The Shape of Love: False Testimony

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
April 13, 2025 AM Sermon
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Exodus 20:16, 23:1-3, 6-8

During this sermon series, one of the things we've been doing is looking for how the ten commandments tell us something about God's character. And as I was thinking about this commandment against false testimony this week, I remembered a statement attributed to the philosophy of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Words create worlds. Words create worlds"

This is an appropriate thing for a Jewish or Christian person to claim, right? God's words certainly do this. We worship a God whose creative power is unleashed through the act of speaking. God speaks over the chaos of the unformed universe, "Let there be light," and light IS. God says, "Let the water be gathered into one place, and let dry ground appear," and they DO.

And then Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, comes into the world as the Word of God. Christians believe that in Jesus the power and wisdom and sustaining and organizing Presence of God comes and speaks– right up close. Jesus' words and acts – his life, death, and resurrection – "re-create" a world just as real as the one God began in the beginning, in which history turns out right in the end; a world in which God's relationship with people doesn't stay broken but is renewed by wrapping us up in his perfect obedience and walking us all the way home. Jesus is the Faithful One who sacrificially speaks a word of grace over us, through faith. This God sustains all things by his powerful word.

God's words literally construct the cosmic realities of creation and salvation. The human power to use words is much more limited, but it's still a power that differentiates us from the rest of creation. This uniquely human faculty allows us to reflect God's nature and glorify him.

With words we croon lullabies and teach children math. With words we make our minds known to one another, arguing and apologizing and reconciling. With words we ask, answer, promise, observe, appeal. With words we generate spiritual living rooms, environments that may or may not be faithful representations of reality. Our words, too, can create worlds.

So, the commandment against false testimony is here because words are powerful. In the immediate context of the Israelite community in the wilderness, words literally held the power of life and death. The legal system did not include trials with lawyers and juries of one's peers, so the truthful testimony of witnesses was a crucial part of determining the true facts of a case and a just verdict.

Exodus and Deuteronomy use different Hebrew words for unfaithful testimony in their versions of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:16 emphasizes the problem of deceptiveness. The command is against lying, against perjury. In Deuteronomy 5:20, the command prohibits empty or worthless testimony. It includes the sense of being false, but it could also mean something like being a "gossipy" witness. A witness shouldn't repeat hearsay while giving evidence that can influence a judgment.

One Israelite witness was not enough for a conviction. But two or three were. And the penalties for perjury were severe. Deuteronomy 19 spells out what should happen to someone who acts as a malicious witness to accuse another person of a crime. The priests and the judges would gather; the judges would investigate; and if the witness was shown to be lying, "then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party." (Deuteronomy 19:19).

But despite that powerful deterrent of an eye for an eye, and a life for a life, you still see serious cases of false witnesses in the Bible. It's as if the commandment and its penalties can't go far enough to eradicate the problem of deception in the heart. And the words that come from our warped and injured hearts do indeed shape the world in crucial ways.

One of the most egregious examples is in 1st Kings 21, during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They ruled Israel during the time of Elijah. King Ahab sees his neighbor Naboth coming and going from

his vineyard just beyond the palace in Jezreel. The land is good, the grapes are huge; and Ahab is determined to have that vineyard for his own. He wants to grow a vegetable garden. But Ahab has a problem. Naboth won't sell.

"The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors," Naboth says to Ahab. Naboth's words hint at his character. Although Ahab wants the land purely for its farming value, for Naboth, the land is about so much more. God owns the land. God apportioned this piece of it to Naboth's family. God never wanted it to be permanently sold (Leviticus 25). So Naboth holds onto his inheritance.

But Ahab is, shall we say, seriously put out. He goes to bed and refuses to eat. Jezebel sees how miserable he is and hatches a plan to get Ahab that vineyard. She sets up a sham trial with the informed participation of the city elders and nobles. Two renegade witnesses are recruited and prepped. They publicly and falsely accuse Naboth of a crime - blasphemy against God and speaking against the king. And so the man guilty of nothing more than keeping a productive vineyard in the family is found guilty of a capital offense. Naboth is executed on the spot.

When the house of Ahab exerts its covetous will on the legal system, it sets in motion an authorized but deeply unjust process. The lie first sanctioned by Queen Jezebel spreads through the complicity of elders and nobles. It's advanced by false witnesses and carried to its conclusion by a crowd that doesn't know any better. It's a terrible story that didn't stop with Ahab, a story whose broad outlines still show up in our fallen world today.

As soon as Jezebel hears that Naboth is dead, she goes to see her depressed husband. "Get up," she says. "Go claim your vineyard. Naboth's dead and now it's yours." Just like that, the clouds clear and sunshine returns to Ahab's life. He gets up and takes the property. And innocent Naboth's life seems forgotten. But God doesn't forget. Before long the prophet Elijah comes knocking on Ahab's door.

