

YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS

Exod 20:16

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 12.14.2003

This is a test . . . only a test. Yes, I am going to begin today by giving you a test. I will present to you the testimony of three individuals, and you must render a verdict. Are they, or are they not, telling the truth?

(1) Richard Allen—National Security Advisor to President Reagan, explaining the \$1000 in cash and two watches he was given by two Japanese journalists after he helped arrange a private interview for them with First Lady Nancy Reagan: *“I didn’t accept it. I received it.”*

(2) General Douglas MacArthur: *“We are not retreating – we are advancing in another direction.”*

(3) Francis Gary Power—U-2 reconnaissance pilot held by the Soviets for spying, in an interview after he was returned to the United States: *“I was a pilot flying an airplane and it just so happened that where I was flying made what I was doing spying.”*

It was Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) who noted, “Oh what a tangled web we weave, / When first we practice to deceive!” Adlai Stevenson (1900-1965) quipped, “A lie is an abomination unto the Lord, and a very present help in trouble.”

“You shall not bear false witness”—the ninth of the Ten Commandments. Let’s look at it, within the wider context of the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 1:

Then God spoke all of these words saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **You shall have no other gods in My presence**” (20:1-3).

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna [a jealous God], punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments” (20:4-6).

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not let you go unpunished if you make wrongful use of His name” (20:7).

“Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your livestock, or the alien resident who is within your settlements. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy” (20:8-11).

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you” (20:12).

“You shall not kill” (20:13).

“You shall not commit adultery” (20:14).

“You shall not steal” (20:15).

“You shall not bear false witness” (20:16).

Herbert McCabe observed that it is not so much God who reveals to us the Ten Commandments, but the Ten Commandments that reveal God to us.¹ Furthermore, the Ten Commandments also reveal who we are. We have been created for friendship with God and for friendship with one another. And perhaps nothing is more important for friendship than speaking the truth. In the words of the Apostle Paul, “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another” (Eph 4:25).

The ninth commandment comes to us in two forms, very close in wording but with one interesting difference. Note these very literal translations of Exod 20:16 and Deut 5:20:²

You must not answer against your neighbor a lying witness
(Exod 20:16).

You must not answer against your neighbor an empty witness
(Deut 5:20).

The Deuteronomy version refers to an “empty” witness, which thought echoes the warning of the third commandment against lifting up Yahweh’s name for “emptiness” or “nothingness”—taking His name “in vain.” Although a “lying” witness and an “empty”

¹Herbert McCabe, *What Ethics Is All About* (Corpus Books, 1969), 57.

²I am using translations suggested by John C. Holbert, *The Ten Commandments: A Preaching*

witness may amount to nearly the same thing in a court of law, there are subtle distinctions between the two words that we will talk about later in this lesson.

The obvious setting for the ninth commandment is a law court. The words “answer” and “neighbor” and “witness” suggest a formal setting for the examination of evidence. However, what was a “courtroom” setting in ancient Israel might appear rather informal to us, for there were many possible locations in which legal proceedings might take place. For example, in the fourth chapter of the Book of Ruth, Boaz stands at the “gate of the city” in order to begin a legal proceeding wherein he hopes to gain the legal right to marry Ruth. From this account we learn that the lower court of Israel was regularly the gate of the city, that place through which many workers and traders passed. Another example is seen in the prophet Amos who, while castigating the social evils of the people of Israel, singled out the gate, the hopeful place of justice, as a place where “the needy” are instead “pushed aside” (Amos 5:12). Amos demands in the name of Yahweh that Israel “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate” (Amos 5:15). Amos makes plain what the ninth commandment demands: truth-telling in the court, wherever such courts may be held. If one cannot get truth and justice in the court, then truth and justice are unavailable in any place where laws attempt to regulate the behaviors of members of a community. Lack of justice in court leads to a lack of justice in the larger community. Community life is not possible unless there is an arena in which there is public confidence that life, as it really is, will be reliably described and reported. And while we are looking at Amos, we should not overlook chapter 8. Here, the shopkeepers, sitting in the back of the sanctuary, are anxious that the service be over so that they can go back to cheating their clients again! Lying speech to human beings leads to lying worship of God.

