

Exodus 20:16 Court in the act!

It was a strange way to advertise a product, when the manufacturers of **Marmite** just decided to be honest: you love it or you hate it. But that's not the only thing in life that can be like that. At times, I would think that many of us would feel rather like that about the **Internet**.

There is no doubt that it has affected modern life almost from top to bottom. Even if you prefer to read **books**, you know, those old paper things, rather than use the on-screen equivalent, there's a decent chance that you might have **ordered** those books online. Or if you've bought them from an actual **bookshop**, you can bet that *their* stock-keeping is done digitally, rather than just with **paper and pencil**.

And so much of the Internet can be used for substantial good. It was so helpful earlier this year when the 2nd Lockdown happened, and we could opt for online **Click and Collect** shopping.

But the Internet, I'm sure you realise, has a dark side, too. I don't mean just the "**Dark Web**", whatever that precisely is, or dodgy stuff like **Bitcoin**, or just the frightening proliferation of online **gambling** that seems to be particularly promoted throughout football matches on some channel. And I don't even mean all those sites that distract the eyes with indecent imagery, either. I'm thinking about what they nowadays call **Social Media**.

I absolutely *love* being able to keep in touch with our family by means of video phone calls, and snapshots of family life, over things like **Whatsapp** or **Facebook**. But you know there is very much a *hate* side to things like this, too. We've had it in the news this week following the unfortunate **penalty kicks** that didn't make it last Sunday evening. It is so easy to just log in, tap a few vindictive words, and press **SEND**. And anywhere around the world, the poison in your words can wreak havoc in people's lives.

Fake News can be propagated.

Riot and murder and just general abuse can be instigated.

Hate speech can corrode the mouth of the speaker and the heart of the reader.

With just innocent words, or the lack of **Likes**, slim teenage girls can be convinced that they are **seriously overweight**, and feel compelled to starve themselves yet further.

The Bible is absolutely right:

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

(Proverbs 18:21)

And today's Commandment, number nine in this list, tackles it *all*, I think I would say. We start with those Commandments about how we are to relate to God himself, things like

“You shall have no other gods before me.”

(Exodus 20:3)

And amongst that batch is one that more particularly has applications to how we are to speak concerning this God:

“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.”

(Exodus 20:7)

Hopefully you remember that that is about having “the name” or the reputation of the LORD upon our whole lives, but it clearly does particularise too, down to the level of the words that come from our mouths.

But if the purpose of these rules is not just to regularise our lifestyles, but to make them appropriate and fitting for God to come and reside amongst his people:

“And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.”

(Exodus 29:46)

... then as well as honouring the God who has redeemed his people, his people are to live together honourably, too. Just as you get in the NT:

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

(1 John 4:20)

So we are not to *dispose* of the image-bearers of God by murder. We are not to *defile* the image-bearers of God by adultery. We are not to *defraud* the image-bearers of God by theft. And, in today's verse, we are not to *derogate* the image-bearers of God by our words.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.”

(Exodus 20:16)

Very often we just mentally reduce this to “do not lie”, but I think that oversimplifies what this is saying, and in some ways can actually distract from what we need to take on board from it. For one thing, we miss the flavour of what is being said. Think “witness”, and shouldn't that immediately conjure up the image of the **courtroom** - or however that process took place in Israel of 3000 plus years ago?

The word that we have translated **bear** is much more frequently translated as “answer”. The immediate scene we have here is when we are being asked a question about someone. How do we reply? And unfortunately the word that we just about always see translated as **against** ... that really needs to be more vague, more like “in relation to”. This commandment is not just about doing someone *down* by falsehood; it can just as much apply to “bigging someone *up*” by falsehood. That is just as much “against your neighbour” in this commandment.

But maybe we’ll return to that kind of implication in a few minutes. I think it might again be useful to use the same framework of headings for this Ninth Commandment, because there are certainly a few things we need to be comfortable in thinking that it *doesn’t* mean, first of all.

What *doesn’t* it ban?
Don’t be limited by the literal
Flip it over

- **What *doesn’t* it ban?**

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.”

