

A Truthful Witness
 Exodus 20:16
 Tampa Covenant Church
 02 August 2026

Proposition: As God's redeemed people, we're called to reflect his character by bearing truthful witness for the good of our neighbor's name.

FCF: Using our words in ways that distort the truth and injure our neighbor's good name, failing to treat their reputation with the same care and charity we desire for our own.

RHF: Jesus Christ is the faithful and true witness who stands before the Father on our behalf, sanctifies us in the truth by his person and work, and redeems our witness for the good of our neighbor.

(#1) Introduction:

I'm sure we're all somewhat familiar with these sayings:

- Someone says, "Sticks and stones may break my bones..." And we say, "But words can never hurt me."
- Someone says, "Loose lips..." And we say, "Sink ships."
- Someone says, "If you don't have anything nice to say..." And we say, "Don't say anything at all."
- Someone says, "Honesty is..." And we say, "The best policy."

Maybe some of us are chuckling right now, remembering the first time we heard some of these pithy anecdotes. And the reason why is because they still resonate with us and they also point to the fact that our words carry weight. Our words can be likened to sticks and stones in harming others mentally and emotionally. And when our lips are loose in community, we'll speak carelessly about others; resulting in an erosion of trust and the fracturing relationships. And we should remain quiet when tempted to lash out at another because it helps us to think before we speak even if we're speaking in love.

As we'll see today; in the Christian life, honesty is more than the best policy; it's the mark of a truthful witness which is what we're being exhorted to in this ninth commandment. Because as God's redeemed people; we're called to reflect his character by bearing truthful witness for the good of our neighbor's name. (#2) So, we'll begin by examining the context of the commandment, followed by its concern then we'll see what this command is calling us to by the grace of God.

(#3) The Context of the Command: *Preserve the proper administration of justice*

The ninth (#4) commandment states, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." The context of the command is a legal setting. And it forbids a legal witness from rendering an unfounded, unreliable, distorted or worthless testimony in a court of law.¹ We're all (#5 Blank) familiar with what happens when a witness takes the stand. They raise their right hand and swear an oath to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth... so help me God" and failing to do so is to commit perjury. Because to falsely accuse an innocent person of a crime is a crime!

In Scripture, legal witnesses were crucial to the judicial process because their testimony held sway over matters of justice, to include matters of life and death.² (#6) In Deut 17:6, a charge for a capital offense had to be established “on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Because no one could be put to death on the testimony of a single witness. And v.7 tells us the witnesses were required to cast the first stones against the convicted person. Meaning, they took their truthful testimonies into their own hands in executing justice. (#7) And this is serious because in Deut 19, if a witness was found to be malicious and false, they received the due penalty they sought to impose on the accused.

And the Lord is clear, “So you shall purge the evil from your midst.” A false witness was considered evil and had to be removed from among God’s people. Because justice didn’t just depend on fair laws and judges; it also depended on witnesses telling the truth. (#8 Blank) We step away from these few verses and we can see how the legal system of ancient Israel depended heavily on the honesty of its people. And as we look out in the world today, we don’t have to look very far to see the principle still rings true. Because the health of a court system in any nation really does depend on the truthfulness of its citizens.³ If legal witnesses lie or twist the truth to protect themselves or punish someone else, then justice remains perverted and will not go forth.

From our meditation text, Ps. 33 helps us see why false witnessing is not just a legal problem, but a strike against the character of God. (#9) The Psalm tells us that the Word of the LORD is upright, his work is done in faithfulness, he loves righteousness and justice. Therefore, the whole earth is called to fear the LORD and all mankind to stand in awe of him. Why? “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” So, since God is the sovereign creator of this world and all that’s in it; our minds were never designed to stand over his word in judgment. Rather they were designed to receive and submit to it. Because he’s the ultimate judge of what’s true and false, right and wrong. Thus, we think God’s thoughts after him. It doesn’t mean we know everything he knows. It means we understand our minds were created to apprehend the truth as he’s revealed it to us.⁴

(#10 Blank) So, when God’s redeemed people speak truthfully, we’re doing more than following a rule; we’re expressing the character of our creator; the one who’s transformed us and whose image we bear. Therefore, to act as a false witness is to act antithetically to God’s creative design. Because bearing false witness goes against everything in the created order; it’s not upright, lacks faithfulness; doesn’t promote righteousness; rather it perverts justice and most importantly it doesn’t fear the LORD. In other words, it doesn’t seek the way of wisdom but the way of the fool. So the ninth commandment begins in the courtroom but it doesn’t stay there. The majority of us will never be called to testify in a civil or criminal case. But every day we’re given opportunities to preserve the good of our (#11) neighbor’s name. This leads us to the second point.

