

## **The Ninth Commandment: No False Testimony**

**Exodus 20:16**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus 20:16. We are continuing our study through the ten words this morning, the words that God spoke to Israel and wrote with His own finger. We are in the second table of the law, and over and over we have seen the lesson repeated that our love to neighbor — especially as we have been studying from the fifth commandment to the ninth today — our love to neighbor is closely tied to our love to God. Remember, John can say in 1 John 3 that this is how we know that we have passed into light, that we love our brother. What's he stressing? He is stressing that our obedience to the second table of the law — our love of neighbor — is a reflection, it is an index of the reality of our love to God. Anybody can claim to love God, but you can see that love, John says, in the way that person deals with neighbor. That point comes home — maybe a little too close to home — in the commandment we are going to study today, because our tongues give us a penetrating index of how much we really love our neighbor. Does the use of our mouth, does our example of speech, show a deep and careful and abiding love of our neighbor, of our brothers and sisters in Christ? That's one thing that the commandment we are going to look at today gets at.

Now it's apparent from our study of the commandments so far that each of the commandments in the second table of the law relates to the first table of the law. And that our keeping of those "neighbor commands" — five through ten — relate directly to our keeping of the "duty to God" commands in verses one through four. For instance, when we studied the sixth command, "Do not murder." we saw that that was rooted in our realization that man is created in God's image and therefore if we truly revere God we will also treat those who are created in His image with dignity and respect with regard to their persons, and take care to save and promote their life and well-being. We saw in the fifth command, with regard to honoring father and mother, that whereas God retains to Himself the ultimate reverence that we are to show, yet He also calls us to reverence our father and our mother. And so our parental respect is in fact a sign of respect to God. It's obedience to the first commandment. When we looked at the seventh command we saw that sexual loyalty to our spouse is a reflection and an illustration of covenant loyalty to God, so that the seventh commandment is

actually part of obedience to the first commandment.

Last week when we looked at the eighth command we said that it required our respect for our neighbor's person and property, and it's rooted in a belief in God's providence. If you really believe that God is going to provide what you need, you never need to take wrongly from someone else to meet that need. And so recognition of God's providence undergirds obedience to the eighth commandment. Thus the eighth command is related to the first commandment.

Today we come to the ninth command. It's the fifth commandment of the second table of the law, and it relates to public truthfulness, especially in solemn court situations. And so it obviously has a connection with the third commandment. Remember, when we studied the third commandment we said that it should be understood not simply to forbid foul use of God's name, but to forbid any kind of taking up the name of God which is empty or vain or which demeans the name of God. And so if we take up the name 'Christian' and do not act as Christians we are breaking the third commandment. Well, the ninth commandment or the violation of the ninth commandment is one way that one can break the third commandment and take God's name in vain. And as we say, it especially relates to public truthfulness in solemn situations like in a court and in witnessing and in testimony. But it is also that this command is rightly applied to all issues of truth telling. It would be legitimate for us to explore the whole range of issues with regard to lying. They are certainly under the rubric of this commandment. But, were we to do that we wouldn't be able to adequately cover the ground of application that I want to attempt today. We are going to focus in our discussion today on a specific kind of speech, and that is speech which is harmful to our neighbor. Let's look then at Exodus 20:16:

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy inspired and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord, this is Your word and we ask that You open our eyes to behold wonderful things from it. Your command is exceeding broad and we see that in this commandment. Teach us from it, convict us by it, build us up in the truth thereof. And by Your Holy Spirit grant that we would walk in truthfulness and in desire to honor and be good to our neighbor in the use of our tongues. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

All of the second table commandments — all of the commandments about love to neighbor from the fifth to the tenth — all of the second table commandments are about the well-being of the whole covenant community, and not merely about the right conduct of individuals. Each of these commands does indeed call on us as individual believers in the Lord to conduct ourselves in uprightness in different ways. But the concern of these commands is not merely for individual or personal

piety. The concern is to preserve a community of believers who are building one another up and united in their fellowship. As important as personal integrity is in all these matters addressed from the fifth to the tenth commandment, God's word always has in view the effect of the individual's behavior on the whole body. And so this commandment is given not simply because God wants us to be truthful people. He does. He wants us to be truthful people. And it's not only given because He wants us to be truthful people because He is truthful, and thus image Him in that sense.

