

[Ten Commandments Episode 12]
[Speakers in the audio file: Jon Collins and Tim Mackie]

Jon: Don't lie. This is something we learn at a very early age. Lies are bad. Lies erode trust. Lies can cause harm. Don't lie. Not lying is so important; we think this is what the ninth command is: "Do not lie." But interestingly, that isn't actually the command.

Tim: The way we normally summarize the meaning of the ninth commandment is we flatten it out: "Don't lie." But instead it's: "You will not bear false witness against your neighbor."

Jon: "Do not bear false witness." What does that mean?

Tim: This is a fixed little phrase used to refer specifically to legally or publicly making a declaration.

Jon: So "bear false witness" is specifically about twisting or manipulating the truth in a communal legal setting. It's really specific, and honestly, it kind of sticks out alongside these more general commands. "Don't kill." "Don't steal." Why is it so specific?

Tim: The biblical authors have this conviction that when truth is misrepresented in the one place where the truth is most at stake in public, it results in violence against the most vulnerable. Because who tends to suffer, like, get the most taken advantage of when people bend the truth in legal settings? Often, it's people who are in vulnerable social and economic positions.

Jon: In this series, we talk about how the 10 Commandments are words of wisdom that lead to life and flourishing. And we often see this when we flip over the command into a positive. And so flip over "Do not bear false witness." And what do we get?

Tim: Hold up, and celebrate, and reinforce the value of truth-telling in our public setting. That is what's at stake in the ninth command.

Jon: "Do not bear false witness." That's what's on the docket today. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[Musical break (1:49-1:50)]

Jon: Hey, Tim.

Tim: Hello, Jon Collins.

Jon: Hello, we are looking at the 10 Commandments.

Tim: Mhm. We are nearing almost the end. We are command number nine of the 10.

Jon: Nine of 10 is today.

Tim: That's today. As we've gone through them, we have been trying to discern what is the—not just the meaning or implication of each of the 10 Commands—but what is the value underneath them? What's the deeper value and the deeper wisdom? And in a way, we're trying to learn from Rabbi Jesus about how he saw expansive, deep, divine wisdom in the commandments. He even quoted from the 10 Commandments and saw things in them that we may not normally see. So we're going to take that same approach today, looking at the ninth command, which is about lying and truth-telling.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: That's the topic addressed here. And we're going to find this actually a major theme in the laws elsewhere in the Torah, but also in the narratives and poems. Lying and truth-telling is a big deal in the Bible.

Jon: Can we situate ourselves where we're at in the 10?

Tim: That's great.

Jon: The 10 have formed a shape in my mind.

Tim: Good. Yeah. Great.

Jon: Because we've talked about the beginning.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: One through four—our relationship with God.

Tim: Mhm. Which is no idols, no other gods, don't carry the name of God in vain, and then remember the Sabbath.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And then five becomes this hinge.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: How you treat your parents is, in some way, how you—

Tim: Bound up with how you relate to God.

Jon: —relate to God.

Tim: Yeah. Mhm.

Jon: But then it's a shift on—you're talking about how you treat other humans.

Tim: Yup. So commands six through 10 are all really specifically focused on my neighbor and me. Don't kill, don't commit adultery, don't steal. How I relate to my neighbor's life, their spouse, and their stuff.

Jon: Six, seven, and eight.

Tim: Six, seven, and eight. Number nine: "You will not bear false witness against your neighbor." And then number 10, then, having brought up the word neighbor, is going to be "You will not desire your neighbor's house, or your neighbor's wife, or—" and it gives a list of all these things that belong to your neighbor. So yeah, six through 10 are all bound together very clearly, specifically about how you relate to your neighbor.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And this one, number nine specifically, is "bearing false witness against."

Jon: "You will not bear false witness against your neighbor."

Tim: So we're talking here about how—whether or not I live in my community as someone who values the truth, and protects the truth, and helps prevent false representation of the truth in my community. That matters. That's a part of neighborly flourishing, right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Maybe the easiest way in is how to translate this command. It's really interesting. So there are other words for lie; the main one in Hebrew is, like, *kazav* is the verb. That would be more general: "Don't lie."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Why isn't it just—

Jon: "Don't tell lies?"

Tim: Yeah, *lo'—lo' tikhzov*. Don't lie. But instead, it's bearing false witness, which is a specific kind of lying.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: The word "bear witness" actually points to a really specific social situation, namely standing in a court—

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: —before judges or maybe a jury. So here in the command, it's *ta'aneh*. It's from the Hebrew verb *'anah*, which just means to, like, answer or respond.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Like, it's a real common phrase in Hebrew to say, "And he answered, saying," and then to begin a quote.

Jon: Okay. Like, in a book, it's like, "And he said."

