

Exodus 20 v 16 Tell the Truth!

Introduction

‘I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth...’ –words familiar from many a court when the traditional oath has been taken. The fact that it is necessary to put people on oath speaks volumes about human nature, as well as the solemnity of proceedings. Truthfulness is a virtue that some people cannot comprehend and which others conveniently forget. How do you and I view it? Often personal advantage is the reason behind the breaking of this commandment, but the increasing departure from it is eating away at the very fabric of our society. We need to be able to trust one another in so many situations. As Christians we cannot transform the whole of our society on this issue, but by our own personal example we can seek to influence the people with whom we have the closest contact. This commandment does cover the offence of perjury, but it goes much deeper into the integrity of our speech in conversation with other people.

1. The requirement of justice

In Exodus 20:16 and Deuteronomy 5:20 the words translated *false witness* have a slightly different meaning. In Exodus the emphasis is on the nature of the evidence given, that the words spoken are as accurate as possible. In Deuteronomy the emphasis is on the spirit in which the communication is made. It is best to take the two complementary guidelines here to provide the guide for our speech. It is important to be as accurate as we can in the words we utter, but it is equally important that our intentions in making a verbal communication are honourable also. To illustrate, for a time I worked in sales for a company. It was perfectly possible and legal to say things to a potential customer that would increase the likelihood of a sale. Yet although the words and statements individually were correct, they could be spoken in a way that conveyed a completely untrue impression to the other person. It was a clever sales trick and legal, but as a Christian I could never operate in that way, even if it meant that my sales figures and therefore salary was lower than it could have been operating in a less ethical way. The two emphases of truth and justice were the big concerns of God behind this commandment –*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour* (Exodus 20:16). The big issue behind this commandment in daily life in the Israelite community was to prevent miscarriages of justice. Even in Israel with its high legal standards miscarriages of justice did occur, none more so than in the case of Naboth the Jezreelite (I Kings 21:1-29). There the wicked queen Jezebel arranged the murder of an upright man using due process in the courts, with ‘witnesses’ who were prepared to lie under oath against a totally innocent man. Upon his conviction and execution his property reverted to the crown and all was well in the palace, until God told Elijah what had taken place. The punishment of God was the early death of Jezebel and the wiping out of the dynasty of Ahab within a few years, as Elijah prophesied. This was such a serious breach of the rules that the Lord intervened and the situation could not be the same again- justice was non-negotiable. Under Old Testament law there were a number of emphases to be noted: (a) **Fair play for all** (Exodus 21-23) Here is listed a whole series of practical situations where there might be issues to address. For example, Exodus 23:1-3 gives clear guidance about treating everyone as equals: ‘*Do not spread false reports. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness.*’² ‘*Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd,*’³ and *do not show favouritism to a poor person in a lawsuit.* God, through Moses, gave clear guidance how justice might be obtained for men and women, slaves and free people. Coming through loud

