

**The Ninth Commandment, “Bearing False Witness”**

*Exodus 20:16 "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."*

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Dr. David Baker**

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**Christopher J. Kinner**

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**I. Introduction**

While the immediate context for this commandment is often seen as a court of law and its governance applied to the legal testimony that a witness provides in a public trial before a jury or judge. The word "neighbor" (Exodus 20:16) as described by Jesus in Luke 10:25-37 consists of not only those 'likely' candidates, but anyone that we come into contact with and to whom one can show pity and kindness to (Fitzmyer, 878). With this definition of neighbor in mind, God is condemning any speech that falsely, unjustly or inaccurately describes or portrays any person, action or event.

Through the writing of this paper, two thoughts occurred to this writer. First almost every person condemns lying and values the truth especially when it regards reference to their own good character or actions. Secondly, almost every person lies in one of three categories that this paper will research and describe in some detail. The first category of lying that I will describe will be concerned with lies against others in society. This examination of false witness best explains the most basic meaning and original context of this command. The second category will be lies as they pertain to the misrepresentation of our own selves and the third will be lies as they pertain to our knowledge and presentation of God. Each of these final two discussions will display how this command was repeated and expanded in its negative form throughout the Old Testament.

At the conclusion of these three categorical examinations of providing false testimony, I will briefly examine the testimony of Jesus Christ as it provides through example a positive side to this command and displays for us how this command is to be kept. Following this observation

I will provide a brief summary of how this commandment plays a crucial role in the context of Pastoral ministry.

## **II. Bearing False Witness about Others**

The legal system of the ancient world provided little protection for those that were accused of a crime. Unlike our presumption of innocence until proven guilty, the ancient courts presumed guilt and had few regulations that guided the presentation of evidence. Most ancient courts were willing to convict the accused on the strength of a single witness (Walton, 97). This made the courts subject to abuse. Without the more modern use of forensic evidence and scientific examination (such as we often see on television - CSI), ancient courts generally depended entirely on one person's word against another's. In the wisdom and providence of God, this situation was made quite different in the nation that He brought out of Egypt and gave the Decalogue and the Law to. In Israel when a member of the community was put on trial, he appeared before a jury of elders. There had to be more than one witness and the matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). This became especially important in a trial for a capital offence (Clements, 436); in this case no one could be put to death by a single witness (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6).

Another protection for the accused concerned the execution of judgment. When someone was sentenced to die, his accuser had to throw the first stone (Deut. 17:7; John 8:7). This is significant as it is one thing to accuse someone, but quite another to put them to death (Marshall, 179). Also if the allegations of the accuser proved to be false, the accuser was punished.

"The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you" (Deuteronomy 19:18-20).

These legal safeguards were designed to protect the innocent from having false testimony being brought against them and set an example for the community to the importance of God's prohibition regarding the bringing of false testimony against others (Marshall, 180). God's people were not to bring false testimony against one another. As the prophet Zachariah later said to God's people,

"These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD" (Zechariah 8:16-17).

These principles are still relevant for us today and are needed to reestablish the credibility of our legal system. Every person involved in the legal system has an obligation before the Lord to speak truth in regard to their testimony and that of others. Further this prohibition should not only be seen in light of its most severe offences and the legal setting, but in its smallest and most personal uses as well (Gill, 282). The most blatant violation of the ninth commandment is any lie that harms someone else (Deuteronomy 5:20). What is forbidden is the dissemination of false information against our neighbor. Our speech has certainly been corrupted by our sin; James described the outcome of violating the ninth commandment in this way,

"Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5-6).

In this passage we can observe how dangerous and powerful words can be. Because of the dangerous nature of words it is not surprising that when the New Testament lists the sins that we are to avoid it often tells us that we should watch what we say. The Apostle Paul warned the Corinthians to guard against "quarrelling, slander and gossip" (2 Corinthians 12:20). He also told the Galatians that "discord" and "dissensions" were to be regarded as acts of sinful nature

(Galatians 5:19-20). Paul further exhorted the Ephesians to get rid of "slander" and "malice" (Ephesians 4:31). These sins of speech all violate the ninth commandment because each utilizes words to tear apart the truth of God's people and to hinder God's work in an inappropriate fashion. The inappropriate words here do not simply regard casual talk of other people's business, but they seek to damage the reputation of God's people and His Church.

