

# SEEK TRUTH SPEAK TRUTH

**SERIES: LOVE GOD, LOVE PEOPLE**



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In the movie *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett O’Hara walks for miles and miles, in and out of danger, during the Civil War, only to discover that her home has been destroyed, her mother has died, her family is penniless, and there’s nothing to eat except dried-up radishes in an abandoned garden. At this point, she famously vows:

*As God is my witness, as God is my witness, they’re not going to lick me. I’m going to live through this and when it’s all over, I’ll never be hungry again. No, nor any of my folk. If I have to lie, steal, cheat, or kill. As God is my witness, I’ll never be hungry again.*<sup>1</sup>

In one sentence, she vows to break almost half of the Ten Commandments if she must. She vows, if necessary, to break the ninth commandment, which reads: *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor* (Exodus 20:16). Why are people so willing to speak falsely about other people? Why might we at times want to be less than truthful about another person? What, on the other hand, might compel us to speak truthfully? The ninth commandment sends us on a journey through the Scriptures in search of answers.

## Safeguarding courts

The commandment, written by the very finger of God, was designed to safeguard Israel’s courts. One’s “neighbor” was any member of Israel, the covenant community. For justice to prevail in Israel, truthfulness, especially truthful testimony, needed to be valued. There was, of course, nothing in the Mosaic Law that encouraged false testimony against people outside of Israel, but in that Israel was supposed to be God’s model community, and his means of bringing his justice to the world, the way its people treated each other had bearing on its impact on the world. If the Israelites began by practicing truthfulness with each other, then they’d be prepared to practice truthfulness with those outside their community.

The courts in the United States, of course, are not set up specifically to uphold justice in God’s covenant community. Even so, in some places, his word and his name are still invoked when testimony is required: a witness places her hand on a Bible and swears “to tell the truth, the whole

truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” For the most part, our nation’s system of justice values truthfulness and frowns on perjury, at least in theory, thank God. Even so, the Apostle Paul challenges us not to take cases against fellow members of our covenant community to court but for the community itself to resolve such issues (1 Corinthians 6:1–8).

Today, we will find the ninth commandment most relevant not when called on to give testimony in a court of law (for how often does that happen?) but in our relationships—first with each other in the church, God’s covenant community, and then with those outside the covenant community. Let truthfulness begin with—and be exemplified in—the household of God.

## Bearing false witness

Why would anyone want to bear false witness against another person? One bears false witness, quite simply, because he believes he will benefit from doing so. What benefit accrues to one who bears false witness against another person? If we perceive that someone stands in the way of what we want or threatens what we already possess, we may find ourselves at odds with such a one. We may be inclined, therefore, to speak against her, either uttering outright falsehoods or spinning the facts to portray her in an unfavorable light. If, for example, someone were to stand between Scarlett O’Hara and food, we can imagine her lying about that person. (Those of us who have never been hungry, however, do not know the measures that hunger drives people to take.) Sometimes, people speak falsely about other people simply to make themselves look better, to prop up their self-worth, or to present an image.

Think of Ahab, who coveted Naboth’s vineyard. Ahab’s wife Jezebel convinced two men to falsely charge Naboth with cursing God and the king, capital offenses both. Naboth was taken outside the city and stoned to death, and Ahab took possession of the vineyard (1 Kings 21:1–15). Or think of the men from the synagogue of the Freedmen, who perceived that their way of life was threatened by Stephen, an early follower of Jesus who performed great signs and wonders. They couldn’t cope with Stephen’s wisdom, so

they secretly persuaded men to speak against him; dragged him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body in Jerusalem; and put forward false witnesses against him. Like Naboth, Stephen was taken outside the city and stoned to death (Acts 6:8–15, 7:54–60).

Standing in the way of a political candidate is his worthy—or, he would have you believe, not-so-worthy—opponent. He needs to convince voters that he is the better candidate. So what does he do? He’s careful not to tell outright lies—or at least outright lies that could be easily proved to be outright lies—but he massages and stretches and spins the truth to make him look good and his opponent look bad. He bears false witness against his opponent.

Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann comments concerning the ninth commandment:

*The major pertinence of the prohibition in our society is the collapse of truth into propaganda in the service of ideology. That is, public versions of truth are not committed to a portrayal of reality, but to a rendering that serves a partisan interest.*<sup>2</sup>

Bruce Waltke, another Old Testament scholar, observes:

*Politicians seek to destroy one another in negative campaigning; gossip columnists feed off calumny\*; and in Christian living rooms reputations are tarnished or destroyed over cups of coffee served in fine china with biscuits. These de facto courtrooms are conducted without due process of Torah; accusations are made, hearsay allowed, slander, perjury, and libelous comments uttered without objections. No evidence, no defense.<sup>3</sup> (\*Calumny: slander, defamation (of character), character assassination, libel.)*

Wait a minute, we don’t use fine china or serve biscuits! Must have nothing to do with us!

## Consequences for bearing false witness

When we speak falsely against another person, we damage his reputation, thereby threatening his relationships and, in some cases, hindering his ability to make a living.

