

# Do Not Bear False Witness

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**Sermon Series:**  
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 5:20

***Communicating truthfully with and about our neighbor is difficult, and is of the utmost importance to our life together—that's why God placed it in the Ten Commandments.***

*Lord Jesus,*

*You are the way and the truth and the life. As we listen to your word today, open our ears—so that we might hear your communication with us. Show us how to speak the truth, and how to build up others with the truth. In your holy name we listen, Amen.*

Everything about communication—or lack thereof—I learned in church. It all began back in Mrs. Hays' first grade Sunday School Class at First Presbyterian Church, Raleigh, North Carolina, with my first game of telephone. You know the game: one person whispers a message in the next person's ear, who then passes it onto the next.

I was somewhere in the middle of a circle of ten 5- and 6-year-olds. The message I received didn't make much sense, but I passed it along as faithfully as I could to the next person. By the time it got to the last person, it was unrecognizable from the message I passed along, let alone the initial message. I was shocked. How could a simple message get so garbled? Who was twisting it as it went? I looked from person to person around the circle, wondering. I left Sunday School that day deeply troubled.

I don't know what message Mrs. Hays was trying to teach us but a

deep distrust was what I took away with me.

Fast forward a quarter century. Here at Vienna Presbyterian we have our own version of telephone, church gossip. Not unique among churches. Back in March when I told you I was pregnant, the simple news spread accurately and quickly. The day after I told you, I got phone calls, emails, visits from people who were in worship—and lots of people who weren't. It was a great joy to share our exciting news with you.

Other news we stumble with as a community—especially complicated or difficult news about someone else. I confess that when I'm speaking about someone else, I find it so much easier to be negative than positive. "That was a bad decision," rolls off my tongue much easier than "they must need some help." Building up someone else with words is almost a lost art.

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Let's look at the Scripture more closely to see what direction God gives us for communication. Deuteronomy 5:20: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." This short verse contains several clues about

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communication. Note-takers out there, follow along with your pencil/pen in the bulletin—circling, underlining. Let's inch our way through the commandment.

The first clue God gives us is in the use of the word "witness," a legal word. Later on in Deuteronomy 19, we see how witnesses worked within Israel's growing legal system. "Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained." Not one, but two or three. Two or three witnesses could be the primary testimony to sentence someone to death. The power of the word of the witness is the power of life and death.

False witness was treated so seriously, because it was a way to kill people with words, literally (sixth commandment). Having truth-telling witness is still a cornerstone of our legal system today. Recall the oath that witnesses swear before testifying in the witness stand: "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" Trust in the witnesses is one of the things that holds our legal system together.

The second clue God gives us about communication is the word "false." In Exodus, the Hebrew word used means lying or untrue. In Deuteronomy, the Hebrew word used means insincere, empty, or frivolous. The witness that God desires is not just a true witness but also a thoughtful witness. You can be a false witness by deliber-

ately lying or by carelessly throwing words around.

The third clue God gives us is that false witness is "against your neighbor."

In other words, false witness isn't just an offense against the cosmic order; it has an object. Words can be used against people, causing real and personal wounds. The writer of Proverbs says: "Like a war club, a sword, or a sharp arrow is one who bears false witness against a neighbor" (Proverbs 25:18).

Words can be used as weapons against people, against their life, their reputation, their good name. (In this way this commandment is connected to the third: The third is about honoring the name of God, this is about honoring the name of your neighbor.)

So what? Is this message just for lawyers and witnesses? Absolutely not. All of us are judges, making pronouncements about people, their actions, and their character. We have opportunities to bear false witness or to tell the truth almost every time we open our mouths.

Let's look at two sides of the same coin: what's involved in breaking this commandment, and what's involved in keeping it. Negative first. Bearing false witness, or lying, can have a high price. In the ancient world (as today), lying can be a matter of life and death. Scripturally, James describes best the negative power of speech: "No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the

Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:7-9).

There are all kinds of ways that we can use our tongues to destroy. (I mention these ways not to give your imagination new ideas—but to show us the scope of what lying involves.)

There are basically two types of false witness: sins of commission and omission. Sins of commission involve what we say, and sins of omission involve what we don’t say.

Sins of commission include slander, libel, gossip, boasting, even labeling people. Sins of omission include remaining quiet when we know the truth, harboring suspicion against someone, or even being jealous of someone else’s success.

The effect of bearing false witness is that trust is broken. You and your word cannot be trusted. Augustine, Church Fathers from 4th century, said: “When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.”

Communication becomes impossible without trust. Now that we have explored how to break the commandment, let’s look to the other side of the coin: at what’s involved in keeping this commandment.

If James best describes the price of lying, then Ephesians best describes the blessings of truth-telling: “Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of

one another.... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4.25-29).

A few verses earlier, Paul describes this “speaking the truth in love” as the way for us to grow up into Christ (4:15). God intends us to use words to build up others—not by denying the truth, but by offering grace.

Does it sound like an impossible task? A challenging one? The Westminster Catechism (1643), part of our Presbyterian Book of Confessions, guides us in how to keep this commandment:

- Speaking only the truth between people
- Loving, desiring and rejoicing in our neighbor’s good name
- Loving and care of our own good name
- Freely acknowledging our neighbor’s gifts and graces
- Sorrowing for and covering of our neighbor’s infirmities
- Discouraging slanderers and other negative talkers.

You may be thinking. That’s well and good in general. But what does this mean for me? In this commandment and this sermon, I trust that God is speaking to each of us specifically.

Talkers: Talk about things that are true. Talk about your neighbor’s good name. Use your talk to deliberately build others up.

Listeners, quiet: Watch out for your silence. It implies consent, and can be a way to passively be

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negative about others. Continue to speak up thoughtfully—and so build up others.

Critics/skeptics/negative. Self-critics: Uphold your own good name. Defend it when necessary—beginning first with yourself. You are a new creation, made by God, sustained by grace.

Critics of others: No matter how tempting it is not to, uphold your neighbor's good name. Begin by holding your tongue. Your neighbor is also a new creation, made by God, sustained by grace.

Regardless of your personal communication style, God commands us all to use our truthful words to build others up in Christ. My communication with you is coming to a close. But I trust that communication remains between you and God on this subject.

- What kind of effect are your words having?
- Where are you building others up? Or yourself?
- Where are you tearing others down? Or yourself?

That's your homework.

To wrap up this message, let's step back from the realm of human communication. Let's look at God's witness about you, as recorded in the Scriptures:

- You are a child of the covenant
  - I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine (Isaiah 43)
  - I am with you, you are my people, the sheep of my pasture (Psalm 100)
  - I forgive you, and you are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5)
- Jesus adds to God's witness

about you, at this talking table:

- You are my disciples
- You are my friends
- I lay down my life for you
- “This is my body, given for you”
- “This is my blood, shed for you.”

These words of Jesus about you and me—have the power to give life. Through them Jesus builds us up, and offers us grace. God has entrusted this same power to us—the power of life-giving communication. Every time we speak, you and I have the opportunity to give life—by building up others, and offering them grace.

*Lord Jesus,*

*We have heard your words to us: Words that build us up, words that help us grow, words of grace. Help us to receive this sacrament of grace, so that we might offer that same grace to others, in word and deed. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