The Concern of the Command: *Our neighbor’s good name*

We look at the commandment again (#12) and notice it’s stated relationally, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Contextually, neighbor here is a fellow Israelite within the covenant community.⁵ (#13) As we’ve already noted; the first four commands are concerned with loving God and the final six, loving our neighbor. And God’s people were to love one another by honoring father and mother, protecting life, guarding marriage, respecting property, and here, by refusing to speak falsely

against one another. The importance of the neighbor relationship within the covenant community was paramount. If these commandments weren't practiced reciprocally then it would erode trust, pervert justice... all leading to societal breakdown.⁶ So this command is pressing us beyond private honesty and calling us to consider how our words bear upon our neighbor.⁷ And who is our neighbor?

(#14 Blank) We open to Lk 10 and Jesus expands the definition of neighbor with the story of the Good Samaritan. A Scribe asked, "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" Jesus responded with a question of his own, "*What's in the law.*" "*How do you read it?*" To which, the Lawyer responds, "*Love the Lord your God....love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus said, "*you've answered correctly, do this and you will live.*" Seeking to justify himself the lawyer asked... "*And who is my neighbor?*" then Jesus told the story of a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho who was robbed, beaten and left for dead. He was ignored by both a priest and a Levite, fellow countrymen who should've known better. But it was the Samaritan, the despised outsider, who attended to his needs with compassion. Then Jesus asks the question... *Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?* (#15) The lawyer responded, *the one who showed him mercy....* Jesus concluded, "*You go and do likewise.*"

(#16 Blank) The point is clear, Jesus set no limitation on who qualifies as the neighbor we're called to love.⁸ So, if every person, regardless of social status, ethnicity, or personal feelings or preference is our neighbor, then we're forbidden from speaking falsely against anyone; in here as well as out there. Because this commandment applies to everyday life, where we constantly bear witness concerning our neighbors; in our individual and corporate contexts. And we can do serious damage to their reputations through lies, gossip, slander, half-truths and careless speech. (#17) John Frame said, "*the reputation of a person is a delicate thing and not easily restored after it is compromised.*"⁹ That's because a good name is fragile and takes time to build, but once it's been wounded by false witness, it's not easily repaired.

(#18) Pr. 25:18 says, "*A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.*" Commentator Bruce Waltke notes these weapons were used for different stages of battle. The war club for close combat, the sword for hand-to-hand fighting, and the arrow for striking a blow from a distance.¹⁰ These images provide us a good picture of the lethality of weaponized speech. It wounds up close; like a blunt lie spoken right to someone's face. It wounds within social circles where gossip and slander are shared about a certain person(s) in the group. And it wounds from a distance, in our digital era, it's the posting or reposting of something disparaging about someone we don't even know; just hit send. And overtime; by God's grace; these wounds heal but they oftentimes leave scars.

(#19 Blank) And we know this is true but how often do we let ourselves off the hook by telling ourselves, I'm just sharing a concern, venting or setting the record straight; when really we're seeking to justify ourselves and that's not God's will for our lives. Church, in all these instances, we must examine our hearts when tempted to bear false witness against a neighbor and ask ourselves: "*Am I seeking to protect my neighbor's good name, or am I seeking to injure it and why?*" And we ask the Holy Spirit search our hearts in discerning our motives as we seek to do God's will over our own. But here's the good news...the ninth commandment doesn't just leave us with a prohibition. (#20) Positively, it holds out our calling before us...

The Call of the Command: *Becoming a truthful witness*

We're all witnesses in some sense and that means we can either witness truthfully or falsely.¹¹ And this commandment by the grace of God is calling us to grow in becoming truthful witnesses. And so we turn to Eph 4:25, where Paul is appealing to his readers to put on the new self which entails putting away old patterns of sin and walking in a manner consistent with their new (#21) life in Christ. He writes, *"Therefore, having put away¹² falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."* In this instance, Paul is reminding these believers that falsehood no longer fits who they are since they've put off the old self and are being renewed in Christ. Thus, truthful speech must become the characteristic pattern of the way they talk to one another as fellow neighbors. In so doing, they're corporately laying the foundation of trust in the life of the community because they're all parts of the same body; the (#22 Blank) body of Christ.

This is a good word for Tampa Covenant Church. The Lord has also made us one body in Christ. Each week he calls us into his presence and we gather to worship him; through Word, Sacrament and Prayer. Then we go out in fellowship and throughout the week that fellowship continues in various contexts: Showing hospitality to one another, bearing one another's burdens and just doing life together. All of that requires trust. And that trust is strengthened to the degree we consistently put away falsehood in seeking one another's good. Allowing us to grow as a church where truth is spoken in love and where concerns are handled with humility, and where our words build up and not tear down.