But He gives us this command because he wants us to be concerned about the well being of the whole community, and he wants us to realize that personal untruthfulness is harmful to the whole community. False testimony hurts the whole community.

Now we could give many examples today of how false testimony and untruthfulness hurts you as an individual. I could refer to a famous football coach, for instance, who coached the program at Georgia Tech and was offered one of the most prestigious college programs in America, the football program at Notre Dame. He was hired as the head coach, and within seven days he had had to resign because of a lie on his resume that he had done more than 25 years earlier. He was shamed in front of the entire nation. The program was brought into disgrace. He was embarrassed and his career was unsettled, because of untruthfulness. We could give dozens of examples of how our untruthfulness hurts us. That would be a whole different area of application.

I want to focus on how our untruthfulness, or our speech that is harmful to neighbor, harms the whole community and not just the individual neighbor. Because in the second table commands, God is concerned for us to have a view that our individual actions impact the whole covenant community. You know, that's one of the emphases that Derek reminded us of as we worked through Joshua and came to the sin of Achan. Achan's sin was not simply a private matter of violating the specific command that had been given by God through Joshua. It ended up having an effect on the whole community - a nearly disastrous on the community.

And in all of the second table commands God wants us to realize that our personal actions have an impact on the whole community. And we realize that even with regard to this commandment. When someone perjures himself or herself there is an evil effect on the whole community even if you are not involved in the trial. For instance, there was once upon a time a president of the United States who perjured himself in court testimony. And it had a disastrous effect not simply upon him but upon the whole of the nation. There are still lawmakers in Washington who are estranged because of the fallout from that particular action. It may take years for lawmakers in Washington to recover from that one act, and all the collateral and residual effects of it. It had a disastrous moral effect on the whole nation, as we began to see people proliferate in justifying their perjury.

Well, the president perjured himself. We can see the effect of false testimony and frivolous suits impacting the whole community right here in Mississippi. You know, it's not just the wrongly accused person in a frivolous suit that suffers. When frivolous and inordinate suits are brought to bear it hurts the whole community. And so the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has now made an appeal to the people of Mississippi to do something about the frivolous and inordinate suits being brought regularly in Mississippi courts. Doctors are leaving the state. Businesses are being hurt. Why? Because false testimony is being given. Frivolous suits are being brought. And so it's easy to see how wrongdoing in the area of the ninth commandment can have a damaging effect on the whole community. We could go and give many other examples.

What I want to do today is stress two things over and over to you. First of all, that the keeping of this commandment means that in your speech you are always concerned about the effect of that speech on the whole community. Secondly, I want to stress over and over that in our obedience to the ninth commandment we always have in view that our speech is a measure of our love for God. Our speech is a measure of our loyalty to God. And the way we love our neighbors in speech is a more accurate gauge to our real piety and love of God than any claim than we can make. And I want to say that over and over in various ways. And I'd like to outline what I do in two parts.

First we are going to look at the Old Testament teaching right here in verse sixteen. Then we are going to go to Jesus' exposition and application of this commandment found in Matthew 5:33-37, and we are give some specific applications of this based on especially New Testament teaching, but also some other Old Testament applications. And then we are going to ask some questions about what this command says to unbelievers, and what it says to believers.

### **I. The people of God are not to employ speech which is wrongly harmful to our neighbor.**

Let's look at Exodus 20:16. This Old Testament command obviously prohibits false testimony. It prohibits perjury, but it also prohibits slander and gossip. God is telling His people here that the people of God are not to employ speech that is wrongly harmful to our neighbor. The original context is of course the setting of a court. The first reference in this command is to truth telling in judicial situations. It is a prohibition against false witness or testimony in a court of law. Now, that was extremely important in the early days of Israel. Most of the crimes that you could have been brought before a judge for in the wilderness were capital crimes. And the main way that you were either convicted or exonerated in Israel was through the testimony of witnesses. They did not have advanced forensic science. No one could run DNA tests and all the other various things that we can do in court procedures today and so the testimony of witnesses was extremely important in either acquitting you or convicting you. And false testimony in such a setting was

not only damaging to your neighbor it could be deadly. If your neighbor was accused of a capital crime false testimony he could be executed under the statutes of legal justice.