(Exodus 20:16)

It seems all very spiritual to say that this implies we must never say or imply anything that is less than 100% true. But what if it were a

- **lesser evil?**

If you read, way back, that classic Christian book **The Hiding Place**, set in the context of the Second World War, and with a family sheltering Jews from Nazi death squads, there was something about Corrie Ten Boom resolving that if, if asked the direct question about whether there were Jews hiding in this particular house, she would be obliged to give the truthful answer that there were.

Leave aside the question of how convincingly should could have lied, anyway, or whether it could ever be good to learn to lie convincingly. But is it necessary to interpret this Commandment, in that scenario, to imply that the obligation to tell the truth trumps everything else?

Go back to the beginning of Exodus, and you’ve got an example of the Hebrew midwives, it looks very much to me, concocting a story to cover why they refused to carry out the Egyptian edict of killing any newborn male babies. And what sounds to me suspiciously like deceit is commended as an act of faith in God.

The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”

(Exodus 1:19)

So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

(Exodus 1:20-21)

I don't want to push this too far. The typical cop-out to justify "white lies" is usually "to not hurt someone's feelings", but I expect there's a whole lot of less wholesome reasons concealed beneath that. You might say you want to spare someone the hurt of thinking that you forgot their **birthday** - you might actually be even more wanting to avoid the loss of face in admitting it!

But there are also

- **social conventions**

that you could argue employ deceit. I've always thought it was a bit empty to have to answer "would you like **another helping?**" with ***Oh, I couldn't possibly!*** ... even though you really know you *would* like some more ... and you're *fairly* sure that it will be offered again. You have to be "pressed" into having more. You can't seem too eager. And I must admit that my gut feeling is that that is a silly game. But I don't think I can any longer insist that it is a deceit that this Ninth Commandment speaks about. There's a clear recognition that posturing, if you could put it that way, is recognised in the Scriptures.

"Bad, bad," says the buyer, but when he goes away, then he boasts.

(Proverbs 20:14)

And even Jesus plays this game, too. On the road to Emmaus he meets two downcast disciples who do not realise that he has not just died but been raised, and somehow they don't recognise him. And he feigns ignorance of those recent events by the way he asks questions:

And he said to them, "What things?"

(Luke 24:19)

And then he seems to be intending to continue onward on the road:

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, ...

(Luke 24:28)

A few more that I think might be worth mentioning here: the whole area of

- **acting / game play**

I've heard some people say that Christians shouldn't think to take part in acting, because it's all deceitful. You *aren't* the King of Spain, or whatever, and therefore you shouldn't act as if you are. I just think that's way over the top. And we

need to take these queries and quibbles back to the Commandment it's claimed they are applications of.

If it's a question of a social convention, in what way is this "answering falsely in relation to a neighbour"? Most people know the rules of the game. If you're playing the board game **Sorry** - in case you don't know that one, if you send your opponent home, you say "Sorry" - though you obviously aren't at all! - it's all up-front, and part of what you implicitly accept when you play the game. You *know* that that is **Claire Foy** or **Olivia Colman** playing the Queen, and that the words you hear are largely imagined. You see the word "drama" and you know you are running the risk of being misled.

And if you play a game on which "you" appear on your screen and other people's screens as something more like **the Hulk** ... come on now, *you* know it's a fantasy, *they* know it's a fantasy.

And related to this

- **stories**

I remember someone talking about one of Jesus' parables that starts ...

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ..."

(Luke 16:19-20)

And this person then said, *The Lord Jesus never told a word of a lie*. Which, of course, is correct. But the inference he drew from that was that this parable had to be literally true. There had to be a real Lazarus. There had to be a real rich man, who really did have that subsequent conversation with Abraham - if you know how the story goes on.

And so there had to be a real man who **fell among bandits**, was ignored by two Jewish religious professionals, and was finally tended to by a Samaritan. And two real men who built **two real houses**, one on sand and one on rock.

Whereas I really think we have to recognise that, even if they *could* have happened, they don't *have* to have literally happened. It is a recognised literary form, telling a story to make a point more effectively than reading a logic-driven essay. It doesn't have to be literally true. No more than you should call a vet if you hear that it has just been **raining cats and dogs**.

One final snippet: sometimes it is simply better

- **not answering**

at all, or not answering fully. In a **court of law**, you might be asked to state “the whole truth”. But just because someone asks “What do you think of my **new shirt?**” (or dress or kitchen or whatever), you are not obliged to tell them just how gross you really think it looks. A partial answer or changing the subject entirely (if you can get away with it) is not deceit. Though perhaps there is also the question about whether letting your neighbour look like a right idiot is really most truly loving. It might be much more a question of “How can I say this ...?”

