

“Do Not Bear False Witness”  
 Sermon for 7 August 2016  
 Text: Exodus 20:16; Malachi 3:1-5

The ninth commandment plays into God’s concern for truth, justice and righteousness among His people and in the world. It is a directive for our obligation to God and one another. These concerns are addressed in the biblical narrative. Historically in Israel when God gave His people His Law that they might be a righteous nation—a nation known for truth, justice and righteousness!—a holy people. These concerns are also current in our time and space—both within the church and, by extension, in wider society. We note, pertinent to this topic of our spiritual and social obligation to God and one another, that Jesus is declared **the faithful and true witness**. (Rev. 1:5 and 3:14) The book of Hebrews also alludes to Christ’s “testimony” (the proper function of a “witness”): **Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son**... (Heb. 1:1-2) However, we must add this distinction, Jesus did not merely witness to the truth, *He is the truth*. (John 14:6) **I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true**. (John 8:26) Consistent with these scriptures, Jesus taught His followers that truthfulness was to be habitual with them . . . it was to be their way of life. Without truthfulness, the process of church discipline (detailed in Matthew 18) could not work. Church discipline is a practice of continuity—it extends the Old Testament practices from the giving of the Law straight into our dealings with one another. We speak the truth in love, and we deal with each other directly and wholly—it is not merely the turning from sin we seek *but we seek to live righteous lives . . . and justice flows from our being good and faithful witnesses*. How the Sanhedrin failed the judicial system of Israel, missing the mark with God and one another, in seeking to find false witnesses so as to justify putting an innocent man to death, namely Jesus, stands as a horrific miscarriage of justice. A sign of its entire corruption!

We are going to walk together through the implications of **Thou shalt not bear false witness**. We will start with politics and the primary season and move on to the preservation (and protection) of character implicit in the command. We will cover the obligation to be witnesses and to testify to the truth which supply the glue to good social order. Then, because of the prophetic strand which culminated in Jesus’ appearing to establish the rule of righteousness on earth, we will touch on Malachi’s prophetic word to us. And we will conclude with an exhortation to be good witnesses, sharing Christ’s testimony with the nations even as we participate in bringing about justice in our dealings with one another. We will learn that truth is a collective pursuit, justice is a common goal and righteousness is the desired outcome.

The primary season. With regard to the ninth commandment, the primary season has been cringe-worthy! All the candidates front loaded unjust suspicion, evil surmising, rash judging’s and unjust concluding’s concerning the state, intention and meaning of one another. *There has got to be a better way than a brawling slime feast (playing to media ravenous for more dirt, more allegations, dishonoring speeches). In the end no candidate is left standing that is worthy of serious consideration!* I do not happen to ascribe to the view that all the candidates are

rascals and scoundrels but the *ad hominem* attacks are despicable. And when it comes to candidates from the other party, things become particularly unhinged, vicious, the naked contempt and hatred (paranoia and character assassination are on a rampage). One wonders how God takes all this folly. Does it rise to the level of mockery? In the heart, by gesture, in gesture and sound bytes, in writing and through unkind, savage speech, the flagrant violation of the ninth commandment is, well, deeply worrisome. *Politics are so ungodly as to invite divine censure and rebuke.* Those who participated coarsened our public life. They made participation unseemly and many decent people shy away from involvement—just when and where they are needed most. When lies and false witnessing are the currency of public discourse, the whole business is cheapened, degraded. It is truly vile. Jumping to conclusions without sufficient evidence, making insinuations (and outright vilification) are unhealthy and unhelpful social actions. Slandering is fostered by people being willing to listen to it—zero tolerance for slander might not be a bad goal for public figures. Our neighbors should not be harmed by untruthful, mean-spirited and vicious words—deliberate injuries are unacceptable to all, not just to people of faith and fellow believers. Words are not just words. They are, often, the children of our inner selves which, once uttered, quickly outgrow our parental control and embark on an independent career which can tend toward great blessing or towards great destruction—like a prairie fire in high winds. We have made great progress in the area of roadside litter, and to a lesser extent domestic abuse has been exposed—perhaps we can clean up public speech. Perhaps we can impress on everyone that it is our civic duty to be civil. We can promote that by being God honoring, truthfully careful in what we say.

The protection of character. The ninth commandment is aimed at protecting character, everyone's character. It is wrong to impute unworthy motives to others, and to pass on or publish prejudicial opinions. We should be more circumspect, across the board, and reign in our speech as public acts of public men when we participate in the public square regardless of our party, or political leanings. It is, I think, commonly thought to be wrong to impute danger to strangers, or to those who are racially different—simply on the basis of prejudice. This does not mean, however, that we are forbidden to describe people of specific races, of ethnicity in terms of their actions. Blacks who murder police officers are dangerous men—so are police officers who use excessive force in the discharge of their duties to protect the public and uphold the law. Murderers come in every color and culture; they are still murderers. Tying Muslim extremists to terrorism is factual, not prejudicial, or unfair. Those who inflame racial hatred and suspicion, who disrupt commerce and disturb the peace, are responsible for their actions (and calling it a protest is an unacceptable dodge). The destruction of property is inexcusable and those who want to protest have an obligation to be more creative unless they want to be charged with breaking the law, jailed, tried and punished. Bearing false witness is claiming something to be the case when it is not—or denying something to be the case when it plainly is. Both are “spin” and both consist of lying.

