

# Thou Shall Not Bear False Witness

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## Key Scripture

Exodus 20:16 (ESV) “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

## Sermon in One Sentence

The ninth commandment calls us to a life of truthfulness, recognizing that God's very nature is truth and our words, whether in legal settings or daily interactions, must reflect His integrity and protect the reputation of others.

## Introduction

Imagine a courtroom drama unfolding before your eyes. The tension is palpable as a witness takes the stand, their testimony holding the fate of an accused person in their hands. Or perhaps, consider a more mundane scenario: a casual conversation among friends, where a whispered rumor, presented as fact, unravels relationships and damages reputations. The power of words is immense, capable of building up or tearing down, of delivering justice or inflicting irreparable harm. We live in an age awash with information, where the lines between truth and falsehood are often blurred, and misinformation spreads at an alarming rate across social media and digital platforms. This phenomenon, while seemingly modern, is as old as humanity itself.

The ancient world, much like our own, grappled with the devastating impact of deceit. Lies in court could condemn the innocent; gossip in the community could destroy a family's standing. It is into this human condition, saturated with the potential for both truth and deception, that God descended upon Mount Sinai, not merely to give abstract moral principles, but to lay down foundational laws for a thriving, just society. These are not merely suggestions but divine imperatives, designed to align His people with His righteous character.

Today, we turn our attention to the Ninth Commandment, a concise yet profoundly impactful declaration: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." This commandment, found in Exodus 20:16, is far more than a prohibition against perjury; it is a holistic call to truthfulness that permeates every facet of our lives. It challenges us to examine the integrity of our words, the motives behind our speech, and the impact our utterances have on the fabric of our communities and the witness of our faith.

## Historical & Biblical Context

The Ten Commandments, delivered by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, form the bedrock of the Mosaic Covenant, establishing the ethical and moral framework for the nation of Israel. They are not merely a list of rules but a revelation of God's character and His divine expectations for His people, called to be a holy nation set apart from the surrounding pagan cultures. The commandments can be broadly divided into two

sections: the first four deal with our duty to God, while the latter six address our duty to our neighbor. The Ninth Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," falls squarely into this second category, emphasizing the crucial role of truth in maintaining societal justice and personal relationships.

Originally, this commandment had a primary legal context, specifically addressing false testimony in court that could lead to the unjust conviction or punishment of an innocent person (Deut. 19:15-21). In an agrarian society where land and reputation were paramount, a false witness could devastate a family's livelihood and social standing. However, its implications extend far beyond the courtroom, serving as a foundational principle for all speech. It speaks to the inherent value of every human being, created in God's image, whose reputation and rights are to be protected. For us today, the principle remains unyielding: our words have consequences, and our integrity in speech is a direct reflection of our allegiance to the God of truth.

## **Main Point I — The Divine Mandate for Truth**

**Scripture:** John 14:6 (ESV) "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

The Ninth Commandment is not an arbitrary rule; it flows directly from the very nature of God Himself. He is a God of truth, and deceit is utterly foreign to His character. John 14:6 reveals Jesus as the embodiment of truth, the ultimate standard against which all truthfulness is measured. To bear false witness, therefore, is not merely a social transgression; it is an offense against the character of God. When we speak truthfully, we are reflecting the divine image stamped upon us, participating in the very essence of God's integrity. Conversely, when we lie, we align ourselves with the "father of lies," as Jesus describes Satan in John 8:44.

This point emphasizes that our commitment to truthfulness is a theological imperative, not just a moral preference. It reminds us that our words have eternal weight because they either honor or dishonor the One who created us. Therefore, upholding truthfulness in all our interactions is an act of worship, a tangible demonstration of our allegiance to the God who hates falsehood and loves righteousness. It challenges us to consider every utterance not just in terms of its immediate impact, but in light of its broader implications for our spiritual walk and our testimony to a watching world.

## **Main Point II — Beyond the Courtroom: The Scope of "False Witness"**

**Scripture:** Proverbs 6:16-19 (ESV) "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers."

While the immediate context of "false witness" was often legal, the prophets and wisdom literature of the Old Testament consistently expand its application to everyday speech. Proverbs 6:16-19 explicitly lists "a lying tongue" and "a false witness who breathes out lies" among the things God hates, placing them alongside grave transgressions like shedding innocent blood. This passage makes it clear that deceit in any form—gossip, slander, exaggeration, misrepresentation, or even silence when truth is required—falls under the umbrella of bearing false witness. It's not just about what we say *in court*, but what we say *in*

*conversation.*

This broader understanding means that Christians are called to be truth-tellers in all areas of life: in business dealings, in social media posts, in casual conversations, and within the sanctity of our homes. It challenges us to examine the subtle ways we might distort the truth, perhaps to protect our image, gain an advantage, or justify our actions. The commandment compels us to guard against the casual utterance of untruths and to cultivate a reputation for unwavering honesty, understanding that our words are a powerful force for good or ill in the lives of others and in the health of our communities.

