

You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor 11/7/2021

Hey, how we doing? If you have a Bible go ahead and turn to **Deut 5:20**, we're in commandment 9 this week, so we're almost to the finish line.

And before we get into it, some of yall know how I'm a dad to three kids - ages 7, 5, and 3 - and as you can imagine me and my wife have our hands full nearly every second of the day. Given the moment or the kid, we've learned to wear different "hats." Sometimes we wear the "teacher" hat as we help them how to read or do math. Sometimes we wear the "chef" hat as we prep the food. Other times we've played the "doctor" hat whenever someone is sick or hurt.

But one role that surprised us, that prior to being a parent I never really thought about before, and that was playing the role of judge. Like, I had no idea just how much of my day would be listening to the complaints against each other, weighing the evidence, coming to a decision, demanding order in the court.

Here's how it usually looks: kids are playing in another room of the house. Excited laughter AND THEN crying. Then I hear one of them running up the stairs, with another one quick to follow: "They hit me!" "Nuh-uh!" "Yes, you did!" "No, I didn't."

- And there are times when, as I listen to the plaintiff and the defendant, every now and again, I will actually see some evidence of what unfolded and wait for one of them to confess.
- And there are times when one of them will actually tell the truth about what happens and they're reconciled and it's great.
- And there are times when it's a bit more complex and after hearing the plaintiff's arguments like "They hit me", and I'm like, "I know exactly why you perceived that, but that's actually not what happened at all." I know you *think* they did it on purpose but I happen to know that was not the case at all.

Today's commandment speaks into this sort of complexity:

20 "And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Now if you grew up in church you may have been taught this to mean, "don't lie." And while that's certainly part of it, the context of this commandment deals with "bearing false witness" which means, telling a story about someone that isn't true or communicating something about someone else that doesn't fully line up with what is reality.

So in the ancient world, this definitely had some courtroom imagery. Back before DNA evidence, and video surveillance, and CSI, the best form of evidence people had within a court case was through eye witness testimony. And because of that, there was this **enormous weight** placed upon someone giving testimony, or a witness, about someone else. And if that was the primary way a judge would make a decision - then you could imagine just how much power a witness had to totally ruin someone's life.

This commandment assumes that we, as people with a proclivity towards sin, can and do bear false witness against our neighbors, especially when it goes to serve our own interests. So not only does this commandment prohibit lying, it also has the angle of lying through defaming other people. Lying to further your interests at the expense of other people.

This is why elsewhere in Old Testament laws you get more regulations when it comes to courtroom cases in Israel. Take for example Deuteronomy 19:15,18-20

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15 “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

Why? Because people lie. So to prevent one person from having the power to potentially ruin someone’s life, they needed more witnesses. (Now sometimes, that might be maddening, because if you’re the only victim of a crime you are the only one to bear witness to it.) But this was obviously put into place to safeguard against people using a false witness to unjustly condemn an innocent person.

Penalties for certain offenses at this time went all the way up to death. So it was possible for a false accuser to bring a claim against someone, and if believed, the innocent person literally would have been killed. And if you want a just society, you don’t want that. So here’s the instruction on how to handle this in the nation of ancient Israel.

18 The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, 19 then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother.

Which reading that we’re supposed to have a collective, “yike.” Basically, if someone was spreading false witness to get the other person thrown in jail, and the judge finds out they were lying, then the false witness gets thrown in jail. At its most extreme, this meant if the person lying was trying to get the other person killed, do to him as he was trying to do.

The point is, God takes telling the truth way more seriously than we do. Keep reading:

So you shall purge the evil from your midst.²⁰ And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you.

In other words, people who bore false witness were dealt with radically and quickly to set an example to the rest of Israel: we cannot be the kind of people who spread false witness, because it could do so much damage and destruction to a society, so you have to deal with it right away before it spreads with the overall intent being: Israel was supposed to be a community where people told the truth, and lived out the truth, for their good and for the good of the people around them.

Now to be clear, we are not ancient Israelites who live under the same civil laws that they do, those civil laws are not binding in the sense that they aren’t “forever” laws, they were for a particular people in a particular time and place. What is binding for us and eternal are God’s moral laws, the Ten Commandments, those hold up regardless of time and place. And God’s intent since the dawn of time was that we be a people who love the Truth.

