

"If a False Witness Rises Against Any Man"

I'm sure we've all been told before: Don't believe everything you hear. Often this is said about what you hear on TV. It's easy to think that if we hear it on TV it *must* be true. And yet wisdom tells us that's not always the case. We have to look at the source of who is making the claim. We have to search their motivations. We have to see if it's just one person's wild claim, or is there a large group of reasonable people presenting a researched position.

Of course apply this to a personal level. What if someone tells you something bad about another person? Do you just assume it to be true? Hopefully, if it's gossip, you find a gentle but firm way to stop the other person right there. But you see, we all have truth claims coming to us of all sorts today. We have to wisely evaluate them. Often the truth claims can actually be an accusation against someone. Sometimes these accusations are false. This tarnishes good reputations. It can hurt people tremendously in different ways: both emotionally and socially to say the least. If you've bore the brunt of these false accusations, you know the pain. It's especially painful if it comes from someone who you thought was your friend. In these situations we usually want justice. We want our name cleared. We want to be vindicated.

Our passage for today deals with these sorts of issues. Here we see again some general teaching on the importance of multiple witnesses. This is something mentioned in several of the places in the Torah. It's also a principle referenced a lot in the New Testament as well. This is the wisdom that we can't place our stock in just one person's account. We need to have multiple witnesses to establish a claim. This is especially true when determining someone's guilt or innocence in a court of law. It is also true in all areas of life when we are trying to ascertain the truth of something. This is a common principle in Scripture, one we had looked at somewhat recently back in chapter 17. Because of this, we're not going to spend any more time today on the general principle of having multiple witnesses.

Instead, I'd like to turn our attention to a specific focus of this passage: the false malicious witness. This passage calls for justice when a person maliciously and falsely accuses someone. We'll look first today at the strict justice described here in this scenario. Second, we'll spend some time considering how Jesus faced and responded to false witnesses. Third, we'll reflect on how this calls us to deal with false witnesses in our midst.

Let's begin then in verse 16. There you see the perpetrator introduced. A false witness who rises against another to testify against him. I'm calling this the false malicious witness. They are "false" in that they have untrue testimony. They are "malicious" in that they are using this false testimony proactively against someone with intent to bring punishment upon them. In this case, they are using it in a court of law to find the person guilty of a charge. In other words, this passage isn't talking about someone who just holds a mistaken view about someone or something. It's about the person who uses his untrue views against someone else with evil intention. By the way, I'm not just making up the word "malicious" here. It's actually the word used in many English translations here in verse 16, instead of the word

"false" here. The Hebrew word is the literal word for "violence;" it literally refers to of a "witness of violence."

Of course, this passage describes the person as a false malicious witness after the fact. You don't know someone is a false witness until you prove it. Verses 17-18 go on to describe how you investigate a false witnesses' claims. Verse 17 says that both the false witness and the wrongly accused should stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. This probably is referring to a specific situation where one person's word was placed against another. This reference of "standing before the LORD" likely means that this kind of case could be referred to the highest court, the city where the tabernacle was, the place where God has put his name. Verse 18 then describes the thorough investigation that had to take place. Presumably more witnesses and evidence would need to be obtained in order to prove that the witness was indeed a false one.

But if at the end of the day the person was proved to be a false witness, then verse 19 describes their punishment. Whatever punishment they had tried to inflict on the innocent, that would be their punishment. That's reiterated by the principle stated in verse 21: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, etc. If the malicious witness tried to have someone killed, then they themselves would receive the death penalty. If they tried to find someone guilty of stealing something, which would have involved a sort of fine as restitution, then that would be their punishment. What they tried to falsely put on someone else, would be their own punishment. As we mentioned last week, the punishment would fit the crime; in the legal world today this is known as the *lex talionis* principle.

The opening verses of Exodus chapter 23 add some extra thoughts on this. If you have your Bibles open you might want to flip there. Exodus 23 verse 1 describes how false witnesses can sin by circulating reports. That's almost a sort of gossip or an intentional smear campaign by a malicious witness. Verse 2 of that chapter describes how you shouldn't follow an evil crowd in giving false witness. In other words, justice can be thwarted when multiple false witnesses go into collusion together. The law required multiple witnesses, and so if several malicious witnesses conspire together, that will be a problem for the judges. Exodus 23 verse 8 goes on to condemn receiving bribes in exchange for giving false testimony. And so I mention Exodus 23 here because these are some common problems that are often associated with false malicious witnesses.

