

'You shall not bear false witness'

Exodus 20:16

A sorry history

In the last week or so, the Pope has been meeting with his Cardinals from the United States of America. Together they have been working on the fact of paedophiles among its clergy.

The force of the media and public opinion has forced them to begin to agree to speak the truth about sexual sin among its clergy.

Of course, this problem is not new.

Catholic Popes, clergy, and nuns have been busy at sexual crimes for many, many centuries.

And they have accepted it and tried to cover it up for centuries.

They have abused their positions of power and influence in society by refusing to be open and honest.

And they are not the only ones.

Other denominations have clergy who have been as guilty.

And they too have failed to be open and honest about what has gone on.

In some cases they have failed to tell the truth.

In others they have failed to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

In others they have failed to expose their clergy to the law courts.

And in others, they have covered up the truth by simply moving their clergy around.

The truth is that the leaders of churches all around the world have failed to be like God.

They have failed to act rightly.

And they have failed to speak truly.

And they stand condemned by the clear teaching of the Bible that springs from such passages as Exodus 20:17 that we will look at tonight.

So let's make a start.

Exodus 20:16

Context and meaning of words

The first thing to note is the context of these words.

The language of false witness is the language of the court system.

What is imagined is an Israelite being called in as a witness in a judicial forum.

The purpose of such a forum was to establish truth.

On the basis of this, certain judgments or decisions could be made about the people involved.

In Israelite law, witnesses were key elements in such court cases.

They were an integral, if not foundational element in the Jewish legal system.

The Hebrew words used here are important.

First, there is the word that is used for 'witness'.

It literally means 'to answer, give a reply, testify'.

When it is followed by another Hebrew word, as it is here, then it means 'to answer, give a reply, testify ... for, or against, or in the case of someone'.

The word for 'neighbour' literally means a 'companion, friend, neighbour, or fellow citizen'. In the Old Testament the word always refers to a person you have a reciprocal relationship with. When it is used in a legal context it means someone who is a fellow member of the covenant community.

Lastly, the two Hebrew words behind 'false witness' mean 'lying, deceiving, false, or fraudulent testimony or evidence'.

So, what we have here is the idea of giving witness in a court on behalf of a fellow Israelite.

And when you give witness, your testimony is to be true.

It must have no lying, no false, deceiving, or fraudulent evidence.

It is clear that this commandment is like the ones that have come before it.

It is about relationship with God and with our fellow community members.

It is about preserving relationship with God by not sinning against our neighbour.

It is about preserving relationship with our neighbour.

This commandment makes clear that every Israelite is responsible for the integrity of the legal system.

This can be seen in other parts of the Old Testament where there are checks and balances put in place.

For example, the testimony of two or three witnesses was required before a charge could be brought (Exodus 23:1; Numbers 35:30; Jeremiah 7:8; Psalm 24:4; Proverbs 25:18 and Job 31:30).

Also, the penalty for false witness was severe.

If you gave false witness against your fellow Israelite and your evidence was discovered to be false then you would receive the punishment of the crime you gave witness in (e.g. Deuteronomy 19:16-21).

In fact, in ancient Israel you could even be punished if you frustrated justice by not coming forward with any information that you had.

You see, there is nothing like truth to spoil relationships, is there?

And lying about someone does huge damage to them, their family, and their reputation.

It does huge damage to the legal system.

And it thereby does huge damage to the stability of society.

Examples of false witness

Let's have a look at an Old Testament example of false witness.

It can be found in 1 Kings 21:1-29.

Let's have a look at it together...

Put on overhead.

The teachings of Jesus (Matthew 5)

As we have been looking at the 10 Commandments we have often seen that Jesus has some things to say about nearly all of them.

And that is so here as well.

Take a look at Matthew 5:33-37.

Let's see what Jesus has to say.

The first thing to notice is that Jesus does not quote directly from any Old Testament passage.

Instead, he appears to allude to a number of Old Testament passages.

Here are some examples of passages I think he might have in mind:

Exodus 20:7 and 16

7 "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

16 "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

Leviticus 19:12

You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

Numbers 30:2

If a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

Deuteronomy 23:21

“If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.

Most of these passages speak of taking oaths.

And oath taking was common in the Old Testament and endorsed by God (cf. Deuteronomy 10:20).