If you go back to the intended ideal, what it means to be a human being according to the Bible, you go to Genesis 1-3. And what you'll notice is that the first "attack" by Satan in the Garden was not through brute force or sending out demons or anything like that, Satan's first attack on human beings was to tell a lie. To defame God's character. To spread something about Him that didn't line up with true reality.

And we're supposed to see through that just how powerful words are. In Genesis 1, God through His words has the power to speak all of creation into existence. Through his words, He gives human beings purpose and value, and worth. Through His words, He gives them abundance and dignity. And then in Genesis 3, Satan comes along through his words to paint an alternate reality. He tells a different story and he questions God's motives and in the process brings nothing but death and destruction.

Words have immense power in this creation narrative. God speaks the entire creation into existence with the word. He gives humans purpose, relationships, and boundaries through His words. There is no reason whatsoever to doubt Him. The picture of true reality was God is good. God is gracious. God is loving and glorious.

Satan comes along and takes the exact same situation--same details, same words spoken--and he paints an alternate reality. He tells a different story, with a different motive, different intent. God is not good. God is not gracious. God is selfish. He creates an alternative reality

And with these two realities held in their minds, they acted on and believed in, the false reality. They trusted in the lie rather than the truth. And in the process brought chaos, betrayal, distrust, and heartache in the world.

So now there's this battle going on not only in the human heart but in the world at large - lies vs truth. False reality and the destruction it brings, or true reality and the goodness and abundance that comes as a result, and who will win it out?

And in this cosmic battle happening all around us, we who are made in God's image, have a role to play in this cosmic battle with our words. Our words have immense power. And will our words line up with reality, which upholds and affirms God's Word, and honors every human as an Image Bearer and in the process usher in life and love to those around us? Or will our words line up with a false reality, that shrugs off what Scripture says, that defames other Image Bearers and in the process bring in division and deceit and damage?

And just in case you weren't already feeling the immense weight of what your words can do. I've got one more for you that'll make you say "wut." Coming from Jesus Himself in Matthew 12:

Matthew 12:35-37

35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. **36** I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, **37** for by your words you will be justified, and by your words, you will be condemned."

Like I said, wut. Are we talking every word, Jesus? Like, all of them? Like, even when I'm not in a good mood, or it's a Monday?

Jesus in agreement with this commandment, and in line with Genesis, is echoing the sentiment that your words are immensely powerful. They can be a weapon to tear down others or they can be a tool to build people up. They can bring division or unity. Death or life. It's either Satan's kingdom or the kingdom of God that will be built up through our words.

And so at its most basic application of this commandment: we are to be people who refuse to knowingly spread lies about other people in such a way that it benefits you. Don't lie indirect, overt ways because that furthers the kingdom of Satan and his domain of lies. And **maybe for you this morning**, you already have plenty right there to work through and process.

But as is the case with all of these commandments, there's a mountain of other implications that this command means.

I would imagine that many of you may never have to be a witness in a courtroom and put your hand on the Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but if you do I'm sure you would, by that act, realize the impact of your words. But what about everyday life?

To help answer that, in preparing for this sermon, I came across what's called The Heidelberg Catechism. Which was basically a 500-year-old document that Jesus' followers put together to sort of summarize basic Christian doctrine. And they said this about the ninth commandment that I found incredibly helpful. It says this:

[To obey the ninth commandment means] 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 neighbor's good name."

That's really good, isn't it?

That I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly

So never give false testimony - that's the obvious one. But also, never twist anyone's words and use it against them. Which, already feels hard to do especially when you're arguing with someone right? That is a form of breaking the ninth commandment.

But then it goes on...never gossip. Don't pass along a report about someone in an unhelpful way that will damage the person. Never slander, that is, spreading information about someone that is false. Or don't allow negative information about someone to become the lens by which you interpret everything they do.

I love that next part, I wanna put it back up on the screen again:

"not condemning anyone...without a hearing."

So as Jesus followers who see our words have the power to bring life or destruction, we don't rush to judgment based on a sound byte, or what we heard through the grapevine. We don't arrive at conclusions about someone without a proper hearing. Like, at times it can feel like someone's talked to literally everyone else about a person except the person that they're slandering. They've not given them a fair hearing. That's a breaking of the ninth commandment.

(Which for what it's worth, I think that sort of cancels out most of Twitter and the 24-hour news cycle.)

