
DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS

Stand Firm in Truth

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How are you all doing this morning? – Wait, before you answer. How many of us, regardless of how we are feeling, would automatically answer with, “I’m doing well” or “Things are great?” For many of us, that answer of “I’m doing well” is not really true. It may even be a flat our lie.

Before you think I am calling you all liars, there is a difference between an acceptable lie and an unacceptable lie.

But first back to our question – How are you doing this morning? Why would we answer a simple question with “I’m fine?” Maybe the question is not that simple. There could be many things that we are feeling besides “fine.” We could be feeling sad or even depressed. We could be lacking energy for life or sleep deprived. We could be stressed and anxious over work or over a problem that is threatening a relationship. So when does a simple answer to a seemingly simple question start to become harmful? We don’t see some lies as harmful. We might describe them as little lies, white lies, just bending the truth a little, or say, I am telling the truth, just not all of the truth.

Lies become harmful when the intention behind the lie is harmful. A lie that we tell from a good intent to save someone else from harm, is an acceptable lie because the end in view is not ourselves but others. However, a lie that we tell because we see a benefit to ourselves is an unhealthy and harmful lie. These are the ones that we will be looking at today

Lies come in many forms and disguises. Lies infiltrate the things that we say, they affect the way we treat others and they dictate how we live our lives. Regardless of how and when we lie, a lie become harmful when we lie to protect ourselves. We may be embarrassed that our marriage or close friendship is feeling like it is falling apart, so when someone caringly asks how things are going, our embarrassment stops us from asking for help and instead we lie and say everything is “fine.” We may lie to cover up a fear of losing reputation among friends. So in our conversation lies creep in through exaggerations of things we’ve seen and done, hoping that it will make us more accepted in the group. We may lie to cover up the greed for money by making promises to customers and superiors knowing that we don’t really stand a chance of actually fulfilling the promise. Our words aren’t the truth or the full truth but we know what others want to hear in order for them to feel satisfied and go along with us.

We lie then through things we say, through the things we do for other and through the way we live our lives to cover up our embarrassments, our fears, our anger or our greed.

So what does the Lord say about covering up our embarrassments and fears? "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." How does this commandment relate to my everyday life? What is the relation between me covering up for myself and lying to my neighbour? Lets' start on the lowest level of this commandment and build it up.

The most common and easily understood context of this commandment is that of bearing false witness in civil law. We read from the Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church,

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. (True Christianity §322)

We are probably all aware of the justice system and how it should work from experience in a court of law or from learning about it in books or from TV. It is expected of someone in court to tell the truth and not to bear any false testimony. This aspect of the commandment is fairly straight forward and understood by all. But there are aspects of this commandment that fall outside of the context of a court room and in a broader sense we read,

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. (True Christianity §322)

Politics has a very nasty side to it. Politics is not only found in government but in any group. Whether it is a work environment, school or even church group, politics and the desire to undermine others exists through twisting what is true into what is false.

When we take natural earthly truths and twist them, we hold the power to hurt people, sometimes to people we don't like and sometimes hurting people we love. We are able to do this by taking information or a truth about that particular person and pull it out of context twisting it through clever reasoning, and using it against them. The same hurtful power exists with the Lord's truths that He has given us.

We can take the Lord's truths in His Word, pervert them into a falsity and use them to justify what we think is right. An example of twisted truths is that Jehovah of the Old Testament is an angry, vengeful God who punishes the wicked and rewards the good. But we know God is love and love can never be angry and vengeful. How does a truth that God is love get turned into a God of anger?

Let us imagine for a moment that we are the children of Israel and we are disobedient to the Lord and don't walk in His path. When we are left to ourselves and our own loves, where do they lead us? When we turn from the Lord we encounter the pain and distress of our own choosing of our own path. We are walking our path and not the Lord's path. Only the Lord's path leads to happiness and joy. But our path has brought us anger and pain and we easily blame the Lord for our predicament. We see Him as angry and vengeful and that He has put us in this miserable state. In blaming the Lord we defend and hide our anger, our embarrassment and our fears. We take truths like, the Lord is all powerful and oversees everything, and use that truth to justify our bad choice, saying He has used His power over everything to put obstacles in my way so I cannot succeed. In this way, to us in our fallen wayward state we look to the Lord as the source of our problems and see Him as angry and vengeful, were in fact it is we who is angry and full of vengeance.

