To Tell the Truth
November 15, 2026

Introduction
Have you ever been falsely run down by someone else? I imagine it's happened to many of us, whether a false rumor about us in school, a frustrated co-worker or maybe an ex. If you've ever been in any kind of leadership role, it's certainly happened to you.

Being falsely accused goes even further than mere slander. Here in the ninth commandment we gain understanding that God is not understanding and patient with our malicious words that run down another in the pursuit of some selfish gain.

Exodus 20:16

How many of us have heard this as "thou shalt not lie"? Candidly, flattening this command to simply "thou shalt not lie" presents some real challenges as we consider some of the heroes of our faith:

- Shiphrah and Puah…The Hebrew midwives who lied to save the lives of male Hebrew babies. The Bible says that God dealt well with them (Ex. 1:15-22) for their efforts.
- Rahab…The prostitute who lied to the king of Jericho about the whereabouts of the spies. This was, again, an effort to save the lives of God's chosen people and resulted in Rahab's salvation and eventual position in the lineage of David and Jesus (Joshua 2).
- David…The future king of Israel who found refuge among the Philistines by deceiving Achish, king of Gath in that he told him he was raiding portions of Judah when he was really using his cover to strike inhabitants of Canaan. This deceit led Achish to trust David because he thought he'd made himself an enemy of his own people. (1 Samuel 27)

The aim of these examples is not to justify lying and my aim is not to create a caveat that finds lying to be acceptable. You'd have to ignore lots of the Bible to get to that point, but as Christians we want to handle the Bible rightly and root our arguments in the proper places. Jesus makes it clear that lying is an outworking of Satan's influence in John 8:44. He says, "*You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*" God, however, is not a liar. Titus 1:2 tells us that God, "*never lies*" and Hebrews 6:18 tells us that it is "*impossible for God to lie.*" In the Old Testament, Balak sought for Balaam to deliver a positive report of God's favor for him against Israel, but Balaam's answer was, "*God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?*" (Numbers 23:19). My point in all of this is to reinforce my point that we have a God who does not lie and who expects His people to not lie, but God would not want us to volunteer the fact that we're housing Jews in our attic for fear of breaking the ninth commandment.

It might, instead, be good for us to think in terms of one "should not perjure oneself" in an effort to defraud or defame another. Just as murder and theft and adultery are justice issues, so too is

not bearing fraudulent witness against one's neighbor. So let's consider the ninth commandment in this light.

The Outward Concerns of False Witness

There are outward facing concerns in this matter. By outward facing, I mean that there are effects that emanate outwardly that impact those around us. In fact, in the light of the text, this command seems to concern itself chiefly with the negative realities of bearing a false witness against someone in your community. The commentary on this command in Leviticus 19 is clarifying. "*You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life* [blood] *of your neighbor: I am the LORD.*" (Leviticus 19:16) It's important to consider who our neighbor is. Jesus helped us with this in giving the parable of the good Samaritan. In the parable, Jesus defines neighbors as those who descend into the plight of their fellow man in an effort to offer assistance. Do you remember the conversation that preempted that parable? A lawyer asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life and Jesus asked him what the law of God said. The lawyer answered correctly: love the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. This is, of course, correct according to Jesus, but the lawyer, "*desiring to justify himself*", wanted to know who his neighbor was and Jesus gave this parable to define it. The lawyer would have gotten his summary language from this very passage in Leviticus which expands on the ninth commandment. So the command to refrain from bearing false witness is aimed at strengthening the trustworthiness of our communities and curbing our impulse to achieve ill-gotten gain at the cost of our neighbor's reputation. This command should create an impulse for believers to endeavor to maintain one another's good reputation. John Calvin noted, "*It ought to be a sufficient inducement* [motive] *to us to guard our neighbors' good name, that God takes an interest in it.*" (Calvin, John; *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, pg. 353)

