

## “Don’t Bear False Witness”

Exodus 20:16

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

### Intro: What is Truth?

When Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, having been handed over by the Jewish leaders to be disposed of and gotten out of the way, Pilate was put in a position he did not like. The Jewish leadership was obviously using him to get their way with Jesus, and he didn’t much like being a tool to be manipulated by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Ruling Council. So, he questions Jesus –

*Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?”* <sup>30</sup> *They answered him, “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.”* [Notice that this is not an accusation, not a formal charge or set of charges.] <sup>31</sup> *Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”* [Pilate knows when he’s being played.] *The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.”* <sup>32</sup> *This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.*

<sup>33</sup> *So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”* [This charge would make some sense, because it would put Jesus in the position of claiming an authority for Himself that would challenge Rome’s authority.]

<sup>34</sup> *Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”* [Jesus knows He has done nothing to challenge Pilate or Rome’s authority or rule over Judea, as this charge would insinuate.]

<sup>35</sup> *Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”* <sup>36</sup> *Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”*

<sup>37</sup> *Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?”* *Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”* <sup>38</sup> *Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”* – John 18:29-38, ESV

Pilate’s final words in this exchange can be read one of two ways:

1. He is either genuinely intrigued by Jesus and really wanting to know what truth is – for he has lived in a world of power and manipulation, and he is weary of the cynicism and obvious spin.
2. He is cynical and frustrated with Jesus' high-minded rhetoric, and he doesn't really want to deal with Jesus anymore.

The fact that Pilate left the conversation with Jesus after asking this question and did not wait for an answer suggests the cynical option. And yet, he says to the Jewish leadership, "I find no guilt in this man," which hints that perhaps Pilate has been more deeply impacted by this itinerant rabbi from Galilee.

You certainly do not need me to tell you that we live in a very cynical age, an age of political power fought over by polarized factions who view information as something to be spun and manipulated for the advantage of their side and the destruction of their enemies. In other words, we live in a very similar kind of culture to the Roman Empire and Roman-occupied Judea of the First Century.

What are we to do in such a culture, where it seems almost everyone is ready to say almost anything that would advance their cause and the power of their party against all rivals? Well, the Ninth Commandment has much to say to us if we will listen from the heart and allow the Holy Spirit to write these words in their fullest and deepest meaning on our souls.

### **I. The Narrow Meaning: Do Not Bear False Witness**

As with all of these Ten Commandments, the Ninth Commandment has a narrow meaning and then a broader application to our lives. The narrow meaning is found in the actual words of the commandment ("*the letter of the law*"), while the broader application is found in the reason behind the commandment, which is anchored in the moral character of God ("*the spirit of the law*").

"*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" This commandment specifically forbids giving false testimony in a trial which would support an unjust accusation against your neighbor. In Jesus' own trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leaders tried to find two witnesses who would testify against Jesus and whose testimony would agree. They could not find two agreeing false witnesses, until they finally found two men who agreed that they heard Jesus say, "*I can tear down this Temple and rebuild it in three days.*" They were bearing false witness because this is not what Jesus said.

In Jewish law as given by God through Moses, any accusation against someone had to be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. This could often be manipulated

and abused by unscrupulous people. In 1 Kings 21, we're told the terrible story of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and the conspiracy to unlawfully seize the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. King Ahab wanted the vineyard of Naboth, but he refused to sell it, for it was his inheritance from his fathers.

Queen Jezebel conspired to have two worthless men both testify against Naboth, saying that he had cursed God and the king. And so, on the testimony of these two men, the crowd took Naboth outside the city and stoned him to death. [By the way, if you want proof of the total depravity of people, study mob psychology and the history of mob justice and mob violence.]

So, the Ninth Commandment obviously forbids this kind of gross miscarriage of justice, and so it's horrific to see the Seventy Elders of Israel, the Sanhedrin, carrying out this exact kind of injustice against Jesus.

But we need to acknowledge that the courtroom is not the only place where we bear witness about our neighbors. Also, the Hebrew word translated as "bear" can mean to hear, carry (bear), or speak as a witness. So, we can receive false witness against our neighbor, carry it in our hearts, and repeat it to others.