Tim: Mhm. Yeah. So what you—when you *'anah*, you are responding verbally to something that somebody said or did to you.

Jon: Would this be the word in the Psalms where, "I cried out to God and he answered me"?

Tim: Oh, yes. Yes. Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yeah. Regularly. Mhm. And then when you have this verb *'anah* with a certain preposition, marking the object, the *bet* preposition.

Jon: The *bet* preposition?

Tim: Yeah. That was the letter *bet*.

Jon: What does that even mean?

Tim: Oh, yeah. Okay. So in English, prepositions are themselves—

Jon: Let's pretend I don't know what a preposition is.

Tim: Oh, got it.

[Laughter]

Tim: Uhm—what's so funny is it's hard to describe abstractly. But if I say the group of words: with, by, on, under, next to—so they describe something's physical location.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Or the spatial relationship between two things.

Jon: It's a rela—it's a relationship word.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah. Refers to a space relationship. I am with you.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: I am over you.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: You are under the desk.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: That kind of thing. That's a preposition. That's pre-position.

Jon: Ooh, position's in the word.

Tim: Yeah, I guess so.

[Laughter]

Tim: Yeah. But in Hebrew, prepositions are not always separate words. Some are.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But there's a whole group of prepositions where it's a letter that you stick onto the beginning of the word—

Jon: Alright.

Tim: —that you want to mark it with. So in Hebrew, you would say, "I am with the table."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: You would say, "I am *be'table*."

[Laughter]

Jon: Okay.

Tim: You just put the B.

Jon: So the B is "with."

Tim: The B. Yeah. Mhm.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So—

Jon: I am *be'table*.

Tim: I am *be'table*. Yeah.

Jon: I kind of like that.

Tim: So the whole point is this is a fixed little phrase. And to respond with—the *bet* preposition is used to refer specifically to, like, legally or publicly, making a declaration. Here, let's just look at some examples, and it'll become clear.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So in the book of Samuel, there's this story about how Samuel—he's a prophet, a great prophet and priest figure. He's been leading the people. But the people of Israel want a king. They want somebody who will go fight battles for them and be, like, a king, like the other nations.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: And so Samuel's—what do you say?—he's miffed?

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: He's a little insulted when he hands over leadership to this king, whose Saul—he gives this long speech, and he says, "Okay, I'm signing off leadership here. Here I am. Anybody around, bear witness about me. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Did I defraud anybody? Who have I oppressed? Whose hand have I taken a bribe from to blind my eyes?" So he's essentially saying, "Look, I've done right by you all. And if there's anybody who thinks I've done wrong against them,"—and then he uses this phrase, "bear witness." And then the *bet* preposition connected to the word me.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So literally what he says is "respond to me."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But when he's—then brings up all of these. "Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken?" He's asking them to, like, bring a legal charge.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: And he knows that nobody can, because he's done right by them. So, how you bring an official charge or bear witness in a public way to represent a claim about somebody—you use this phrase: "bearing witness."

Jon: Because literally, this phrase, you could say, is "say against me."

Tim: "Say about me."

Jon: Or "say about me."

Tim: "Respond"—yeah—"with regard to me."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: And we would use the phrase "bear witness," because it's usually in a setting of—making an accusation that we can all decide if it's true or not.

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. Here's a couple other examples: Isaiah 59. "Our transgressions, O God, are multiplied before you. Our sins bear witness about us."

Jon: Hmm. And that's the word there?

Tim: Yeah. Or testify. It—I mean, again, it's hard to put into English, really, because what it literally is "our sins respond with regard to us."

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: But that's just a figure of speech.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And figures of speech—

Jon: It's a figure of speech for when you are making an accusation or a public declaration—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: —about—

Tim: A public claim. You're lon—

Jon: A public claim.

Tim: Yeah. It's almost like—mmm—an open letter.

[Laughter]

Tim: The concept of an open letter.

Jon: Okay

Tim: Where you are—or a whistleblower moment. You're going public and claiming something about another person.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: That's it.

Jon: Alright.

Tim: It's what this phrase means.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So again, back to the ninth command: "You will not bear witness"—and then the kind of witness that you are bearing is false is how it gets translated. Let's talk about this word "false". This is—I don't know why I like this word, but it's a really interesting word. The word "false" in "false witness" is the Hebrew word *sheqer*.

Jon: *Sheqer*.

Tim: *Sheqer*. It's just fun to say.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: *Sheqer*. It's used 113 times in the Hebrew Bible.

Jon: That's a lot.

Tim: It's a lot of *sheqer*. Yeah. Yeah. So let's just look at some examples before I try and give an abstract definition. Here's one from Psalm 33, verse 16: "A king is not saved by a mighty army, and a warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a *sheqer* for victory. It cannot deliver anyone by its great strength."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: "A horse is *sheqer*."