This is the basis for what much of the act of gossiping attempts to do in our society at large. The Bible views the reputation of a person as important; "A good name is better than great riches" (Psalm 22:1) and gossip attempts to steal this treasure from others (Gill, 285). When done in speech this is called slander while in print this is known as libel (Marshall, 181). We must remember that others have the right to explain their circumstances, clarify their motives or correct misconceptions instead of being tried and convicted in the court of someone else's private opinion of them. We must remember that gossip and idle talk contain a fair amount of misinformation. Leviticus 19:11-12, 16 states, "you should not go around as a slanderer among your people" and Leviticus 20:9 states, "all who curse their father and mother will be put to death." Each of these should remind the believer of the serious nature of any slanderous talk among believers.

Gossip regarding others is such a common sin in our society that Christians often lose sight of how inappropriate it is and that it is a clear violation of the ninth commandment. It is as wrong to spread gossip as it is to listen to gossip although our newsstands seem to be full of magazines such as "US" and "People" that contain little but the frivolous gossip of movie stars and wealthy members of our society. There is an old Rabbinic saying, "Slander kills three: the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it and the one about whom it is spoken" (Hendrickson, 153). Whenever we listen to gossip, we become involved in sin. Proverbs 18:8 states, "The

words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts." Regardless of how 'tasty' gossip may sound, the Christian would be well advised to steer clear of such 'juicy' morsels, wherever they come from.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17).

This passage from Matthew provides a clear guide to clearing up the inappropriate reality of gossip among Christians. The one who confronts must do so personally and directly and provide an atmosphere in which two-way communication is established and allowed. The parallel here between "throwing the first stone" should be noted as it provides both the accused and the accuser the ability to be defended and face each other. We need to confront the sins of others not to deface them and degrade them publicly, but rather to provide them with spiritual help and guidance that "builds them up" and does not "tear them down."

We have considered a few ways that we can relate the ninth commandment to others in both the legal system, our society, our churches and even in our families and homes through this brief overview. It can also be noted that even true words could be seen to violate the ninth commandment if the words are communicated to the wrong person with an inappropriate intent for the purpose of harming others. Parading the shortcomings of other Christian brothers and sisters for public disapproval is one example of this and is described by scripture as inappropriate.

"and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty" (1 Corinthians 12:23).

Likewise the ninth commandment prohibits us from lying about ourselves both in order to appear greater than we are or as less than God has made us to be. It is to this category of false speech that we now turn.

### **III. Bearing False Witness about Ourselves**

In December 2001 George O'Leary had just been named the head football coach at the University of Notre Dame. O'Leary was in charge of one of the most prestigious sports programs in the world. However, years before when O'Leary applied for a job at Syracuse University, he had been asked for information regarding his athletic background. Some of the information he provided had been true, but he decided that it would not hurt to 'improve his resume.' There it was twenty-one years later, in his own handwriting: "College - University of New Hampshire - 3 year lettered." Although he had never taken the field with his college team and certainly never received a varsity letter.

What had seemed like a small lie regarding his past experience cost George O'Leary not only his job, but also his reputation (Smith, 85). In the aftermath O'Leary's brother was quoted stating,

"is anyone trying to tell me that resumes are truthful in the America that we live in? The willingness to lie on a resume is an indication of how much you want the job" (Smith, 87).

According to a "Time Magazine" survey in the spring of 2002, nearly three million job applicants (almost fifty percent of American resumes) contain one or more falsehoods (Kluger, 23). We all know the ninth commandment has something to say in regard to how we speak of others. In this second category there are three examples offered that speak to the importance for the individual to follow the ninth commandment in presenting testimony regarding him or herself

to others they come in contact with. In the first example we see how providing false testimony of who you are and what you have done to others in community is inappropriate and destructive.

Next, let us turn to two in the Bible who brought false testimony regarding their actions to the church and before God. Ananias and Sapphira were members of the first Christian Church in Jerusalem. We find the first Christians in Acts to be sharing everything they had (Acts 4:32, 34, 35; 2:44-45). No one among them was in need of anything. These early Christians were willing to give all they had for the work of God's kingdom.

Ananias and Sapphira saw that other Christians were giving generously and some, like Joseph, even gave so generously that the Apostles were amazed at his generosity and gave him the nickname 'Barnabus' which meant 'son of encouragement' (Acts 4:36-37). This couple sold a piece of land but kept back a part of the proceeds for themselves (Acts 5:1-2). They both desired to have an enhanced reputation in the early church and sought to inappropriately enhance their resume among God's people.

Ananias had not done something totally for God, but rather partly for God and partly for himself (Wall, 98). Peter said three important things to Ananias. First he confronted Ananias with his sin. What he had broken was the ninth commandment (Acts 5:3-4). Secondly he told Ananias where his sin came from, Satan, who Jesus called "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Third, Peter told Ananias that he had "lied to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 5:3). His false testimony had not simply been given before men, but to God as well. "You have not lied to men, but to God" (Acts 5:4).