### **Main Point III — The Cost and Consequence of Deceit**

**Scripture:** Ephesians 4:25 (ESV) "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."

The cost of bearing false witness, both individually and communally, is immense. Deceit erodes trust, isolates individuals, and corrupts the very fabric of society. For the individual, a deceptive tongue leads to a burdened conscience and a fractured relationship with God. For the community, especially the church, falsehood sows discord and undermines unity. Ephesians 4:25 gives us a clear New Testament imperative: "put away falsehood" and "speak the truth." The motivation for this is profoundly relational: "for we are members one of another." When one member of the body speaks falsely, it wounds the entire body.

Consider the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Their lie, though seemingly small in scope, brought swift and severe judgment because it was an act of bearing false witness against the Holy Spirit and against the nascent community of believers. Their story serves as a stark reminder that God takes truthfulness seriously, and the consequences of deceit can be grave, both spiritually and relationally. This point challenges us to consider not just the act of lying, but the *impact* of our falsehoods on others, on our personal integrity, and on our witness as followers of Christ. Our transparency and honesty are vital for fostering healthy relationships, both within the church and with a skeptical world.

### **Illustration**

During World War II, a fascinating psychological operation was mounted by the British against Germany. Known as "Operation Mincemeat," it involved convincing the Germans that the impending Allied invasion of Europe would target Greece and Sardinia, not Sicily, where the actual invasion was planned. The British dressed a dead body in a Royal Marines uniform, planted it with fake "top-secret" documents detailing the false invasion plans, and then released the body off the coast of Spain where it would certainly be discovered and the documents passed to German intelligence. Despite the extraordinary nature of the deception, the Germans bought it hook, line, and sinker. They diverted significant forces to Greece and Sardinia, leading to lighter resistance when the Allies landed in Sicily, saving countless lives and significantly contributing to the success of the Allied campaign.

This ingenious deception, while strategically effective in wartime, highlights the immense power and destructive potential of bearing false witness. In this case, the false witness was used for a perceived good. But imagine if those "secret plans" had been released by a disgruntled insider, causing catastrophic failure. The very principle that made "Operation Mincemeat" effective — the believable transmission of untruth —

is precisely what God forbids in our daily lives. If a meticulously crafted lie can shift the course of history and determine the fate of nations, how much more impactful are the truths and untruths we speak daily, shaping the lives and eternal destinies of individuals and communities? The Ninth Commandment isn't just about avoiding a legal penalty; it's about acknowledging the God-given power of our words and stewarding that power with divine integrity.

## Practical Application

**1. Fact-Check Before You Share:** Before sharing information, especially on social media or in public conversations, take a moment to verify its accuracy. Ask yourself: "Is this true? Do I have credible evidence? Am I misrepresenting facts or promoting rumors?"

**2. Cultivate a Habit of Honesty in Small Things:** Practice absolute honesty in everyday interactions. This includes avoiding exaggeration, white lies, and misleading statements, even when it might be inconvenient or slightly embarrassing. Recognize that consistency in small truths builds a foundation for larger integrity.

**3. Seek Reconciliation for Past Falsehoods:** If you realize you have previously borne false witness—through gossip, slander, or misrepresentation—prayerfully consider how you can make amends. This may involve apologizing to those you've harmed or correcting the false impression you created.

**4. Speak Up for the Truth:** When you witness others bearing false witness, especially against your neighbor or within your community, lovingly and appropriately speak truth. This doesn't mean being confrontational, but rather, being an advocate for accuracy and justice when possible.

**5. Pray for a "Guarded Mouth":** Regularly pray for God to help you bridle your tongue and speak words that are true, edifying, and honoring to Him. Ask Him to convict you quickly when you are tempted to speak falsely or carelessly.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does understanding God as inherently truthful (John 14:6) influence your personal commitment to speaking truthfully?

2. Beyond false testimony in a courtroom, what are some common "false witnesses" we bear in our daily lives (e.g., gossip, exaggeration, misleading advertising)?

3. Can remaining silent when truth is needed be a form of bearing false witness? Explain your answer.

4. What protective measures can you put in place to guard against bearing false witness in the age of rapid information sharing (e.g., social media)?

## Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we confess that our tongues are often quick to speak falsehood or remain silent when truth is required. Forgive us for our careless words and our deceptive ways. Implant your Spirit of truth within us, that our every utterance may reflect your holy character and bring honor to your name. Grant us the courage to speak truth in love and the wisdom to discern falsehood, protecting the reputations of others and building

up your kingdom. Amen.

## **Benediction**

Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.