Repenting from False Witness

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

8 November 2026

Children's Talk: Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say

You all know that it is wrong to tell lies. I don't need to tell you that. So mostly you probably tell the truth without even thinking about it. One of the times we lie though is when we are afraid of getting in trouble. If your dad asks you, "did you break this vase?" without even thinking about it you might say, "no of course not!" even though you did break it. If your dad then questioned you more, you would probably insist even more strongly that it was you and promise that you are telling the truth. It's especially hard to tell the truth after telling a lie because now you are afraid of getting in trouble for breaking something *and* for lying.

Well that's natural and it makes sense, but it is not how the Lord wants us to react. The Lord wants us to tell the truth without having to think about it. At the end of the day, telling the truth is very simple, much simpler than telling lies. Here is what Jesus said about something called "oaths." Oaths are like promises, so when someone made an oath it was kind of like they were promising that they were absolutely telling the truth. Which kind of implies they weren't always telling the truth. Jesus said,

> Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:34-37)

Jesus makes telling the truth simple: you don't have to make all sorts of promises and insist that *this time* you're telling the truth. All the truth takes is saying "yes" when you mean "yes" and saying "no" when you mean "no." When the dad asks his son if he broke the vase (and he did), the son can simply say, "yes." That's a scary thought because he might get in trouble, but it is so much simpler. There is no need

to make meaningless promises. There is no need to keep spinning more lies. Just a simple “yes” or “no.” That’s how easy it is to tell the truth

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When was the last time you told a lie? I'll give you a moment to think back. Don't forget to include lies that you tell yourself. When you told that lie, was it the right thing to do? Lying is tricky because it often seems like what we need to do, but it also goes against the Ten Commandments. So what do we do with that? We'll come back to if or when it's ever ok to lie. For the moment I just want to focus on what lying actually is. If we go to Exodus chapter 20, we find all of the Ten Commandments listed. And interestingly, they don't mention the words "lie" or "lying" even once. Verse 16 however states, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." It's not much of a stretch to interpret this command to forbid telling any lie, but it's worth our while to actually look back at the way it is originally stated and unpack some of its meaning, so that is where we will begin.

The Teachings of the New Church broaden and expand what each of the Ten Commandments means. The Eighth Commandment is defined as follows; as I read, notice how much emphasis is put on the antagonistic nature of bearing false witness:

> In its most accessible earthly meaning, [this commandment against] "bearing false witness against our neighbour" or testifying falsely includes not being a false witness before a judge, or before others outside of a courtroom, against someone who is wrongly accused of some evil. We are not to make such false assertions in the name of God or something sacred, or base them on our own authority or on some expertise for which we are well known.
> In a broader earthly sense, this commandment applies to political lies and hypocrisies of every kind that have an evil intent, as well as disparagement and slander of our neighbours to undermine the status, name, and reputation on which their whole good character depends.
> In the broadest earthly sense, this commandment includes plots, deceptions, and evil intent against anyone for a variety of motives such as hostility, hatred, desire for revenge, envy, rivalry, and so on. These evils have false witness hidden inside them. (*True Christian Religion* §321)

The phrase "false witness" immediately brings to mind a courtroom setting. Witnesses have to be brought into a court because it is a situation when it really

matters that the court establishes the truth of what happened. The defendant's life could depend on witnesses who give honest testimony. Bearing false witness is not just asserting something as true when it is in fact incorrect; bearing false witness is doing this when it really mattered that you told the truth. This emphasis is strengthened by the second phrase, "against your neighbour." It's one thing to speak an untruth; it is another thing altogether to speak an untruth that is destructive or harmful to other people. This second, qualifying phrase suggests the commandment particularly forbids lying that harbours malicious intent or destructive outcomes. So when we look at ourselves and the lies that we tell, we should put a special focus on the intent behind them and the impact they have on other people and society.