**A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold** (Proverbs 22:1).

Iago, in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, cares little if someone steals money from him but cares much if someone damages his reputation:

*Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,  
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:  
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.*

James warns us both about our proclivity to *curse people who are made in the likeness of God* and about what the tongue, though it is only a small part of the body, can do: *How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire* (James 3:4–9). James’ words have never been more relevant than in the age of the Internet, which can be set ablaze by one false word that generates instantaneous and multitudinous comments and “shares” and “forwards” and “likes.”

It is easier to say something negative about someone behind his back—or electronically—than face to face. An editor of a newspaper I worked for could, on occasion, be seen in his glass-walled office working himself into a lather typing a scathing review of something that found its way into our paper. After he pressed the send button, making his thoughts known to the entire newsroom, he would emerge from his office and be as friendly as could be, even to those he had just ripped.

It has always been easier to say something negative about someone behind his back than to his face, but it has never been easier for what you say to spread. In our age, words spread around the world instantaneously. An English proverb attributed to James Callaghan echoes the words of James: “A lie can be halfway around the world before the truth has got its boots on.” Today more than ever: Isn’t that the truth?

The Internet has made bullying too tempting for many people, especially teenagers. Several web sites and apps allow users to post and interact anonymously, allowing them to say almost anything about anyone without fear of consequences. In the past, a teenager would scribble something anonymously on the bathroom stalls. Now, the bathroom stalls have gone global.

Reporter Jack Dickey, in a July 7 story for *Time* magazine, writes concerning websites and apps that allow for anonymity:

*Recent findings in neuroscience have shown how the developing teen brain is ill equipped to override emotional reactions with cooler assessments. Now these fragile and self-destructive minds have a tool to indulge their worst tendencies.*

Press reports have suggested that one particular website that allows for anonymity and which is particularly popular with teenagers (it has 120 million users worldwide, nearly half of whom are high school age) was a factor in at least sixteen adolescent suicides in the United States and Europe. Dickey concludes:

*So what are the effects of anonymous, constant social networking, cruel or otherwise? This is a global experiment with adolescents as its central subjects. And the conditions are changing faster than the experiment can produce measurable results.<sup>4</sup>*

If you bear false witness against another person, you not only damage his reputation, you also endanger your own reputation. If you become known as someone who speaks falsely about other people, it's likely that you will be taken less seriously when you speak of other matters. You become the proverbial boy who cried wolf.

Bearing false witness not only affects the victim and the speaker, it also affects the hearer:

**The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body**  
(Proverbs 26:22).

There's something within us that likes being in the know, being privy to secret information, perhaps even secret information that dishes a little dirt. The dirt tastes like a delicious morsel, and it whets one's appetite for more, but it's dirt nonetheless: It sullies the inner being of those who hear.

## Desire for truth

The command comes to us: *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.* On the one hand, don't do it: don't bear false witness against your neighbor. On the other hand, something within us wants to do it, especially when we believe that we will benefit from doing so: when another person stands in the way of what we want or threatens what we already possess, or when we want to make someone else look bad so that we look good by comparison or to present a particular image of ourselves.

Sure, something within us wants to bear false witness against our neighbor. But isn't there something within us that believes in something we might call "the truth"? We want to know what's true, and we want to distinguish what's true from what's false. For all of postmodernism's attempts to remove "truth" from our vocabulary, humanity still believes in such a thing as truth. No one, not even the most entrenched postmodern secularist, whose good name has been sullied by lies, blithely responds, "It doesn't matter; there's no such thing as truth." No, we believe in truth.

David, after he had been less than forthcoming in his dealings with Uriah and Bathsheba, wrote to the Lord, *Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being* (Psalm 51:6). The Lord delights in truth. Don't you also delight in truth? Aren't you constantly seeking to know what's true? I'm so grateful that God gave us the Scriptures, words of truth. I hear and read many words, which may or may not be true, but when I turn to the Scriptures, I know I'm turning to the truth. I turn to the Scriptures to seek out the truth. I hunger and thirst for the truth. Don't you?

We find within us, then, not only the desire to bear false witness against our neighbor but also the desire for truth. Is it possible that our desire for truth is more compelling than our desire for falsehood, exaggeration, and spin? The psalmist is able to resist the delights of sin with a greater delight: the law of the Lord (Psalm 1:1–2). We defeat the desire for falsehood, which promises to get us what we want or to enable us to keep what we want, with the desire for truth. Seek and value the truth, in all its forms, and truth will permeate your being and overpower your desire for falsehood.

## Guarded knowledge and careful speech

Our quest for truth, however, should not be unrestrained. We don't need to know everything. There are certain things we shouldn't know. It wasn't for nothing that God prohibited the first humans from partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They disregarded the command, of course, whereupon they knew things they weren't prepared to know. There are certain things, quite frankly, that are none of our business—the sex lives of your neighbors, for example (certain television shows notwithstanding).

Moreover, our speaking the truth should not be unrestrained, either. Yes, there are many times when a truthful witness, especially as opposed to a false witness, is called for. *A truthful witness saves lives* (Proverbs 14:25). *Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another*

(Ephesians 4:25). However, just as there are certain things we shouldn't know, there are certain things we shouldn't say, even if they're true—especially things that, if spoken, would fall under the heading of gossip. For example, if I somehow find out something about the sex lives of my neighbors, I have no business sharing that information with anyone (certain television shows notwithstanding).

