

You Shall Not Bear False Witness
Exodus 20:16
October 25, 2026

Back in July, we had a guy come out to give an estimate on trimming our large oak in the front yard of our house. After a few minutes, he said this, “I’ll do it for *this* amount, but if you wait until early October, I can cut a significant number off the price.” So, since there was no major reason we couldn’t wait a few months, that’s what we decided to do. But at the time, I did think, “That was pretty honest of him.”

Fast forward a few months and his crew was at my house this past Monday. Now, y’all know that I love trees. And I quickly decided this guy knew what he was talking about. So, within minutes this guy is pointing at particular branches and talking about what causes this or that. His crew is already high up in the oak working; but he and I are on the ground talking about all kinds of fascinating things.

Eventually, I decide I like this guy enough I’ll show him the trees in the backyard. Though I only have *one* large tree in the front, I have *three* in the back. As I’m walking back there, I’m preparing myself for the number I’m going to hear, assuming that when the gate opens to the backyard this guy will just see dollar signs. Instead, he looks at my trees for a few minutes, tells me about a limb or two that *might* be an issue at some point, but eventually he says this, very simply, “I think you’re ok back here for now. These trees look good.”

I’m sure I asked him to repeat himself. Because at this point—twenty minutes into a conversation—it was *abundantly* clear that he knew more about trees than me. He could’ve said all *kinds* of things I needed to do. So, either he doesn’t like money; or he’s honest.

And honestly, truth is so refreshing. In our world, we’re used to falsehood. On a Tuesday morning, I get a text from a woman named Jane who says that she has a job opportunity. I’m not in the market, of course. But also, there is no job opportunity. And Jane is a dude named Steve texting in his basement. Or, more likely, it’s not a person at all.

In our world, who am I to believe? Who’s telling the truth?

It’s hard to know when Claude creates an entire album of photos that *never* actually happened. Just five or ten years ago, only a few highly trained people could create an image like that. Now a child can in 30 seconds. Who am I to believe? Who’s telling the truth?

It’s hard to know when the people you’ve trusted—friends or family—have lied about you, or selectively edited conversations to make themselves look good—and you *not*.

Who am I to believe anymore? Who’s telling the truth?

The ninth command, though stated negatively, concerns itself with these very questions.

And again, though I’ve tweaked it a little, I’m going to stick with the outline we’ve used a couple times, hoping the repetition actually makes the outline stick.

1. Why did God give this command in the Old Testament?

From a *very* different angle, Andy asked the question Wednesday night, “What does the word, ‘witness’ mean? Can it mean more than *one* thing?” And then someone answered quite quickly, and perceptively, that the word is *both* a noun *and* a verb. There is a witness who tells another what they’ve seen or heard. And then, of course, *when* they tell what they saw or heard they do, in fact, witness to it. Of course, that word carries certain connotations in our minds. That is, a *witness* tells what they’ve seen or heard on a witness *stand*—in a courtroom or some other legal setting.

And that connotation is the right one for our command today. Because “bearing false witness” refers *specifically* to words spoken by a witness or defendant in a court trial.¹ Which isn’t *all* that surprising in the context of this book. Though it’s been a minute for us, Exodus 18 is not that far back. In *that* chapter Moses was given counsel by his father-in-law, Jethro. And the counsel was to select God-fearing men—men of truth, men who hated dishonest gain—to serve over tens, fifties, hundreds, and thousands (Ex. 18:21). Those men were to serve as judges, sorting through the disputes that would inevitably arise in this *large* community of sojourners.

As we get into the case laws, we’ll see more *specifically* the kind of disputes that might come up. And I imagine we’ll sense how vital it would be that community members speak what’s true in these quasi-court cases. Not unlike today, eyewitness testimony is *key* to sorting through the facts.² For that reason, we *could* say that the essence of this commandment sought to uphold the integrity of Israel’s judicial system.³

I don’t know if you’ve ever prepared to testify in court. If you have, or if you ever do, I imagine you will think *very* carefully about the things you plan to say. You’ll be as slow to speak as you’ve ever been. Many times, even the most pathological of deceivers are sobered by the setting and the moment.

Now, does this command apply to more than when we’re subpoenaed? I found Kevin DeYoung’s logic compelling when he noted that while murder was the *worst* way to break the sixth commandment, it was not the *only* way. And while adultery is the worst or most extreme way to break the seventh commandment, it was not the *only* way. Likewise, while maybe we’d say the worst place to bear false witness was in court—because someone might be punished severely *based* on that lie—we also know that perjury is not the *only* way to break the ninth commandment.⁴

I quoted the Heidelberg catechism last week. We’ll quote it again tonight. But it asks this: “What is required in the ninth commandment?” And then it answers: “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.”⁵

To state the matter plainly, we *don’t* believe that because the catechism says so. We believe that because of what we’ve called the biblical rule. That is, the Bible says quite a *bit* about lying and deception in places *other* than the ninth commandment.