So we make sure to avoid that, and then lastly, I love this, not only do avoid all of this as followers of Jesus but:

I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name

That's so good! "Do what I can." So that means if I hear others talking negatively about my neighbor, which for the record, according to Jesus in **Luke 10** means everybody, I ought to immediately be their defense lawyer. If I see gossip spreading, then as someone who loves Jesus and loves people, I ought to insert myself to stand up for that person no matter what. We stick up for them as we would want someone to stick up for us if the roles were reversed.

Do you see just how big this commandment is? It's way more than just not lying, it's to be a defender of the truth. In a world where the spirit of the age is to twist others words, to point the blame on others to justify ourselves, we refuse to give in to that, and instead, we choose to build up the Kingdom of God with words that bring life, who refuse to give into to tearing others down and to instead defend and encourage and bless.

So to get this really practical, because the spirit of the age is all about gossip and slander, and we see it everywhere on social media and news - I think it's really easy to sort of grow numb to this. When this is the water we swim in and that's become so normalized, it's hard to actually see when gossip or slander are unfolding right in front of you.

And as followers of Jesus, we want to be a people who don't fall into accidentally bearing false witness, and instead, we should be the ones who shut the conversation down and say something like one of the following:

- Hey, what is the reason we are talking about this person? If we're just smearing the person then let's shut this down
- Are we being charitable in our assessment and giving the same grace we would want to receive? If not, we gotta stop
- So when are you gonna talk to them about it? If not, then you don't need to talk to me
- Well, we don't know both sides of the story so it's not gonna do us much good to sit around and guess?
- Another pastor we have learned from developed a brilliant way to nip so much of this in the bud. If he found himself in a situation where someone was telling him something that didn't quite sit right, he would be like, "Oh that's strange. That doesn't seem like something Steve would do, but we need to get to the bottom of this. I've got his number, so I'll call him right now and we'll get this settled." In a culture where that is the norm, conflict would plummet.

If we aim to create a culture where truth reigns and all people are valued, then questions like that should not seem weird. And even if it does make things weird, which it may very well be for the first little bit of you doing this, better to be okay with some social awkwardness than to let the Kingdom of Satan continue building power.

In a world that is quick to condemn someone without a hearing, we should seek to understand and be slow to judge.

This means there should be a noticeable distinction in a Christian community that should a non-believer walk in here, they would pretty quickly discern that these people use their words differently. They speak about others who aren't present differently. They put an uncommon weight on their words. They even hear differently.

Now before I move on, let me say, that maybe for some of us in the room right now, this is some immediate application for you. Maybe you've become too tolerant of gossip. Maybe there's a part of you that secretly and sinfully enjoys it. And maybe repentance for you this morning is to take the words you say more seriously because you might actually be creating a false reality, or crafting a false narrative onto others that are actually destructive to your soul and to others.

But as I being to wrap up I do want to spotlight an area that I think could be a blind spot for us, especially in the culture we live in. To do that, I want to go back to my example at the start, when I often end up being the judge and jury in my home.

And it's that sometimes my kids, who I love and would do anything for, are also sinful and can be a false witness against the other and they know it. They wanna avoid the consequence, and so they knowingly will participate in a lie.

AND there are other times when they are being false witnesses and they just don't even realize it.

Like they are times when my kids are playing and one of the kids comes crying to me saying "She kicked that ball right into my face on purpose!" But I happen to have seen it all go down and noticed, that she didn't mean to do that at all and that he just walked into the path of the ball at the wrong time. And then wham.

Now here's the thing, my kid who is crying tears out her face "believes" in her mind that what she perceived is what actually happened. And sometimes as a parent, I have to lovingly challenge that and say, "Sweetie, I know that's what you think happened, but I saw it too, and let me tell you what exactly happened." And I try to help steer my child towards what is true.

And I think there's an equivalent that can be made in our culture at large.

Where news and media depending on the political/ideological slant will take one piece of information to fit into what they believe to be true, that lines up with their preconceived story and completely run with it. Meanwhile, another news outlet that leans the other way will take the same piece of information to fit it into what they already believe to be true and lines up with their story - and just run with it. And the truth often lies somewhere in the middle.

But on a smaller scale, the same thing can happen to us. That as story-making creatures it's really easy to take a data point or a handful of them, and craft a narrative that lines up with what we believe to be true about something or someone - and it may very well not even come close to lining up with reality.

