

The Ten Commandments

The ninth article by Neil Richardson in our year-long series



9th Commandment:

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

The injunction not to bear false witness seems to cover a wide variety of things and demands behaviour from us such as not knowingly speaking falsely in any matter, whether lying, equivocating, even procrastinating and in any way designing to deceive or misrepresent our neighbour. Neither should we speak unjustly against our neighbour.

Rather, we should think better of others than ourselves and be resolved to maintain and protect the honour of others even over and against our own, if that be the truth. The ninth commandment demands the preserving and promoting of truth between all people, and maintaining the good name of our neighbour, as well as our own. We are asked to stand up for the truth, even if it not in our own interest.

This Commandment is very much a community - based commandment. Living in community requires a deep honesty arising from a commitment to each other as members one of another. Without this honesty, people will suffer and sometimes die as a result of false witnesses.

The matter is taken very seriously in courts, of course, where the giving of false witness is a crime, the crime of perjury. Perjury can obstruct justice or even convict the innocent. Jesus himself was subjected to the perversion of the truth by those who gave false witness about him at his trials before the High Priest and before Pilate.



1768 parchment by Jekuthiel Sofar after the Decalogue at Amsterdam's Esnoga Synagogue



Not many people will argue in favour of false witnesses, of course, but many of us will be tempted to transgress this commandment when telling the truth starts to affect our own lives negatively. Without this commandment, justice, one of the cornerstones of a civilised society, would become impossible to maintain and we would fall into anarchy. Whether in major concerns or tiny little details, the commandment requires of us the highest degree of integrity.