

Legal implications of bearing false witness

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” (Exodus 20:16)
There is a strong legal implication in this commandment. Testifying, being a witness, and telling the truth certainly apply to a courtroom situation. But there is a higher court than merely the human one. In the Supreme Court of Love where God is Judge, no lies, gossip or unfounded speculation are permitted.

Do we lie to avoid exposure? Have we done something wrong and are trying to hid it by turning the focus off ourselves and onto another? God, who is all-seeing and infinite Love, will not permit one of His beloved children to be harmed by a lie. The truth will be known. God is speaking the truth 24 hours a day to each human consciousness, correcting lies and misconceptions. Every lie, even a little one, will be exposed and corrected.

It is upsetting when someone is lying about us, falsely accusing us, slandering our good name and reputation. But God is our Judge and He is a pro-active one. God is continually pouring the truth into the hearts and minds of those around us. No matter how vicious the lie, it will be nullified by the truth communicated by God. In fact, when the lie is exposed and corrected, we will receive approval and respect from those who have recognized the truth.

Some years ago in another city I received a call from a friend informing me that someone was accusing me of terrible misdoing. It was a total lie. But the accuser was spreading this false witness throughout their church, and it was being believed by many, including my friend! I was shocked, deeply hurt, angry and fearful. This could ruin my reputation and good name. There was nothing to be done humanly. Protesting my innocence would be viewed with skepticism and frankly was impossible to prove.

I turned in prayer to the Supreme Court of Love. God knew my innocence. God knew I could not even conceive of such a thing. And God would communicate the truth to those who should know it. I prayed like this whenever the situation came to thought.

Soon I had an unplanned opportunity to speak to a highly respected member of that church who I did not know previously. In the middle of the conversation (which was on a totally different subject), he hinted at this malicious lie. Right then my innocence was apparent. I could see his thought about me change. He turned from skeptical to supportive. We returned to the business at hand. From that moment the lies seemed to shrivel up and disappear. I was not harmed by another's malicious lying.

We can pray daily to not gossip or talk about other people and their affairs. Even if we are not intentionally trying to harm another, negative remarks are often speculative and this is bearing false witness. Instead of rehearsing someone's faults or mistakes, shouldn't we be praying for them? Instead of attaching errors to the person, shouldn't we be affirming their true identity as God's beloved child capable of responding to God's guidance? This will keep our conversation constructive instead of destructive. Obedience to the ninth commandment enables us to fulfill the New Testament command, "as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation." (1 Peter 1:15)

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