Jon: Okay. And in this context, it's—it's unable to give you victory.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: So it's inadequate.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah. But why I read kind of the lines around it was—that seems kind of counter—

Jon: It is counter.

Tim: —to normal experience.

Jon: Yeah. Yeah, if you have a horse in battle and the other person doesn't have a horse, you're going to win that battle.

Tim: You're gonna—totally. Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. But in the context of the psalm, it's going to say, like, "But kings will let you down. Warriors let you down."

Jon: Yeah, a horse is going to let you down.

Tim: "A horse is *sheqer*." In other words, a horse is normally a sign of something that's true and reliable, but actually it's not.

Jon: It's a *sheqer*.

Tim: Yeah. It's *sheqer*. A *sheqer* presents itself as one thing, but in reality, it's not that thing.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: That's *sheqer*.

Jon: Okay. Interesting.

Tim: Mhm. So it's about something—

Jon: It's like an illusion?

Tim: It's an illusion. Yes. Illusion. It's—uhm—something that betrays. It's masquerading.

Jon: What was the word that we talked about earlier in the 10 Commandments about ...

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Oh, vanity.

Tim: *Shav'*.

Jon: *Shav'*.

Tim: *Shav'*. "Don't carry the name of Yahweh your Elohim—"

Jon: In *shav'*.

Tim: Mhm. Towards—

Jon: That feels similar.

Tim: It—it is similar. Actually, *sheqer* and *shav'* are synon—

Jon: *Sheqer* and *shav'*.

Tim: —are related words, often, in biblical poetry. Carrying the name of God in vain means something exists for a purpose, and that purpose was frustrated or compromised.

Jon: Right.

Tim: It didn't happen.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So something is for—

Jon: It's more about its—its utility.

Tim: Yeah. It's made to be a thing.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And then it—that thing—

Jon: That's *shav'*.

Tim: —that doesn't happen. That's *shav'*. And this is similar. This is—you're putting yourself forward as if you're one thing.

Jon: You're representing yourself as one thing.

Tim: As one thing, but actually—

Jon: But it's not.

Tim: And not only is it not, it's the opposite. It doesn't—

Jon: Ah.

Tim: So a horse should bring victory, but actually, you could have the most powerful horse in the world, and if God isn't on your side, then it's *sheqer* for victory.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: In Jeremiah 10, idols and molten images are *sheqer*—

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: —because there is no breath in them.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So you're—you're—

Jon: They're representing themselves as ...

Tim: As a god.

Jon: A god.

[Laughter]

Jon: And they're inanimate.

Tim: But in fact, it's a statue.

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

Jon: That's a *sheqer*.

Tim: Alright. This is my favorite one.

Jon: Alright.

Tim: It's a riddle from Proverbs 25. This is so good. This is great. "Clouds and wind but no rain. A man who boasts about a gift of *sheqer*."

[Laughter]

Tim: It's a riddle.

Jon: That's a riddle?

Tim: Yeah. "Clouds and wind, but no rain."

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: A man who boasts about a gift of *sheqer*.

Jon: So clouds and wind mean rain should be coming.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So it's making me anticipate the rain.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: But then if the rain doesn't come, then that was just a huge disappointment. And the sign that the rain was coming actually wasn't really a sign.

Tim: Was—yeah, yeah. That's right.

Jon: The sign was a *sheqer*, I guess, in a way.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah. The clouds and wind are promising to offer.

Jon: Something that's not coming.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So they're a *sheqer*.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: And a man who boasts of a gift of a *sheqer* is like that.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: A man who boasts of a gift—

Tim: Of *sheqer*.

Jon: —of *sheqer*.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: How's this usually translated?

Tim: So here, I've just stacked them up right here. So NIV translates, "One who boasts of a gift never given." Or ESV: "A man who boasts about a gift he does not give."

Jon: Ooh.

Tim: So you could take it to mean clouds and wind, but then they don't—

Jon: They don't deliver the gift.

Tim: —deliver the gift of rain.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: A guy who keeps talking about what he wants to, like, give—

Jon: He's going to give you something.

Tim: Going to give you something.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But like, he never does it. He never—never follows through.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: His talk. His talk is like—

Jon: Ah. He makes promises that he doesn't uphold.

Tim: Yup.

Jon: And the promise is, "I'm going to give you some. I got something for you."

Tim: "I got something for you." Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: And you're like, "Yeah. Yeah. You know what you are? You're like a cloud that doesn't bring rain."

Tim: Totally. So *sheqer* is about expectation.

Jon: Mmm. Oh, okay.

Tim: Or presentation.

Jon: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tim: You expect this thing—"I looked at it, and it seems like I should expect X as the result."

Jon: Right.