I remember seeing this in my life when I first got married some 9 years ago. For the first few weeks, I just had this tally in my head of everything I did wrong and assumed my wife had that tally in her head too. So I was really defensive, and when she said things I would interpret it through the lens of "Ya I bet you're saying that because you've noticed how I've been messing up and I'm just a letdown." To where it eventually came to a head one day and I was frustrated and said, "Look I know you said this on Sunday, and then you did this on Tuesday, and then you said this today and it's because you think this about me." And my wife was just bewildered and was like, "What? I have no idea what you're talking about. That's not true and let me show you why." But I had built up all these data points in my head to construct a narrative onto my wife that wasn't true at all, but I was so convinced that I was.

Or something I heard when talking to a friend from church this week when the pandemic was at its peak last year and they didn't see some folks participating in LifeGroup over zoom. And he was like, "I haven't

seen these people in a while, and I have a hunch that it's for *this* reason." And they developed this narrative in their minds based on the data points. And then one day he called them to say "Hey what's up its been a while since we heard from you?" And they said, "Yea I'm so sorry about that, we had Covid and we were just knocked out." And he was like "Oh dang, I had no idea." Sometimes the story that pops into your mind based on the data points can sometimes be way off.

(Now to be clear, sometimes the story can fit the data points - but our default should be one of charity and seeking the truth by going to the people involved lest we build up a false reality in our minds and create division and bitterness in the process.

And if I can be a bit more transparent when it comes to this: not only does this happen at a macro-level with the news, or on a micro-level in marriage and relationships, but this is just as susceptible to happen in the church as well.

I heard from a good friend of mine from a few weeks ago, she attended a women's ministry conference with leaders from all over the country and they all spoke on how hard ministry has been since the pandemic and coming out of it. Just story after story of one person leaving after another. Friends within the church that they've known for years leave because of believing something about the other that wasn't true. Or leaders and staff leaving because of spreading gossip and slander. Or folks who were in conflict about something, that once they were approached, had already made their minds up about the church or had built a narrative in their minds about the leader, and already had one foot out the door. And my friend was sitting there just floored by how pervasive this issue is everywhere in the American church right now. That these female leaders from all over the place were all experiencing the heartache of what happens when false realities and narratives creep in and divide a church.

Which again, for clarity, it could very well be that at times the data points do match the story, and I'm sure you can probably think of leaders who were unhealthy and people who rightfully left a church. But again, when gossip and slander become the water you're swimming in, I would argue it's far, far easier to believe the worst about someone than it is to be an agent of and defender of truth and reconciliation.

Could it be that for the last year and a half when because of covid, a lot of people didn't see each other's faces that we became susceptible to building and believing such false narratives about other people? And when that happens, it becomes so so easy to take some data points and become a false witness, building a false reality without even knowing it - perhaps even building a story about others so that by the time you are confronted, the narrative is so locked into your mind that there's no convincing you otherwise.

And let me say too, that generally speaking the larger a church is and the more in each other's lives you are, the easier it can be to misinterpret something, or to legitimately be hurt by something or someone and to build a narrative around it. And: we have a fairly big church and the way we do church, we put a high value on being in each other's lives.

So in light of all of this, I have two realizations I hope we can settle into and 2 requests.

Realization #1: Hurt doesn't think clearly.

We are all prone to believe things that are untrue. We all have this susceptibility to believe lies, tell lies, and spread lies. So that's already our starting place. What hurt does is it acts as a **multiplier to that susceptibility**. It makes you so much more prone to believe things that aren't fully accurate.

And if we believe that our culture and our sinful nature make us susceptible to lies and that Satan would love nothing more than to tear down something beautiful like a group of Christians striving to build the kingdom of Jesus and push back darkness - then we also need to realize that it's to misinterpret and assume people's motives because that's a dangerous game to play....**especially when you're hurt.**

I see this sometimes with our kids. Especially when we have to discipline them or tell them to do something they don't want to do. Like the other morning, we were getting the kids ready for school and we told one of them, hey you need to go put pants on. And I kid you not, what proceeded was a full-on melt-down for about 10 minutes because he didn't want to wear pants. And in the process, they said things like, "I don't like you. I've never liked you. And I'll never go to school ever again."

And that's a silly example, but the truth is, hurt often doesn't think clearly. We get clouded by our emotions. We get locked into stories that make sense to us based on our hurt-informed data points and if we simply operate as if the stories in our minds are 100% objective and true, man, the damage is heartbreaking.

Realization #2: We are (somewhat) unreliable narrators.