So, the Ninth Commandment explicitly forbids gossip and slander of all kinds – and, yes, even gossip and slander of politicians and celebrities on social media. All of this is explicitly forbidden by the express commandment to not bear false witness against our neighbors.

## **II. The Broader Meaning: Speak the Truth in Love**

If we look beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law, we'll see two important aspects of the Moral Character of God lying behind this commandment:

God is truth and the source of all truth.  
 God is love, and we love because He first loved us.

If we put these together, we can see that the Ninth Commandment is a call to speak the truth in love. Ephesians 4:15 says, "*speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.*" And then, ten verses later, verse 25 says, "*Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.*"

The 1997 Jim Carrey comedy movie *Liar, Liar* explored the idea of what it would be like to be irresistibly compelled to tell the truth all the time. Jim Carrey plays a successful lawyer who has built his business on lying all the time and is then cursed to have to tell the truth,

the whole truth, and nothing but the truth for an entire day. His character just bursts out with whatever he's thinking about people with absolutely no filter or restraint.

Some people think of the Ninth Commandment in these terms – that the most important thing to do is to always speak the whole truth all the time no matter what. This usually means telling people exactly what you think in a straightforward and even blunt manner, having no regard for the feelings of the person to whom you're speaking. Your only responsibility is to tell the truth as you see it and you can't be responsible for their feelings about it.

Well, this kind of approach actually undermines the spirit of the Ninth Commandment, which is fleshing out how we love our neighbors as ourselves. Also, this kind of approach often confuses our opinion about something with the actual truth. Only God is truth itself and has all truth in Himself. We have some truth, revealed by God, but we also have been sold a bunch of spin masquerading as truth, and we have a bunch of opinions which are just that, opinions, and not factual truths. Even when someone asks you for your opinion, you can give it in a way that is loving and kind and helpful, not in a way that is so blunt as to be potentially deeply hurtful.

We should speak the truth in love, and we should put away falsehood and speak the truth with our neighbor, for we are members of one another. We owe each other the truth in love because we do, in Christ, belong to one another. And even our non-Christian neighbors are owed the truth from us because we have responsibility to them as those made in God's image whom God calls us to love.

And here is where Catechisms can be very helpful as we seek to flesh out what this means. We read earlier from the Heidelberg Catechism, which helps us think through what the Ninth Commandment requires in the light of the second great commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves –

What is required in the ninth commandment?

**That I bear false witness against no man  
nor falsify any man's words;  
that I be no backbiter nor slanderer;  
that I do not judge,  
nor join in condemning any man rashly or unheard;  
but that I avoid all sorts of lies and deceit,  
as the proper works of the devil,  
unless I would bring down upon me  
the heavy wrath of God;**

**likewise, that in judgment and all other dealings  
I love the truth, speak it uprightly and confess it;  
also that I defend and promote,  
as much as I am able,  
the honor and good character of my neighbor.**

We're required not to falsify anyone's words. We can do this not only by blatantly lying about what someone said, but also by taking their words out of context and casting them in the worst possible light. Sometimes, when we're listening to someone, if we're assuming bad motives, we will mis-hear and then mis-remember what they've said. We need to listen carefully with an open mind, give people the benefit of the doubt, and be very careful when and if we repeat what they say that we're doing so accurately and in love.

We're required not to be a backbiter or a slanderer – that is, that we not talk bad about someone behind their back or to their face. Gossip, two-faced backbiting, rumor-spreading, and slanderous accusations or even innuendo are all out of place.

I must not judge or join with others in condemning any man “rashly or unheard.” In other words, without due process and a just trial of the evidence. Give someone a chance to speak for themselves, to explain themselves, to counter what you have heard of them.

Further, I need to see all sorts of lies and deceit as the proper works of the devil, and I need to avoid them because they would make me subject to God's wrath.

Positively, I must “**love the truth, speak it uprightly and confess it.**” This means I don't use the truth as something to advance my own agenda, but even when I am speaking the truth, I am doing so uprightly, without selfish mixed motives. It also means I need to confess the truth about myself openly and freely and I need to prize the truth above my own self-righteousness.

And, finally, I am told that I must “**defend and promote, as much as I am able, the honor and good character of my neighbor.**”

This is a very high and holy standard, but this is what God's Law requires.