Tim: Based on what it is and how it appears.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But in fact, a guy who keeps saying he wants to give you a gift. Whoa! Okay. I—I take that at face value.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: I assume that's true.

Jon: You know, it's so interesting that—I think it's human psychology. There's something in the human psyche that we just want to trust people.

Tim: Mmm. Mmm.

Jon: When someone says something is true, our natural response is to be like, "Of course, that's true."

Tim: Mmm. Mhm.

Jon: And it's so disorienting when someone just starts saying something that's just absolutely not true.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: It's kind of how con men, you know, like, are able to do their thing.

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

Jon: It's because our internal position—

Tim: Default, yeah.

Jon: —default is trusting people. I think, I think.

Tim: Mhm. Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: Until you learn after a long time, like, you actually can't trust this person.

Tim: Through experience.

Jon: It takes a lot of time.

Tim: Yeah, totally. Yeah. And usually, it seems to be the case that people who are slow to trust, or their default has changed to assuming people aren't telling the truth, it's usually just because they've been—

Jon: They've been hurt so many times.

Tim: —hurt so many times.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That they're just like, "That default's not working for me."

Jon: Right.

Tim: And maybe it has—partially has to do with the fact that humans are so helpless when we come into the world that if you have existed and flourished as a child, it's because the people who cared for you were—were mostly truthful.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And like, reliable and trustworthy.

Jon: And if we had to second-guess everything—

Tim: Everything. Yeah.

Jon: —we would go nuts.

Tim: Totally.

Jon: It would drive us crazy.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So you just have to start to trust that people are presenting reality.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: And so how damaging is it when—

Tim: Yes. Totally.

Jon: —that's not the case?

Tim: Totally. So that's *sheqer*. *Sheqer* is, you put forward, "I'm a truth-teller. I'm trustworthy. I'm one thing." But in reality, it's another. That's *sheqer*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So Jeremiah, he looks out at the city of Jerusalem—Israelites there—right as Babylon's on the horizon as the big bad oppressor. And the city's just full of crime and terrible leadership. And he says, "From the least of them to the greatest of them, everyone's greedy for gain from the prophets, even the priests, everyone does *sheqer*. They heal the brokenness of my people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace.' But there's no peace here."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So *sheqer*.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Like the leaders are going, "Everything's fine."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: "We're all fine here."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: "Nothing's broken."

Jon: But it's not.

Tim: No. So that's *sheqer*.

Jon: Okay. They're doing *sheqer*.

Tim: Yeah, but that's called doing *sheqer*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So there's many cases where you can do *sheqer*, but then *sheqer* is often used to describe people's words. Ooh. So when Moses and Aaron go to the enslaved Israelites—this is after Moses has come back from the burning bush—he meets up with Aaron, his brother, and they go to Pharaoh, and then they go to the people, and they say, "God wants to set you free." And

they're, like, stoked. And then they go to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's like, "What? No way. I don't know who Yahweh is." So this is when Pharaoh starts demanding more bricks, but he gives them less straw.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: And what he says is, "Let the quota and the labor be heavier on the Israelites, and let them pay no more attention to these words of *sheqer*."

Jon: Referring to Moses' words?

Tim: Yes. Moses and Aaron. About you're going to get to go free.

Jon: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. False hope.

Tim: False hope. Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Oh, so that's the word false—makes sense there. That's a phrase that we have.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: False hope. Mhm.

Jon: Yeah, or the—

Tim: Deceiving words. Words, yeah, that are false hope.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So you can just have words of *sheqer*, or you can do *sheqer*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Mhm. But then once you use this phrase "bear witness" and then you add *sheqer*, now we're talking about what, in our cultural setting—it's like, "Put your hand on the Bible."

Jon: Yeah. Courtroom settings.

Tim: And you swear an oath before the court that you will tell the truth. And then you, on purpose, you don't.

Jon: Misrepresent—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: —reality.

Tim: So it's so interesting that the ninth command is actually really specific to a specific social setting.

Jon: Yeah, now, they didn't—

Tim: As opposed to using a more general statement, like, "Don't speak *sheqer*."

Tim: Why wasn't the ninth command that? "Don't speak *sheqer*."

Jon: Yeah, words of *sheqer*.

Tim: Words of—yeah, just don't say words of *sheqer*.

Jon: Which is more like, just, don't lie.

Tim: Yeah. That's right. That would apply to a courtroom.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But then it would also—

Jon: It's more broad.

Tim: —apply to, like, any other conversation you're having.

Jon: Yeah, it is a specific setting. But ancient Israel didn't have courtrooms like we have courtrooms, right?

Tim: Yes, they had city gates.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: As far as we know—and this is mostly from, like, the book of Judges and Ruth, where the elders of a town come together. Deuteronomy talks about this. So you're—the gates were like, uh. So opening—

Jon: This was the public forum where you would go and settle disputes?