Let me offer a little assessment of all of this. I hope it goes without saying that being a false malicious witness is a sin. In fact it's a direct violation of the ninth commandment. The ninth commandment forbids giving false testimony against your neighbor. What's described here in Deuteronomy is about as specific of a way to break the ninth commandment as you can get. And yet, it'd be easy for us to think through this sin and for most of us to think we're personally innocent of this crime. Most of us probably have never been a plaintiff or a witness in a court case. Most of us have probably never committed the official perjury described in this passage. Praise God, if that's the case.

And yet when we consider this issue more broadly, it's one that I hope we all recognize that we've broken in one way or another. It's a sin we've all committed in one degree or another. First off, you don't have to go to court in order to falsely slander and accuse someone. Any way we gossip about someone and spread lies or tarnish their name can fall into this category of

sin. Any way in which we accuse someone of something, but only tell part of the story, and not the whole story; that breaks this commandment. You know that's easy to do, you blame someone for something and only tell part of the truth; just the amounts that in isolation and out of context really makes your case against the other person. But we need to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Any time we side with the wrong people in these sorts of circumstances, the people who are distorting the truth or propagating a lie, we've sinned in this area as well.

Of course whenever we study the ninth commandment, it's typical to point out that any lying is a form of breaking this commandment. That's applying this in an even broader sense. White lies, false flattery, you name it. These are things we know we fall short in. These are all areas that we need to confess. We need to confess how we break this commandment in what we say and do. We also need to confess how we break this commandment in what we don't do. This passage reminds us that instead of thwarting justice and truth by spreading lies, we should be defending the cause of the righteous. We should be advocating for those who receive malicious false testimony against them. We should be looking to advance the cause of truth and helping the false accused in their plight. We should look to restore good names, and not aid those who falsely condemn.

So we can read this passage and recognize this sin. We can recognize how we all have failed in some degree in this area. And yet I'd like to turn now to consider how Jesus himself experienced the blunt of this sin. The Scriptures make it clear to us that this was a specific part of Christ's suffering. Think of the trials of Jesus. Think specifically about Judas Iscariot's role in that. Those trials were possible because of what Judas had done in betraying Jesus. Judas sided with those who wanted to bring false charges against Jesus. He accepted a bribe to hand Jesus over to them. As Exodus 23 mentioned that's all an extension of this crime.

Of course then at Jesus' trials you see ample evidence of false witnesses. Matthew 26 and Mark 14 both testify to this. Matthew and Mark both record that the chief priests and the Sanhedrin were proactively finding and bringing false witnesses to the court. The very people charged here in Deuteronomy with protecting against false malicious witnesses are the ones who are ultimately the false malicious witnesses! And yet in the face of all this Christ remained silent. He did not revile in return.

He bore with this false malicious testimony, because that is what he came to do. Jesus came to pay for sin on the cross. Jesus paid the penalty of all sorts of sins, and so it's fitting that he bore the brunt of the very sorts of sins he came to atone. On the cross he died for the sins of breaking the ninth commandment. He died to save those who have sinned this sin of false testimony in varying forms and degrees. He died to save us from our gossips, our slander, our white lies, and our perjury.

And so Jesus did not fight against these who falsely and maliciously accused him. He didn't because this was all part of the divine rescue mission; he knew this would happen in the process of saving his people. In fact this was even predicted ahead of time in the Old Testament. The passage that probably especially comes to mind is Isaiah 53:7. Speaking in advance of Jesus it says, "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

But another one that I think is especially fitting comes from Psalm 35. That's a psalm of David. It's likely originally describing the life of David. In that psalm David describes the way malicious witnesses falsely accused him. What's even worse, is David says that these people were the very people he had shown kindness to before. Listen to verses 11-15 of this psalm.

