

IX: Not Giving False Testimony

If you have a bible, go with me to [Deuteronomy 5](#). In 1992, a prominent news outlet published a story about the sitting president at the time, George H.W. Bush. It was based on the moment *this* picture was taken ([Photo](#)). In the story, it described Bush as being *amazed*—almost *dumbfounded*—at the way a grocery store barcode scanner worked. Which was interesting, given that by this *time*, barcode scanners had been in use for some sixteen years. So *obviously*, only an out-of-touch elite like President Bush—a man completely unfamiliar with the lives of ordinary Americans—would be *amazed* at a *sixteen year old* piece of technology.¹ After the story was written, pundits, broadcasters, and political cartoonists absolutely *ran* with the story—painting President Bush as entirely buffoonish for his ignorance. It became fuel for a narrative that was already forming, where people were concerned that he was out of his depth and unable to manage the U.S. economy to make it work for average Americans. I mean after all, he evidently didn't even know how the average American buys *groceries*!

The somewhat fascinating thing about the barcode scanner story is that it was *substantially* misrepresented. President Bush actually *wasn't* in a grocery store looking at an ordinary barcode scanner; he was at a convention for the National Grocers Association, where brand *new* grocery store technology was being exhibited. The scanner he was commenting on was a brand *new* version ([full photo](#)), where the scanner could read damaged barcodes as well as weigh produce—both of which were brand *new* capabilities in the year 1992. In other words, he knew how a barcode scanner worked; he was just marveling at the development of *new* technology—much like you and I probably would have. The *real* story was that he was a bit of a tech nerd, and was genuinely interested in what he was seeing. But that's not nearly as interesting of a story as one titled “President Bush Has No Idea How a Grocery Store Works.”

What's even *more* interesting is that the person who *wrote* the original story wasn't even *present* for the event. He was writing his article *second-hand*, based on just a two-word description from a press pool report written by someone who *was* there for it. But despite all efforts to provide context to the story and explain what actually happened, the *false* story was already out there. People had already heard *it* and formed an entire narrative around *it*. One columnist at the time described the incident as “politically devastating” for the president, who ended up losing his re-election effort later that year. **As the old adage goes, “a lie travels much faster than the truth.”**

¹ A composite story of the incident is detailed [here](#).

And **regardless of what you think** about George H.W. Bush or his presidency: **I think we can all grieve a world in which lies sometimes are often more potent, and more easily spread, than the truth is.** Generally speaking, our society is much quicker to believe things that sound *exciting* or *shocking*—whether or not they’re true—than things that sound *boring*, but happen to *be* true. / Which is unfortunate. Because *lies*—at least *most* lies—are not harmless. *Lies sow distrust between friends, they color and malign people’s reputations, they destroy relationships, careers and sometimes, people’s very lives.* It’s no coincidence that in the bible, Satan is called the “*father of lies*.”² **The devil himself is very aware that if he wants to make the world an altogether terrible place to be, lies are one of the most powerful weapons at his disposal.** Lies can be an unbelievably destructive thing.

And it is *that* insidious power of lies that I would argue motivates the ninth commandment. Let’s read it from Deuteronomy 5, v. 20:

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

That **phrase “false testimony”** is most literally, “false *witness*.” It was language borrowed from the ancient *legal* world; it’s *courtroom* imagery, in other words. In a society before CCTV footage, iPhone cameras, bodycams, and audio recordings—the most powerful testament to what did or did not happen in a given situation was the number of *eyewitnesses present* for it. The more eyewitnesses you could find, the more certain you were you could accurately determine what happened, and hold the *correct* people *accountable* for it.

Which **also meant that the integrity of those eyewitnesses mattered, tremendously.** *These* days, you and I probably don’t put a ton of stock into a person’s word, unless we *know* them pretty well and know their character even better. Today, we tend to assume that everyone *else* has an agenda, everyone has a slant—until proven otherwise. But back *then*, a much *higher* priority was placed on people’s trustworthiness. If a person couldn’t be trusted to tell the truth about something they witnessed, they couldn’t be trusted to do or say much of anything, as a result. Personal integrity was *paramount* in those days.