Several hours later his wife Sapphira came to Peter. Rather than confess her sin, she also offered false witness regarding the actions of her and her husband (Wall, 99). "Yes, that is the

price" she said (Acts 5:8b). Acts 5:9-10 displays for us the serious impact of this couple's refusal to follow the guidance of the ninth commandment.

"Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband" (Acts 5:9-10).

A third example of bearing false testimony in regard to oneself is that of Peter's denial of Christ in Luke 22:57-62. In this narrative Peter is not the one calling others to be truthful as they represent themselves to God, rather he is bearing false witness in regard to his own knowledge and friendship with Jesus. Each time Peter said "I Do not know Him" he was "witnessing falsely" (Gill, 283) regarding what he knew and where he had been. Unlike the two previous examples Peter was not bearing false witness to promote himself, or boast, but rather he was misrepresenting himself out of fear of reprisal and personal injury. His response, however, to being 'discovered' by Jesus is quite different from the two others we have examined.

"The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: 'Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:61-62).

The example of Peter provides a powerful example for us to follow.

In Dallas Willard's well known work, The Spirit of the Disciplines, he offers two areas of spiritual discipline that are worth investigating briefly here. In the category of 'abstinence' he offers the study of a discipline he calls "secrecy" and in the category of 'engagement' he offers the study of a discipline that he calls "confession." Each of these two disciplines can provide balance in our lives and can assist Christians in resisting the temptation to misrepresent themselves. First I believe we need to practice 'secrecy.'

"Secrecy rightly practiced enables us to place our public relations department entirely in the hands of God, who lit our candles so that we could be the light of the world" (Willard, 173).

This view can help us to resist inappropriate 'boasting' that violates the ninth commandment.

Next I believe we should practice confession. Where we "let trusted others know our deepest weaknesses and failures" (Willard, 187). Here we can lay down the 'burden' of hiding and pretending. James 5:16 exhorts us to,

"Confess your faults to one another and pray one for another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

We can see here there is a positive side to telling the truth just as there are disastrous consequences of bearing false witness. Our God desires for us to see the benefits that speaking truthfully provide. Earl Wilson in his book, How to Stop being Your own Worst Enemy, states this principle in this way,

"We must accept ourselves as struggling persons, and accept God as one who loves people - even when they struggle. Obedience, repentance and faith are the key elements that keep the normal struggles in life from destroying us ... Faith says, 'God cares about me and has my best interests at heart, I will trust Him' (Wilson, 47).

With this understanding one can see that God acts as our 'neighbor.' The very neighbor that Jesus described in Luke 10:25-37. God is a neighbor that shows pity and kindness to those He comes in contact with. Because God is our neighbor, it is important to briefly highlight the importance of keeping the ninth commandment as we consider the testimony that we bring forth in relationship to our references to God.

#### **IV. Bearing False Witness about God: Heresies**

It can be said that "To despise truth is to despise God, whose very being and character are truth" (Kaiser, 101). Thus the sanctity of truth that the ninth commandment delivers is not simply meant for how we are to speak of others or ourselves, but it also guards how we speak of

God. In the book, So Help Me God, Former chief justice Roy Moore shares the following transcript as he was questioned by the Alabama Attorney General Pryor regarding his acknowledgement of God in the courtroom.

**“Pryor:** And your understanding is that the Federal Court ordered that you could not acknowledge God isn’t that right?

**Moore:** Yes.

**Pryor:** And if you resume your duties as Chief Justice after this proceeding, you will continue to acknowledge God as you have testified that you would today?

**Moore:** That’s right.

**Pryor:** No matter what any official says?

**Moore:** Absolutely. Without – Let me clarify that. Without an acknowledgement of God, I cannot do my duties. I must acknowledge God. It says so in the Constitution of Alabama. It says so in the first amendment to the United States Constitution. It says so in everything I have read” (Moore, 239).

The appropriate response to all of life’s blessings is to remember the Lord. Although rarely in our society are we reminded as the Israelites were just before they crossed over into the Promised Land with words such as these.

“You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today. If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 8:17-20).

Judge Moore was not about to modify his speech in order to keep his position or to please others. He knew that what is said about God matters. Likewise “Apologetics defends orthodox Christianity” (Kreft, 22) and the appropriate representation of who God is and what He has done is an imperative task for all Christians to be involved in. As 2 Timothy 2:15-18 states,

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus

and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some” (2 Timothy 15-18).

