had not yet been delivered, God's law was on their hearts, and they knew this was an evil thing to do. If you worked at a place of business that used a keypad entry, and your cousin who is a thief says give me the code. I wanna rob the place at 2 AM. If you give them the code you are complicit in their theft, and you have violated the 7th commandment not to steal.

The **second determining factor** deals directly with knowing God. The Hebrew women feared God and defied the evil king. They were wisely more afraid of God than they were of Pharaoh. In a fallen world, it is not possible for us to always make safe, easy decisions. Again, looking at these extreme cases that would be rare in any of our lives, if evil actors come in and put a gun to your head and say tell us where your wife and children are or we will kill you— out of both love for wife and children and fear of God, you will sacrifice yourself rather than make a truthful statement about where they are. We do not fear one who is done after killing the body. We fear him who, after killing the body, can cast both body and soul into hell. Now that is not a danger for a believer, but it does remind us who our God is. We are to fear him, and that fear is to govern what comes out of our mouths.

Let me close with this grace-filled encouragement. As with all aspects of the law, Jesus is our fulfillment of the command not to bear false witness. He is after all, the Truth. He fulfilled the 9th Commandment perfectly on our behalf, never shrinking in fear of the Pharisees or from Pilate. He always kept this command perfectly. Let the sweetness of this sink in for a moment: As our High Priest and our Mediator, he is now in heaven, telling the truth about his children: that all of their sin, including their lying, and their failure to be truthful— all that sin debt has been paid in full. He became sin on their behalf, and took on himself the deadly penalty of lying and gossip and slander and misrepresenting truth, and failure to speak truth in love — **so that we could be righteous in him. That is truth for all those who look away from themselves to Christ**. And as he not only **freed us** from the penalty of sin, he has **broken** the power of sin by sending the Spirit of Truth to live in us that we may proclaim his truth to a dark and dying world. Thanks be to God.