And furthermore, for a person to give false testimony or false evidence in such a setting had four other terrible effects. First of all, it injured the innocent accused. To give false testimony was a direct assault upon the freedom and dignity of another member of the covenant community. Secondly, it hindered the administration of justice in that particular case. For a person to give false testimony not only wronged an innocent individual who was a defendant but it prevented the authorities from bringing to bear justice on the one who was the perpetrator of the crime. Thirdly, it undermined public confidence in the judicial system. How many of us wish that we had never ever seen justice at work in the O.J. Simpson trial. It undermined your confidence in the integrity of the system because your eyes were wide open to the facts, and you saw how the system was manipulated. And what did it do? Did it leave you very confident to take your greatest concerns to the legal system? No. Well think about how false testimony would have thwarted the just administration of the judicial system in Israel and of how it would have undermined the public confidence in the integrity of that system. And that in turn would, fourthly, lead to a deeply troubled society as a whole. When the society loses confidence in the just and equal administration of justice through the court system there are big problems indeed. And false testimony could eventuate each of these things.

And therefore the law of Moses had at least two ways that it tried to counteract false testimony and witnesses. First, it required that two witnesses come forward. There had to be corroboration. One person alone could not substantiate a charge. There had to be corroboration.

Secondly, there was a provision in the law of Moses that a false accuser would receive the punishment due to the person who had been wrongly accused and who was eventually declared innocent. So that a false witness would be liable to the punishment that the accused would have received had he been convicted. This was a way of deterring someone from bringing false testimony, realizing that he would have to bear the penalty were his false testimony discovered. By the way, this is still part of Scots law today. When the statutes were being written in early Scottish history this idea from the Old Testament law was incorporated, so that if you bring false charges into a Scots court you are liable for the punishment that would have been due to the unjustly accused. That might stop some of the suits going on right now in Mississippi. Maybe we should suggest it to the legislature. At any rate, the Old Testament makes clear that one reason for truth-telling then is out of concern not simply for your individual neighbor who will be harmed by your false testimony, but out of consideration for the whole community. This command enforces the right of all the members of the covenant community to have the truth told about them in public and in private. And it enjoins on all the members of the covenant community to be respecters of their

neighbor's good name and reputation. And so it has a community focus.

Now let me just pause right there and ask. As you speak, as you talk to friends, as you talk to fellow believers, and as you talk about other believers in the covenant community, do you speak with a concern to uphold the welfare and the unity of the whole community? Do you realize that one word, one stray word out of your mouth could result in a division between brothers and sisters in Christ that hurts and harms the whole of the covenant community? That is certainly a message that we learn here in Exodus chapter 20:16. That our speech always has to have in view a concern for the well-being of the whole community as well as our neighbor's reputation.

## **II. Jesus stresses absolute truthfulness in our solemn witness and testimony as evidence of our recognition of Lordship.**

Now let's look at Jesus' application of this. Turn with me to Matthew 5:33-37. Jesus stresses absolute truthfulness in our solemn witness and testimony, and He stresses this as an evidence of our recognition of God's Lordship. He says in Matthew 5:33, "Again, you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is in the city of the great king. Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. Let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No'; any more is from the evil one." Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees in this passage. The Pharisees seem to have done two things that have thwarted the impact of the ninth commandment.

On the one hand, they have encouraged a multiplication of oaths. There is an oath for every situation. Your neighbor wants you to help you redo the driveway. Well, for that one you swear an oath on your head. For this case there is a major business contract to be agreed upon. Well, for that one you swear an oath on Jerusalem. Well, in this case there is a major treaty being made between two tribes. Well, in that case you would definitely need to swear upon the whole earth. And so on. There was an oath for everything. So there was a multiplication of oaths that diminished the significance of a person giving his word.