Conversely, have you noticed that our society has instead shifted to a constant barrage of trying to catch people and discredit them? We live in a time of watchdog blogs and flock cameras seeking to catch anyone and everyone in the tiniest misstep. We're the most "on the record" generation in history and every inconsistency is magnified through a lens of ill intent and ill-deserved influence. Sadly, I worry that we relish in some sort of class warfare against authority and leadership in an effort to level the playing field. Even where we don't utter the false witness, I wonder how our listening provides fertile ground for sinful disobedience. Do we affirm, by our mere listening and silence, that which damages the character of another under the guise of providing a listening ear of support and a shoulder to cry on? John Calvin observed that mankind takes, "*envenomed delight…in prying into and exposing our neighbor's faults.*" (Calvin, John; *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, pg. 353) Furthermore, AW Pink cautioned, "*There is no word of the Decalogue more often and more unconsciously broken than this ninth Commandment, and men need perpetually and persistently to pray 'Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.'* (Ps. 141:3)" (Pink, A.W.; *Gleanings In Exodus*, pg. 164)

The Inward Concerns of False Witness

If the outward concern is the damage done by the false witness upon the subject of the false witness, the inward concern is that engaging in false witness erodes your trustworthiness and

identifies one, by participation, with the evil of false witness. Similar to how Leviticus 19 offers commentary pointing to these outward effects, Deuteronomy 19 offers some commentary that helps us to consider the inward concerns. "*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.*" (Deuteronomy 19:16–19) Look at the closing sentence there. The false accuser invites upon themself the judgment meant to be laid upon their neighbor. This is regarded as an evil act that invites significant consequence. We're all too familiar with Aesop's fable, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. The website fablesofaesop.com provides the most succinct summary of the moral of that story: "*A liar will not be believed, even when telling the truth.*" In the fable, the physical harm is the death of the sheep, but the greater moral harm is the eradication of the boy's trustworthiness and damaged reputation.

This may sound overly utilitarian and maybe even a little self-concerned, but the fact of the matter is that our character is the capital of our entire social order. All contracts have this formal feeling because you sign your name a bunch of times, but at the end of the day, why is it our name that we sign on a contract? Have you ever considered that? Your name carries a certain credibility or lack of credibility upon which others' trust in you is built. The evacuation of trust between members of a society erodes the building blocks and sees in one another, not neighbors to protect, but targets to victimize. That victimization creates a boomerang effect wherein the evil extended against another is laid back upon the offender.

The Spiritual Concerns of False Witness

While both the outward and inward concerns are important, it is probably more important to consider the spiritual concerns. From whence does our temptation to bear false witness come/arise? All false witness and lies emerges from Satan's influence. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees that, "*You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*" (John 8:44) As I said at the beginning of this sermon, God does not and cannot lie. Lying is the fruit of Satan's work.

That said, let's bring this issue into the life of the church. In Matthew 18, Jesus lays out the process for navigating sin against one another. Therein, Jesus says, "*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*" (Matthew 18:15–20)

In this, we see the importance of reliable witnesses. Many of us will probably never stand before a judge or jury and willingly lie about one of our neighbors to get an extra couple of feet of property, but we may find ourselves in the scenario where we have to way on a matter of sinfulness that is potentially disqualifying and warranting measures of church discipline. In that matter, truth telling becomes a paramount concern that allows the church to rule on matters rightly. This responsibility to bind and loose is a weighty one given to the church that is founded on the need for truthfulness. The spiritual implications go far beyond mere land disputes and contract settlements.

Conclusion

"*You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.*"(Exodus 23:1–3) As we think about the gospel implications of this, I can't help but think about Jesus who was despised and falsely accused. The gospel of Mark tells us, "*Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even about this their testimony did not agree.*" (Mark 14:55–59)

Our Savior suffered under the violation of the ninth commandment in order that we might have salvation. Pilate found no fault in Him. The only way to find Jesus guilty of death was to employ liars and false witnesses to testify against Him.