

# WEEK 10: DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS

## NINTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20



### The Place of the Passage

The previous three commandments were two-word assertions. The ninth commandment is longer, and it paints a picture. “You shall not bear [or “answer”] false witness against your neighbor.” The scene evoked by this sentence is an Israelite courtroom. The depiction of a “witness” giving “answer” concerning a “neighbor” strings together legal terminology from a Hebrew trial. The command prohibits a witness in court from answering falsely about a person on trial. In other words, this command is not simply about being honest for the sake of the truth, as important as that is. It is about being honest for the sake of other people. The command highlights the damage that dishonesty, whether in a court of law or in some other context, causes a neighbor. The ninth commandment is not simply about speaking truth—it is about “speaking the truth *in love*” (compare Eph. 4:15).

**The Big Picture**

In a community of love, trust must be maintained with truthfulness.

**Reflection and Discussion**

**Read the ninth commandment from either Exodus or Deuteronomy. Also read Paul’s expansion on this commandment in Ephesians 4:25–27. Use the following questions to help you consider the commandment’s meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 177, 340; online at [www.esv.org](http://www.esv.org).)**



**False Witnesses**

A person might bear false witness in different ways. In some instances, a false witness speaks lies. In other instances, a false witness speaks true facts—but in a manner that supports a false or malicious narrative. A false witness could also be a person who remains silent and, by withholding critical information, allows a false conclusion to stand. The faithfulness of a witness is not determined only by the truth value of his words but also by the conclusions to which his communications and actions lend support. Read each of the following passages and note which kind of false witness is represented by each. Add your observations about each kind of false witness.

1. False witnesses against Naboth (1 Kings 21:1–16)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2. False witnesses against Stephen (Acts 6:11–14)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

3. False witnesses during a public inquest (Lev. 5:1; Prov. 29:24)

---

---

---

---

---

---

Of these three kinds of false witness, which do you suppose would (under most circumstances) be the most damaging to relationships? Why?

---

---

---

---

---

---

In the garden of Eden the serpent spoke a mixture of truth and falsehood with an intent to trick Eve, and Adam with her, into disobedience (Gen. 3:1–13). Read the passage and note features of the serpent’s words and goals that mark its representation as false testimony, even though many of the serpent’s words were factually true.

---

---

---

---

---

---

In the book of Revelation Satan<sup>1</sup> is called the “accuser of our brothers” (Rev. 12:10) on account of the testimony he bears against God’s people in his desire to cause them harm (John 10:10). This would be an example of a false witness who speaks both lies and true facts about others with malicious intentions. Read the description of the devil and his fate in Revelation 12:10. What do you see in this brief picture of the devil as a false witness that strengthens your resolve to be a true witness?

---

---

---

---

---

---

WEEK 10: DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS

In the opening lines of Revelation the apostle John calls Jesus “the faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5). How does Jesus perform the function of a faithful witness for us? What does his example teach about promoting truth for the good of our neighbors?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

In the ninth commandment the phrase “against your neighbor” shows that dishonesty damages relationships. In Ephesians 4:25 Paul urges us to build relationships “with” (not “against”) a neighbor by speaking truth, regarding ourselves as “members one of another.” What does it mean to be “members one of another,” and how does this perspective foster honesty?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Gossip is a form of false witness whereby lies or true facts are spread to undermine the standing of a person in the “court” of others’ opinions (Prov. 20:19). How can we differentiate edifying conversation about other people from unwholesome gossip (Prov. 5:1; 11:22; 29:11)?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

The ninth commandment shows us that truth has a purpose. Truth is not a weapon to tear people down. We are to seek truth in order to build up others.

Based on your past readings in the Gospels, what are one or two lessons you see in the example of Jesus, in contrast to other religious leaders of his day, of speaking the truth in love?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Truth and Society**

Deuteronomy 25:13–16 addresses the importance of “full and fair” weights and measures when doing business. Read the passage and discuss ways in which this law regarding truthfulness in an ancient marketplace translates for application in modern business dealings.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

According to Martin Luther’s Larger Catechism, the ninth commandment requires that “everyone shall help his neighbor secure his rights . . . , not glossing it over or keeping silent concerning it.” What are some of the false narratives current today that fuel societal disharmony? How can the church improve its truthful witness in defense of our neighbors against these false claims?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

### Gospel Glimpses

**JUSTIFICATION OF JESUS' PEOPLE.** Each of us deserves condemnation. If the second person of the Godhead had never become flesh to atone for our sins, the word of truth spoken at the throne of God would only condemn us. But Jesus went to the cross to pursue a ministry of truth *in love*. He does not manipulate or hide the truth of our sins. Nevertheless, by his atonement Jesus now stands before the Father and bears truthful witness about the justification of his people. The ninth commandment shows that being a faithful witness is not simply about speaking what is true. It is also about promoting truth for the purposes of love. In the gospel Jesus has accomplished what the ninth commandment requires as our witness.