Tim: There you go. Public forum.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That's right. Mhm.

Jon: And the elders would be the judges.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And you'd have people come and say, "Okay, what's your side of the story? What's your side of the story?"

Tim: That's it.

Jon: And this is where you're bearing witness.

Tim: That's exactly it.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yes. Yeah.

Jon: So this is the setting.

Tim: That's the setting. Yeah. So the assumed setting, then, is you're being called upon to represent your version of what you saw or witnessed or experienced.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: And so now you can really see the communal, neighbor implications of this. Why wasn't it a prohibition of "Don't speak words of *sheqer*"?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Why is it "bearing false witness in the city gates"?

Jon: Yeah, yeah.

Tim: Like, why is it—

Jon: So specific?

Tim: Yeah, it is so specific. But maybe what's happening is that words of *sheqer* spoken between you and me—I mean, that's pretty devastating to our relationship.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Words of *sheqer* spoken between you and me when a dispute that we have is, like, going on publicly, that is not only just about you and me, but it's about how truth or falsehood between you and me affects our whole community.

Jon: So it puts the focus on the community, is what you're saying.

Tim: That is what I'm saying. Yeah.

Jon: And that seems important enough that it—because the move could have been “Don't lie.”

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: No words of *sheqer*.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And then we can meditate on how that applies to bearing false witness.

Tim: That's right. Yeah. Interpersonally or in a more public way.

Jon: But there's something about the way that this command is written to say, “Actually, I just really want you to focus on the communal aspect.”

Tim: The communal, yeah, a shared commitment to truth.

Jon: A shared communal commitment to truth.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It's really important. So important, it's in the 10 Commandments.

[Laughter]

Tim: A communal commitment to truth.

[Musical break (24:32—24:34)]

Tim: So here's what's interesting: when I turn from the 10 Commandments to their matching companion set of commands in the 42 that follow, these ideas come up again. And I'll just kind of give the punch line before all of the case studies that connect and illuminate the ninth command that come in the 42 that follow—highlight how misrepresentations of the truth inevitably lead to violence.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: Especially for the most vulnerable in a given community.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It's really interesting. Like, that's what's at stake. And I think that there's something there that was just—kind of surprised me, because it wasn't where my mind naturally went. But when a shared commitment to truth breaks down communally, one inevitable consequence is violence, especially towards the most vulnerable.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So that's the punch line. Should we look at some examples?

Jon: Sure.

Tim: Yeah. Okay. Exodus 23, verse 1 begins a whole series of case-study laws that are kind of like little, almost little parables, and they use the language of the ninth command, but in surprising combinations. So 23, verse 1: "You will not bear a false report."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So this is actually not the word "bear witness". It's the word report, which just means to make something hearable.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And "bear" is the word "carry".

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So you will not carry a report of—and it's actually not the word *sheqer*, it's the word *shav'* from the third command: "Don't carry or bear the name of the Lord your God—"

Jon: With *shav'*.

Tim: —with false purpose."

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: You can see how connected these words are.

Tim: Very connected. Exactly. Yeah. So "Don't bear a false report. Don't join your hand with a wicked man to become a witness of violence." So the phrase "witness of violence" in English, at face value, just means, "I saw violence."

Jon: Right.

Tim: And that's not what it means here.

Jon: Oh, it means you're a violent witness?

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Ooh.

Tim: Mhm. A witness that brings about—

Jon: Creates violence.

Tim: —or creates or allows.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: Yeah. So it's describing a specific kind of scene here, related to bearing false witness.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: But instead of using the language of the ninth command, we've used a bunch of synonyms.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Bearing a false report.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: But then bearing a false report is described as joining your hand with a wicked man, with the result that you become a witness that leads to violence.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So again, there's another specific little scenario here—I go into a public setting, making a claim about my neighbor's behavior, and I know it's not true.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And I have joined my hand with other wicked men in my community to do this.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And as a result, my bearing witness results in violence.

Jon: Hmm. And why? Why does it result in violence?

Tim: That's a great question. That's a great question. Why would it result in violence? Okay, let's look at another law that uses the same phrase, "witness of violence." Deuteronomy 19:15, "A single witness will not be sufficient against a person for any crime or any wrong in connection with any offense that he's committed."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: "Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses can a charge be made."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So just—just internalize that for a moment. Like it might intuitively make sense, but let's say out loud why.

[Laughter]

Tim: What's the point of this?

Jon: Yeah, so okay, so we're in a setting where, again, there's not a courtroom as we imagine it, but there are elders who are judges of sorts, and people can come and bear witness. Here's what happened. And then a decision can be made about who's in the right and who's in the wrong.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And what this is saying is, "If one person comes and says it, that's not enough for any sort of verdict."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: "There will not be any sort of announcement of someone's guilt or innocence."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: "It's not enough."

