

Truth & Goodness

Exodus 23:1-9

In order to work, interact, plan, grow and thrive, we must have the truth. So we never tell “just a lie.” To lie to someone is an act of war, just or unjust (cf. Ex. 1:19-20). This part of the Book of the Covenant expounds the ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”, showing us God’s truth and goodness, how to love Him and one another with the truth.

False Reports

Moses addresses three ways of dealing in false information. Bearing false witness is something you do in court, but before getting there, the truth can be altered, added to, mangled, and then circulated (v1). Notice it doesn’t say, “You shall not spread a false report so long as you know it’s false.” A false report is something that shouldn’t be spread, period, which means you better know what you are saying is true and good to pass on. Very few Christians will outright lie, but they will pass on false and unhelpful information. Listen to two children describe a conflict in which they both did wrong. Which parts will they include and omit? It’s a little subtler for adults who at least know how to plausibly downplay what they did, but it amounts to the same. The second prohibition of verse one forbids being an unrighteous witness in league with the wicked (v1). This is not a slippery slope argument—pass on false reports and soon you’ll be lying in court—but it is a comparison of degrees. The next law forbids following a crowd to do evil, and similarly warns further against doing so in a judicial setting (v2). Two thousand people advocating hearsay is no different than two, so we must resist what may seem likely when we don’t really have the two or three witnesses required by the Bible. Peer pressure begins early but it doesn’t stop there. So whether it’s the junior high crowd, everyone at the office, or the ladies at church, don’t be swayed by the madness or seeming sense of crowds. The third way of dealing falsely is to favor a poor man in a dispute (v3). This is a prohibition of ungodly sympathy. Just because someone is poor does not mean he is right, and the fact that restitution costs him proportionately far more than it would a rich man doesn’t change the truth. These laws are for the masses, and the masses are inclined to judicially favor the poor.

Loving Enemies

Enemies are people who have wronged you and perhaps are likely to do it again. If you meet one of their donkeys wandering off, you must return it (v4). Even if the guy actively hates you, if you see his donkey trapped and your first desire is to not help, then you certainly must help him (v5)! It’s clear that the Lord knows exactly our feelings, instincts, and temptations (“May I shoot the donkey afterwards?”), and so He states emphatically what we must do. The fact that the guy would not do the same for you changes nothing. We are so blind to and forgetful of our sins: “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Rom. 5:10). There is simply no way to embrace enemy-love without knowing God

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and living by what He has done for you. This is how you were saved, except it wasn't helping your donkey but Jesus being crucified for your sins. Not only does this love not enable your enemies, it overcomes them: "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:44-45). Why are these commands in the center this section about falsehood? Perhaps because this is the true way to live. How can those who live by the mercy and kindness of God not lift a finger to help their awful neighbor? This is for Israel. If you were the awful neighbor, how would someone get through to you? By being kind, we expose if not eliminate falsehood, dishonesty, hatred and so on. We heap burning coals on the enemy's head either frustrating his ongoing sin or leading him to repentance: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21).

False Justice

Everyone was told not to be partial to the poor (v3), and now judges are told not to pervert justice against the poor (v6). Judges are successful, important, and usually wealthy people. While the masses generally favor the poor, the elite tend to be partial to the rich so the Lord addresses both: "You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor" (Lev. 19:15). Judges must keep far away from falsehood, which leads to the death of the innocent and righteous because God will not justify the wicked (v7). When the courts of men fail, God is still on His throne and the reckoning draws near. A judge must not take a bribe because it blinds his discernment and twists the words of the righteous (v8). Favors, gifts, donations, and foundations are all ways to purchase power and influence, which is why it's absolutely critical for judges and officials to be free of covetousness. The words of the righteous cannot stand on their own if he stands to cash in on them. These instructions have been addressed to the individual you so far, but now it changes: Each of you must not oppress the stranger, since you all know the heart of a stranger, because you all were strangers in the land of Egypt (v9). Everyone must do right because the nation knows what it's like to be treated unjustly. When something goes repeatedly wrong and the system is broken, the people as a whole have forgotten who they are and where they came from. The massive problems we have at the top and in the system could not exist if it weren't for countless false reports and injustices perpetrated and tolerated among us. Jesus is the point, the answer, the end, the giver and the keeper of the law. There was never a false word found in His mouth. He spoke truth to corrupt power and to rebellious weakness, and died for our lies. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and we come to the Father through Him, forgiven and freed from falsehood.