

The Ninth Commandment: Bearing False Witness

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exo 20:16)

What is the one thing that belongs to you, always remain with you, but others can take it and lose it for you without even entering your home? Your reputation. Your name, your reputation in the public eye is perhaps the dearest thing you own, and yet others may take it and destroy it in a day.

Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.” — William Shakespeare, Othello

Someone said that character is who you really are, but reputation is who people think you are. You and I have a responsibility to uphold the integrity of our own characters. However, you can do everything right to be blameless in your character, and someone else may take your reputation and destroy it through the sin of false witness.

The command against bearing false witness is not a command against lying in general. It is a command forbidding a specific kind of lying. It forbids any form of lying about someone else. This commandment is entirely about misrepresenting other people, about what we do with our neighbour's reputation.

Societies have understood the danger of this. In the early days of New York, slandering or defaming another person was a crime punished by piercing the tongue with a hot iron, followed by banishment from New York. That probably cut down on slander considerably.

To this day, lying under oath is a crime. Defamation of character can still be punished by the court. You shall not bear false witness.

You remember that the first table of the Ten Commandments is all about love for God. The second table is all about love for your neighbour. Paul said these commandments “*are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Rom 13:9-10)

Love does no harm to a neighbour. Murder certainly harms your neighbour. Stealing harms your neighbour. Adultery harms your neighbour. Being a false witness regarding your neighbour harms your neighbour in sometimes permanent ways. Thomas Watson said that false witness is when a man is beheaded of his good name.

False witness not only harms our neighbour, false witness offends God. God cares about this because He is truth. The Lord Jesus is called in Revelation 3:14 “the faithful and true witness”. The Enemy, Satan, on the other hand, is a liar, and the father of lies. Behind the very first sin was false witness. As Satan speaks to Adam and Eve, he bears false witness of God. He says, “God is deceiving you. You shall not die if you eat this. God knows that if you eat this, you shall be as gods. God has lied to you to protect Himself. God has a hidden agenda.” And by bearing false witness of God, Satan deceived mankind into the first sin.

We want to consider what false witness is – what it looks like, the *meaning* of false witness. We then want to consider why we do it, the *motive* for false witness. Third, we want to know how to

turn from it and be true and faithful witnesses, like our Lord. That's the *medicine* for false witness.

I. The Meaning of False Witness

What is it? Bearing false witness is destroying another's reputation. What are the ways we do it?

1) Slander – this is making outright false statements about another person, as when Joseph was slandered by Potiphar's wife. Whether this is out of sheer malice, out of broken telephone, or whether it is just repeating what someone else said without checking. C.H. Spurgeon warned: “Believe not half you hear; repeat not half you believe. When you hear an evil report, halve it, then quarter it, and say nothing about the rest of it.”

In Israel, nothing could be established without two witnesses, ideally three. This practice cut down on slander, because if you were going to make a statement about someone else, and it could not be independently verified by someone else, you could be charged with being a false witness. And the punishment for being a false witness, according to Deuteronomy 19 was that you received whatever punishment would have come to the person you lied about.

It is interesting how slanderers have difficulty doing this to people's faces. Someone said, slander is the revenge of a coward. I have found that when you ask a slanderer for a one-on-one meeting to discuss his slander of you, he can never find the time. If the accusation doesn't have the integrity to be said to the man's face, alongside two or three witnesses, it doesn't bear repeating.

2) Diminishment – this is the evil report we give of another person. It is in some way diminishing another person's character with negative remarks.

Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. (James 4:11)

Now someone asks, “What if the criticism is true criticism? How could it be a false witness?”

Answer: if the criticism paints the other person without balance, and does not portray them fairly, then it has presented an unbalanced, false picture.

The captain of a ship once found his first mate drunk, and so entered into the ship's log, “First mate drunk today.” The next day the first mate saw that the captain had recorded that, and pleaded with him to remove that, knowing that he would lose his job once they docked. The captain said, “That is the fact, and into the log it goes.” The next day the first mate was keeping the log, and after entering some other coordinates, he wrote, “Captain sober today.” Later, when the captain saw that, he protested, and said it made it sound as if his being sober was an unusual thing. The first mate replied “That is the fact, and into the log it goes.” An unbalanced picture is a false picture.

