



DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS

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The Ninth of the Ten Commandments is “You shall not give false witness against your neighbor.” This means two things: “Do not lie when testifying in court.” And, “Do not lie.” Period. Remember, in order for an action to be prohibited or demanded in the Ten Commandments it has to be fundamental to making civilization. As important as donkey riding might have been when the Ten Commandments were given, the Ten Commandments contains no commandment to ride your donkey responsibly. A society can survive bad donkey drivers. But it cannot survive contempt for truth – whether inside or outside a courtroom. If people testify falsely in a courtroom, there can be no justice. And without even the hope of justice, there can be no civilization.

The Hebrew Bible was so adamant on this subject that the punishment imposed on a witness who gave false testimony was the same as the punishment that would have been meted out to the accused had the false testimony been believed. In the case of a crime that would be punishable by death, therefore, the false witness was liable to be put to death. But the commandment is clearly concerned with truth generally, not only in a courtroom.

Both the great twelfth century Jewish commentator, Ibn Ezra, and one of the most influential biblical scholars of the 20th century, Brevard Childs of Yale University, agreed that the commandment was about truth-telling generally. As Childs pointed out, if the Ten Commandments were solely concerned with truth and falsehood in a courtroom, it would have added words such as “in court.”

There are many important values in society, but truth is probably the most important. Goodness and compassion may be the most important values in the micro, or personal, realm. But in the macro, or societal, realm, truth is even more important than compassion or kindness. Virtually all the great societal evils, such as African slavery, Nazism and Communism, have been based on lies.

There were slavetraders, Nazis and Communists who were compassionate in their personal lives, but all of them told, and most of them believed, some great lie that enabled them to participate in a great evil. Black slavery was made possible in large measure by the lie that blacks were innately inferior to whites. The Holocaust would have been impossible without tens of millions of people believing the lie that Jews were inherently inferior to so-called Aryans. And Communist totalitarianism was entirely based on lies. That’s why the Soviet Union’s Communist Party newspaper was named Pravda, the Russian word for “Truth” – because the Party, not objective reality, was the source of truth.

There is only so much evil that can be done by individual sadists and sociopaths. In order to

murder millions, vast numbers of otherwise normal, even decent, people must believe lies. Mass evil is committed not because a vast number of people seek to be cruel, but because they are fed lies that convince them that what is evil is actually good. However, one big obstacle to truth-telling is that believers in causes, including good causes, that don't place truth as a central value, will be very tempted to lie on behalf of their cause.

There are many examples. In the 1980's, to promote the cause of the homeless, the leading activist on their behalf, claimed that there were 2 to 3 million homeless in the United States. Years later he admitted on national television that he had to come up with a number and made that one up. The real number was between 250,000 and 350,000.

Similarly, groups in the fight against cancer were caught greatly exaggerating the number of women who get breast cancer each year. Why? In order to frighten more women into getting mammograms. Again, lying on behalf of a good cause. Why is lying on behalf of good causes destructive? Because if we don't know what's true, how and where do we know how to properly allocate society's limited resources? And in the worst cases, it distorts society's priorities, and therefore does great harm.

The Ten Commandments is there to warn all of us that, with very few exceptions, such as the immediate saving of innocent life, no cause is more important than truth-telling. The Ten Commandments is the greatest list of instructions ever devised for creating a good society. But such a society cannot be created or maintained if it is not based on truth.

I'm Dennis Prager.