Naboth's trial is on the far end of unconscionable for most of us. We'd lament the injustice of the false accusations and the travesty of Naboth's murder. We'd repudiate Ahab's wicked greed. But in contrast to this egregious example, our lives might be comparatively quieter and our temptations to falsehood smaller. How does this commandment about false testimony touch our lives?

One thing I think we sometimes believe is that if we speak factually, we are necessarily speaking truthfully. But is getting the facts right enough to keep the spirit of the commandment?

In his sermon on the ninth commandment, Tim Keller tells a vignette about people X, Y, and Z. Person X and Person Y know, Keller says, that Person Z did not rob the bank. But when she's asked about it, X says, 'Yes! Z did rob the bank.' On the other hand, Y says, 'Well, all I know is that Z was coming out of the bank at the time of the robbery.'

X's statement is a blatant lie. She knows Z did not rob the bank but says otherwise. But Y's statement… Is Y's statement a lie? It's factual: Z was coming out of the bank at the time of the robbery. But Y's statement is a factually accurate statement calculated to mislead. It leaves out known information that could clear Z's name. It is not a truthful statement.

The ninth commandment, Keller goes on to say, requires us "Never to use the facts in a misleading way to advantage ourselves and harm someone else." Our neighbor's well-being is of great concern for us - not just our own advantage or good name.

When we talk about current events, report on our work, advertise products, communicate financial outlooks, deliberate with board members, or talk with our families — minimally they need the facts as best we understand them. But they also need us to communicate the spirit of the truth in what we express. They need us not only not to lie, but also not to mislead with facts.

Words, gestures, tone, and content that point someone else to the reality we're expressing as we perceive them all matter - both for the sake of truth as a principle worth upholding, and perhaps even more for the integrity of the relationships that we are building.

The Bible has a lot to say about truthfulness - 137 verses directly mention truth, and many other passages deal with related concepts of faithfulness, integrity, or honesty. Valuing truth-telling as the normative posture of human interaction cuts across all types of biblical literature and across both Testaments.

God seems to care a lot about honesty and integrity. It's the best platform for an open and trusting relationship with him and others.

Here's a smattering of verses on this theme:

- "'Do not go about spreading slander among your people. (Leviticus 19:16)
- You desired faithfulness even in the womb (Psalm 51:6)
- The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)
- The mouth speaks what the heart is full of (Luke 6:45)
- Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. (Ephesians 4:25)
- With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness….Brothers and sisters, this should not be. (James 3:9)

There's an acronym that I stumbled on when our kids were young; I can't remember if I've mentioned it here at LaGrave before, but when I asked my kids, they hardly remembered it so maybe you don't either. Some of you who are teachers might know it. It's helpful for people of any age trying to use our words responsibly in relationships.

The saying is: Before you speak, THINK. The letters of THINK all stand for something to ask yourself as you contribute to the world we make together with words: Is what I am saying True? Is it Helpful? Is it Interesting? Is it Necessary? And is it Kind?

I don't think it would be good for us at LaGrave to go around trying to catch each other breaking the THINK acronym in what we say. But it's certainly a good spiritual formation tool for us as we practice speaking and creating. We try to submit our thoughts and our words to Christ before they come out of our mouths. Given world enough and time, sometimes we might do this reasonably well. And other times we'll be tired, hurried, overwhelmed by complexity, or in a bad mood and we'll fail at it. Badly.

As you think about truthfulness shaped by love as a standard for Christian communication, with all the layers it involves, do you feel a little worried about opening your mouth at all now? I sure do. Once you start thinking about it, this is an enormous call. James 3:2 is oddly reassuring here: "We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check." There is only one person who never sinned in his speech or by his silence.

There's only one person who is, in himself, grace and truth. And this week we will remember his sacrifice. Like Naboth, he was brought into a court proceeding and surrounded by false witnesses. He was peppered with accusations. We will remember that, like Naboth, Jesus was innocent. And we will remember that when he might have saved himself, he neither hurried the journey to the cross nor shrank from its horror. When a denial could have saved him in the moment, Jesus the Messiah answered the questions put to him: "Are you then the Son of God?" and "Are you the King of the Jews?" He said, "You have said so."

He thinks of his mission. He thinks of us. He thinks of the wrongs and consequences and miseries of all the lies perpetrated throughout history. Gossip and rumors. Broken trust. Systemic corruption. Little white lies and genuine whoppers. And he wills that if he has anything to say about it, that false world will itself one day come "untrue." He says it at the cross.

With infinite grace and unflinching truth, with love for us in his heart our King submits himself to the will of sinful humans. He bears their jeers and wears their crown and makes their cross his throne. As we seek to follow this king, may our failures keep us near his cross, and his grace be the song that motivates our obedience. Amen.

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