In the book of Proverbs, we read this: **Put away from you a deceitful mouth and put devious speech far from you** (Prov. 4:24). A couple chapters later, that book lists seven things the Lord hates. Of the seven, *two* are these: “a lying tongue” and “a false witness who utters lies” (Prov. 6:16–19). The book of Psalms agrees, noting that the Lord hates **all who do iniquity. You destroy those who speak falsehood; the LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit** (Ps. 5:6).

Of course, the Scriptures don’t *merely* tell us what the Lord thinks about deception, it shows us where deception *came* from. Like we’ve done with a few of these commands, we ought to go back to the garden. There, the Serpent sought to convince Eve that God was a liar. But of course, he did so by lying about *who* God was—and *what* God said. That’s the *first* lie: “You surely will not die!” (Gen. 3:4).

¹ Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 465.

² Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 423. Unlike today, they wouldn’t have any corroborating evidence like forensics.

³ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 221.

⁴ Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 145.

⁵ Quoted in DeYoung, 146.

And *that* is the lie that gives birth to every other deception. Which doesn't take long. Cain's lie concerning Abel is in the following chapter (Gen. 4:9). Abraham lies. Jacob does almost *nothing* but lie. But then Laban lies to him. Joseph's brothers lie. Potiphar's wife lies.

Why did God give this command? In part, because of the issue's pervasive nature.

And because of that, the command has sweeping applications. In the case laws ahead, the Law will prohibit bearing a false report (Ex. 23:1). Leviticus will prohibit slander (Lev. 19:16). So, they were commanded not to speak something false in a more formal setting. But nor were they to deliberately pass along something untrue, or unknown, in less formal settings.⁶

In court, or in the court of public opinion, this continues to be an issue that plagues humanity. It often begins with, "Did you hear about . . ." And we spill the tea. But maybe *more* often, in our day, it begins not with our tongues but with our fingers. Because our world is so quick to speak. In fact, you could pick *any* major event over the past 15 years, and it wouldn't take ten minutes to find a false report on it. It's "Dewey Defeats Truman" over and over and over again.

It's the headline. It's the image. It's the conversation.

Who am I to believe? Who's telling the truth?

Why did God give this command? It's not only because of the issue's pervasive nature *but also* because of the harm falsehood does to a community. This command is actually the *first* command to use the word "neighbor."⁷ The concern is, in part, the community. I don't have to tell you how detrimental falsehood is to relationship. Nor do I have to tell you how truth is an absolute necessity.⁸

And, of course, the list of deceivers goes beyond Adam, or Cain, or Abraham, or Jacob, or Potiphar's wife. We can't say our world is borderline post-truth while absolving ourselves entirely. So, though we've been lied *to*—certainly—we're also guilty of massaging the truth, maybe engaging in our own version of spin, and sometimes just outright speaking that which is false.

Again, the Law reveals *us*.

And if we're *not* convinced, let's consider what Jesus said about our words.

2. How did Christ teach this command, as well as fulfill it for us?

A number of times in this study, we've gone from the command in Exodus to Jesus's teaching on the command in the Sermon on the Mount. Repeatedly that's been in the form of "You've heard it said, but I tell you *this*." That's not *exactly* what Jesus does with the ninth commandment. He doesn't quote it. But He does speak to what it speaks to, saying this: **Let your statement be, "Yes, yes" or "No, no"; anything beyond these is of evil** (Mt. 5:37).

In that verse, Jesus addresses yet *another* case where the religious leaders had skewed what the Law said. That is, when people made a vow in that world, they would often swear by something *other* than the Lord's Name. And then, because they hadn't "put their hand on the Bible"—as it were—on *that* basis they would/could release themselves from fulfilling the promise they'd given.⁹ In short, they drew lines around which statements they made were true, and which ones weren't. Honestly, it's not *all* that different from 10-year-old Matt crossing his fingers.

In *that* context, Jesus says, very simply: Your "yes" is to be a "yes"; and your "no" is to be a "no." The bottom line was this: speak truth.

⁶ DeYoung, 148.

⁷ Stuart, 466.

⁸ Alexander, 423.

⁹ See Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 96.

Of course that's *all* Jesus ever did. Every statement in the Sermon on the Mount, in the Sermon on the Plain, in His rebukes to the Pharisees, in His gentle words to those suffering, in His conversation along the way with His disciples—each and every syllable was nothing but the truth.

And it's not *merely* that He says true things. He is truth *itself*. Not quote, "truth" by consensus: "Together we can create a reality that we all agree on." Not "truth" based on faulty logic, inherent bias, or untrustworthy witnesses. Not "truth" that shifts based on circumstances. Not soft "truth" that bends a little if you happen to disagree. But "truth" that endures—in every age, for every person, truth for every circumstance. Truth that can be trusted.

We could go to any chapter in the Gospels and make the case.

