

March 10, 2021 – Acts 22:12-16 & Matthew 26:57-68

Perjury is a serious crime. Lying under oath has gotten millionaires sent to jail. Olympic gold medalists stripped of their medals. Presidents impeached by Congress. It's a big deal.

And it's always been a big deal. In fact, in many ways, perjury in the ancient world was even more significant than it is today. They didn't have security cameras, computer records, or forensic scientists in the ancient world. Most of the time, the only evidence presented during a trial was the eyewitness testimony of others.

Even then, that testimony had to be verified by at least two witnesses. That's what was written in the Mosaic Law. Eyewitness testimony was completely inadmissible unless the crime had been seen by at least two people. This was one of the foundations of the Israelite judicial system.

The other was the importance of telling the truth under oath. A matter that was so important that it was codified in the Ten Commandments themselves.

You'll notice, there is no commandment about generally telling the truth. "Thou shalt not lie" is not a commandment. It's certainly assumed. The fact that Jesus calls himself the Truth, while the devil is the Father of Lies, should tell you that much. But the only form of lying that's spelled out in the commandments is lying about others under oath. Perjury. Bearing false witness against your neighbor.

Thus, it's fairly shocking to watch the events of Jesus' trial unfold. Because the amount of perjury taking place is just appalling. Witness after witness telling one lie after another. None of them agreeing with each other. Which means that none of this testimony should have even be spoken in court. Let alone admitted as evidence.

But the Council is desperate to convict Jesus. They were convinced that having him executed was the right thing to do. *"It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."* Caiaphas said this to the High Council. And he was going to make sure this man died. No matter how many commandments he had to break to do it.

It was an attitude that was actually shared by St Paul, at one point in his life. Back when he was going by the name Saul. And was a Pharisee of Pharisees.

Because Saul had basically made a livelihood out of bearing false witness against Christians. We see it in the stoning of Stephen. We don't know exactly what role Saul played in that event, but Luke makes sure that we know that Saul is there.

He is there and approves of it. Despite the fact that an unruly mob is stoning a man unjustly. Despite the fact that there has been no trial for the blasphemy that Stephen is accused of committing. No elder of the people or high priest of the temple who has handed down a guilty verdict. No, they simply seize him, drag him out of the city, and beat him to death with rocks because they don't like what he said.

And Saul approves it all. Stephen is guilty in the court of public opinion, and that's good enough for him. Saul has decided that Stephen deserves death, so who cares if there's a trial. Say whatever you want about him. Do whatever you want with him. Who cares how many commandments we break in the process. It is better for everyone if this one man dies, than that the whole nation should perish.

And that's the attitude that Saul continues to have. The book of Acts says that Saul ravages the church, entering house after house, dragging men and women to prison. There's no trials convened. No witnesses gathered. No testimony heard. Just letters of arrest issued by the high priest, and Saul's murderous threats to terrorize the Christian Church.

Until that day when Jesus stands before him with the light of heaven all around him. And tells Saul that it is not just the Christian Church that Saul is persecuting. It is Jesus himself.

For the Church is his body. And when you bear false witness against a Christian, you bear false witness against Christ. When you attack a Christian, you attack Christ. When you accuse a Christian of blasphemy, you accuse Christ of blasphemy, just like Caiaphas did during Jesus' trial. And that accusation of blasphemy actually becomes its own act of blasphemy.

With the help of Ananias, Saul repents of his sins. He is baptized. He regains his sight, both physically and spiritually. He returns to the Lord. And the Lord is gracious and merciful to Saul.

The Christians of Damascus and then Jerusalem are not quite so gracious and merciful. At least, not immediately. They're terrified of Saul. They're terrified that he is going to accuse them of the same blasphemy that Jesus was accused of. They are terrified that he is going to come up with charges to have them arrested. They are terrified that they too will be thrown in prison without a trial or witnesses.

It takes weeks before they trust that Saul is telling the truth. It's a full year before Saul is allowed into any sort of leadership position in the church. Only after the Jews begin plotting against Saul, only after Saul suffers for the sake of Christ, does he become the apostle that Jesus intended him to be.

Saul learned a lesson that we all need to learn: bearing false witness against your neighbor hurts you as much as it hurts them. There is no faster way to destroy your own reputation than trying to destroy the reputation of others. There is no better way to eliminate someone's trust in you than by showing yourself to be untrustworthy with the truth.

Because we break so many commandments when we lie about and slander others, not just the 8th commandment. We steal from them their reputation, which the Book of Proverbs says is more precious than gold or silver. We defy the governing authorities who actually have the responsibility for judging their guilt and innocence. We may even put them at physical risk of harm, like the High Council did with Jesus or Saul did with the early Christians.

In short, bearing false witness is a selfish, sinful act, that proves you don't care how many commandments you have to break in order to get your way. In order to do what you think is best, no matter what God's Word actually says. And when Christians attack other Christians with their words and slander, we show ourselves to be no better than Caiaphas questioning Jesus or Saul nodding in approval over the dead body of Stephen.

And there are Christians and former Christians around the country – around the world – who will testify to the harm that other Christians have done to them. Who have abandoned the church because of the false witness they experienced inside it and who have written off all Christians as hypocrites because of the sinful behavior to which they were subjected. And I pray that those who have hurt them can be brought to repentance.

Because even those who bear false witness are not beyond redemption. Ananias is proof of that. He approached Saul in faith that God would change his heart. Ananias came to him before he professed an ounce of faith, before he had even been baptized, and called him “Brother Saul.”

This man who had breathed out murderous threats against the church was now Ananias' brother. Not because of anything Saul had done, but because of what Christ was doing in him. And that was something the whole church began to realize.

They forgave Saul because Christ had forgiven Saul. They accepted this sinner into their midst because on the road to Damascus Christ had entered into this sinner's midst. They saw in Saul someone who was suffering for Christ's name just like they were. And they knew in that moment that he had been baptized and forgiven just as they themselves had been baptized and forgiven.

Perjury is a serious crime. Bearing false witness against your neighbor is a serious sin. And things like rumor, gossip, and slander can do serious harm to the church. It was false witness that sentenced Christ to death. And it's false witness that can kill a church today just as easily.

But Saul's conversion on the Damascus road shows us that even those who persecute Christ himself are welcomed into the kingdom of God. Even those who hurt the body of Christ can become part of the body of Christ. And with the Holy Spirit working inside us, even a Pharisee of Pharisees, the chief of sinners, can turn from false witness to the true witness of Christ who died for them. Amen.