The bottom line is, things like this are not *answering falsely in relation to a neighbour*. So ... what *is*? What *does* this verse refer to?

- **Don't be limited by the literal**

Well, the literal is serious enough. The Jewish system of laws had a heavy deterrent for false testimony in a court situation. First, there is the recognition that perjury is possible, so ...

“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.”

(Deuteronomy 19:15)

And if perjury is detected,

“... if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

(Deuteronomy 19:18-19)

“And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

(Deuteronomy 19:20-21)

That's pretty serious stuff, I think I'd say. But that is specifically relating to the courtroom. And the courtroom doesn't apply all that often in our everyday lives. So let's think outside that box for a while. How else might *answering falsely in relation to a neighbour* apply to you and me, any day of the week?

- **Putting down - belittling**

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

(Proverbs 12:18)

There are so many ways of belittling people. Someone disagrees with you, so you call them an idiot. Someone does something that you can't do, so you suggest it's none too spectacular - maybe with a bit of sarcasm. Maybe with darts barbed

with verbal poison. You're stupid. You're rubbish. You're useless. You'll never amount to anything. Nobody loves you. You're worthless.

Sometimes it's not the word, but the tone, perhaps that weary note that suggests that you're such a dummy to do or think *that* ... that surely you should have grown out of that by *now*. The look just flickers across the face. Or the **eyes roll**.

Even worse when actions encourage others to pitch in as well. Perhaps it's not you initiating the verbal abuse, but when the victim is on the way down you start to put the boot in too.

You can see that in the public arena nowadays, too. Maybe someone has done something considered inappropriate - and maybe it is, or it's just considered to be, nowadays - like saying on Facebook that you believe in traditional marriage. Maybe it's only an accusation, with very little basis at all. But the online mob gathers and feels justified in using all sorts of demeaning and quite likely hate-filled words in joining in with the condemnation **feeding frenzy**.

Maybe there is the presumption that anyone who plays the victim card must always be believed, and the alleged oppressor can then quite rightly be indiscriminately savaged.

Or maybe this can take shape in a more homely setting, when people are shamed inappropriately, or embarrassed unnecessarily, or teased mercilessly, most likely for mere trivia: the **colour of the hair**, the clothes that have just gone **out of fashion**, the teenager who publicly expressed even the least appreciation of their parent.

Anything, any excuse to not "bring people down to size", but to belittle them further, to make ourselves feel more handsome or clever or well-off or popular, more *something*, at their expense.

Contrast that with how we are told our Saviour spoke:

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; ...

(1 Peter 2:22-23)

But if there is putting down, there is also flattery, what you might call

- **putting up - flattery**

And that is destructive too, according to Scripture.

A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

(Proverbs 26:28)

Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart. Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbours deceit in his

heart; when he speaks graciously, believe him not, for there are seven abominations in his heart;

(Proverbs 26:23-25)

How does it help if people are told nowadays that they can do anything they set their minds to? Told that their skills are superb, when they're actually pretty mediocre. Don't those acts that get rubbished on **X-Factor** make you wonder why, oh why, didn't somebody tell those poor contestants that they have a weak voice and can't hit anything like that top note?

There's a fairly obvious one that you probably have expected soon

- **speaking up - gossip**

I know, I know, these are just prayer requests! Well, sometimes they are ... but sometimes the experience grows in the telling ... and the hearing.

The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.

(Proverbs 26:22)

I don't know what the border-line between the two is. But I think it might be like when you try to walk down a **scree slope**. You know how possible it is that that would give way beneath you. If you have to descend by that route, if there is no other way around it, you come down very, very gently. One step at a time. If things start to slip a little, you hold still until all the slipping will hopefully stop.

So if you have to share something that is not positive about someone, how reluctant are you to do so? How carefully do you decide where to plant just one foot at a time? Do you stop and think about each statement before you make it? Do you start to feel some slight hint of enjoyment in the relating of that "delicious morsel"? Do you remember that it can descend into the inner parts of both hearer and speaker and poison you?

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.