On the other hand, the Pharisees seem to be making loopholes in these oaths. If you swore upon the name of God well then that oath couldn't be broken, but, if you swore on your own head that wasn't quite as important as swearing on God, and therefore that oath, hmm — maybe that one could be fudged. And Jesus says, over against this, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No.'" He's not saying, "Take absolutely no oaths at all." because Jesus Himself took and made oaths. You remember what Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room in John thirteen? "I tell you I will never again eat of this meal until we eat it in the Kingdom." He was making an oath. He was saying, "I'm never going to sit down

with you and eat this supper until we are eating the marriage feast of the Lamb together." It was a pledge to His people — that He was going to be faithful until He brought them to glory. Paul made oaths. So Jesus' point is not, "Don't ever make oaths." His point is, "Don't ever use God's name in an oath with subterfuge." You always tell the truth. And even if you don't invoke God's name, whenever you are being called upon to tell you are witnessing as to whether you are from God or from the evil one.

Notice that Jesus only has two categories of speech. Speech either reflects the Lordship of God or it reflects — look at verse 37, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No' be 'No'; anything more is from the evil one." So your speech either reflects your submission to the Lordship of God or it reflects the influence of Satan. It's that simple. All speech falls into one of those two categories. It's that black or white.

So let me ask you this: In your speech about your neighbor, with your neighbor, do you always have in mind that what you say is either a witness to the work of God in your heart and your submission to His Lordship, or it's a witness of the work of Satan in your life? See, on the one hand the Old Testament says, "Remember your speech always has an impact on the community." And on the other hand the New Testament is saying, "Your speech always either witnesses to the divine regeneration of your soul by the loving and gracious Heavenly Father or it witnesses to the fact that Satan is having influence on you." Jesus makes it clear that all of our speech is said in the sight of God, and therefore all of that speech — especially speech about our neighbor — must be truthful and designed to build up our neighbor.

You see this is really an exposition of the third commandment, not to take the name of the Lord our God in vain. When we damage our neighbor by our speech, we are taking the Lord God's name in vain and acting as if we are under the lordship of the evil one. We are besmirching God's character as well as hurting our neighbor and hurting our community. And so this command is not only a call for truthfulness, it is a call for concern about the community. It's a call for concern about our neighbor's name and welfare. And it's a call for loyalty to God in the way that we talk, in the way that we speak. And of course it rules out perjury and slander and libel and gossip. But it also does a number of other things. And I'd like to point these things to you.

First of all, it directs us to be faithful in our witness. This command does indeed call upon Christians to be faithful in our witness in civil courts and in church courts. When we are called upon to testify, we are called to be open and free and clear and sincere in our testimony. Our testimony is to be open. We are not to conceal anything that might clear up the matter. Our testimony is to be free. It's not to be intimidated by any person. It's not to be intimidated by any threat of any person. Our testimony is to be clear. We are not to mince words or obscure the truth. We should speak in such a way that all understand what we are saying.

And our testimony is to be sincere without any intention of concealment or deception or partial counsel. All of that is involved in being obedient to this commandment. That's one side of it.

The flip side of it — and that's the second thing I want to bring your attention to — is this: This command prohibits all forms of false witness and swearing: deceit in a court of law, perjury. We are to be truthful people. And this command is violated in a variety of ways. It's violated by false judges — judges who give unjust rulings — whether they be out of respect for persons, whether it is calling what is good evil and what is evil good, false judges violate this command through unjust judgments. False accusers violate this command. When somebody brings a false accusation in court, when a complainer falsely charges another and brings false witnesses to substantiate, they are breaking this commandment of God. False denials are entailed in the violation of this command. The defendant who denies just charges rather than pleading guilty as he is, is violating this command. False witnesses violate this command. Those who conceal the truth or who invent stories or who twist the truth violate this command. Those who facilitate them doing so violate this command. False pleaders violate this command - those who appeal to truth and justice, but they do so for an unjust cause. All of these are ways that this command is violated in the court.