And we do this because the work has already been accomplished and now we're called to walk in it by the grace of God. Recall in John 17, Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples and before going to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray to the Father; he first prays for his disciples. (#23) In v.17, he asks the Father to, *"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."* Jesus is asking the Father to set his disciples apart, in truth. Because after his departure they'll be sent out as witnesses into the world just he was sent into the world. And like him they were to be in the world but not of it. As Lou has often said, those two prepositions make all the difference in the world; it's how we distinguish ourselves as God's people. And what Jesus says in v.19, takes us to the heart of this reality (#24) *"And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth."*

In this sense, Jesus is speaking of dedicating himself to the will of the Father as the perfect sacrifice in order that we might be consecrated holy to God. (#25 Blank) For Jesus is the perfect embodiment of the truth of God's Word as the Word who became flesh. Psalm 33 finds its fullest expression in him. He's the upright Word of God, the fullest revelation of God's righteousness and justice. He's the maker of heaven and earth, for through him the LORD, commanded and it stood firm. In his humanity, he bore truthful witness to all that the Father revealed to him. He never bore false witness against his neighbor and in his darkest hour, he never twisted the truth to protect himself. Rather, he walked in perfect obedience to the Father's will. Yet he endured the war club, the sword, and the arrow of false witnesses throughout his ministry, during his trial and while he hung on the cross.

And it's on that blood stained cross that the truth of God was fully revealed. It's where Jesus' humility, obedience and self-giving love reach their fullest expression.¹³ He willingly gave himself for us; in forgiving our sin and bringing us into the fellowship he's enjoyed with the Father for all eternity. And by

his grace we've sanctified in truth and formed into a people who have been called to live our lives as truthful witnesses before God and neighbor. Church, this is the gospel, it tells us in order for us to be sanctified in truth; Jesus had to consecrate himself for us. This is something we could never do for ourselves; for it is a gracious gift from God received through the instrument of faith.

Conclusion:

And so this morning, we rejoice, because by faith we know where this redemption story is going. Our risen Savior, who is now seated at the right hand of the Father, has promised to return, and make all things new in ushering in a new heaven and a new earth. And in that day, all lies, slander, and gossip will cease. And honesty won't be a policy to enforce because it will be our very nature. Nothing false will enter into that city, only righteousness, peace, and joy in the presence of our Savior. And because we're being sanctified in his truth now, we answer the call to live as people of that coming world: truthful witnesses who are growing in reflecting the character of the One who was and is and is to come. May God grant us grace toward that end.

¹ שֶׁקֶר (*šeqer*). n. masc. **lie**. Refers to a lie or false witness. This term can refer to various kinds of lies, deceptions, or falsehoods. Accordingly, the OT uses the term in a variety of ways, although it often conveys the idea of deception through speech (e.g., Psa 120:2; Prov 6:17; 12:19). The word *šeqer* can also be used to describe false charges (e.g., Exod 23:7), false oaths (Lev 6:3, 5; Jer 7:9), and the deceptive path (Psa 119:118, 128). False prophets are known for speaking empty words (e.g., Jer 5:31; 20:6; Mic 2:11). Francesco Bianchi, "Deception," in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

² John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 831.

³ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 465–466.

⁴ Frame, 44.

⁵ Neighbor: נָחַר (*rēʿa*): fellow countryman, neighbor, i.e., one who is of the same race, or social/geographical group (Ex 2:13); neighbor, i.e., one who lives in close geographical proximity, and by implication the same national group.

⁶ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Neighbor," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1539.

⁷ Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis, Exodus*, vol. 1 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 447.

⁸ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Neighbor," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1540.

⁹ Frame, 842.

¹⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of PROVERBS*, Chapters 15-31, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 327-328.

¹¹ Frame, 832.

¹² ἀποτίθεμαι (*apotithemai*) lay aside, rid oneself of (Ro 13:12; Eph 4:22, 25; Col 3:8; Heb 12:1; Jas 1:21; 1Pe 2:1+). Clinton states, Although it is an aorist participle (ἀποθέμενοι), it should be understood as having an imperatival force, which some translations accurately bring out (e.g., NIV; NLT; Geneva). However, he does acknowledge the possibility that Paul used the aorist participle here instead of the present imperative because he wishes to retain some of his characteristic tension between the indicative and imperative. Thus the verse can be read that the Ephesians have already taken off falsehood and put on truth by receiving the message of truth (1:13) and by entering a relationship with Christ, in whom "there is truth" (4:21b). Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 299.

¹³ Rodney A. Whitacre, John, vol. 4, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 415.