Do the love your neighbour as yourself test. If someone was criticising you, how would you want them to criticise you in such a way that you could still say, that was true? No one likes criticism, but someone could criticise you in such a way that you would have to say, “Yes, you have fairly described me, and correctly stated what I am or what I did. You presented the positive as well as the negative. You gave adequate space to what I tried to do that was right.” When criticising, just ask yourself, if this was being said about me, how would I want it said?

3) Gossip – bringing up details of another's life out of context. It is what Scripture calls being a talebearer, discussing the secrets and stories of another's life, without being involved as a helper. If you are neither a part of the problem, nor a part of the solution, but are merely a bystander, it is

almost certain that you do not know the facts as they really stand. You have got a portion of the truth. But a portion of the truth, out of context ends up being a lie.

The person listening to gossip is just as much at fault as the person speaking it. People have said that garbage is not dumped on fresh green lawns, and people are not likely to gossip to those they know are pure in heart.

Alan Carr tells the story of the woman who had been gossiping about her pastor. She came under conviction and went to him and asked for his forgiveness, which he granted. She then said, "I want to undo what I have done. How can I do that?" The pastor said, "Here's how. Get a live chicken, kill it, and then pluck all the feathers out. Go to the highest building in the city and release the feathers. Then come back to me." She was a bit puzzled, but she followed the instructions and returned to him. He said, "Now, I want you to go and gather all those feathers." Her eyes went wide. "That's impossible! Who knows where those feathers have travelled by now?" The pastor nodded. "So it is impossible for you to undo what you have done to my reputation. Who knows where those stories have ended up by now?"

4) Insinuation or innuendo— open-ended statements that invite evil speculation. The false witness avoids an open accusation, but he gets to have his cake and eat it. He doesn't have to come out and say, "You are guilty of embezzling from the church." He just says, "Have you noticed how so-and-so hovers around the offering bags after church?" He is not bold enough to say, "This man is not faithful to his wife." Instead, he says, "Every time I look at so-and-so, he is talking to a young woman." When I was in high school, some boys decided to bring stink bombs to class. They were in little glass bottles, so they would quietly crush the bottle under their feet, and the overpowering smell would soon fill the room. Innuendo is like that- a verbal stinkbomb, which someone quietly crushes, and the stink to a man's reputation soon fills the place.

5) Exaggeration – using language that inflates one thing out of proportion. You might have a picture of a man with a head, a torso, two legs and two arms, but exaggerate any of those parts out of all proportion, and you no longer have a man, you have a monster. So in our speech, when we take one truth and use language that is extreme. "He's always watching television. He does nothing else, all day." "I've never heard him speak a kind word." "She thinks only of herself, and no one else." "He is quite simply the worst driver on earth." "You've never met a ruder man in your life."

6) Flattery – lying to my neighbour to gain an advantage from him. Someone asks how this could be false witness against my neighbour when I am actually being nice to my neighbour. But flattery is not loving to my neighbour. Flattery is making my neighbour think I admire him more than I do, so as to use him. It is saying to his face what I would not say behind his back.

7) Silence – the slander of silence. This is when we hear any of the above going on in our presence and we do nothing to stop it. Our silence confirms the false witness. Imagine the scene. You're given a magical ring that turns you invisible. You walk up to a group of people you know, and to your surprise you hear they are discussing you. You hear one criticise you, and another agrees. Another repeats an innuendo, combined with some untrue gossip about you. Standing there is one of your closest friends. What are you expecting, hoping your friend will do? He or she should come to the rescue of your reputation. But as you stand there, you are grieved as your friend keeps silent. The slander of silence: allowing a false witness to carry the day, to go unchallenged.

II. The Motive of False Witness

Why do we do it? Why is the tongue, as James said, "an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. (Jam 3:8-9)

Well, out of the heart the mouth speaks, so here are three truths about our hearts, that bubble up into our mouths. Three reasons for false witness.

