

## “Bearing False Witness” (An Exposition of Exodus 20:16)<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

We have been studying through the Ten Commandments one at a time on Communion Sundays for a while now, and in the course of these studies we now come to the ninth commandment. This, of course, is the commandment that explicitly forbids us from *bearing false witness* against our neighbor.

*What does it mean to “bear false witness”?* The ninth commandment primarily deals with two (2) things: the truth in general, and the truth in relation to the reputation of ourselves and others. The great 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Puritan writer, Thomas Boston, writes:

“The scope of this command is the preservation of truth amongst men, which is a necessary bond of human society. And forasmuch as all the commands of the second table relate to ourselves as well as others, the meaning of this is, Thou shalt not bear false witness either against thyself or thy neighbor, and so neither wrong thy own nor thy neighbor's good name.”<sup>2</sup>

If the truth being maintained between men is “a necessary bond of human society,” then it should be no surprise to see our once civil society coming apart at the seams and crumbling all around us. After all, in our day it seems that the truth is in short supply, and seemingly in even less demand.

Christians, by definition, should be the greatest defenders and supporters of the truth. The church is, after all, called “**a pillar and buttress of the truth**” (1 Timothy 3:15), and our Lord Jesus calls Himself “**the way and the truth and the life**” (John 14:6).

The 9<sup>th</sup> commandment certainly deals with lying and speaking untruths in general, but it is stated in such a way as to show the deadly serious nature of this sin and to impress upon us the damage it can do to our neighbor. *False witness is a courtroom term and in a court of law bearing false witness can be a matter of life and death.* In his book on the Ten Commandments, Kevin DeYoung writes:

“What we see throughout the Ten Commandments is that each commandment often gives us the worst example of sinning in some way. For instance, murder is the worst way of breaking the sixth commandment, but Jesus tells us that it’s not the only way. You can also be angry. Adultery is the worst way of violating the seventh commandment, but Jesus tells us that if you lust after someone, you have also sinned. So, with the ninth commandment, the worst thing you can do is bear false witness in a court of law, where someone’s life could be snuffed out because of your deceit.”<sup>3</sup>

The Bible is filled with numerous warnings and admonitions about the sins of the tongue. Concerning the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment, the great Puritan writer Thomas Watson writes,

“God has set two natural fences to keep in the tongue, the teeth and the lips; and this commandment is a third fence set about it, that it should not break forth into evil.”<sup>4</sup>

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1 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

2 *The Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, Vol.2, p.312

3 Kevin DeYoung, *The 10 Commandments: What They Mean, Why They Matter, and Why We Should Obey Them* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), p.144–145.

4 *The Ten Commandments*, p.169

*How serious of a sin is falsehood, lying, and false testimony?* To put it simply, it is in God's "top 10" list – the Ten Commandments. That alone ought to be enough to cause us to take it *much* more seriously. Likewise Proverbs 12:22 says,

**“Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,  
but those who act faithfully are his delight.”**

Lying lips are an **“abomination”** to the LORD! An abomination is something that is *highly offensive to God*. Revelation 21:8 says of **“all liars”** that **“their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”** *Clearly falsehood is no small sin in the eyes of God.*

As we have done in these studies previously, we are going to use the Shorter Catechism's treatment of the commandment as an outline of sorts. Q/A 77 says, *“What is required in the ninth commandment?”* A. The ninth commandment requires the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbor's good name, especially in witness-bearing.”

And so we will *first* look at what it means for us to 'maintain and promote the truth,' and then what it means to maintain and promote our own good name and that of our neighbor.

### ***Maintaining and Promoting the Truth***

The first thing that we are taught in the ninth commandment is that we are to *maintain and promote the truth*, and, conversely, “whatsoever is prejudicial [or harmful] to truth” is expressly forbidden.

In Ephesians chapter 4 the Apostle Paul turns from his explanation of the gospel and the doctrines of grace to the application of the gospel in how we are to live differently in light of the gospel of our salvation.

He exhorts us to **“walk in a manner worthy of the calling”** with which we have been called in Christ (v.1), and to *put off our old self* with its old way of life and to *put on the new man*, **“created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”** (v.24) And what is the first specific example that he gives of this life of holiness? Speaking the truth.