(1 Peter 2:1)

For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish — that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

(2 Corinthians 12:20)

So the answer might be, you might conclude, the opposite of speaking up:

- **shutting up - silence**

But that alone isn't the answer. Refusing to speak when there is something that needs to be said is just as much *false witness in relation to a neighbour*. So

“If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity; ...”

(Leviticus 5:1)

So remember what The Preacher in Ecclesiastes says about times:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ...

... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

(Ecclesiastes 3:7)

I wonder if we shouldn't tweak the word "witness" at this point to include - although it's a bit of a jargon word - "witnessing". There was a time when Jesus' disciples became exuberant in shouting his praises. The Pharisees, as you might have guessed, weren't too keen with that impropriety. But Jesus insisted that what they were doing was exactly right.

And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

(Luke 19:39-40)

Folks, do you think that it is possible that "false witness in relation to a neighbour" could also at times include not speaking up when we could, just waiting for those stones to cry out to do our job for us?

I don't know what opportunities might cross your path week by week, but there's one thing that I think I should re-institute when we are, in principle, back to normal next week - that's the regular prayer every Sunday for opportunities that we just can't dodge, during the coming week.

How much harm could we be rendering people in our lives by our silent refusal to bear witness *to* (not *against!*) your neighbour?

And even if it's not something that serious, do we sometimes shrink back from giving praise - or at least encouragement - where it is due and helpful? Perhaps we fear we could tempt someone to pride ... so instead we condemn them to fear and doubt?

And it could even be that we fail to speak up concerning or to *ourselves*. What if an accusation is made about us, and it's *right*? And we try to evade the point, or make excuses, or shift the blame. *You don't understand my circumstances! I'm only human; we have these needs! I just have a weakness in that area!* Or ... *And you're a fine one to talk, with YOUR ... (something or other)!*

Contrast that with a king whose word had already arranged murder, but whom God's Spirit cut to the heart.

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."

(2 Samuel 12:13)

Folks, do we insist on speaking false witness to or concerning ourselves?

- **Flip it over**

I'd like to flip this over in two ways, before I finish this morning. First, we've been thinking about bearing false witness in relation to a neighbour. Can I also suggest that, also ...

- **Do not bear truthful witness against, either**

There are times when we could stick to words that are absolutely truthful, but that do not need to be spoken. This verse from Proverbs could apply just as much:

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

(Proverbs 12:18)

Truthful words could still be spoken rashly, and slash like swords. Truth needs to be applied *wisely* in order to bring healing. And here is, I think, some good advice about whether to speak. It's not specifically, in this format, expressly from the Scriptures. Some people claim something like this was spoken by Gautama Buddha, but that is also disputed. But every element, I'm sure, fits with the Word of God. Five points to remember, if you're going to speak up:

Is it *true*? - that's pretty basic, in terms of what we've already been looking at.

Is it *necessary*? If it's a correction, for example, is it important enough to make? If it's a sin, even, is it important enough to specifically challenge ... or can you just leave it to the Holy Spirit to work on someone's conscience?

Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

(Proverbs 17:9)

Is it *kind*? Do you speak as gently as possible? Do you use minimum force?

Is it *benevolent*? - of good intention. Are you speaking with the intention of doing good, or is it really a pretext of indulging your anger?

Is it *timely*? It could be that if you miss the time to speak, it becomes the time to keep silent. Past hurts, I suspect, become increasingly incapable of full resolution.

The bone has set, and it has set **wonky**. In this like, perhaps, it cannot be set straight again - or the cure could be worse than the disease, so long after the event.

So, as I said, be careful not to bear *truth* falsely in regard to a neighbour. But, much more usually, much more encouragingly, much more wholesomely ...

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another.

(Ephesians 4:25)

What kind of truth? We've heard this verse abused a few times, I'm sure. People who say "I'm saying this *in love*" ... but what comes out next is delivered in a way far from loving.

... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ...

(Ephesians 4:15)

But what is *supposed* to be the result of speaking gracious truth to one another? We see it there: Christian growth, growth in Christ-likeness.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

(Ephesians 4:29)

And why do I say Christ-likeness? Just to finish, and in this context of faithful or faithless witness, this Jesus is the example to follow. He is

... Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, ...

(1 Timothy 6:13)

"... the Amen, the faithful and true witness, ..."

(Revelation 3:14)

He is the one who fully lived truth. And he is the one who gives true life.