So **into that world**, and that *dynamic*, God gives us the ninth commandment. It instructs us—*commands* us—not to give “false testimony” against our neighbor. That word *neighbor* in the passage has a very *broad* meaning. It can mean anything from a close friend to just any other person we come across. It’s like the word “someone” in English; it’s a very

² John 8:44

non-specific term. **God is saying that regardless of who the other person is, and regardless of how familiar or unfamiliar you are *with them*...you should *never perpetuate* information about them that you aren't sure is true.** To do *that*, in any form, would be to “give false testimony against your neighbor.”

Now, sometimes, people will **paraphrase this commandment** as simply being a command not to “lie.” And while it *is* that, it's a little more *specific* than that. It's specifically a command not to lie *about someone*. Or, lie about a *situation* in such a way that it *misrepresents* someone or their character. **It's a command about truth-telling in the context of our relationships.** / So if you can **remember all the way back** to week 2 of this series, we mentioned that the Ten Commandments operate from a number of different “moral foundations”: ways of *thinking* about morality that undergird the commandments itself. And *this* command, about not “bearing false testimony”— it assumes a few *different* moral frameworks.

First, it assumes the **care/harm** framework. It's wrong to bear false testimony about someone because doing so *harms* that person: it inaccurately tears down and maligns their reputation without due reason. / This command *also* assumes the **fairness/cheating** framework. To lie about someone is generally done in a setting where *that* person is *not* there to *respond* to what you're saying about them. In many cases, it's even done in a setting where they don't *know* you're doing it. So by nature, it is an *unfair* situation: you are speaking negatively and dishonestly about them, when they can't defend themselves against what you're saying.

And then **in some instances**, it's a command that assumes the **loyalty/betrayal** framework. If the person you're lying about is a close friend or family member—someone who has placed some amount of trust in you that you are then *betraying*, it is *disloyal* to them to bear false testimony. / So from all sorts of different angles, bearing false testimony against a neighbor is morally wrong. You *could* make a case that this commandment has the widest *variety* of reasons for *why* it's wrong.

And **perhaps because of that**, most of us would probably *like* to think that we don't go around lying about other people on a regular basis. If you *do*, as always, consider this your official invitation from God to cut it out. But I think when we put it bluntly as “lying about other people,” it's easy to think we're not guilty of doing it, at least very often. But as always, there may be ways that we are participating in “giving false testimony,” whether we *realize* it or not. So I wanted to offer you some ways *I've* seen this particular command *violated* in present-day. What are some ways we may have “given false testimony,” whether we would've called it that or not?

The **first, most obvious form** it takes is what we might call...

Slander

To slander is to say anything untrue about someone else, with the express purpose of tearing down their reputation or character. *Biblically*, it is literally to “speak evil” of, or against, another person. It’s saying something that isn’t *true* about them, with the intent of making them look bad in front of others. So for instance, it’s things like going to your coworkers and saying that you’re *certain* **your boss is sexist** or a racist—even when you have no actual data to substantiate that claim. It’s when you say that a friend or a LifeGroup member or a church leader is an **“unsafe”** person, when all you really mean is they confronted you on something one time. It’s when someone makes you feel less than, so you **retaliate by starting a rumor** about them.

Slander is anytime you say something negative, malicious, or evil about another person that you know isn’t actually true when you say it. That is a *form* of “bearing false witness against your neighbor.” But so is (next category)...

Gossip

The word *gossip* in the bible literally means **“secret slander.”** *Gossip* is when you say the same *types* of things, for the same *types* of reasons, but you say it in a more low-key way. You *whisper* it instead of shouting it. You *suggest* it instead of *insisting* it’s true. You ask it as a *question* instead of stating it as a fact. If *slander* sounds like “our boss is a sexist,” **gossip is when you say “our boss seems kinda sexist...doesn’t he?” “Do you think that person is having an affair?” “I heard that person voted for _____—isn’t that crazy?”**

Gossip is **the practice of subtly, secretly slandering** someone, in what is usually socially acceptable ways. It’s saying things that either you know aren’t true—or at least things that you aren’t sure are true. That, too, is to “give false testimony.” You’re suggesting information about another person that you don’t have any degree of certainty about. *That’s* giving false testimony too. And *then*, there’s what we might just call...