Tim: Yeah. Yup. You need two.

Jon: And—you need at least two.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah. Because one person might give a witness of *sheqer*.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Two people? Well, that's also still possible.

Jon: Right.

Tim: But it becomes a little less likely that two people would do that. Three? So the idea is that maybe if one person—their conscience is so rotten—they'll do that. But two people with an equally rotten conscience? Maybe.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But that's the idea. So, okay, first of all, only on the evidence of two or three witnesses. "If a"—again, here's this phrase—"violent witness or witness of violence rises up to accuse someone of wrongdoing, both parties to the dispute shall appear before Yahweh, before the priests and the judges who are there in those days. And the judges will diligently inquire. And if the witness is a false witness who's accused his brother falsely, then do to him whatever he meant to do to his brother."

Jon: Whoa!

Tim: Whoa! "So you will purge the evil from your midst, and everybody else will hear and be afraid and never want to commit any kind—that kind of evil among you."

Jon: And the evil is the false witness.

Tim: The evil is—yes. Yeah. So the idea is you're bearing false witness because you know what the consequence will be.

Jon: Yeah, and you're trying to get that consequence for that person.

Tim: You're trying—yeah, that seems to be what—

Jon: And that makes you a witness of violence.

Tim: A witness of violence means—

Jon: Or a violent witness.

Tim: Yeah, because what I said earlier was the reason, I think, why the ninth command is worded in the way that it is, is because of this conviction the biblical authors have, that when truth is misrepresented in the one place where the truth is the most at stake in a public way—

Jon: You create violence.

Tim: —it results in violence towards the most vulnerable.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: Because all of a sudden, significant, life-altering consequences, legal punishments can end up getting handed out to the wrong people. So that's the violence that's in mind here. Okay. So let's go back to Exodus 23: "Don't carry a false report. Do not join your hand with a wicked man and become a witness of violence"—or a violent witness. "You will not follow after the many in doing evil. You will not testify concerning a dispute so as to turn aside after the many for distortion."

Jon: Hmm. That's dense.

Tim: It's super dense. And the way I've translated it is actually difficult English.

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But it's hyper-literal.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So let's say you're called upon to testify in a dispute between two people.

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: And let's say—

Jon: There's a group that says, "We're going to bear false witness. We're going to take this guy out."

Tim: Yup.

Jon: "Here's the scheme. Let's get on the same page. Here's the story."

Tim: That's it. It's the red. That's the wicked man.

Jon: That's the wicked man.

Tim: That's the joining your hand to the wicked men.

Jon: And they say, "We need you to follow this story."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: "This is what we're going to do."

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And so if you say, "Cool, I'm in with that—"

Tim: Dude, you can imagine the scene right here. Let's say you're a witness.

Jon: Yeah. Yeah.

Tim: Like in a court case.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: And then the night before, like a group of shady figures comes to your house.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And they're like, "You're going to be on the witness stand tomorrow. And what you're going to say is ... X."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But that's not what happened. "What you're going to say is X. Or else we're going to break your kneecaps," or whatever.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: That's what's here. So don't turn aside after the many in a way that distorts the truth. Okay? Let's come back. Here's the next sentence: "And a poor man, you also will not show preferential honor in his dispute." Oh, okay. That's interesting.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So it's almost—we have three different laws next to each other, and you're just supposed to be like, "How do they relate?" So don't bear false witness because that will lead to the wrong people getting punished.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Don't follow after the many, even when the many are saying you should bear false witness. And also, let's say there's somebody who's economically, like, really ...

Jon: In bad shape.

Tim: ... in bad shape, in a dispute with somebody who's better off economically. Don't show preference—

Jon: Based off of their status.

Tim: Don't alter the truthfulness of your testimony based off of economic status.

Jon: Hmm. So in any situation, don't alter the truth.

Tim: Mhm. That's right.

Jon: For any reason.

Tim: Yup. That's right. Okay. Let's keep going. "Don't distort justice for the needy person in his dispute."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Oh, okay, so that's interesting. What I just heard was, "Don't show preference to somebody just because they're" ...

Jon: Yeah, in a needy situation.

Tim: Yep, in a needy situation. But then also, don't distort justice against the needy person in his dispute.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: I think is what that means.

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: So it gives you both sides.

Jon: Both sides. Okay.

Tim: Yeah. "Keep"—this is verse seven, no?—"keep far away from a *sheqer*, a word of *sheqer*."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: "Do not kill the innocent or the righteous one, because I will not declare the guilty to be righteous. Do not take a bribe, because a bribe blinds open eyes and it subverts the word of the righteous. Do not oppress an immigrant, because you know what it means to be an immigrant, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt." Dude, this is a great example of the laws in the Torah. They'll just put these little bundles in front of you.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And you're not told explicitly how they work together, but they are bound together to force you to meditate on a bigger set of values here.

