

Deuteronomy 5:20

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-5/deuteronomy-520/>

The LORD prohibits His people against false testimony.

The Ninth Commandment

The ancient Near Eastern laws spoke against false witness in court. Citizens were commanded to speak the truth in judgment and were often required to take an oath to prevent false testimony. This oath-taking involved calling on the name of a god to attest to the oath transactions. Since the ancient people thought the god would punish those who violate the agreement, they were forced to tell the truth. Some societies (like Mesopotamia) even inflicted the death penalty for falsehood. Thus, accurate witness was very important in the ancient Near East.

Amid this context, the LORD also called His people to speak the truth to ensure the Israelite community has a minimal certainty in the accuracy of one's words. God said, "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" The verb translated as "bear witness" here has the idea of witnessing against someone in a legal situation. Moreover, the word translated as "false" is the same word used in the third commandment where God told His people not to use His name in vain ([Deuteronomy 5:11](#)). It basically means "empty" or "vain." The idea is that when someone is accused without solid or valid ground, he is accused falsely.

The term *neighbor* seems to be used in its broader sense to refer to anyone interacted with, whether the person is a fellow Israelite ([Leviticus 19:18](#)), an alien ([Leviticus 19:34](#)), or a pagan ([Exodus 11:2](#)). The Old Testament penalty for false accusation involved doing to the wrongdoer "just as he had intended to do to his brother" ([Deuteronomy 19:19](#)). Such a measure called the Israelites for a commitment to the truth as they dealt with one another.

This is a foundation for another pillar of self-governance: consent of the governed. God appointed Moses. But Moses caused the people to choose their own judges under him, rather than selecting them himself ([Deuteronomy 1:13](#)). This command to avoid false testimony establishes the principle that each citizen of Israel is to take responsibility to see that justice is done, by ensuring people are not accused falsely.

The New Testament also contains teaching against false testimony. Jesus restates the commandment when someone asked him what to do to obtain eternal life ([Matthew 19:16-18](#)). False accusation is a serious offense because it injures people's reputation, and potentially deprives them of what belongs to them. If an innocent person is accused and convicted of theft, for example, the restitution they paid would amount to stealing from them. Therefore, accusing someone falsely is another form of theft.

Speaking rightly of others is a key component of righteousness and truth and is a necessary element of a just society. But it is only possible if people govern themselves, and refrain from false accusation.

Biblical Text:

²⁰ **You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**