Therefore, be careful about what you say about another person. When speaking about another person, ask yourself, before you open your mouth or start to type, whether what you're saying is truly helpful, whether the person you're speaking to really needs to know what you're thinking about telling him. Ask yourself if your reason for sharing has more to do with some craving to be in the know or to be viewed as someone in the know. Take note of the following:

**Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered** (Proverbs 11:13).

**Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin** (Proverbs 13:3).

**Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends** (Proverbs 17:9).

**Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble** (Proverbs 21:23).

**Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear** (Ephesians 4:29).

When we use words, let's do so to build each other up and give grace to one another. If you send an email or post on a website, you never know who's going to save it, who's going to pass it on, who's going to see it—even years later. Just assume that any email you send and anything you post on any website will be read by everyone, because it could conceivably be read by anyone. If “the developing teen brain is ill equipped to override emotional reactions with cooler assessments” and if constant social networking is a “global experiment with adolescents as its central subjects,” as the *Time* magazine story maintains, then parents and other adults must help adolescents navigate this ever-changing world, even if they know the world better than the adults. My eleven-year-old daughter is teaching me how to use my new smart phone. In many ways, she knows the cyber world better than I do, but I have to help her navigate it.

Moreover, be careful about what you listen to. If someone starts to tell you something about someone else that you don't need to know, stop the speaker. Bruce Waltke again:

*Personally, I refuse to participate in or tolerate any conversation in which a person is being defamed or accused without the person being there to defend himself. It is wrong to pass along hearsay in any form, as prayer requests or pastoral concerns. More than merely not participating, it is up to Christians to stop rumors and gossips in their tracks.*<sup>5</sup>

When I was a college journalist, one of my fellow editors was proofing a guest column for the newspaper. When he came to the description of the columnist, he decided to have a little fun at the writer's expense and, speaking out loud, built on what he knew about her to invent an outlandish and derogatory and humorous story for her life, as if that's the description that would be published in the newspaper. As he spoke, a small crowd gathered around him, and we all laughed. Looking back, instead of laughing along with everyone else, I should have done what Waltke advises: I should have stopped him in his tracks.

## Truthful lips endure forever

We bear false witness against another person because we think it will profit us—that we will get what we want, keep what we have, feel better about ourselves, or present a certain image. Are we right? In the short term, yes—usually. In the long term, no—never.

**A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape** (Proverbs 19:5).

A lie may make it halfway around the world before the truth gets its boots on, but as Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher observed, “Eventually, truth gets booted and spurred, and the lie gets a good licking.”

Ahab dispatched with Naboth and took possession of the vineyard, but immediately thereafter the word of the Lord came to the prophet Elijah, instructing him to tell Ahab, *In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood*. Later, Ahab was killed in battle, and the blood from his wound flowed into the bottom of his chariot. After he was buried, workers washed his chariot, *and the dogs licked up his blood* (1 Kings 21:17–19, 22:29–38). Likewise, those who stoned Stephen would later have to answer to God, or find the answer to their sin in the cross of Christ, for Stephen with his last breath prayed, *Lord, do not hold this sin against them* (Acts 7:60).



As my fellow editor was spoofing the guest columnist, the columnist herself came into the student publications office to check on her column. We were all hovering over the editor, however, and no one noticed her. She heard most of the spoof. My friend, proud of his little diversion, finished by asking a question about the guest columnist. Finally, someone noticed the columnist and said to the editor, “Well, you can ask her; she’s right here.” Suffice it to say the editor was more than a little embarrassed. He did not go unpunished: he had his comeuppance.

Our model, of course, is Jesus Christ, *the faithful and true witness* (Revelation 1:5, 3:14). *Who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession* (1 Timothy 6:13). What happened to him for telling the truth? Like Naboth before him and Stephen after him, he was executed outside the city (Hebrews 13:12).

If bearing false witness against your neighbor doesn’t profit you in the end, it seems that speaking the truth may not profit you at all. Stephen was stoned and Jesus was crucified. The crucifixion of Jesus, though, was not the end but the turning point—for him and for all of human history—for God raised him from the dead. And what did Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, see when he gazed into heaven moments before he died? *Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God* (Acts 7:56). Stephen, executed outside the city like his Lord, would take his seat alongside the one who is called *Faithful and True*, at the right hand of the Father (Revelation 19:11). What does a lie profit a man in comparison to being welcomed into the eternal kingdom by the Son of Man?

Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. Instead, seek truth and speak truth.

**Truthful lips endure forever,  
but a lying tongue is but for a moment**  
(Proverbs 12:19).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Gone With the Wind* (MGM, 1939).

<sup>2</sup>Walter Bruggemann, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 851–52.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce Waltke, *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 258.

<sup>4</sup>Jack Dickey, “The Antisocial Network” (Time magazine, July 7, 2014), 42.

<sup>5</sup>Waltke, 258.