When we read what Aristotle once wrote, “All men by nature desire to know” (Sire, 20), it becomes imperative that we should not be doubtful or vague regarding the teachings of our God (Sire, 22). Certainly we must follow the example of the Disciples as Jesus entered Jerusalem.

“When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:37-40).

Therefore the truth regarding our God is to be spoken of truthfully in order “to convince unbelievers and instruct and build up believers” (Kreeft, 22). This description of Apologetics demonstrates clearly it is an endeavor that at its very heart seeks to support the ninth commandment in a positive way.

“It is important to recognize that the very life of Christianity in general as well as the salvation of individual Christians depends on at least one substantial measure of right doctrine, and where right doctrine exists, contrary views must be heresies” (Brown, 22).

When one considers the importance of representing God properly in his or her speech, the example of Jesus Himself must then be examined through scripture as He is referred to in the first chapter of the Gospel of John as the word that became flesh. It is to the person and the speech of Jesus that we now turn.

## **V. The Example of Jesus, “Bearing *True* Witness”**

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth...From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came

through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known... I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God" (John 1:14, 16-18, 34).

When challenged through the writing of this paper to examine the positive aspect of the ninth commandment, it was with great joy that this writer discovered that the very words of Jesus and example of both His time among us and His current activity at the right hand of God provide the very best example of "Bearing *True* Witness" that could ever be found.

When we examine the words spoken by Christ we cannot escape the attitude from which He spoke and the confession of truth that we are called to speak as we echo His attitude of reverence for the Father.

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:5-11).

The many sermons, teaching moments, words of healing and parables that Jesus shared with us during His earthly ministry were based solidly in line with the teaching of the Torah which He read, knew well and presented to us as God's Word and guidance for our lives (as well as His words and teachings, which 'made full' the previous teachings). His prayers to God for His Disciples and those that followed Him are all to be considered here as examples of 'Bearing *True* Witness.'

To close this brief overview, it seems imperative that the current work and words of Christ are brought forward for our examination.

"Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who

shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. I speak the truth in Christ--I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 8:34-9:1).

As Paul offers a confession of the current whereabouts and work of Jesus Christ we should stand in awe that Jesus is currently speaking to the Father on our behalf. Clearly the dangers and hardships that we face do not go unnoticed by our Savior. Jesus is constantly speaking in favor of those that know Him and have placed their faith in Him. With the savior for us, bearing witness of our faith in Him to the Father, who can be against us? There can be no greater encouragement for the Christian to honor the ninth commandment than what is provided through the example of the 'Bearing of *True* Witness' from Christ our Lord and Savior.

## **VI. Conclusion – Application to Ministry**

As I bring this paper to conclusion, I would like to retreat for a moment back to the original application that can be seen for the ninth commandment. That of the courtroom. As I read many articles and researched this paper there was one article that caught my eye, but seemed not to 'fit,' so I discarded it after a quick read. It discussed the importance of the 'expert witness' as he/she appears in the courtroom. The expert witness must be 'qualified' by the judge and his or her experience, reputation and stature all must be carefully considered as a part of this process. This process insures the integrity of the expert witness as this person has the ability to provide a testimony that is taken very seriously as actual forensic and scientific fact by the judge.

In retrospect as I write this conclusion I think I should not have discarded that article as irrelevant. As I conclude this work there is one thing that I feel obliged to point out; something

I have considered during the writing of this paper often and something I have reached a firm conclusion regarding. That is this, that Jesus is the Expert Witness of heaven.

Jesus was tempted by Satan in all the ways we are tempted and his responses were based in scripture and reflected God's truth. His life was that of a perfect, blameless and upright man and yet His actions and attitudes were that of a submissive and humble man that feared God. The many miracles and wise teachings in the synagogue in no way inflated His ego or disrupted Him from following the direction of God in His life. He alone was approved by the Judge of heaven and earth to offer expert testimony on our behalf. He alone meets the criteria of the highest court to offer His expert testimony regarding our standing in this court.

Perhaps I am concluding this paper in very close proximity to where it started. But our confidence in Christ and His ability to uphold the ninth commandment in the most positive of views makes Him truly worthy for us to put all our confidence in. In his book, The Authentic Jesus, John Stott offers this quote from Luther in the closing sentences of his text.

“The one doctrine which I have supremely at heart is that faith in Christ, from whom, through whom and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth, day and night” (Stott, 92).

We should be truly encouraged to offer Jesus no less than our constant praise and lift Him up as our King in every conversation because that is just what our savior does for us as He speaks. As a man I must say that no one will ever speak to me or about me as kindly, rightly and lovingly as Jesus has done and will continue to do. My response to His testimony about me is to confess what He has done for me to all that will listen.

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