and clear were messages about telling the whole truth and not telling lies; don't commit perjury in court; don't discriminate or be swayed in favour of the rich and powerful, at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. In a number of cases here there was a potential death penalty to be handed out, for example, to a guilty defendant who has been convicted of murder. Exodus 21:6-7 records God's view of active participants in miscarriages of justice: *Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. ⁷Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.* Justice in a legal setting is naturally the foremost concern in this passage, but it highlights a bigger point that God hears and notes all our communications. He wants us to ensure that we, like Him, are committed to fair play for all people. (b) **An obligation to disclose all relevant evidence** *“If anyone sins because they do not speak up when they hear a public charge to testify regarding something they have seen or learned about, they will be held responsible (Leviticus 5:1). To stay silent when you know something important in a court case or a more informal context might be a serious misjudgement. An innocent person might be convicted because a witness declined to testify; a colleague at work might need our support in a difficult meeting when unfair comments have been made about them or work they have done. In life opting out of doing the right thing is the easy path many people choose today, but it is not the way of integrity. In a legal context people can be forced to testify under oath, when they are reluctant to speak. Caiaphas, the high priest, put Jesus under oath at His hastily arranged trial prior to the crucifixion, in order to require Him to declare His full identity as the Messiah (or ‘Christ’ same word -Matthew 26:63-66). This was the only time Jesus spoke in that trial as the proceedings were a farce and the court judgement was never in doubt, but He respected the due process of the law. (c) **The Requirement of two or three witnesses** In the very serious cases, most notably those where a guilty defendant might receive the death penalty, the testimony of independent primary witnesses was crucial. Every safeguard possible must be employed to prevent the testimony of false witnesses. Deuteronomy 19:15 sets out this clear message: ¹⁵*One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offence they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.* These principles were retained in rabbinic teaching in Jesus' day (*Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 3:6, 5:2 –N. Shields, *Pattern for Life*, p.213), yet deliberately flouted in the trial of Jesus as Mark 14:55-60 reveal. ⁵⁵*The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any.* ⁵⁶*Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.* ⁵⁷*Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him:* ⁵⁸*‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.”’* ⁵⁹*Yet even then their testimony did not agree.* ⁶⁰*Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, ‘Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?’* ⁶¹*But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.* Under the law the case should have been dismissed at that point and Jesus set free. God can give clear boundaries, but human beings make choices as to whether we live by them or not. God can give clear boundaries, but human beings make choices as to whether we live by them or not. (d) **Punishment for false witnesses** (Deuteronomy 19:16-19) ¹⁶*If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse someone of a crime,* ¹⁷*the two people involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time.* ¹⁸*The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite,* ¹⁹*then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party. You must purge the evil from among you* (Other passages make the same point, Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6-7). The punishment for the false witness was that which would have been inflicted on a guilty defendant, which in a murder trial was the death penalty. You could not have a clearer deterrent against lying under oath. (e) **Banning of bribery** This can be actual cash or gifts in kind or some other favours; it is any action that perverts the course of justice. Deuteronomy 16:18-20 makes this very plain: *Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes**

in every town the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. ¹⁹ Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent. ²⁰ Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you. A society where corruption is endemic is less than healthy and will never achieve its full potential. The leadership of the prophets in Israel ended after Samuel's day because of the actions of his sons. I Samuel 8:3 reports: *But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.* In the New Testament Jesus warned that: *out of the heart come evil thoughts...false testimony, slander* (Matthew 15:19); Peter, in I Peter 1:17, reminded his readers that we serve God, *a father who judges each man's work impartially...* In heaven the angelic choir included these lines of praise to God in Revelation 15:3: *Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations.* In summary Paul told the Ephesians: ³¹ *Let all ... evil speaking be put away from you...* (Ephesians 4:31NKJV). We serve a God who requires justice for all practised by all of us.

2. The priority of justice

(a) **A right to be upheld** Every human being is a neighbour to others. Therefore, we have an obligation to ensure that each person before the law is treated fairly and with equal rights, regardless of social status or gender. Micah's famous words echo down the ages: *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8). This requirement goes beyond our personal relationships, where we treat other people properly. It has an expectation that active steps are taken for justice and fairness in the wider society in which we live –and living in a global village we have responsibilities for expressing concern over human rights in other countries as well. James, in his letter to early Christian Churches applied this principle to congregational life in James 2:1-4: *My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism* (James 2:1). (b) **A Case to be argued for** Building on the previous point we can get weary of endless cases of justice being presented to us and the consequent requests for petitions to be signed, letters written and politicians contacted directly from Care or the Christian Institute or Christian Concern; or overseas from Barnabas Fund, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, open Doors or Middle East Reformed Fellowship, to name but a few agencies who regularly highlight injustice issues. We cannot just live in peace in our comfortable society and do nothing when our brothers and sisters are suffering –after all if the situation was reversed I suspect we would be hoping for some action on our behalf? (c) **Restraints on litigation** The way we seek to make our society more fair is also important. Litigation ought to be a last not a first resort. Proverbs 25:8a: *What you have seen with your eyes do not bring hastily to court...* Paul, likewise warned the Corinthians in chapter six of his first letter to the Church at Corinth about taking fellow Christians to court. *If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people?...Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? ⁵ I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?* (I Corinthians 6:1, 4-5). He was not advocating that injustice be swept under the carpet, on the contrary, it was his earnest aspiration that in our accountability to one another all such matters could be resolved without requiring civil legal redress. When the courts are required in civil matters it is a sad day because justice has not been seen to be done in a family or work or other form of dispute.