With that focus in mind I want to look at some of the sneaky ways we bear false witness that might not fit nicely and neatly into the category of telling an outright lie to someone else. How we think and talk about other people is an area in which we end up bearing false witness without even noticing it. Consider how you might assume someone's bad motives. A coworker criticizes a piece of your work and you immediately start thinking how arrogant they are, how much better they must believe themselves to be, and how unsupportive and selfish. The point is not that these thoughts are always wrong; there are selfish people out there and these thoughts could all be entirely correct! But remember, we're not talking about being right or wrong, we are talking about bearing witness. A witness in a courtroom cannot just throw around assertions without evidence. A witness must only assert what he is confident in. When we in our minds assume someone's motives we are bearing false witness not because we are necessarily incorrect, but because we have no right to make that judgment. We cannot see into their hearts and witness first-hand what their motives are. Furthermore this kind of thinking is most certainly "against our

neighbour.” It is not a neutral assessment of correct or incorrect, it is rather a way of tearing them down and building ourselves up in contrast. No matter how much we tell ourselves we *know* someone’s evil motives, it is a form of false witness to not give the benefit of the doubt.

This kind of thinking bleeds into how we talk about other people. Here again we get so caught up in the technicalities of correct and incorrect that we fail to consider the weight of bearing witness and the obligation to not attack our neighbour through it. When you tell an embarrassing story about a friend, or when you talk about someone with a tone of disdain, or you repeat what awful thing someone said three years ago, you are bearing false witness through your words. You are bearing false witness even if you tell the story exactly as it happened. You are bearing false witness because the impression that you are creating of someone in the minds of your listeners is a false one, even if your words are correct. People are larger and more complex than one embarrassing story, what you feel about them, and the things that said in the past. By using your words a certain way you bear witness only to their few flaws and so bear false witness against your neighbour. Since you can bear false witness even with the truth it becomes all the more important that you carefully examine your words and thoughts, asking not, “is this correct,” but rather, “will this give a false or negative impression? Will it bring harm?” If the answer to those is yes, then you should hold back on what you have to say.

Oftentimes we come to church and hear of some evil that we are meant to avoid, and today is no different: avoid bearing false witness! But the point today, as it was last week, is to talk about what we do when we find that we’ve already missed our chance to avoid evil and are up to our neck in it. I assume that most if not all of us practice some form of bearing false witness. So far we have looked at how to

recognize it, but I want to spend the rest of the sermon talking about the next steps: how to get out of it and live a new life. If we are working on no longer bearing false witness then we will start to move toward true and honest witness. Jesus taught that honesty is extraordinarily simple. He said,

> Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:34-37)

That's it. Being honest does not require a big show of making abundant promises. Making over-the-top promises about how sincere you are actually undermines your own sincerity. Instead, let a simple yes or no suffice. If you say you will do something, do it. If you say you won't do something, don't do it. Take your word seriously no matter what.

This principle can be applied to those instances of false witness that we talked about before: in your own mind, if you are going to make a judgment about someone's character, take that seriously, and make sure that you only judge motives honestly and charitably. When you talk about people, make sure your words are honest, not just honest in the sense of being correct, but honest in the sense that they paint a true picture of the person you are talking about. Remember that you bear witness to other people's character with your thoughts and words.

If we take this concept one step further we see that the opposite of bearing false witness against our neighbour is not simple honesty. The opposite of bearing false witness against our neighbour is to actively bear true witness on behalf of our neighbour. Think of it like being a witness in a courtroom: if someone is accused of a crime, and you have evidence that will exonerate them, wouldn't you be obligated to

come forward as a witness? In life we are obligated to come to the defence of our fellow human beings by bearing true witness to their goodness and character.

Our challenge is to honestly and openly bear witness to the goodness and truth in the people around us. If we take this responsibility seriously we will not just avoid dishonesty, we will embrace the practice of truly testifying to the goodness that the Lord has placed all around us. To get there, remember to examine your thoughts and words with care; identify instances of bearing false witness against your neighbour; pray to the Lord for help in resisting that temptation; and as you put false witness aside, embrace the newfound love of true witness that the Lord will give you. *Amen*.