There are many ways in which we take the truths that the Lord has given to us and because we are so clever we are able to excuse, justify and rationalise our bad behaviour. We are able to justify to ourselves why in some cases it OK to steal food from a store. We are able to justify to ourselves why gossiping is not really murdering our neighbour. But what are we really doing by not standing firm in the truth? What are we really doing to ourselves by taking the truth and bending it just a little? Brace yourself, Isaiah 28:15 puts it quite bluntly,

We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement;
for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid
ourselves. (Isaiah 28:15)

Why do we make a covenant with death when we lie? Well, if we aren't standing firm in the truth then we are bending the truth, perverting the truth and essentially banishing truth from ourselves. We are saying to ourselves "I cannot hold onto this truth as my own, I can't be responsible to this truth therefore if it's not for me, it's against me." We therefore are separating ourselves from what is true and spiritually we are killing ourselves. The Lord says, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), and if we are separating ourselves from the truth, we are separating ourselves from Him and we are separating ourselves from life.

We can see the separating effect that lies have on our everyday lives when we consider the effect that lies have on our relationship with others. Consider the effect a statement such as "My friend/my parents/my spouse never listens to me." What is the truth behind that statement? The truth is that sometimes they may not

be listening when you talk to them. The falsity in this is that they are never listening. What effect does this statement, this bending of the truth, have on how we treat that person from now on? We always assume that they aren't listening, we bagger them about listening, we reinforce at every opportunity the fact that they aren't listening. We are effectively driving a wedge of resentment between us and our friend/our parents/our spouse. And what are wedges good at? They are good at separating.

Lies separate us from others; this is the truth about lies? We are hurting ourselves! We hurt other on occasion through intentional false statements and empty promises. But every time we lie, every time, we are lying to ourselves and hurting ourselves. We are trying to convince ourselves that we are clever, that we can control others; that we can pull the wool over their eye, that a lie will solve the problem. We hope that the lie will hide our embarrassment of a failing relationship, hide the fear that we will lose reputation.

Lies, even if they are hidden, hurt our relationship with loved ones. Lies separate us from our relationship with the Lord. We are lying to ourselves. We are lying to those we love. We are lying to the Lord. In effect what we are saying is, "Lord, I don't believe in you." This is the ultimate and sad reality of lies.

So how do we stop this slow spiritual death? How do we restore a belief in the Lord? By standing firm! Stand firm in what is true. It is our part to play to know what the truth is and to be responsible to it. Does it mean we have to speak the truth when we are called to answer for something that is wrong? Yes, in a similar way a witness is called before a judge. But how about standing firm in the truth when things are going well? When we see a truth announce it, to your spouse you can say "My love, you have a beautiful heart," or "Mom, Dad, I respect your guidance and opinion." How about, "Friend I honour and cherish the support that you give to me." How about a prayer to the Lord, "Lord I honour and value you as a part of my life."

These are truths we can stand firm in. These are truths that keep our relationships open and honest and allow them to grow.

As we go out this week, let us reflect on the words that we say, and ask ourselves, "Am I covering for myself?" "Am I standing firm in the truth?" And "How can I celebrate the truth in my life through supporting others?"

Jesus says, "For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth." (John 18:37)

AMEN

Lessons: Exodus 20:16, AE 1019:2, TCR 322, 323.

AE 1019[2] The eighth commandment of the Decalogue, "Thou shalt not bear false witness," shall now be explained. "To bear false witness" signifies in the sense nearest to the letter to lie about the neighbour by accusing him falsely. But in the internal sense it signifies to call what is just unjust, and what is unjust just, and to confirm this by means of falsities; while in the inmost sense it signifies to falsify the truth and good of the Word, and on the other hand to prove a falsity of doctrine to be true by confirming it by means of fallacies, appearances, fabrications, knowledges falsely applied, sophistries and the like. The confirmations themselves and the consequent persuasions are false witnesses, for they are false testimonies. From this it can be seen that what is here meant is not only false witness before a judge, but even a judge himself who in perverting right makes what is just unjust, and what is unjust just, for he as well as the witness himself acts the part of a false witness. The same is true of every person who makes what is right to appear crooked, and what is crooked to appear right; likewise any ecclesiastical leader who falsifies the truth of the Word and perverts its good. In a word, every falsification of truth, spiritual, moral, and civil, which is done from an evil heart, is false witness.

TCR 322. 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. Doing them deliberately is doing them after we know what truth and goodness are, not before. The Lord says, "If you were blind you would have no sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (John 9:41). This falseness is what is meant in the Word by a lie and this deliberateness is what is meant by deceit.

TCR 323. In the heavenly meaning, testifying falsely refers to blaspheming the Lord and the Word and driving the actual truth out of the church. The Lord is truth itself, and so is the Word.