When the presidential election of 2000 was too close to call in the state of Florida, we expected our judicial system to rule definitively on the confusion. The five to four ruling of the United States Supreme Court to stop all post-election ballot counting, and so to give victory to George Bush, clearly had the final force of law, although it appeared to many that the politics of some of the justices had been a significant factor in the decision.

However, we United States citizens expected our judiciary to sort out the mess, and when they did just that, to the satisfaction of some and to the anger of others, no one took up arms or declared war to reverse the decision. In a community ultimately ruled by law, the courts have the ultimate authority.

The notion of “the rule of law” in the Western world is taken for granted now. Since the signing of the Magna Carta in A.D. 1215, our part of the world has moved toward the rule of law. The ninth commandment —“You shall not bear false witness”—predates the Magna Carta by at least fifteen hundred years and enshrines within its few words one of the bedrock ideas of our civilization. John Dryden (1631-1700) remarked, “Truth is the foundation of all knowledge and the cement of all societies.”

Now, let’s return to the two versions of the ninth commandment as found in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

You must not answer against your neighbor a lying witness
(Exod 20:16).

You must not answer against your neighbor an empty witness
(Deut 5:20).

The Exodus version prohibiting “lying” witness focuses on the dangers of deliberate deception. In 1 Kings 21, we find what is probably the most memorable instance in the Old Testament of the use of lying witnesses to destroy an innocent man. Ahab’s demand for Naboth’s vineyard, which Naboth refuses to relinquish, leads Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, to pay two witnesses to bring a false report against Naboth. The lying report of the two witnesses, given at a gathering to honor Naboth, leads to Naboth’s death by stoning and the theft of his vineyard by King Ahab.

The Deuteronomy version prohibiting “empty” witness focuses on speech that is destructive due to its worthlessness. Such witness possesses no positive value, but undermines the one spoken against. The quip of William Blake (1757-1827) expresses this thought quite well: “A Truth that’s told with bad intent / Beats all the Lies you can invent.”

We need, then, both versions of the ninth commandment, for they are the two sides of one coin. Both deliberately deceptive speech and undermining empty speech are forbidden by this commandment—we must avoid both misinformation and empty cynicism. What we say to and about one another is very important. The ninth

commandment reminds us that words can be weapons of destruction and can be building blocks of community.

Negatively stated, this commandment prohibits false witness and empty witness. Positively stated, this commandment calls for a commitment to the truth in all of our dealings, and it calls each and every one of us to use speech constructively, to so speak of others that their well-being is furthered and enhanced.

We have all heard the saying, “If you don’t have anything good to say, then say nothing.” The problem is, this is exactly what we too often do. We don’t have anything good to say, so we proceed to say nothing—we offer empty, worthless talk that tears down our neighbor. If you don’t have anything good to say, then refrain even from speaking nothing—refrain from all talk that does no good. If you don’t have anything good to say, be certain that what do you say is not good-for-nothing.

“Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important matters.” It doesn’t take a genius to figure that out, although these are words uttered by Albert Einstein (1879-1955). Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) once said, “Sin has many tools, but a lie is the handle which fits them all.”

Truth—spoken honestly and spoken constructively—is the foundation for friendship with God and for friendship with one another. Without such truth, life is hardly worth the living. And that’s no lie.

Walter Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 1 (Abingdon Press, 1994).

Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1991).

Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Abingdon Press, 1999).

John C. Holbert, *The Ten Commandments: A Preaching Commentary* (Abingdon Press, 2002).

Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1990).

Rubel Shelly, *Living by the Rules: The Contemporary Value of the Ten Commandments* (20th Century Christian Foundation, 1982).