But Jesus makes it Himself in John 18. And He does it in something of a courtroom setting. Standing before Pilate, in a sham trial, He tells those judging Him why He came: **For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth** (John 18:37). If you were going to ask, "What's the opposite of bearing false witness?" you might say it *that* way. He came—His purpose—was to bear witness to the truth. That's what He was doing in Pilate's headquarters, during His pseudo-trial.

And, of course, with the Answer standing right in front of him, Pilate asks the question, **What is truth?** (John 18:38). It's easy to slam Pilate for that question. But he's not alone. And, in fact, Christ came for others as blind and as deaf and as spiritually obtuse as that Roman Governor.

He came to bear witness to the truth *for* those who'd borne false witness, over and over and over. He died, in part, *because* of false witnesses (Mt. 26:60). In the place of those who'd lied about Him, for those who've believed lies, He came. Which is partly why the Apostle John describes Him as full of truth—but *also* full of grace (Jn. 1:14).

He, the self-revelation of God—truth itself—put on flesh to show men and women precisely who God is. And as we were reminded in the baptistry last week, it is the truth that sets us free (Jn. 8:31-32).

3. How do we, by the Spirit, follow this command in the New Covenant?

We could begin by quoting something *else* Jesus taught. That is, **out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks** (Luke 6:45). This is yet another example of the inside/outside rule we've considered with each of the commands. The application is this: in order to *speak* what is true we're to first think on and believe those things that are true. Philippians 4 instructs us in this way. It's the first thing in the list: **whatever is true . . . think about these things.**

Negatively, that means we need to guard against thinking upon those things that *aren't* true, or we don't *know* to be true. Speculation *can* be quite dangerous—in theological matters, in matters within our world, and in relationships. People can teach falsehoods; and people can believe those falsehoods without *ever* saying so out loud. People can be falsely accused in a courtroom; and they can be falsely accused within our minds and hearts.

We *begin* there, within. But that's not *all* the Scriptures instruct us concerning our relationship to the ninth commandment. We considered Ephesians 4 last week. We'll do so again. But first, to be clear, this instruction is aimed at those who've believed Christ, put off the old self—a former manner of life—and have put on the new self, **created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness** (Eph. 4:24).

That's the language of Ephesians 4. Again, we don't obey God's command in order to be delivered. Like Exodus 20, He delivers and then commands. So, for those who've believed, the Apostle Paul writes this in the following verse: **Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor** (Eph. 4:25).

The Heidelberg catechism applies it in this way: “I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it.” Of course, there are all *kinds* of arenas where we might do that—love, acknowledge, and speak truth. In terms of the Bible, all of us are committed to bowing before what God’s revealed about Himself. We do not fill our small group times, our Bible studies, or even our conversations with, “this is what *I* think God is like”—based on *nothing* in the Scriptures. In this community, that’s the kind of thing that ought to raise eyebrows.

Though none of us have arrived. So, to the degree we’ve entertained certain tenets that are not biblically defensible, we commit to reformation. And I use that word because history shows us that believing what we *want* to believe about the gospel, or what benefits certain institutions, can enslave humanity. False witness pervaded the Middle Ages. Jesus came to bear witness to the truth. Here we stand.

But it’s not just that we’re committed to truth theologically, we’re committed to truth relationally. In a world of lies, we ought to be able to listen to a fellow church member and know they’re not one of the ones telling us *half* of the story. That verse in Ephesians 4 goes on to say, **let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another** (Eph. 4:25). Paul roots our truth telling in the nature of the church. In Christ, we *belong* to one another, each member part of a body that Christ died for. Like anger, like greed, like lust, falsehood tears at the fabric of community. But Jesus died, rose, ascended, and sent His Spirit so that we might speak truth to one another.

Maybe we immediately think, “Well, I guess I need to confront that person.” And *maybe* it means that. But speaking truth means, and more *often* means, we remind one another of the kinds of things the Bible says about this or that person. We don’t use “brother,” as filler. We mean it. Further, we say the things, the *true* things, we might regret *not* having said. We encourage one another, reminding one another of biblical truth. Most specifically, we speak the gospel to one another—over and over and over again. And not *just* what Jesus did, but how God sees *us* now that we’re in Christ.

Not only do we *not* bear false witness, we are those who speak truth—in love (Eph. 4:15).

Conclusion

Because of the One each of us worship—the One who cannot lie.

So, if we’re asking the question, “Who am I to believe? Who’s telling the truth?” I point you to Him.

Though we’ve not said it in a few weeks, the title we gave this entire study through Exodus was this: “The God Who Makes Himself Known.” Because that’s what He did when He came for His people. He made Himself known as a Deliverer. But also because that’s what He did when He fed them in the wilderness. He made Himself known as a Provider. Exodus 20 is no different. That’s what He *continues* to do, in each jot of the Law. He shows us who He is.

He is truth itself. He came to speak truth. And the truth of the gospel is that He came for those who’ve lied. He died for those who’ve believed lies. And He—the One who cannot lie—promises to save.