

The Ten Commandments - 8

Your first reaction of reading or hearing the Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour" is probably to think of a court-room situation and of the untrue testimony which a person might be tempted to give there. That this is involved there, is of course no doubt. It means the solemn misrepresentation, in court, of facts or of a situation, to the harm and injury of another; sworn testimony which a person affirms is true.

Having said this, your next reaction might be to think that this being the case it is not a Commandment which particularly concerns you or has special relevance to your ordinary and day to day living. But I must hasten to point out that in these few words of explanation given so far, the Commandment has only been touched upon in its most obvious meaning, and that much more is involved here than what is otherwise first suggested. It is the same here as with the other Commandments. I have spoken in previous talks of murder and theft, for example; crimes few of us ever commit or seriously think about. But there are so many ways to murder and steal. So much more is involved. And when we examine them more closely it becomes clear that things are touched upon in each case which deeply concern us all.

The fact is that we don't have to be in a court-room or under solemn oath to bear false witness and break this Commandment. Any misrepresentation of facts or a situation, especially where it injures another person, is false witness. The Commandment is talking about lying in all its various forms; things said which hurt another; which wrongfully shift the blame for something to another person; which suggest or even imply things about others which have no foundation - these are the things that are meant here.

Let's forget for the moment the formal, legal connotations this Commandment carries. If you or I suggest of another person things that are not true, then we are witnessing falsely about them. Again, if you or I say things of another with the deliberate intention of casting them into an unfavourable light or belittling them, then this too would involve our breaking this Commandment. Any attempt to persuade others that what is untrue, or without foundation, is true, is to bear false witness.

We commonly call this kind of thing malicious gossip in which people are tempted to

indulge out of their small-mindedness and tragic need to bolster their sense of self-esteem and importance. And, concerning it, the Scriptures themselves have much to say. As in Leviticus 19, verse 16: "Do not go around spreading slander among your people." In Proverbs we have: "A gossip goes around revealing secrets, but a trustworthy person keeps a confidence." (11:13) "Don't be a witness against your neighbour for no reason — would you use your lips to deceive?" (Proverbs 24:28)

Talking about others can of course be of the friendliest nature and quite devoid of malice. Yet it is something to be carefully watched because it so easily leads into the realm of slander and backbiting. There is much to reflect upon in the words of the Apostle James where he describes the tongue, though little, as "unruly", hard to "tame", and able to cause vast destruction.

Even so, misrepresentation can be of two kinds. There is the misrepresentation of which I have just spoken which belittles, injures, sows suspicion and doubt about another person; and the misrepresentation which exaggerates and flatters. In both cases this is to bear false witness. In both cases an evil has been committed. We can as easily harm a person by over-stating their abilities and by creating expectations about them, as we can by running them down and slandering them. And questionable motives are involved in both instances. So often the flatterer's aim is to win his or her way into the favour of another; even to gain influence over that other, which the plainer statement of the facts would not win for them. The Commandment demands of us strict truth about another at all times; not supposition and guesses, not whispered suspicions or gossipy anecdotes; at no time downright falsehoods or deliberate lies; nor insincere flattery and over-stated praise. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour."

Previously I have said that all forms of lying are a form of false witness. Lies about ourselves; lies which misrepresent us; incorrect statements which create a wrong impression and which suggest to others other than what is the truth of the matter - these are meant as well. We can create a wrong impression by suggesting knowledge we have not got, or experiences which in fact we have not had. And what other word for this is there other than 'false witness'? There are also the misrepresentation of situations which few of us can resist. Who of us, in relating some personal experience for example, can totally resist the temptation to tell it in such a way that it shows us in a better light than the facts actually warrant? Can you? By such misrepresentation

we break the Commandment concerning false witness. And there's no getting away from it.

What is of special concern in all of this is that such misrepresentation, such lying, becomes habitual. People can become so chronically inaccurate in their statements that they forget what strict honesty is. They forget what it is to be honest about themselves, about situations and experiences, and about other people. They by nature exaggerate and over-state. Others learn to take what they say "with a pinch of salt". It's sad that this has to be said about anyone. Unhappily it is of many; of people in business and of neighbours in the same street. We learn not to depend on the total accuracy of what they say or the complete truthfulness of some statement they make. Complete honesty is a somewhat rare commodity in our community and it is an indictment of us all that this is so.

The question is, Why is it so? And the answer is that by lies and misrepresentations, of which we have been guilty, we attract to ourselves spiritual influences from hell which lodge in the mind and obscure what total honesty and truthfulness is all about. Constant lying and the distortion of the truth seals the mind off from the Lord's inflowing life. Conscience becomes silenced and exaggeration and mis-statement become habitual and are like second-nature. The mind and manner of a person becomes orientated to that way of speaking about and presenting things.

And this in turn brings home to us the harm that is caused in bearing false witness, not just the harm caused to the person slandered, but the harm that is caused by the person who tells the lie or misrepresents the facts. Rarely do we consider this aspect of things and yet it is certainly there. Thinking becomes so distorted that at last they no longer recognise what total honesty and truthfulness is all about.

There are, surely, obvious lessons in all of this for everyone; for you and I and for people everywhere. Things have been said which should, alert every parent to be on their guard where their children are concerned that they might cultivate in their children this important virtue of honesty. It was once wisely said, "Accustom your children constantly to this: if a thing happened at one window and they, when relating it, say that it happened at another, do not let it pass, but instantly check them: you do not know where deviation from the truth will end." (Dr. Johnson)

False witness, as has become clear to us, is the attempt to persuade others that what is false is true; to witness falsely about situations, people, or ourselves. At a deeper and more interior level to bear false witness means to witness falsely about the truths of the Lord's Word and to try to persuade people that things that are false are in fact true.

Here is a simple illustration of what is meant: Say someone comes to you, someone who has been hurt or wronged by another person. If, though knowing better, you encourage them to get their own back, to take revenge on them, you have broken this Commandment. You have witnessed falsely concerning the Lord's truth which teaches mercy and forgiveness. This is what is meant. Swedenborg wrote: "In the spiritual meaning, testifying falsely refers to convincing people that a false belief is a true one and an evil life is a good one, and the reverse; but only if these things are done deliberately, not out of ignorance." (*True Christianity 322*) And this is just what I have been talking about.

The Swedenborg Programme – Number 122.

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>