Unwholesome Talk

Look with me **on the screen** at **Ephesians 4:29**:

*Do not let any **unwholesome talk** come out of your mouths, but **only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.***

So “unwholesome talk” is **probably the broadest category** out there. It’s basically just talking about things we know we shouldn’t be talking about, with what we know aren’t good motives. And specifically when it’s talking *about* other *people*, and when we speculate about things that we don’t have certainty about...it can easily become “giving false testimony” about those people. So here’s the best way I know to describe it to you. **Unwholesome talk is when a conversation about someone else ceases to be productive—ceases to be fruitful—and devolves into something less than that.** It’s when it devolves into just talking about the other person for the sake of talking about them—in a less than positive light.

Sometimes, “unwholesome talk” is just **when you find yourself in a situation** where slander or gossip *is* happening, and you laugh at it and encourage it and go along with it, rather than putting a *stop* to it. **Exodus 23 actually hits on that type of situation specifically.**³ **According to Ephesians 4, anytime there’s not an objective of “helping,” or “building up” the person you’re talking to or about, I would say you need to be very, very careful. Because that conversation can easily become something it doesn’t need to be.** It can very *easily*, and *quickly* morph into unwholesome talk and into bearing false witness.

So let’s **imagine a scenario**. Let’s say you and I are in a LifeGroup together. And there’s a *third* person in our group named *Sam*. And you and I end up talking one night, without *Sam* present, about ways to help *Sam* grow in certain areas of his life. Now, **as long as our conversation stays brief, and focused, and centered on the question, how do we help Sam grow, I would argue it’s probably a completely fine conversation for you and I to have.** But, **if that conversation begins to devolve** into all the ways that we’re *frustrated* by *Sam*, and *venting* about all the things in *Sam*’s life we’re *bothered by*, and all the things we *wish* we could say to *Sam* but *aren’t* saying to him—**then, I would say, it has actually become “unwholesome talk.” We are no longer having a discussion about how to help Sam; we’re having an unfruitful discussion about Sam.** A discussion that’s not helping *Sam*, and also isn’t helping *us* help *Sam*. We’re just ranting, venting, getting stuff off our chest that we’re actively *avoiding* saying to him—when in fact those things might be very *helpful* to bring up with him, if they’re brought up *well*. Make sense? I think that’s what Ephesians 4 is trying to help us avoid: *unwholesome* talk.

And **I’ll just add this:** **whenever possible, when there’s an issue, just talk to the person the issue is with.** **Meaning that a lot of the time, you don’t need to talk to the other person in your LifeGroup about how to help Sam; you just need to go**

³ See v. 1-3 specifically

help Sam. Does that make sense? If you're a follower of Jesus, you have the Spirit of the living God inside you; a lot of the time, he can give you all the wisdom you need to have those types of conversations. And sometimes, there's actually no reason you *need* to talk to someone else about the situation first.

Now, if there are moments where you're *unsure* of *how* to be helpful, and you're not *used* to having those types of conversations, feel free to run it by someone else in your LifeGroup. Run your plan by them to see if they think it's a good approach. But then, as swiftly and as directly as you can, just go talk to Sam. *He's* the one in need of help, counsel, wisdom, correction—whatever it is. So just talk to *him* about it. ~~You can probably tell that I'm a tad passionate about this.~~ Here's why: I tell people often that about **80% of my job as a pastor** is just encouraging people to talk to *each other*, about their problems with *each other*. And that's only *kind of* an exaggeration. I wish I could tell you the number of times I sit in my office with someone, hear them explain something going on with a friend of theirs, or a LifeGroup member of theirs, and then they want *me* to go talk to that person about it.

I always respond with, “wait—what do *I* have to do with this situation?” Why would I need to go have a conversation with someone about something that I wasn't even *present* for? That's going to turn into a very pointless game of “telephone” really fast. **Our church, and churches in general, would save themselves a *substantial* amount of drama and conflict and headache if, when there's a problem, we would just talk to the person that the problem is with directly.** Not talk *about* the problem first, not get fourteen different people's perspective on the problem first—but talk to the person the problem is with. Am I making sense? Can we commit to *that*, together? Love it—I knew you guys would be game for that.

