

OVERVIEW

The ninth of the original “Ten Commandments” says we are not to bear false witness against our neighbor. This commandment had a specific original meaning. But Jesus reinterpreted all the commandments in ways and made them central to our lives today. Just so, the original application was to ensure that witnesses told the truth in legal disputes. Jesus extended the application to how we witness to our own faith and identity.

KEY INSTRUCTION

Our most powerful witness is our actions. If we say we have faith and our actions say something else, we are false witnesses. If our actions match our faith, our witness is true.

COMMANDMENT IX – “A Witless Witness?”

We have come to the 9th commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Like all the previous commandments, this one had an original meaning for the Israelites and then Jesus reinterpreted it.

God’s primary concerns, when He gave the original Ten Commandments, were that the people would worship and obey only Him, Commandments 1-4, and that the people would get along with each other as a peaceful unified community, Commandments 5-10.

Peace and unity in society is hard to come by. It only happens if people accept and live by rules. If stealing and murder weren’t controlled, society would unravel. For the Israelites, peace and unity meant there had to be a way to settle disputes without vigilante justice, family and clan vendettas, and civil war. The answer was to have trusted community elders determine guilt or innocence and to set reasonable penalties. This led to the legal rule of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. At the time this seemed like a fair enough balance for the Israelites to live by it.

This process could be successful only if elders received true and accurate information from witnesses. Pretty straight forward? But, if several people see the same thing, they often remember it differently. Honest witnesses may not get the details right. So early on, as we read in Deuteronomy, there was the belief that, for legal purposes, there should be at least two, or better three, witnesses of the offence, before anyone was punished for something.

God took this judicial process so seriously that He dedicated a Commandment to it. He wanted the innocent to be protected and community to be unified and He didn't want liars messing the process up.

The Israelites accepted this commandment and made false witness a punishable offence. In fact, as we read, a false witness was punished as if they committed the crime. If the crime being tried was murder and a witness lied, he would receive the death penalty like the murderer.

The most famous account about a Jewish trial happened to Jesus' before his crucifixion. The Sanhedrin wanted to condemn Jesus for a crime that carried the death penalty. This could be rebelling against the Romans or it could be blaspheming against God. The biblical account says that many witnesses were called but no two of them gave the same story. Without two witnesses who could agree that Jesus did or said such and such in a certain place at a certain time, they would not condemn Jesus. They took it that seriously. Even though they desperately wanted to get rid of Jesus, they wouldn't break the rule that two witnesses had to agree on his crime. They finally condemned Jesus not because of witnesses but because of what Jesus said directly to them.

So the original application of this commandment was to legal disputes, usually between individuals, where one allegedly committed a crime.

When Jesus came, he applied this commandment completely differently. He was a world changer. He began by changing the premise that made a false witness dangerous. A false witness can hurt you only if what they say makes a difference; for example, when you are in a law court.

First, Jesus discouraged His followers from going to court at all; especially to get things from one another. In Luke 12:13-15 he was asked to intervene in an inheritance dispute. He answered, "Who am I to judge between you and your brother?", and counseled the man not to care so much about how much money he inherited.

Rather than going to court, He taught, "Make peace with your adversary before you ever get to court and fall under the control of a judge"; a judge who might be swayed by false witnesses.

Second, even if you went to court, Jesus took on the eye for an eye punishment. He said that among Christians the rule was humility rather than fairness. He taught us to turn the other cheek, although fairness says slap him back. He said give the person, who sues us for our coat, not only the coat but our shirt also. Fairness says, if he gets my coat, that's enough.

So it is no surprise that he completely changed the thrust of the commandment that we not bear false witness.

Here is what Jesus said about this commandment in a debate with his opponents.

“I have no need of human witnesses, but I say these things so you might be saved. ³⁵ John [the Baptist] was like a burning and shining lamp, and you were excited for a while about his message. [He was a witness for me.] ³⁶ But I have a greater witness than John—my teachings and my miracles. The Father gave me these works to accomplish, and they prove that he sent me.”

When we are challenged about our faith, Jesus expanded the concept of witness from people who saw what we did to works that show our faith in public. If I said to you, “I can cook a turkey,” I wouldn’t need two witnesses to say, “I saw him cook a turkey.” All I would have to do is actually cook some turkeys and give them to the needy and not get sick. In other words, Jesus said we should let our faithful acts speak for themselves. He really believed that.

Remember when John the Baptist sent his followers to ask Jesus if Jesus was the Messiah that was prophesized to arise in the Old Testament. It’s in Matthew 11:2-5. Jesus didn’t call witnesses to come and defend him. He just answered, ***“Tell John what you see. The deaf hear, the lame walk, ... and good news is preached to the poor.”***

This is the real lesson for us today. If we believe in Jesus and love God, our deeds are our true witnesses. What we do, how we behave, and what we say is the witness we need.

What, then, is a false witness? It is a life without good deeds. It is a life without compassion. It is a life valuing things over people. It is a life seeking empty or self-destructive pleasure for one’s self rather than caring for others.

If we are Christians who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior and our behavior doesn’t show it, we are spouting confusion. We aren’t being clear or consistent. We are being witless. What our deeds say about our inner identity doesn’t make any sense. Our lack of good behavior is a witless witness about who we are. Our deeds are saying, “Hey. I’m just like everyone else,” when we are really different.

And, if we do hurtful, damaging things, we are worse than witless; we are false. Either our claims of having faith and God’s power within us are lies or our actions are lies.

Jesus took a dim view of such witless and false witnesses. In Luke 10:32-33 He said, ***“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.”***

If we think we have faith but don't witness in both word and deed, we are not acknowledgers of Jesus. Remember always that what we do and how we behave are the true witnesses of our hearts.

So I would like to finalize this meditation on a positive note. All of you, by faithfully coming to church, by supporting our ministries with money and work, by putting up with and caring for one another, by singing and praying together, and by treating one another and your neighbors with love, all of you are bearing true witness of your identity. You are being true, not witless or false, witnesses of the power of Jesus Christ. You are practicing the 9th commandment and Jesus will acknowledge you. Thanks be to God and “Thank you.”