

You Shall Not Bear False Witness

by the Rev. Glenn G. Alden

“Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears God’s words” (John 8:47).

We are all familiar with the commandment, “You shall not bear false witness.” On the surface this commandment forbids false testimony. A person is forbidden from testifying falsely about any matter. False witness, in a broader sense, means not only to be a false witness but it means all lying or fraud or slander. If you misrepresent a product you are trying to sell, you are bearing false witness. If you try to harm someone’s reputation by spreading lies or rumors about him or her, you are bearing false witness. Even if you fail to speak in defense of an innocent victim when you know he is innocent (because you do not want to become involved), you are bearing false witness. It is easy to see the importance of this commandment in society. For deceit, lying and slander break down the very fiber of trust on which the smooth running of society depends.

In the spiritual sense false witness means to declare something false to be true, or something evil to be good, and the converse. Pornography is a good example of something which equates evil with happiness. Much of our culture bears false witness when it equates power and material success with happiness.

In the supreme sense the commandment against false witness forbids all blasphemy against the Lord and His Word. To deny God, or to attribute evil to God, is to bear false witness. To use the Word to defend some false idea or some evil practice is to bear false witness. So today we read about the Lord’s discussion with some of the Jews about the reason why they were persecuting Him and would eventually put Him to death. And He said to them, “If God were your father, you would love Me.... Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do.” Plainly, the reason the chief priests and Pharisees hated the Lord and wanted to put Him to death was the truth He taught. For they saw that His teachings threatened their own power and self-interest. Their loves of power and money and status were threatened by the Lord’s words, and so from those selfish loves they judged and wished to condemn His teachings.

We are no different. Our selfish loves of power and money and reputation are continually pressuring us to bend the truth or to see things in ways that bring our own advantage. If I drive through a red light, I tend to excuse or minimize it, especially if no accident results. “No harm done, but I had better wake up and pay attention,” I think to myself. But if someone else runs a red light in front of me, I am outraged. “Stupid jerk!” I think, and I imagine that the other driver is totally selfish and vicious, with no care at all for the rest of humanity, and no remorse if his actions had caused harm. Isn’t this false witness? Am I not seeing the “facts” the way I want to see them? It happens just as easily with those we live with and care about. If I lose my own tools, it is a misfortune. If my children lose my tools, it is a selfish act of laziness, showing total disregard for my things. If I leave my clothes lying around the house and forget to put my boots on the rack, I am “very busy” but the children are “inconsiderate and thoughtless” if they do the same. Self-love causes us to put evil interpretations upon the things that other people do and say,

while we put a good interpretation upon the things we do and say. On the surface this does not seem like a terrible thing. The truth is that it destroys relationships, causes harm to others, and prevents us from seeing evils in ourselves that could easily be shunned. We do not grow spiritually because we see our own evils in a good light and justify them or excuse them.

Honesty means telling the truth about what is really happening in our lives. And in a higher sense, honesty means continually asking the Lord to show us what the truth is in our lives. We are so experienced at lying to ourselves about what is going on in our own lives that we cannot see the truth about ourselves without the Lord's help.

It is interesting to observe that whenever you hold a public discussion about honesty, one of the very first things to come up is the question of "white lies" and of the need sometimes to say things that are not true. Somebody always makes the point that you shouldn't tell your wife or other friend that they look ugly in their new hairdo, even when they insist you tell them what you really think. Certainly it is useful to discuss "white lies," but what is really happening? Is not the subject of honesty very threatening to the hells? They immediately want us to begin to make room for dishonesty. If they can get us to think that it is useful, even charitable, to tell lies sometimes, they have eroded our resolve always to see the truth. For if we think that it is sometimes all right to lie, we will almost never tell the truth when our own interest is at stake.

Personal spiritual growth is impossible without honesty. You cannot be changed by the Lord until you are willing to look at yourself honestly and see the things that need to be changed. Most of the time personal dishonesty involves ignoring what is happening in your own life. If your anger is a problem, you are probably very good at denying the fact that you even get angry. And when you do blow up and really lose your temper, you are probably very good at forgetting that you were angry. Do you notice that you tend to wall off certain subjects or problems within your own mind? It is as if you create a blind spot in your thinking about certain subjects that are painful. If somebody comments about my anger, or if the subject of my anger comes up in my own mind because I have been losing control a lot lately, I tend to try to turn my mind away as quickly as possible. "Yes, yes," I think quickly to myself, "I must do something about that." And as quickly as I can, I close the door on that subject so I won't have to look at it. Actually, I am bearing false witness about what is happening in my life, because my loves feel threatened and I don't know how to change and control my anger. So it is easier for me to minimize the anger, or pretend it isn't much of a problem, than to look honestly at the harm my own anger causes. I need to remember that the Lord is trying to help me to see the truth, not so that I will feel guilty or bad about myself, but so I can be freed from that evil. "You will know the truth," He said, "and the truth will make you free."