Yes, we owe each other the truth. We do not dare to be cavalier about the existence of truth (as philosophers are wont to be), because truth is the glue that holds a church, community, or nation together. We must all be prepared to be witnesses *because all men are sinful! All witnesses are likewise sinful.* Therefore a

plurality of reliable witnesses is necessary to justice being accomplished. (It helps with distortion, incompleteness and, possibly prejudicial testimonies.) The punishment for false witnesses, in Old Testament times, was for them to endure the punishment for the crime of which they falsely accused the innocent! (They must be exonerated.) Or, the knowledgeable witness, given the guilt of the accused, was charged to cast the first stone. Individuals initiate, engage the corrective process. The judges were to oversee the investigative processes justly, vet the witnesses and check for legitimacy of claims of wrongdoing. Unfounded allegations were ruled out of order. *Character matters because truthfulness matters—justice as well as peace hand in the balance.*

And these matters play directly into God's concern for truth, justice and righteousness as enshrined in the ten commandments. When these commandments were delivered to Israel, after salvation (that is after deliverance from slavery in Egypt), there were no policemen . . . courts were less formal and more comprehensive. One did not call the police if a crime happened, no, it was the victim's obligation to press charges because the person most likely to steal from you was either known, or a neighbor. The local elders, or leaders sat at the gate to hear complaints and to settle disputes daily. The victim of the crime and the accused were summoned, witnesses were called—testimony was given and then a judgment would be rendered. The sentence was pronounced quickly, punishment was initiated by the one pressing charges and restitution (or loss of a body part) ruled the day—because the recovery of trust and community was the objective of the judicial process. However, *the process only worked justly if people told the truth (that is, refused to give false witness)! Then peace and righteousness were the outcomes and social order was restored.*

True testimony is essential for both a just trial and due process. **A rascally witness makes a mockery of justice, And the mouth of the wicked spreads iniquity.** (Proverbs 19:28) There were, in Israel's judicial system, three components: a body of laws, judges and witnesses (who presented the evidence). An informal jury of ones peers often sat nearby and listened. God's Law, written by Him, was held to be the perfect standard because it was unstained by human sin. The same could not be claimed for the judicial process, either the judges or the witnesses. Hence this prohibition of false witnessing. Incidentally, this process is replicated in church discipline where Christians are obliged to intervene is a brother is overtaken in sin, must bring charges and summon witnesses and submit the matter to the elders for judgment. The danger of unjust judges is real and that is what the Lord urges His followers to **not judge as the world judges, but to judge with righteous judgment.** (John 7:24) We are to deal with sin very much as the Israelites were to deal with unrighteousness! A just verdict depends on truthful testimony. Witnesses must be trustworthy, truthful. Or unjust rulings will promote unrighteous living in the land—such as we see in America today! These are good and necessary obligations . . . our obedience is a civic duty.

The prophetic strand. There was also the issue of prophetic testimony to be addressed. Sometimes that came from the Word of God and other times, individual prophets would speak on God's behalf. One of the reasons that the Messiah was longed for relates to this piece of judicial process: He would bring a reign of

righteousness on earth—where sinners sin, liars lie and lawbreakers slander, suspect and falsely accuse one another. Malachi 3:1-5 is instructive in this regard: **“I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien (as in refuse him justice, fair treatment), and do not fear Me,” says the Lord of Hosts.**

Exhortation. But most importantly, remember, the Lord commands us to be His witnesses, His true witnesses! **And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, then the end shall come.** (Matt. 24:14) And again in Acts 1:8: **And you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.** So Jesus came as a witness and left us to be His witnesses (witnesses to their faith and the facts of the atonement and resurrection).

True testimony is essential for the administration of justice and the execution of justice is the outworking of righteousness . . . and true witnessing to who the Messiah is and as to why He came to us because Jesus came to establish the rule of righteousness in the earth. Truthfulness brings life and freedom. Falsehood brings bondage and destruction. **Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before your God.** (Micah 6:8)

False testimony is a strong temptation and a pernicious evil.

There is a priority of witnessing in our body life and in the world.

Plurality is good when it comes to witness credibility. Fact finding/character

Purity in our witness is greatly to be valued.

Love of justice is a purifying force in the world.

Church discipline instructs us in this ongoing work trains us and prepares us for the future with the hope of reconciliation.

False witness is to be avoided at all costs . . . it starts with the offender, neglects the God-given process, harms the innocent, promotes evil, is indiscriminate and indiscreet, leads to silence when speaking out is right, is motivated by sin, it tears down and harms or destroys others, and it is self-centered and selfish to the core. Stop lying (Eph. 4:25) . . . speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:14-16). . . bear witness to the truth (John 18:37). If we practice these things, we will be kept from breaking the ninth commandment.

**Amen**