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Alright, **so slander, gossip, and unwholesome talk.** Three common expressions of what the ninth commandment calls “giving false testimony” against others. Now, before we move on to talking about what we should *do* about all of this, I do want to mention one *other* form that I've seen “false testimony” come in. **So far, everything we've talked about has been related to bearing false testimony against your *neighbor* (i.e. someone *else*).** But I *also* think there's a form of this that we *could* call “**bearing false testimony...about yourself.**”

Let me try and **explain. In my life, the moments when I am most prone to lie, or to misrepresent certain situations, are moments when I think I have something to gain by lying.** It's when the *lie* will make *me personally* look better than telling the *truth* would. If I'm recounting a situation **where I was made to look foolish**, or sinful, or outright *wrong*—but I tweak the details of the situation in the way I tell it—I don't have to look

foolish, sinful, or wrong. I can look *wise*, and *virtuous*, and *right*—which are some of my favorite ways to look. If I recount a situation **where I said something unthinkable** to another person—I can just leave that part of the conversation *out* in how I tell the story. If I **made a terrible decision** that impacted other people in significant ways—but I can explain the decision in ways that make it look like I made the decision for good *reasons*? Well then all of a sudden *I don't look nearly as bad*. *This*, at least *most* of the time, is the reason we tend to lie: *self-preservation*. *Self-commendation*. Or sometimes even *self-pity*.

Which means that there is another, very insidious, type of giving false testimony out there: giving false testimony about yourself. Claiming to *be* something you *aren't*. Claiming you *did* things you didn't do. Claiming you *said* things you didn't say (and actually have no *plans* to say in the future). *Misrepresenting* yourself to others for *your own* benefit. Sometimes, we do this so instinctively that we don't even realize we're doing it. Tiny, seemingly insignificant little embellishments. **Saying things at work like** “oh yeah, that's *in progress*,” when what we mean is “I am aware that I need to start on it.” **Saying things to our professors** like “I didn't get that done because I had a family *emergency* come up,” when the family member who had an emergency was *you*, and the *emergency* was that you *forgot* the assignment was due.

I'll give you another example of how I see this happen *often*: and that's **on social media**. **Social media, I think, has given us the perfect outlet to give false testimony about ourselves.** To pretend to be something we *aren't*. **Just let me ask you: if someone in this room were to comb through your Instagram feed right now, your Facebook timeline right now: would you say that what they are seeing there accurately represents what your life is like?** Or would you say it more represents what you *want* your life to be like? Is it more representative of only the really *fun*, really *exciting* parts of your life? Now, some of that is just how it works. Like obviously, if we go do something fun or something memorable, we're going to be inclined to post about those things online. ~~Not a lot of us are throwing out a grid post that's like, “welp, it's Wednesday, and I woke up too late, so I'm headed to work in sweatpants, still smelling like the Mexican food I ate last night! Hope I don't get fired! #YOLO!”~~ That's not how we typically roll. And I'm not saying it's wrong for you to post about the fun things you do in your life.

But here's **what I am saying**: **be very wary of curating a social media depiction of your life, to hide your real life behind.** Be very wary of concealing your *real* struggles, your *real* sins, your *real* difficulties behind a false social media persona. I'll never forget one time, when I had only been pastoring for a few years: there was **a couple in the church** I pastored who had the most *incredible* social media presence. Like *influencer* level. Tens if not *hundreds* of thousands of followers, every photo they posted was

perfectly shot and edited and filtered. They both had flexible schedules and traveled the world and posted about all of it. They would get paid to post about places they went and ate and drank. The whole nine yards. If you scrolled through this couple's account, you would think their life was a *movie*. You would come away thinking that you wanted *your* marriage to look just like *their* marriage: just picture perfect in every way.

And then, **one day, seemingly out of the blue**: the wife informed us that she had filed for divorce. Evidently, the husband had been involved in *multiple* affairs—had been cheating on her for years. And every time, he would get caught, apologize, and then immediately do it again. Eventually, every time he would get caught, he would blame it on *her*: something about her not being available enough to him or not loving him well. This went on long enough that eventually the *wife* started having an affair to get back at him for making *her* life miserable. And after a couple years of that, she had just decided it wasn't worth it anymore. And listen: *all* of this was happening in the background, unknown to anyone, as they were posting amazing photos of their travels around the world and how great their marriage was.