The first is **the crabs in a bucket** reason. You've heard the idea that crabs put into a bucket are easily able to escape individually. But instead, they grab at each other, preventing any one from escaping, and ensuring that they all perish. The evil in our hearts finds fascination and pleasure in seeing someone else diminished, in stepping up by pushing down. No one should get too far ahead of us, be it in wealth, in success, in beauty, in godliness. A bit of an evil report evens out the scales a bit. The whole phenomenon of the gossip magazines and the paparazzi is built around people wanting to know the dirt on the rich and famous. Dr. James Kennedy wrote: "If you rise just a little bit above the common herd, if you achieve just a modicum more success than your neighbour, most surely those barbs of criticism are going to be shot your way. To avoid criticism: do nothing, say nothing, be nothing...there is no defence against reproach – except obscurity." (*Delighting God*)

Spurgeon wrote: "The more prominent you are in Christ's service, the more certain are you to be the [brunt] of [slander]. I have long ago said farewell to my character. I lost it in the early days of my ministry by being a little more zealous than suited a slumbering age. And I've never been able to regain it except in the sight of Him who judges all the earth, and in the hearts of those who love me for my works' sake."

Jealousy and envy leads to the crabs in a bucket attitude. We simply like to see others fall. *17 Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, And do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; 18 Lest the LORD see it, and it displease Him, And He turn away His wrath from him. (Pro 24:17-18)*

People bear false witness to pull everyone down to their level.

The second is the **pig in the mud** reason. We feel a little better knowing that someone is worse than us, or that others are as evil. If we're all wading in this filthy pigsty, no one should be much cleaner or godlier than we are. Knowing someone else is evil reinforces our feeling that righteousness is a big act, a big sham. We're all sinners, and everyone is just as bad as I am. We would like as many excuses to remain as sinful as we are, and other people's evil serves as a kind of support for our cause. Why do stories about scandal, and corruption, and affairs, and nepotism, and bribery sell newspapers? Pig in the mud. People bear false witness so that the filth in my life seems normal.

The third is the **dirty lens** reason. We look at others through our own sin, and are convinced they are guilty of the same things. I have often found that the thing a man is himself filled with is the things he suspects others of. The adulterous, unfaithful man, is the one consumed with jealousy, treating his wife as if she is guilty of that. The man filled with rebellion and a lust for control is the one who suspects his pastor of being a dictator and guilty of power-grabs. The man gripped by covetousness suspects everyone else of embezzlement and corruption. The woman consumed with jealousy and envy imagines that other women are trying to act superior.

Evil hearts think evil of others. Under some crests and coat of arms you will sometimes find an old Anglo-Norman phrase, dating from the 14th century - "honi soit qui ma y pens". Edward III was dancing with his first cousin, Joan at court, and her garter slipped down to her ankle, causing laughter and sniggers. Henry, in an act of chivalry picked it up, put it around his own leg, and said to the court, "Honi soit qui mal y pens" which means, "Evil be he who thinks evil of it", in other words, the one who thinks evil of this situation, is evil himself.

15 To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. (Tit 1:15)

How then do we turn this around?

III. The Medicine for False Witness

If out of the heart the mouth speaks, we need something changed in our hearts. We need new hearts. We need hearts where the love of God is shed abroad in them and we come to love God and love neighbour in a new way. We see that way in 1 Corinthians 13.

*4 Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; (1Co 13:4)
5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;*

First, rejoice in the blessing of others. *Love does not envy, and love does not seek its own.* Love is genuinely happy at the advancement and promotion, and blessing of others. Love enjoys seeing others being praised, being blessed, enjoying God's gifts, achieving things. Love has a big heart for the blessing of others.

Ever meet one of those people who feel it is their duty to deflate anyone who is being honoured, praised, blessed? They feel they have to add some sour to the sweet. Trolls we call them on the internet, and Christians should be the furthest things from them.

We should be like John the Baptist. John was at one point the most famous man in Israel. He was the first prophet Israel had heard since Malachi, and people streamed to him from all over the country.

But then Jesus arrives on the scene, and John begins to be forgotten. And John's disciples feel the pain. Here you were the key teacher, and people came to you to be baptised, and now in a matter of months, it's as if you don't exist, and everyone is going after Jesus! John's answer is a big hearted answer. He says, the friend of the bridegroom finds his joy in the bridegroom's joy. It's His day, not mine. I'm His best man, and now that it's His day, I couldn't be happier. He must increase, but I must decrease. Avoid the crab in a bucket mentality. Love rejoices in the good and blessing of others. *15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, (Rom 12:15)*

Second, rejoice in righteousness.