**JESUS KEPT THE NINTH COMMANDMENT.** Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus spoke, lived, and taught truthfully. Frequently confronted by opponents who sought to ensnare him verbally, Jesus consistently gave answers that avoided their traps yet remained authentic and true (Luke 5:17–26). He courageously spoke the truth even when doing so brought stoning attempts (John 10:31–39) or death threats (Luke 4:24–30). Jesus understood that truthfulness includes discretion, as he shared some lessons with his disciples but kept them hidden from the multitudes (Luke 8:9–10; 9:18–22). He also understood that there was a proper time to make some things known, speaking truthfully in the moment without revealing what was not appropriate at the time (John 7:1–14). He not only spoke the truth, but he handled the truth wisely and in love. Jesus' example beautifully models the ninth commandment, speaking the truth in faithful relationships. He kept the law perfectly, including his observance of the ninth commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

### Whole-Bible Connections

**FAITHFUL WITNESS.** The ninth commandment shows the importance of a faithful witness, a role that is important in many passages throughout the Bible. Noah was a “herald of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:5) in his day. His faithful witness, though ignored by many, brought about the salvation of his

children and their spouses. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob wandered as nomads in the land of promise, not receiving ownership of the land but bearing faithful witness to their descendants that God's promise could be trusted (Heb. 11:13–16). Moses was a faithful witness, repeatedly ascending Mount Sinai to hear from God and then descending to the people to speak and to teach them God's words. Joshua, Samuel, David, Nathan, Esther, Ezra, Peter, Paul, John, and many other godly characters of biblical history were embodiments of the ninth commandment exhortation to bear faithful witness—and to do so because of their love for others.

**FALSE WITNESS.** The biblical narratives are also filled with examples of false witnesses, as warned against in the ninth commandment. The serpent that tempted Eve was a false witness, mixing truth and error to deceive (Gen. 3:1–13; John 8:44). Abraham, in his fear of Pharaoh and later Abimelech, repeatedly told a half-truth about his wife being his sister (Gen. 12:13; 20:2, 11–13). God instructed Moses to speak to a rock to bring forth water. Instead he struck the rock, allowing his own anger to cloud his witness to God's care (Num. 20:2–13). Paul confronted Peter for bearing false witness about the gospel through Peter's actions in Galatia, when he separated from the Gentiles while eating (Gal. 2:11–21). The damage caused to others when a person gives false testimony is seen in accounts like these all through Scripture.

**RESTORATION OF TRUTH.** One of the most important themes in the Bible is the topic of truth. It was a lie of Satan that originally deceived mankind and precipitated the curse (Gen. 3:1–13). And it is a restoration of truth—restoring the true order and relationships of all things—that the law was given to foreshadow and which the work of Christ came to accomplish. The nature of truth, as that which restores relationships, is affirmed by the ninth commandment and echoed throughout the Bible.

## Theological Soundings

**THE CHURCH'S WITNESS.** The ninth commandment has important implications for the doctrine of the church. One of the primary callings of the church is to be a witness to the world (Matt. 28:18–20). That witness is to be loving and persuasive, not condemning. The church's witness is to reflect both the words of God in what is said and the grace of God in how those words are said. Furthermore, the role of the church is to bear witness, not to judge. Judgment belongs to another (John 5:22); witness belongs to the church. The church's identity as a witness is to be shaped by the ninth commandment concern for faithfulness both to the truth and to one's neighbor.

**Personal Implications**

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue's ninth commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

**1. Gospel Glimpses**

---

---

---

---

---

---

**2. Whole-Bible Connections**

---

---

---

---

---

---

**3. Theological Soundings**

---

---

---

---

---

---

**4. Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20**

---

---

---

---

---

---

## As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first through ninth commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.

### Definitions

<sup>1</sup> **Satan** – A spiritual being whose name means “accuser.” As the leader of all the demonic forces, he opposes God’s rule and seeks to harm God’s people and accuse them of wrongdoing. His power, however, is confined to the bounds that God has set for him, and one day he will be destroyed along with all his demons (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10).