True marriage love is impossible without honesty. In a genuine marriage each partner learns to think and will as the other. He becomes her understanding and she becomes his will. Of course this can only happen when they both have a true understanding and a good will. Otherwise they only love themselves and prefer to think whatever supports that self-love. But you cannot build a true marriage without honesty. How often do we close our minds and hearts to our married partners? Men especially do this because they have been raised to think that they must be strong, and so they are afraid to share their fears or weaknesses with their wives. One way this manifests itself is that men are often embarrassed to pray with their wives, or to lead their family in prayer,

except in the very ritualistic “grace” at meals. They are afraid to show their humility. Many men have been raised to believe that they should provide spiritual leadership, and so they are afraid to show their ignorance or lack of understanding. This often means that they rarely talk about doctrine with their wives, though this is probably what a wife wishes most of all. And men very often feel that their evils are so awful, especially evils that they have done in the past, that they dare not share them with their wives. They are afraid that if their wives knew what they were really like, they would not love them. Isn’t it foolish the way we hide our true self from the very person we wish to become one with? Ask your wife; I am sure she will tell you that she would love you much more for sharing your struggles and feelings of guilt than she does when you pretend you are better than you both know you are. Marriages grow when married partners begin to be really honest with each other.

Good parenting is impossible without honesty. It is probably harder to be honest with our children than with anybody else. This is because we are so confused about what is good for our children, and so confused about our relationships with them. Who does not have the idea that as a parent you must always be right? And what little child does not want to believe that his parents are perfect? We know that we are often not right, and our children know we are not perfect, and yet we both play these roles. By the time they become teenagers, our children think we are hypocrites, and we are torn between resentment at our children for expecting us to be perfect, and guilt because we have betrayed their trust. Honesty could prevent many of these problems. Perhaps most of all, honesty means being willing to admit to your children that you are wrong when you are wrong. If you lose your temper and feel guilty about what you said to your child, tell him you lost your temper and you feel guilty about what you said. Otherwise, whom are you really fooling? Children may be sad to discover that their parents have evils, but if you are always losing your temper and then denying that you have a problem, they will think you have a bad temper and you are a liar. Better that they think you have a bad temper and are honest.

Honesty means not making idle threats. Sure, you want your children to be good, and sometimes it seems that if you threaten horrible punishments, that will keep them from being bad. But every time you threaten to spank them and then feel sorry for your threat and don’t spank them, you are lying. And they will learn to ignore you when you promise to beat them, or chop off their hands, or whatever outrageous threat you make. Honesty means trying to keep your promises. Parents want to do nice things for their children, and the more they are busy, or the fewer nice things they are able to give to their children, the more they tend to make promises that they can’t keep. When we feel guilty about how little we have done for our children, or when we feel guilty because we have hurt them, we tend to make promises which we wish we could keep. “I wish I could make you feel better” becomes, “Next year we will go to Disneyland.” You are wishing that what you have promised could come true, but you have no plans and don’t even know how it could be true. The more guilty we feel, the more extravagant our promises become. Gradually our children learn that we cannot be trusted. Instead of saying what you wish were true, say something you know can be true. “Here, come sit on my lap for five minutes,” or “Let’s go outside and play a quick game of catch.” Those are promises you can keep. They may not seem like much to you, but they will mean much more to your child than any grand promise that you will never be able to keep.

It can be really frightening even to think about being honest. But this is because the evils we most dearly love are threatened by honesty. Honesty exposes all the faults and weaknesses we know we have and think we shouldn't have. Honesty makes us afraid that we will be condemned for the evils we now admit we have. Honesty makes us admit that we have been less than perfect parents and spouses. Don't be afraid. The Lord already knows what you are like. Once you are willing to see it, the truth will make you free.

Amen.

Lessons: Leviticus 6:1-7; John 8:31-47; *Doctrine of Life* 87-89