But thirdly, this command also prohibits slander. It prohibits us from doing unjust harm to another's reputation — and how that fractures the fellowship of the covenant community. You know, in a congregation of our size this has got to be something that is of a standing nature as an issue on a regular basis. And it doesn't necessarily have to be done with willful and malicious forethought. You know, sometimes you can slander a brother, and you can catch yourself doing it, right as the words are coming out of your mouth. The conversation started talking constructively about a brother and sister, maybe in a hard situation, marriage problems. You know, Brother A and Sister B, known them for fifteen years, they're really having hard times right now. And then suddenly, that conversation turns from a desire to help, and information is shared which slandered that brother and sister.

Finally, this command directs us to be concerned for our brother's and sister's reputation. We must care for our neighbor's reputation. How? Well, First Corinthians 13:7 applies this command by saying that we ought to have charitable opinions and estimations of our neighbors. Are we charitable in the way we estimate our neighbors or do we always think the worst? If there's any doubt, we always err to the worst side of it. Do we have charitable opinions of our neighbors? Do we rejoice in the good reputation of our neighbors? Romans 1:8 applies this command, reminding us that we ought to have a rejoicing in the good reputation of our neighbor. We shouldn't be jealous or envious of a good reputation. We should rejoice in the good reputation of a neighbor. Sorrowing and grieving at the faults of neighbors instead of delighting in the faults of



neighbors is one right application of this command, as Paul teaches us in 2 Corinthians 12:21.

Do you love it when you hear that your neighbor has stumbled? You know, sometimes we like to hear that our neighbor has stumbled because it makes us feel better about our own stumbling. And we sort of get down and we wallow in the stumbling of our neighbor rather than really grieving and sorrowing over the stumbling of our neighbor, or even of our enemy. Covering the weakness of our neighbor with a mantle of love. First Peter 4:8 applies this command by saying, "You know, we ought to be as ready as we can to cover the weaknesses of our neighbors with a mantle of love." Rather than springing to bring them down, we ought to be covering their weaknesses with a mantle of love. First Corinthians 1:4-7 tells us that one application of this command is freely acknowledging the gifts and graces of our neighbor. Instead of being jealous for the job that they've been given, for the talent that they've been given, for the gifts that they've been given, for the maturity that they've been given, for the virtues that they've been given, we ought to rejoice. First Samuel 22:14 reminds us that it's not enough not to slander our neighbor or not to falsely accuse him, we need to defend his innocence when we know his innocence. And you can't wash your hands of it. "I'm not involved in that case." No, we have a responsibility to defend the innocence of our neighbor. First Corinthians 13:6-7 also tells us that we ought to be unwilling to receive an evil report of our neighbor, though quick to receive a good report. We ought not love to hear bad things. We ought to be anxious to hear good things about our neighbor. And Psalm 101:5 tells us that those who truly love the Lord discourage talebearers. They discourage gossips and slanderers, as well as flatterers.

This command concerns us all to be careful for our neighbor's reputation. But as I study this command, I am convicted about how I violate it. Surely, there can be few other commands that show us more clearly our need of grace, for there is no one in this room that has not violated this commandment.

And so, what do we do? Well if you aren't a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, this command pervasively shows you that you need grace. And if you'll think about, it also shows you that you can't help yourself, because you cannot cure yourself of this malady. Only the grace of God can. And so the response that you need to give to seeing the law of God set forth in the ninth commandment is to run to the One who was the great truth-teller wrongly accused in your place so that you could become the righteousness of God. And He says to you, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Jesus can address this issue, and more, in you.

But if you are a believer and you are struggling with this, it ought to lead you right back to grace, right back to the cross, and right to the Holy Spirit to apply for His work of ongoing sanctification in your life. It ought to grieve you that this still continues to be a sin which characterizes your life, and you ought to long to be

cultivating community amongst God's people by your tongue, not destroying it. You ought to be longing to cultivate a good witness to God through the use of your tongue, not destroying it. For that, you'll need the grace of the Holy Spirit. And so the right response to seeing God's law is to apply for His grace. Either the grace of justification or the grace of sanctification or both. May God grant that you would run to Him in your need, realizing that you have no plea, but that Christ has died for you. Let's pray.

Our Lord and Our God, show us our sin and then show us the Savior, and then draw us to Him by your Spirit. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen

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