For example, let's say I have some significant relational conflict with _____. (Pick someone in the audience.) Maybe I did something that was hurtful or that you perceived as hurtful, and you did the same to me, and we are really at odds. What I have learned is that in that type of situation, if I go talk to someone else who isn't involved, it would take a very uncommon amount of humility, maturity, and self-awareness for me to give them a picture of our conflict that is unbiased and completely objective. Does that make sense? A very uncommon amount of maturity, humility, and self-awareness. Meaning an amount that many people simply do not have.

What tends to happen instead is I give my side of the story that downplays what I did to sort of get me off the hook, and makes _____ look like the villain of the story

And the truth is, our hurt and pain and confusion, we often bear false witness without even knowing it.

So I think if we want to get to the deepest level of this, we have to start by realizing that we are somewhat unreliable narrators. We have to grow the humility to realize that we are not always big enough to see the full story, that we often only see one angle of a situation.

In humility, we should use very precise, defensible speech. We should not exaggerate or highlight things that make us look innocent and the other party guilty. If you are in conflict with someone and speaking about that conflict to someone else, you should represent their position in a way that if they were there, they would say "Yes you understand and fairly articulated this situation."

Request #1: Aggressively assume the best.

Satan is doing a good enough job on his own of creating chaos and unreality. When we default to assuming the worst about each other, we help him tremendously. When we jump to conclusions and condemn without a proper hearing out, we make him smile.

So please, let's intentionally decide to assume that there are probably factors we don't know about, and aggressively assume the best of each other. Not in a naive way, but in a counter-culturally charitable way. We live in a culture that encourages offense-taking, and we need some winsome Christians who are

willing to reject that. To have our starting place be assuming the best, and we can adjust if and when we find out otherwise.

Assuming someone else's motives is a dangerous game to play. So let's refuse to play it for the glory of God and the unity of our community.

Request #2: Clarify & reconcile with urgency.

I would love it if we had a communal commitment that when we feel or hear certain things, we go directly to God with it in prayer, and we go to the appropriate people and say, "Hey, this is how I perceived this situation, can you confirm or deny it? Hey, I'm concerned this is happening based on these available data points I have, can you give any other light to this? I don't want to assume motives."

I would love for us to recognize the immense potential for false stories to be used by our enemy, so we humbly and quickly address any potential for that to happen. Because we love the truth, we are humble enough to know we don't always know the whole truth, and we want to be absolutely sure we are bearing witness to the truth.

Jesus has very strong words when it comes to dealing with relational tension and conflict. In **Matthew 5** and **Matthew 18**, He says that no matter if your brother has something against you, or if you have something against your brother, it's your responsibility to go. In Matthew 5 He literally says "leave your gift at the altar, and first go be reconciled to your brother.

So in just a moment, we're going to take **communion together** as a family, AND part of what communion is supposed to represent is that we as a family, are acknowledging the power of the resurrection and pledging ourselves to one another. This is something we do to bear witness to the fact that Jesus has the power to make us family together.

--This means if you're in conflict with someone or if you've willingly participated in false witness with someone else and you're not going out of your way to resolve it, what you're communicating is that Jesus' resurrection power is not enough, and that church family is not worth it.

So before you take part in communion this morning - I'd love it if you took some time right now to sit with this morning's sermon and examine yourself a bit:

- is anything you need to confess to God? Are there ways you have knowingly or unknowingly been a false witness? If so, confess those things to Him before coming to the table.
- And secondly, is there any potential for false witness spreading in your relationships here? With your spouse, a friend, a LifeGroup member? If there is, I would ask you to engage in those conversations before taking communion together. Grab the person if they are here. Send a text if you need to discuss it later. Do whatever is necessary to clarify or reconcile, so that false stories or disunity will not continue to spread.

The truth is: Jesus came on a rescue mission to save us and although He was perfect, He was continually lied about and maligned. People talked trash about Jesus behind His back. He was slandered, gossiped about, and falsely accused. People said things about Him that weren't true and assigned awful motives to He who literally came to die to save us from sin and hell.

And on the Cross, even in the moment of His greatest agony, He prayed for the false witnesses surrounding Him, piling on and watching His humiliation. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

What other possible source of grace in the universe could offer forgiveness to us for us false witnesses ourselves, and also extend similar grace to those who have hurt us with their lies?

Let those words speak over you even now:

“Father forgive them, they do not know what they do”

“Father forgive them they do not know the damage they’ve caused”

“Father forgive them because my resurrection power can and will bring them together.”

“Alright, the communion stations are now open, let’s make this a time to pledge ourselves once again to Jesus and one another.”