### **III. Fulfilled by Christ and in Christ**

Jesus came into this world as the Word of God incarnate, the fulfillment of the Law of God in human flesh, as the One who was and is and always will be the Truth and the Love of God in human form.

Jesus spoke the truth in love consistently throughout His life. Now, Jesus had an advantage over us in that He knew people's hearts and always perfectly understood their motives.

John 2:23-25 tells us something about Jesus that we cannot say about ourselves:

*Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. (ESV)*

So, many people believed in the name of Jesus and professed faith in His name, but He knew their hearts enough to know that their faith was not true, and so He did not entrust Himself to them. We don't have such knowledge of human hearts, so we do need to be more loving and accepting of people at face value, until we have real reason to believe otherwise.

Jesus spoke the truth always, and He never lied. He also truly loved people, which means He spoke with wisdom to suit His words to their needs. To those who were ignorant and lost in sin, Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God and called them to Himself. To those who came to Him in repentance for their sin, broken and seeking healing, Jesus reached out in compassion and spoke words of forgiveness, healing, and life.

Jesus also spoke harsh words to those who abused their authority and who used religion as a means to advance their own power, agenda and reputation. In Luke 6:20-26, we have a great example of Jesus speaking the truth in love:

*20 And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:*

*“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*21 “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.*

*“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.*

*22 “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! 23 Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.*

*24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*

*25 “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.*

*“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.*

*26 “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.*

The self-centered reasons we lie or twist the truth were all completely absent from Jesus’ life. He wasn’t trying to flatter anyone, telling them what they wanted to hear so they would like Him. He wasn’t trying to be a people-pleasing manipulator. He was never two-faced. He also didn’t lie to get Himself out of trouble. In fact, He willingly faced the cross, even knowing it was unjust and undeserved, because He knew it was the only way for our sins to be forgiven and us to be reconciled to God.

In Matthew 26:59-66, we read of Jesus’ trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, before He was sent to Pontius Pilate:

*59 Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, 60 but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward 61 and said, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” 62 And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” 63 But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” 64 Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.” (ESV)*

When the high priest asked Jesus to tell him the truth, Jesus did so, testifying clearly to who He was, even though He knew it would cost Him His life. He was faithful to the end.

#### **IV. Applied to Our Hearts by the Holy Spirit**

And what we need, if we’re going to be those who truly keep the Ninth Commandment from the heart, to speak the truth in love in sincerity, is to be united to Christ by faith and to have the Holy Spirit apply the righteousness of Christ to us.

We have seen this so clearly through this series on the Ten Commandments: We have no hope of righteousness on our own. If we understand the Law of God, we must confess that we are not basically good people who just need a little bit of help to get to heaven. We’re not

earnest and sincere people who are trying to climb up the mountain of obedience, and we just need Jesus to reach down and give us a hand, to pull us up that last little bit, that tricky final ledge. No. We are the walking dead at the bottom of the mountain with no interest whatsoever in climbing the mountain.

To put it more bluntly: The Ten Commandments have shown us that we are all lying, cheating, rebellious, murderous idolators who dishonor God and fail to love our neighbors in our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. As Romans 7:14 puts it, “*we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.*”

So, what’s our hope? Ezekiel 36:25-28 tells us:

*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. <sup>28</sup> You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (ESV)*

This cleansing is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and the new heart we’re given is the heart of Christ. In the words of Colossians 1:27, it is “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”

We need the Holy Spirit to continue to transform and to continue to renew us in Christ, who alone is the fulfillment of the Law and our only righteousness.

### **Conclusion: Jesus is the Truth in Love Incarnate**

And so, it is because Jesus is the Truth in Love incarnate, and because the Holy Spirit has united us to Christ by faith that we can truly grow in speaking the truth in love – not flattering as man-pleasers or gossiping as back-stabbers, but loving in truth, with sincere hearts. To do this, we need Christ, we need the Holy Spirit, and we need each other.

Ephesians 4, which calls us to speak the truth in love, also calls us to life together as the Body of Christ –

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. – Ephesians 4:15-16, ESV



We grow up in Christ together, as we build each other up in Him. Just as we have no righteousness apart from Jesus, so we have no share in Jesus apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and we have no real and sustained growth in Jesus apart from one another in the church. And that's the truth.