6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;
Make it your goal to find no pleasure in scandal, in seediness, in sordid details, in accounts of failures and sins and evil. Let such knowledge come to you only out of sheer necessity, as one who must endure dirt to clean a toilet. But no one should rejoice in muck and mire. Don't try to deal with your conscience by trying to make everyone and everything else seem as dirty as possible. Go to Christ with your conscience. Go to Him for cleansing. Let Him set the standard.

Paul says in Romans 16:19: *but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. (Rom 16:19)*

You do not need to become expert in evil to live in a way that pleases God. Don't make a study of the evil of others, until you end up acclimatising to it. Rejoice in what pleases God, make Philippians 4:8 thoughts the kind you wish to have, feed your mind and heart with that kind of thing.

I think of the three sons of Noah. Ham comes upon his father drunk, naked, dishonouring himself. He walks off to scoff, scorn and generally publish his father's dishonour. Shem and Japheth take a coat, walk backwards so as not to see their father's shame, and cover him with the coat. One son was desirous to see his father's reputation harmed. The other two did their best to protect their father, cover shame.

Third, assume the best about others until proven otherwise.

bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1Co 13:7)

Love assumes the best. It treats you as if you have done right until proven otherwise. Innocent until proven guilty. Isn't that how you would wish your neighbour to treat you? To assume the very best about your actions and intentions until incontrovertible evidence proves otherwise? Or would you like people to assume the worst about you as their starting point?

So why is it then, that a C.E.O. resigns, a pastor resigns, a missionary resigns, and we assume the worst possible motives, and put the most sinister construction on it? Why when we hear of some problem in another's marriage, or another's home, or another's church, do we think that something truly devious and evil has gone on? Have the people in question earned that kind of suspicion? Has their behaviour in the past earned those suspicious thoughts? Have they given you genuine reason to doubt their integrity?

Let us put the best possible construction on our neighbour's reputation, and then if he comes and destroys that with his own hand, and his own actions, then be it upon his own head.

Some people think they are shrewd and smarter than others. They're the sort of people who always have a slight sneer on their lips – they know the real world, the real story, the true score, that the rest of you sheeple just don't get. But such a man is not wiser than his neighbour. He's just harder, more cynical than his neighbour, and his jaundiced view of everyone and everything is sure to lead him to bear false witness of others.

Treat your neighbour's reputation as you would want him to treat yours.

Well, what about my reputation? What if my neighbour bears false witness against me? The only answer is: be blameless, but leave your ultimate vindication in God's hands. Satan is the accuser of the brethren, and he has many accomplices. If you fear being criticised or maligned, you will be paralysed. To do anything for God, you must risk your reputation. You have to be blameless, expect criticism, and trust to God for your ultimate vindication.

Again, Spurgeon: "A Christian minister must expect to lose his repute among men. He must be willing to suffer every reproach for Christ's sake. But, then, he may rest assured that he will never lose his real honor if it be risked for the truth's sake and placed in the Redeemer's hand. The day shall declare the excellence of the upright, for it will reveal all that was hidden, and bring to the light that which was concealed. There will be a resurrection of characters as well as persons. Every reputation that has been obscured by clouds of reproach for Christ's sake, shall be rendered glorious when the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let the wicked say what they will of me, said the apostle, I commit my character to the Judge of quick and dead."

Think of what happened to Mary's reputation in the town of Nazareth, when she fell pregnant outside of wedlock. Who in that town would believe it was a virgin conception? What became of her name and reputation? But she was willing to embrace that ruining of her good name, to be used by God, to become the bearer of the Lord.

The Lord Jesus is the Faithful and true Witness, and who does Scripture say stands at the right hand of the Father as our Advocate, pleading for us, on the basis of His own work? Let Satan say what he will, let men join with him to malign you and try to destroy your name. If you are in Christ, and He is in you, then according to 2 Timothy 2:19 *Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His,"*

*When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.*

Be blameless. Protect your neighbour's reputation as if it were your own. And then be willing to give up even your reputation for God's name, knowing He will vindicate your name in the end.