But now Jesus says, ‘Do not take an oath at all...’

Now I don’t think that this means taking oaths in a court room or taking oaths of allegiance.

Even Paul in the New Testament takes oaths (cf. Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:23), as does God himself (Luke 1:68, 73; Acts 2:27-31).

What I think Jesus is saying here is something along these lines...

He is making the point that oaths are designed to make truthfulness more solemn and sure (e.g. Hebrews 6:17).

But what had happened by the time of Jesus was that the Jews had devised a whole system around the Old Testament teaching about oaths and truth telling.

For example, one Rabbi said that if you swear BY Jerusalem you are not bound by any vow.

However, if you swear TOWARD Jerusalem, then you are bound to your vow.

In other words, the swearing of oaths had degenerated into a terrible system of rules that let you know when you could or could not get away with lying and deception.

In other words, these systems of oath taking actually fostered lying, not truth telling.

They therefore weaken the cause of truth and promote deceit.

They therefore break the two commandments about oath taking and false witness, each of which are concerned with endorsing truth.

The answer of Jesus is clear.

If people will play games with the Old Testament laws like this then oath taking is to be abolished.

For Jesus is interested in what lay behind the Old Testament laws.

And what lay behind these laws was truthfulness, honesty, constancy and absoluteness.

And therefore Christians should be marked by such truthfulness, honesty, constancy and absoluteness.

When a Christian says ‘yes’ it should therefore mean ‘yes’.

When a Christian says ‘no’ it should therefore mean ‘no’.

If a Christian needs to clarify their words by giving an assurance that their words on this occasion are truthful only serves to question whether all their other words are not truthful.

But Jesus has some other things to say in other places in the NT, doesn’t he?

For Jesus is clear in such parables as the Good Samaritan that while our truthfulness is primarily expressed with those who are in covenant relationships, our neighbour is not just our covenant brothers and sisters.

Our neighbour is far more than this.

Our neighbour is also those who are outside close relationship.

It is even those who are distant from us culturally, theologically, and socially.

The Apostolic teaching

If we were to go elsewhere in the New Testament to see how these ideas were picked up, perhaps the best place to go is to the Epistle of James.

Let's start with James 5:12.

¹²But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

James clearly relies on Jesus.

Christians are to be known for truthfulness.

However, James has some other things to say.

Let's have a look at James 3.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Notice what James says.

It is with our tongue that we destroy people.

It is with our tongue that we poison relationships and abolish peace.

And it with our tongue that we can speak and live the gospel.

Tongues are potentially the instruments of great good.

But so often they are used as the instruments of great evil.

Such is not to be true among God's people.

Thinking about God and us

The God whose word is truth

And with this we move on to thinking about God and the issue of truth.

God is a God of communication.

He is a God who therefore loves words.
He is also a God of truth.
He is therefore a God who loves true words.
The Bible tells us clearly that God's word is true.
That is, God's word is dependable, faithful, and can be trusted.
If you hear God's word and trust it, you will not be let down.
This is true in the Old Testament.
It is true in the New Testament.
And it is true now.
God's word is truth.

The people of the truthful God

And if we are Christians, then we are the people of the truthful God.
And this means that truth must be our watchword as well.
And this truth is not just truth for the law courts.
It is truth in every element of life.
It includes being truthful when we as God's people have not told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.
It includes being truthful and open when our clergy have been guilty of sin.
It includes allowing them to be punished openly in our civil courts for breaking the law of the land as well as the law of God.
But it also includes not telling stories that embellish or hide the truth.
It includes not using propaganda.
It includes presenting ourselves truly in job interviews.
Or telling stories about ourselves that present ourselves in a more positive light than the raw facts will allow.
If we are Christians we will not make promises or say we will do things only to renege on these things because it is personally inconvenient to go through with them.
If we are preachers we will not fudge the evidence to make a point.
Nor will we use hyperbole that makes a truth out of something that has shades of grey.
And when we do not know something, we will not mask our ignorance.
We are the followers of him who is the way, the truth and the life.
We are to be like him.
Our word is to be as dependable as his word.
Truth is to be truth.
And falsehood is to be falsehood.
We will ask God to set a guard upon our mouths and to keep watch at the door of our lips.