

Don't Lie on Your Neighbors (Decalogue)

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Prayer

God of truth, help us to be people of truth for your honor and glory. Amen.

Scripture

Exodus 20:16

Context

I grew up in a household that we weren't allowed to use the word "lie." Certainly it was inferred that not only was the word off limits but the act of lying was unacceptable. We understood that the semantics was irrelevant. Whether it was called a story, a falsehood or even the new hash tag #alternativefacts, it was still a lie. It would seem that, according to the Hebrew texts, lying was just as serious in ancient Israel as it was in Demopolis, Alabama in the 1960's and 1970's. My parents and grandparents were clear about the consequences of telling in the words of my grandmother, "a tale."

Exegesis

Ontologically, the ninth commandment as expressed in the Decalogue as found in Exodus, "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,*" and similarly in Deuteronomy 5:20, "Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor, is related to the often misquoted commandment, "Thou shall not tell a lie." The Decalogue also know in Hebrew as "The Ten Words," or in Christianity as the Ten Commandments are a clear a concise set of rules that came directly from Yahweh.

Their use and validity in the church today is often the subject of vigorous debate. For some the grace that is granted through Jesus Christ negates the legalism of the Old Testament and these commandments. Yet, for others "The Law" as expressed in the Decalogue still provides a moral code of ethics. In Matthew 5:19 Jesus states, "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*" He further points to the permanence of the law and the consequences of breaking the law as well as for not teaching the law (Matthew 5:19-21).

Despite one's theological views regarding the validity of the ancient laws of the Decalogue in post modernity it appears that the Church and good Christian families may not have gone far enough when teaching about this commandment. This commandment is not just a warning about being punished for telling a lie but the impending danger involved in conspiring against our neighbors. It implies that there is judgment and consequences for breaking this commandment.

Yahweh seemed to anticipate that due to the sinful nature of humanity colluding with other false witnesses was a high possibility. One of the deuteronomistic codes stated in Deuteronomy 19:15 says, *“One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”*

It appears that having more than one person testify against someone is designed to decrease the odds of having false testimony. False witness can also be used to conspire against one party for the gain of the other party. One such biblical narrative is that of Jacob stealing his brother’s birthright by tricking his father with the help of his mother, Rebecca.

Rebecca bore false witness when she conspired with Jacob to steal his brother’s birthright (Genesis 27:5-17). It didn’t cost Esau his life but his livelihood and meant he had to work harder to obtain less. Maybe we are called to follow the commandments not to keep ourselves from “Hell,” but to keep catastrophic circumstance from befalling our neighbors and to maintain or create equitable situations.

The story of Jacob, Rebecca, Esau and Isaac is a poignant reminder that even when there are multiple witnesses or multiple people on a jury it is not uncommon to receive false testimony. Sadly, for many there are consequences whose impact go much further than the victim’s financial situation. Bearing false witness can be deadly.

Conversation

In 2015, 149 people were released from prison in America after being wrongfully convicted. According to the National Registry of Exonerations “they spent an average of 15 years in prison” before being released. Their lives were put on the line based on someone or a group of people breaking the ninth commandment and “bearing false witness” against them. Marginalized and oppressed people are often at a greater risk of being targeted by false witness. African Americans were told that we were not fully human. We were told we were three fifths human; this is a false witness that was co-signed by a nation of people for centuries. The emotional trauma, the financial and economic losses from policies that were crafted based on these falsehoods are innumerable and have been passed on from one generation to the next.

Emmett Till was an African-American teenager who was murdered in Mississippi at the age of 14 in 1955 after reportedly flirting with a white woman. The brutality of his murder drew attention to the mistreatment of African-Americans, and Till posthumously became an icon of the Civil Rights Movement. Recently it was brought to light that his accuser confessed that her witness was false. This is an egregious violation of this commandment.

Questions

1. How many African Americans were hung, killed, and imprisoned based on false witness? These conditions still exist and in many ways are worse. This is a reminder that The Decalogue should be engaged beyond Sunday morning ritual.
2. What are ways in which you envision helping people to connect to The Decalogue?
3. What is at risk when we normalize a culture that celebrates bearing false witness?
4. How have you been impacted by false witness?
5. What is the role of the church in demystifying or helping people to connect to the Ten Commandments in impactful ways?
6. What are other biblical stories about the consequence of bearing false witness?
7. What are current social examples of accepting false witness as true?
8. Who is currently at risk from some of the false witnesses you have identified?