Fierce witnesses rise up; They ask me things that I do not know. They reward me evil for good, To the sorrow of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, My clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting; And my prayer would return to my own heart. I paced about as though he were my friend or brother; I bowed down heavily, as one who mourns for his mother. But in my adversity they rejoiced And gathered together; Attackers gathered against me, And I did not know it; They tore at me and did not cease;

David's malicious witnesses were those he had considered his friends; people for whom he had shown love and concern. Well, the New Testament commonly takes various ways that psalmists suffer and apply that to Christ. I think that is fitting to do here. David's experience becomes a picture of the suffering Christ experienced. Christ had malicious witnesses rise up against him. But what makes this so deplorable is that Christ had come to do good to humanity. To bring salvation to the world. Here people who stood to benefit from his love and concern are instead rising up as malicious witnesses against him.

David's psalm goes on to cry out for justice and vindication against these malicious witnesses. That's understandable. That's just. Certainly at the end of the day, justice will be served in these matters. And yet here's where Jesus shows yet an even better way. Yes, one day Jesus will come to bring justice. He will ultimately answer the prayer of Psalm 35 for justice in these matters. But first Christ came to bring grace. He didn't do good to mankind only before they falsely accused him. He continued to do good to mankind even as they falsely accused him. Jesus told us on the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies. That is what Jesus did. He practiced what he preached.

Just think through this. How did he handle Judas Iscariot who'd accept a bribe and sided with the false accusers? Just before Judas would betray him, Jesus would wash his feet as an act of love. How did Jesus handle the soldiers who came to arrest him? Did he fight back like Peter tried to do? No, quite the opposite. He healed the ear of the soldier Peter injured. These are direct acts of kindness to those who in some sense had become his malicious witnesses. And then as the official trials started, he did not slander in return the false witnesses. He remained silent and bore the brunt of their sins. But of course his love for enemies didn't stop there. The greatest love for his enemies was demonstrated on the cross. That's why he was silent the whole time. That's why he suffered through with all this false testimony. On the cross, while we, you and me, were yet enemies, Christ died for us. To die for a friend is an amazing act of love. To die for us who were at that time his enemies - Wow! That's radical love. That's a radical grace.

In that same Sermon on the Mount where Jesus told us to love our enemies, he also dealt with this same *lex talionis* principle from verse 21. Jesus countered the principle of "an eye for an eye" with the "turn the other cheek" principle. Now both of these principles are true. Both come from God

as they are both in the Holy Word. There's not a conflict. But Jesus is contrasting strict justice with gracious love. Strict justice is "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Gracious love for your enemies is "turn the other cheek." On the cross, Jesus chose this radical gracious love over strict justice. If he had chosen just strict justice, then you and I would still be in our sins. We'd still be condemned for an eternity of punishment in hell. But because Christ chose to show us radical gracious love instead of demanding strict justice, we now have been forgiven, restored, and even exalted. We have been made friends and even family with God. All because God in Jesus showed us radical love and grace even when strict justice demanded our punishment. And yet let's be clear. Jesus didn't ignore strict justice in our case. Jesus satisfied strict justice, by stepping into our place on the cross. He gave his life for our life. Jesus satisfied strict justice in his radical act of gracious love. So then, God is able to satisfy both. God can justly show us wonderful love because Jesus satisfied justice in our place.

Now as a side note here, Jesus' action of radical love over strict justice doesn't take away from the call for strict justice in our civil governments. It's quite fitting and appropriate that the courts in our civil governments, and even the courts in our churches, should bear in mind the principles of strict justice; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. In fact it's quite pleasing to God that they do. Certainly our courts should deal with perjury especially. God uses these institutions on earth to enforce justice and to teach us about justice.

And so as we apply this passage from Deuteronomy in one sense we can apply it to our courts in terms of the importance of seeking strict justice upon those who bring false testimony. Our courts should seek the strict justice seen in this passage. Certainly we should have a heart not only for this justice, but for true testimony and preserving the good names of our brothers and sisters. We ourselves should seek to speak truth in all circumstances and support the cause of truth.

And yet our more common concern when we think of a passage like this is to recognize all the people who have been false malicious witnesses against us. Again, I'm not talking just about in the courtroom. What do we do when people speak falsely against us, in any context? How do we respond to the malicious person who falsely speaks against us? Usually that's the time we especially want justice. That's the time we often want strict justice in order to clear our name and punish our accusers. Often these are the times in life where we can experience the most pain. We've heard the childhood saying of "sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me." But is that true? I don't think so. Words can hurt. They can leave emotional wounds. They can leave social wounds too. If other people believe the lies about us, they can hurt our relationships with others or our positions in life.