In v.25 Paul writes: **“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”** And so a holy life, one that is fitting for those who have been called out of darkness into God's marvelous light in Christ, in some ways begins with how we talk. We as Christians are to be a people *characterized by truth*. Not only are we to *believe* the truth, but we are to *speak* the truth as well!

And this just makes sense, doesn't it? After all, Satan is called **“the father of lies”** (John 8:44), and our Lord Jesus tells us that He Himself is **“the way and the truth and the life”** (John 14:6). And the Apostle John tells us, **“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”** (1 John 1:5) And our very conversion itself is spoken of as being **‘called out of darkness into His marvelous light.’** (1 Peter 2:9)

How are we as believers to *maintain and promote the truth*? By having our minds renewed according to the Word of God, *whose very Word is truth* (John 17:17). By judging all things according to God's Word, which is the standard for all truth. By rejecting whatever is false, and holding to the truth, even when it is unpopular. And by speaking the truth, and refuting error and falsehood.

Are we as believers trustworthy people? Are we people whose word can be trusted? Are we known as people who keep our word, even when it costs us? We should be. If people cannot trust us to be truthful about the things of this life, how will they ever believe us when we bear witness to them of the gospel?

Kevin DeYoung again writes:

“There is almost nothing more important than living our lives as faithful witnesses. Our words must be trustworthy at all times—otherwise, how will people believe us when we want to give them the words of life? Why should they trust us to speak of eternal things if we cannot be trusted to speak of temporal things?”<sup>5</sup>

Q/A 77 teaches us that not only that the ninth commandment “requires the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man,” but also the maintaining and promoting “of our own and our neighbor’s good name, especially in witness bearing.” What are some ways that we can seek to maintain the good name or reputation of ourselves? Of others?

Simply refraining from speaking falsehood or slander is not enough. Thomas Watson writes, “A man may wrong another as well by silence as by slander, when he knows him to be wrongfully accused, yet does not speak in his behalf.” (*The Ten Commandments*, p.173)

Conversely Q/A 78 teaches that the ninth commandment “forbids whatsoever is prejudicial to truth, or injurious to our own, or our neighbor’s, good name.” Thus gossip, slander, and speaking evil of others is forbidden. And yet how often do we engage in such sins of the tongue in one way or another? No wonder James tells us:

**“So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”** (James 3:5–10)

When we take a church membership vow saying that we “promise to study [i.e. live in such a way as to promote] its purity and peace,” certainly being mindful of the sins of the tongue and the damage that such sins can cause ranks near the top of the list.

As always, there is a great deal of overlap between the commandments. Bearing false witness can be a form of *theft and murder*, and so a violation of both the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> commandments. Thomas Watson again writes:

“You may kill a man in his name as well as in his person. Some are loath to take away their neighbor’s goods – conscience would fly in their face; but better take away their corn out of their field, their wares out of their shop, then take away their good name. This is a sin for which no reparation can be made; a blot in a man’s name, being like a blot on white paper, which will never be got out. God will visit for this sin.” (*The Ten Commandments*, p.171-172)

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5 Ibid, p.154.

Do we engage in gossip? Do we slander others, even other Christians? Our speech must maintain and promote truth. And speech that is truly fitting for a believer in Jesus Christ must be the kind of speech that seeks to actively maintain and promote not only our own good name, but also that of our neighbor, especially (but not limited to) our brothers and sisters in Christ!

That means no gossip in the form of *sharing prayer concerns*. And that means *not giving ear* to gossip as well. The *listener* is every bit as guilty as the teller. Thomas Watson writes, “A man may wrong another as well by silence as by slander, when he knows him to be wrongfully accused, yet does not speak in his behalf.” (*The Ten Commandments*, p.173)

Not listening or giving ear to gossip is not enough. We must “defend and promote, as much as we are able, the honor and good character of [our] neighbor.” (*Heidelberg Catechism* Q/A 112)

We must learn to *speak the truth in love* (Ephesians 4:15), and we should not sacrifice the truth on the altar of peace (which is a *false* peace).

May we who believe learn to put off falsehood in all of its forms and speak the truth to one another, knowing that we are members of one body, the body of Christ. May we be characterized by truth and truthfulness, so that our witness to the gospel will be adorned by it. - Amen