3. The heart of the matter –truthfulness

A. The Old Testament emphasis: (a) **The truthfulness of God** Psalm 146:6: *He is the Maker of heaven and earth; the sea, and everything in them –He remains faithful for ever.* This means in practice, as I Samuel 15:29 tells us: *He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change His mind; for He is not a human being, that He should change his mind.* Numbers 23:19 records some extraordinary words from that remarkable figure Balaam: *God is not human, that He should lie, not a human being, that He should change his mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfil?* If God is like this then His people ought to seek to follow in His footsteps. (b) **The denunciation of lying** Proverbs 19:5: *A false witness will not go unpunished, and whoever pours out lies will not go free.* The Psalms are full of warnings of those who tell lies. The prophets likewise attack traders using false scales or other unscrupulous business practices. Isaiah was troubled by the growing disparity between people of integrity and those without such standards in his day: *Scoundrels use wicked methods; they make up evil schemes to destroy the poor with lies, even when the plea of the needy is just.* ⁸ *But the noble make noble plans, and by noble deeds they stand* (Isaiah 32:7-8). It is particularly serious when lies are proclaimed in God's name. Jeremiah passed on this message from God warning against false prophets. *Therefore,' declares the Lord, 'I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me.* ³¹ *Yes,' declares the Lord, 'I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, "The Lord declares."* ³² *Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,' declares the Lord. 'They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least,' declares the Lord* (Jeremiah 23:30-32; see also Deuteronomy 18:20-22). By contrast, Solomon in I Kings 8:56 can say this of God: *Praise be to the Lord, who has given rest to his people Israel just as He promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises He gave through His servant Moses.* (c) **The problem of lying by believers** Although this ought not to be an issue, as with other sins, those who claim to know the Lord do at times fall into sin. Jacob deceived his father Isaac to gain the promised blessing that belonged to his elder brother Esau. Repeatedly in Genesis 27 this young man lies to his blind father and obtains something that did not belong to him. What God has planned for Jacob he would have inherited in the proper way in due course. So why did he misbehave in this way? Why did his mother Rebekah put him up to it in the first place? What did that whole situation reveal about life within that family? What is clear is that relations within that family never recovered from the appalling deception by the younger son and mother. As a direct result of what happened Esau deliberately married a Canaanite women who had no time for the faith of his parents (Genesis 28:6-9). Many years ago a Christian businessman was conned in a deal by another man he trusted, also a professing believer –but a less than honourable man away from church. The local church to which he belonged knew about the disgraceful action, but took no disciplinary sanctions- as a result the first man has barely darkened the door of a church to this day. Lies are not just words they can have repercussions over generations. However, careless talk can also be dangerous. Proverbs 11:13 reminds us: *A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.* Yet there are some very difficult scenarios that cannot be avoided. Should the Israelite midwives have told the truth to Pharaoh about why they were not killing baby boys in line with his orders in the time of Moses (Exodus 1:19-20)? *The midwives answered Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.'* ²⁰ *So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.* These ladies were honoured for not betraying these children. Just as Dutch Christians who hid Jewish families from the Nazis were in the right to deny that they had any guests staying in their homes during World War II; as was Elisha for being economical with the truth in advising Syrian army officers when their forces were surrounding Dothan (II Kings 6:19). Justification in such matters is a big call, but wisdom from God is required as to how we speak as truthfully as we can under all normal circumstances.

B. The New Testament emphasis (a) **The truthfulness of God** Jesus said: *He who sent Me is reliable* (or *true* John 8:26). Of Himself He said in John 14:6: *I am the truth*. And the One to follow Him, the Holy Spirit, is *the Spirit of truth* (John 14:17). Paul in Titus 1:2 speaks of *God who does not lie...* and Hebrews 6:18 goes further declaring that *it is impossible for God to lie...* as it is completely contrary to His nature. (b) **The requirement of truthfulness for believers** In the spiritual battle in which we are engaged we are invited to put on our spiritual armour that includes this command: *Stand firm then, with the **belt of truth** buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place...*(Ephesians 6:14). In our relationship both with God and other people may it be an integral part of who we are to be truthful in all the words we speak.