Now, **I understand that's an extreme** example. But at the same time, I think it's probably just an exaggerated example of what a lot of us tend to do. It's proof of this tendency some of us have to "give false testimony" about *ourselves*. To present ourselves as something other than we are. To cultivate a public perception that has almost nothing in common with our actual lives. And I think that story about that couple might be a cautionary tale about the real, substantial damage it can do to our souls when we do that. And that can happen via social media, or in entirely different ways. // The question is this: ***are we regularly presenting ourselves as something other than who we are?*** Are we perpetuating a public image of ourselves that has very little in common with our actual lives?

Or maybe **to ask the same question positively**: are there people in our lives that we hold absolutely nothing back from? I fully understand that we can't disclose *everything* about ourselves to everyone we meet—that would be impossible. But I do think *all* of us, as followers of Jesus, should have at least a *few* people that know everything there is to know about us. They should *know* the stuff we're ashamed of, the stuff that haunts us, the stuff that plagues us. And most importantly, they can remind us of what is true of us in Jesus in spite of *all* of that. They can remind us of the grace and compassion of Jesus in the *midst* of all that stuff. Do you have someone like *that* in your life? I would argue that *if* we want to grow and mature as followers of Jesus, those types of relationships are *essential*.

And they're **essential, in part**, because of the *negative* impact of *not* having them. **If we choose to continually “give false testimony” about ourselves, there is a really harmful cumulative effect to doing that over time. The longer that we functionally lie about who we are, the more insulated we become from real relationships with other people. Because for us to feel truly loved and accepted by other people, we need to know that they know the real us.** If they only love the *projection* of us that we've put out there, we will always feel at least *relatively* unknown. There will always be this thought in the back of our minds that if that person knew the *real* us, knew who we *really* were, they wouldn't feel the same way.

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And **understanding that dynamic** is actually *central* to pursuing change in this arena of your life. You see, to be done with “giving false testimony,” I think we first **have to answer the question, “why** do we give false testimony in the *first* place?” What *drives* us towards it? What *is* it in us that inclines us to lie—repeatedly—about others, and about ourselves? Why do we *do* it? Because it seems to me that until we understand why we do it, we're probably not going to have much luck at just spontaneously *not* doing it.

Here's my guess. I think deep down, **we lie because we think the lie will win us acceptance faster, and easier, than the truth will.** Isn't that usually it? I lie **about my productivity at work** because telling that lie will win me *acceptance* by people *easier* and *faster* than just putting forth effort to do the *work* will. I lie **in my marriage** because lying will win me the acceptance and comfort and “peace” in my marriage *easier* and *faster* than telling the *truth* will. I **gossip** about that other person, because doing *that* will win me the acceptance of that other person *faster* and *easier* than *refusing* to gossip will. **We give false testimony because it feels like an easier, quicker path to acceptance than the truth.**

But of course **the problem with that approach,** as we've already mentioned, is that we're only achieving *superficial* acceptance. People aren't accepting the *real* us; they're accepting the altered version of us that we've presented to them. *False* testimony tells us that as long as we're willing to keep bending the truth, we can keep finding acceptance. Only that acceptance has a diminishing return: it never quite scratches the itch the way we want, because people aren't accepting the real us.

The gospel, on the other hand, tells us that if we're willing to tell the truth about ourselves and others, we have the *eternal* acceptance from the only one who **matters.** You see, this is why Satan is so deeply invested in lies: because if he can get us living in the world of lies, we'll never experience the power of the gospel. But if we discover the acceptance that is ours through the gospel, we all of a sudden have no need for lies anymore. They hold no *power* over us. **The acceptance, the approval, the**

comfort, the manufactured “peace” you are currently seeking to obtain by giving false witness—they’re all just a *shadow* of the acceptance, approval, and peace you already *have* in Jesus. And if you’re willing to let go of the shadow, I promise what you’ll find in return is far better. **You see: God doesn’t just tell us *not* to lie—he rescues us from the *need* to lie. He redeems us out of the power that lies hold over us.**

So **how do we practically experience** that freedom? What do we do when we realize we’ve given in to the power of lies. Two things here—very simple things. First...