It's at times like this that we need to remember what Christ has done for us. We need to remember his call to love our enemies. Let me be personally frank. I think this is one of the hardest teachings in the Bible. We all want grace for our sins, but usually we want justice when others sin against us. We know Christ came to give us joy and abundant life, but if we really live this command out, we realize that our life will include some times of serious suffering.

I've never found it easy to radically love an enemy. I've never found it easy to radically love someone who was a close friend that betrayed you in a deep way. But the way of the cross tells us that we must let radical grace triumph over strict justice. We must do this because that what we've received; because that's what Christ did for us; that's what Christ modeled for us as Christians. There's a sense where this is certainly going above and beyond our duty. There's nothing technically wrong in itself to demand strict justice from the person who's wronged you. I can't tell you that you'd be wrong in that case to demand that. And yet as Christians who've received Christ's radical grace, we can't ignore the radical demand this has placed upon our life.

Now in wisdom, this can't just be simplistically lived out. To radically love those who attack us will require wisdom. It won't mean the same thing in every situation. Sometimes it's best to simply overlook a sin, Proverbs 19:11, for example. This would be the case if the issue was relatively a minor one. In love, just forgive the person and move on. Other times, the way the person sinned against you may be of such a serious nature, that it would not be loving to the person if you didn't address it. As we read here, it's a serious thing to falsely accuse people. If someone is going around spreading lies about you, they need to be lovingly approached about this sin. Use the steps outlined in Matthew 18 to do that. Some situations are so serious that you might need to report the person to the appropriate legal authorities. For example, in the case of courtroom testimony, if you knew a person was perjuring against someone, it would seem necessary to bring out the evidence you have to show his lies; so that the innocent are protected.

In other words, this can get complex real quick. Loving false witnesses in practice will require wisdom. Christ calls us to be ready to be wronged and to be willing to suffer for doing good. We must love those who wrong us in these ways. And yet how we best love someone isn't always so clear. Sometimes this love will involve the overlooking of the sin. Other times to just overlook the sin is just enablement; in which case it's actually not loving to them to do that. How to wisely love someone is tough. It's even tougher when that person has just wronged you. We have to look to our heart. Are we looking to love the person, or are we looking for revenge?

You see, it's our attitude that can make all the difference. Will you act in genuine love and concern for the person that's wronged you? Will you live out Romans 12:8 which calls you to live at peace with all men, even those who revile you? Will you seek reconciliation even with those who slander you? Will you be ready to extend forgiveness and grace toward others?

I mentioned how hard this is. We want to be vindicated when we are wrong. If through your radical loving your enemies your name is vindicated here on earth, then praise the Lord. And yet know your name will ultimately be vindicated one way or another. Even now, realize that your name has already been vindicated. Whether your good name was really that good in the first place is one thing; but if you are in Christ, your good name is that of God's good name. God's good name has been placed on you now, because he has adopted you into his family. People can accuse you now, people can slander you now, but what real charge can they bring against you? In the words of Paul, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies." Nothing anyone says here in this life can truly tarnish your name anymore if you are in Christ. Though some in this world might believe the lies, if we are in Christ, we have been justified. Our final vindication

will be on the last day when we are shown clearly to the world that we belong to Christ.

What I am saying is that we are secure in Christ. And so, with that firm hope that we stand justified and vindicated already before God, let us love our enemies. If we are to have this radical love for enemies, it will only be as the Spirit of Christ is at work in our lives. Let's stay connected with the vine that bears much fruit. Let's stay connected with Christ who is the source of this radical love. We abide in Christ through faith, through the means of his Word and prayer.

If we are united to Christ, we will bear this sort of fruit. And if we are united with him, don't be surprised if you indeed face these sorts of trials. Acts 6:13 records the martyr Stephen receiving false witnesses against him for his standing up for Christ. If we stand up for Christ; if we live out our union with Christ, we should expect that we'll experience Christian suffering. If they falsely condemned Christ, we can expect to receive similar false accusations. But by God's grace, may we respond with this same sort of radical love. May we count ourselves blessed to share in the sufferings of Christ. May we rejoice that we can be a picture of Christ to others. As we extend radical love to those who maliciously accuse us, we are a picture of Christ. You might be the only picture of Christ someone sees. Let's pray that God will make us a good reflection. Amen.

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