4. **Challenges to truthfulness**

(a) **Malicious lies** Paul in II Corinthians 12:20 expressed his real fears about the quality of internal relations between believers in that congregation. He wrote: *For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder*. No wonder the Corinthian church was the least spiritual congregation we read of in the New Testament. They had to get their house in order. However, guarding our tongues is not easy. James in his letter warned about the dangers caused by an uncontrolled tongue: ⁶*The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*⁷*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,*⁸ *but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*⁹*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.*¹⁰*Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be* (James 3:6-10). (b) **Lies of fear** How often have people blamed someone else to try and avoid getting into trouble. 'It wasn't me...' – are they familiar words? One lie is so rarely enough as others are needed to bolster it. As early as Genesis 3 in Eden the blame game began: Adam blamed Eve, she the snake –no-one was responsible! What a cost, of being thrown out of the garden –but they didn't think of the consequences of a lie! (c) **Lies of carelessness** presenting information in such a way that the impression given is untruthful. We all unintentionally make mistakes – which we can correct and to some degree is unavoidable. However, there are some people we meet who appear to make a habit of slanting information in unhelpful ways. How many newspaper stories or other media reports would pass the test of truthfulness? Reporting deadlines are an insufficient excuse for being economical with the truth. Taking care how we represent the views of other people, especially when we might disagree with their views, is very revealing about ourselves. (d) **The Lie of enlarging the truth** 'The fish I caught was so big'!! the temptation here to present ourselves or others in a better or worse light than a fair presentation would allow. We all have opinions, right or wrong, but distortion of factual information is out of bounds in all normal conversations. (e) **The lie for profit** The lie of the salesman –you have won a holiday, a ... -the list is endless. The deliberate misuse of words for personal gain; It can be so easily done and in some contexts so easy to justify-Craig's story. (f) **The lie of silence** When someone's reputation is being slandered and you know it is untrue- to stay silent is complicity in wrongdoing. It is not easy to speak out in the office or a social setting and may damage a friendship, but doing nothing is not an option, especially when serious untrue allegations are being made. (g) **Self-deception** Robert Burns in his poem 'To a louse' wrote: *O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us. To see oursels as ithers see us! It wad frae mony a blunder free us, An' foolish notion. We must not justify doing ourselves what we would condemn with respect to other people. There has to be one standard for everyone.* (h) **Lies to God** God if you answer my prayer, I will... if you get me out of this mess I will... don't make promises

if you don't intend to keep them. Psalm 139 reminds us that God knows everything. Are there any things you need to sort out with Him today? Or things with other people that need to be corrected?

5. A Plan of action

(a) **Being a truthful person** Jesus, in John 18:37, told the Roman governor Pilate *the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.* Only a person who habitually told the truth could even attempt to say such a thing. If we make it a habit to determine to be truthful –although wise too in what we say, people will respect us so much more than would otherwise be the case. However, it is necessary to limit what we say. A doctor, for example, might not be able to give a full diagnosis to a patient of their condition.

(b) **Being an encourager** There was a heated exchange at a dinner party between Winston Churchill and a female MP. She scornfully remarked: 'Mr Churchill you are drunk'. 'And you, madam', he replied 'are ugly. But I shall be sober tomorrow.' It was a witty putdown, which probably amused some guests at the function, but others including the recipient of his comments did not forget them (J. John, *Ten*, pp 68-69). Although, offering opinions about whether a particular garment flatters a person's figure or whether we need to suggest a size bigger or similar scenarios can be tricky.

(c) **Be self-disciplined** There are some conversations we will choose to opt out of. For example, those that are intended to denigrate the reputation of other people; or dirty conversations that are unwholesome. Sometimes limited input that is guarded to avoid breaking confidences can be necessary.

(d) **Be brave** Sometimes challenging untruths can cost us friendships or make life difficult for a time. Yet God is pleased when we honour Him in our conversations.

(e) **Be willing to say sorry** We all make mistakes –be quick to apologise for harsh words or incorrect ones. A quick response is much more readily accepted than one forced out of someone weeks or months later. Sometimes being willing to be a mediator to bring people to a point of reconciliation is a God-honouring activity.

In all our words to ask –is it true? Is it helpful? Is it encouraging? Is it necessary? When we are doubtful of something we plan to say. Paul gave this advice to the Christians in Philippi: *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.* ⁹ *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you* (Philippians 4:8-9).

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