Jon: Hmm. It's a lot to keep track of.

[Laughter]

Tim: It is. Each one of these little sayings is like a little—a little world unto itself.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So we're working through it. So don't bear false witness if it results in somebody being unfairly punished. Don't bear false witness if a lot of people are pressuring you to.

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: Don't bear false witness if you want to bend the truth in favor of somebody because, man, they don't have anything.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: But also, don't bear false witness to take advantage of somebody if they don't have anything.

Jon: Mmm. Yeah.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Keep far from—

Tim: Mhm. Just keep—

Jon: —words of *sheqer*.

Tim: —far away from words of *sheqer*.

Jon: And then, "Don't kill the innocent."

Tim: Ooh. So yeah, that's—we're back to the witness of violence.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: Don't do anything that would bring about capital punishment on the wrong person, on the innocent.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Like the ultimate tragedy here is that bad turns into good, good turns into bad. The innocent are guilty, and the guilty are innocent. You don't want to live in that world.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Keep far away. Whew—and that's true, man. I don't want to live in that world.

Jon: Yeah. Yeah. And "Don't take bribes."

Tim: Mhm. And then immigrants—"Don't oppress an immigrant."

Jon: Yeah, that feels—that feels completely in left field now.

Tim: Okay, yeah, so let's meditate on that a little more. So why are the economically poor and needy, or the immigrant, brought up?

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So they're first brought up with, "You might be tempted based on somebody's economic situation to bend the truth, whether they're rich or whether they're poor. Don't do that." As impartial as you can possibly be.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Like, that's the ideal. But then, also, I think we're bringing up people who are economically or socially vulnerable, because who tends to suffer? Who tends to, on like your statistical average, get the most taken advantage of when people bend the truth?

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Right? In legal settings. It's usually people who don't have high social standing.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: They don't have the friends. They don't have the connections.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Or the resources. In our case to, like, hire the best lawyer or something, right?

Jon: Right.

Tim: And that's really profound that that's being highlighted here, I think.

Jon: The immigrant.

Tim: The immigrant and the needy and the poor are especially vulnerable when people in more secure social positions can rig the courts. I mean, essentially.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's just so interesting. Like, this is clearly not just a modern issue.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Like, this is an issue that's plagued human societies from the very beginning.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: If you have less friends, less money, you're more vulnerable to being a victim of a crooked justice system.

Jon: Yeah. And people can more easily convince themselves, "It's okay if I bend the truth on this, because that's—that person—"

Tim: Oh, sure.

Jon: "—is not one of us."

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Mmm. Yeah. They're not as valuable to our community.

Jon: Not as—there it is. It's not as valuable.

Tim: Yep.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. But God says, "I will not declare the guilty to be righteous. So you humans might think you can trick each other and get the innocent to be declared guilty, but that's not how I operate," God says.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: "So you can trick each other, but you can't trick me. And you don't want to trick me when it comes to this issue."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's kind of a stern—stern statement there.

[Musical break (39:30—39:32)]

Tim: So the ninth command to not lie actually is about not bearing false witness in a legal dispute.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Why is that? Why—right? That was kind of the question that I was trying to pose.

Jon: Right.

Tim: And if you look at the mirror of the ninth command in the 42, it's this section we're looking at. And where it's really focusing is about how a crooked legal system of settling disputes tends to follow a pretty predictable pattern about when the wrong people get punished or have to suffer consequences. It is not just innocent people, though that's true. But often it's people who are in vulnerable social and economic positions. And that is something God really wants to prevent. And then the last—again, the last line says, "Why?" First of all, "I won't—you can't trick me," God says.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: "And you yourselves know what it's like to be immigrants. You were immigrants in the land of Egypt."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So if Israel is meant to be the light, right? The light shining in the darkness in the city on the hill: God really wants to have even their communal justice systems stand apart from the typical types of corruption and distortion that they're liable to.

Jon: So I asked, "Why does bearing false witness lead to violence?"

Tim: Mmm. Mmm.

Jon: And you said, "That's a good question."

Tim: Mmm.

Jon: And I don't know if we've fully answered it.

Tim: Oh, okay. Even though when I bear false witness, my hand is not bearing the knife that stabs you in the chest.

Jon: Mmm. Sure.

Tim: But in a way—let's strip away all the formalities—you're the one stabbing them if they end up, yeah, getting some retributive punishment because of your false witness.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Like, let's just name what's really going on. You're a witness of violence.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: It's just such a striking phrase.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Violent witness.

Jon: Right.