Confess

“Confess” is just a word that **means being entirely honest about our sin**. We acknowledge what we’ve done, and acknowledge *that* it was wrong to do. That’s it. You say, “here’s what I did, and it wasn’t okay for me to do.” “**I said this thing, and that was not an okay thing to say.**” “**I told you this thing about myself, and that was a lie.**” Now, you might ask, “acknowledge” it to *whom*? To *God*, or to other people? *Biblically*, the answer to that question is “yes.” You acknowledge it to both God *and* other people. As followers of Jesus, we believe that sin is first and foremost against *God*. But at the same time, we believe that sin—especially sins like “bearing false testimony” also have a *horizontal* component to them; they’re often *relational* in their expression. Which means that when we sin, we also need to confess to the person the sin was *with* or *against*.

So if we participated in slander or gossip or unwholesome talk with someone else (especially if it was with another follower of Jesus) we go to that person it was with and say “the other day, when we were talking about this other person, what I said was not okay. It wasn’t true (or at least, I wasn’t *sure* it was true), and it wasn’t done with the other person’s best interest in mind, and that wasn’t okay.” And I think especially in cases where what we said made its way back to the person it was *about*, we also need to confess to *them*. We need to say “I said this about you, and I’m sure it was hurtful when it got back to you. And it wasn’t okay for me to say.” As awkward and uncomfortable as that conversation is, it’s better than just letting the rift between you and them sit there. Just like we would hope that if someone talked about *us*, they would apologize to *us*, we should do that for them too.

All of that is *confession*. The **first step** is that we confess to God and to other followers of Jesus, what happened. Then, second, we...

Repent

The word *repent* in the bible means most literally “to change.” It’s the picture of going one way, and then having a change of mind and heart such that you stop, turn around, and start going the other way instead. So in regards to “giving false testimony,” *repentance* would mean that after *acknowledging* the wrongdoing, we make regular efforts *not* to participate in it. It doesn’t mean we never *fail* in those efforts, but it does mean that we make an effort. *We ask for accountability among those we are most inclined to slander and gossip to. We make efforts to use our words in ways that build up and not tear down. We make efforts to live in transparent ways with other people and not present ourselves as something other than what we are. We own it whenever we fail to do that well, and ask for the Holy Spirit’s help in motivating us to approach those situations differently.* That’s what it means to *repent*.

Biblically, we’re told that this type of change *happens* through “renewing our minds.”⁴ Which means that **while it *does* require *effort* to repent, it’s not *just* a matter of effort. It’s actually a change in the way we *think*, that *generates* an effort to change. It’s predicated on the *belief* that other people don’t *deserve* to have me gossip or slander or talk about them in those ways. It’s based on the *belief* that I exist to encourage and build up others, not tear others down. It’s based on an understanding that the community we’re a part of can’t function if everyone is assassinating other people’s character behind their backs. It’s us having an epiphany that all of that is inconsistent with the gospel message and inconsistent with the kingdom of God—and deciding, in light of that, to live *differently* in response.** That’s the work of *repentance* in the life of a follower of Jesus. And as we say often: **repentance is not just a one-time thing we do when we *decide* to follow Jesus, it’s something we do over and over again as we follow Jesus.**

So **each week we come to the tables** together, and we remember the moment when Jesus made all of this possible. When Jesus went to the cross and offered us something better than artificial acceptance. And when he made living *in* that acceptance an actual possibility. We celebrate that moment through the bread and the cup. And that’s exactly what we’re going to do this morning. / But before we do that, I do want to invite you to consider one thing. In keeping with the true and trustworthy character of Jesus, I don’t want any of us to come to these tables this morning and not acknowledge ways that we have *failed* to be that.

So this morning, **if you have felt any conviction**, any awareness of ways you have given false testimony about others or about yourself—I want to invite you, motivated by the

⁴ See Romans 12:2

gospel of Jesus, to own that. Before you go to the tables, confess that to him and to someone you came with, someone in your LifeGroup. Acknowledge the ways that you've misrepresented God, yourself, others. And then receive communion as a tangible reminder of how God offers us his acceptance, despite all of that. Make sense?

Let's **pray** and then we'll do just that.