Tim: Because a witness is something you just—you do with your words. You bear witness.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: But in reality, those words are weapons.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Okay, so the ninth command—it's "Do not bear false witness."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And the focus is now communal and the shared reality that we're having as a community, especially around who's in the right and who's in the wrong, and should someone have a consequence for something that they did?

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And if you go and you carry with you, like, a false report against someone, you're actually creating violence against that person.

Tim: Hmm.

Jon: But you're also, now, just deteriorating, like, the fabric of this community.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And so there's something about this communal aspect and the violence it brings that seems to be the focus of this law. And then, also, you were saying that the violence tends to be against people who are vulnerable.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: Because if you have power and status, you could probably get enough people on your side to not bear the false report. But if you're a needy person, or you don't have a lot of resources, or you don't have a lot of friends, like, it's going to be so much easier for people to turn on you.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah. That's right.

Jon: So there's something about the way communal psyches work, which is, we'll bend the truth. We'll gang up on someone. And that person is going to be someone who doesn't really matter in our community.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And we'll be okay with that.

Tim: Yeah. That's what tends to happen.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That's a—yeah—predictable pattern in human communities. So not bearing false witness has big communal implications. But also, it's built on this deeper value of, like, everybody in your community matters.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Whether they are a landowner and contribute lots of economic, like, fuel to the community, or whether they're a priest or a prophet, or whether they're just hard times and they had to sell themselves into debt slavery and they lost all their land. And like, every one of those community members matters. And if there's a dispute, a shared commitment to truth is so vital to loving your neighbor.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And creating a community that bears witness to the character of the God who's revealed himself fundamentally in the world as the liberator of slaves and immigrants.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. What kind of community is going to carry God's name most faithfully? Well, isn't it interesting that "Don't carry the name of God in futility" or vain?

Jon: Mhm. *Shav'*.

Tim: Yeah, for *shav'*. And that carrying or bearing a false witness is another way. And for sure, the fact that those two laws are connected in those words, and then the fact in the 42 commands that you can bear false witness, *sheqer*, or you can carry a—

Jon: A *shav'* report.

Tim: *Shav'* report. They're kind of bound together. I find this interesting because the way we normally summarize the meaning of the ninth commandment is we flatten it out: "Don't lie." But that actual wording of it is actually making us think about our more public structures, for how we settle people's disputes and how those are prone to distortion, usually to the disadvantage of people who are vulnerable.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And that that's something that should be on the mind of the people of God.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Should be super mindful of that, specifically.

Jon: So flip it over.

Tim: Mmm. Mhm.

Jon: How would you frame it?

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. Hold up and celebrate and reinforce the value of truth-telling in our public—

Jon: To the benefit of everyone.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Especially the vulnerable.

Tim: Yes, that's right. The truth matters. Protect the truth, uphold it. And then, I mean, if you're subverting it secretly, the inversion of that would be to promote it publicly.

[Laughter]

Tim: Right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So publicly promote and—

Jon: Advocate for the truth.

Tim: —advocate. Yeah. For the—it's really important.

Jon: So let's just commit to—no matter what.

Tim: Mmm.

Jon: If someone's offering you a bribe.

Tim: Mmm.

Jon: If you just—you don't like that person.

Tim: Yeah, you feel pressured or—

Jon: You feel pressured.

Tim: —or whatever. Bullied or ...

Jon: Yeah. Everyone else is doing it.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: These are my friends. These are not my friends. No matter what the situation is, let's have a commitment to share the truth about reality. And that's—it's inter—it's just so interesting that that's one of the 10.

Tim: Yeah. It is. It's very powerful. And let's ponder the significance that that—shared public, communal commitment to truth, to the promotion and sustaining of an environment of equity and justice—that is what's at stake in the ninth command of the 10 Commandments. It's not just "Don't lie."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's a very specific form and institutional setting, a communal setting of lying that's under the microscope here.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And apparently, God's wisdom thinks that we need to take that very seriously.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Yeah. As the covenant people of God. It's sending my mind in a lot of places.

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah, me too.

Tim: Uh—and that’s probably, it’s probably happening for a lot of our listeners too. So let’s let the Holy Spirit take this wisdom and send our minds to all the places that it needs to go. Because I’m thinking of so many contemporary public situations that come to mind right now.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But I guess—hmm—you know, here’s what I feel like right now. I feel like this is a moment where Jesus would say, “If you have ears, you should listen.”

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah. Thanks for listening to BibleProject podcast. Next week, we finish the 10 Commandments with the final command: “Do not covet.” Or as we translated from Hebrew: “Do not desire your neighbor’s house, wife, and”—well, a bunch of other things. If this command sounds different from all the others, it’s because it is.

Tim: All the other commands refer to behavior that is observable.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: Actions that you can see—adultery, stealing, bearing false witness in a public setting. Desire is completely internal.

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