

Freedom to: The Truth

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 23:1-9

We continue our *Freedom From, Freedom To* sermon series, and we continue to explore how the Lord doesn't just give Israel her freedom from Egypt; once she is free, God gives shape to that freedom. He shows Israel and he shows us the shape our freedom's proper path. The first nine verses of Exodus 23 suggest a path for our freedom. In these verses, we will hear a series of laws which all orbit around one topic, one part of human life. See if you can tell what part of our life God is shaping in these verses.

Read Exodus 23:1-9. What issue is the Lord addressing? What shape is he giving to Israel's freedom? I think most of you can see the theme. Verses 4 and 5 might throw you off a bit, but all the other verses are obviously centered on the public testimony we give about our neighbor. These laws focus on the things we say publically about others, especially, but not exclusively, in a court of law. That's the part of life we will consider today: our public speech. What kind of testimony do we give about our neighbors?

For Israel, that public speech would have concentrated on two places. First of all God is concerned about the testimony people give in the law courts, the things they say under oath. The laws in verses 1,2,3,6 and 7 mention lawsuits and legal testimony. But God is not just concerned about false witness in the courts, he's also concerned about city gate speech. If you were to go to an ancient city in the Middle East, as soon as you entered the city gate you would find yourself in the center of the action. There would be merchants there, selling their wares, there would be a kind of court set up where people could bring civil disputes, there would be news and public announcements, if you were a prophet the city gate is the place you would go to get your message out. The city gate was the place of public business and public speech. So it wasn't just in court where God was worried about false testimony, God didn't want you giving false testimony about your neighbor in any of your public speech. "Do not spread false reports!" That blanket statement functions as a kind of heading for this whole section and an indication of the Lord's main concern in these laws: When you are in court, when you are at the city gate, make sure the things you say about your neighbor are honest and fair.

That's Israel. Our public speech happens in slightly different locations. We still have courts so these laws have something to say about testimony in court, and about how we run our legal system. But we don't meet at the city gate anymore. Where does our public discourse happen now? Where do we speak publically about our neighbor and our society? In the media, but especially and increasingly, on social media: on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These ancient laws might have something to say about how we conduct ourselves online. More on that later.

For now let's recognize that these verses are not the only place in the Old Testament law where God shows that he is really concerned about Israel's public speech. One of the Ten Commandments is dedicated to this part of life: the ninth commandment. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Don't say false or misleading things about another person. Deuteronomy 19 says, "*One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.*" In fact, Deuteronomy 19 goes on to say that if a person is caught bearing false

witness, whatever the penalty was supposed to fall on the falsely accused should fall upon the lying witness instead. Falsely accuse someone of an offense whose punishment is stoning to death, and guess what happens to you?

Why is God so concerned about the things we say about our neighbors? Why are the penalties for false testimony so severe? Because God knows that when truth is cherished and loved and protected, society flourishes. When public truth is ignored, society withers. On August 10, 1964 the United States Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, giving the government widespread powers to conduct a war in Southeast Asia. That resolution was passed in response to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. The government said, and the press reported, that the resolution was necessary because the Vietnamese navy had attacked the USS Maddox on August 4 and the aggression required a response. The Senate passed the resolution with only two dissenting votes thus laying the groundwork for the Vietnam War. The only problem: the attack of August 4 never happened. Later on, both Lyndon Johnson who was president at the time, and Robert McNamara who was the National Security Advisor, admitted there was no attack. The resolution passed based on false information. Historians agree: this falsehood was the beginning of a long train of misleading statements, twisted truths and outright lies that the government told in order to perpetuate, escalate and justify the war. It was equal opportunity lying. Both republican and democratic presidents lied. Many of these leaders lied with good intentions: the deceiver believed that this lie was in service of some larger purpose.

Regardless of the intention, the damage done by this false witness is hard to overstate. The Vietnam memorial in Washington has 57,939 names on it. American men and women who died. Vietnamese dead are harder to count, but estimates range from 1 million to three million. Beyond the body count there was the social cost. As these lies were exposed, trust in the government collapsed. According to the Pew research Center, in 1964 77% of Americans trusted the federal government to do what is right just about always/most of the time. 10 years later, at the end of the Vietnam War, that number was less than 30%, and it's never recovered. In 2015 only 19% expressed that level of trust. That cynicism has spread. Trust is down for just about every institution of society. According to Gallup, in 1975 68 % of Americans said they had a lot of confidence in organized religion. I couldn't find a number for 1964, but I'm sure it would have been higher than that. By 2018 that number was down to 38%. Many of the angry divisions that still split our society find their roots in the social upheaval of that war. Walter Boomer was decorated for valor in Vietnam. He served in the Marine Corps and ended up as a 4 star general. Someone once asked him what lessons he learned from his Vietnam experience. He had a three word answer: "Tell the Truth."

This is why God is so concerned about our public speech. When the truth is loved and preserved, trust grows. When trust grows people feel like they can count on each other. When people feel like they can count on each other, they move towards each other and care for each other. They walk out of their front door in the morning with a smile on their face and they spend the day doing hopeful things. When lies are told and tolerated. When people start expecting lies and hidden agendas, the movement goes in the opposite direction. We hold each other at arm's length. We look at each other with narrowed eyes. We retreat into our own little identity groups, our own little tribes, and we shout accusations at the other tribes. It becomes harder and harder to find common cause. I'm not speaking hypothetically.

Exodus 23 is calling Israel and calling us to be people who love and seek and protect the truth. In Exodus 23, through these laws, God is forming Israel's freedom by making her a people who will love and seek and protect the truth. I would like to close this sermon with three

suggestions that can help us be people who love and seek and protect the truth. These suggestions come from our text and from the rest of the Bible.

First, if you want to pursue truth, you must be suspicious of your own biases. If we want to be a lover of truth and a speaker of truth, we must understand that our own selfish interests will prevent us from finding the truth or even wanting to find the truth. Last week before the Michigan – Michigan State football game, the Michigan state Football team marched the length of the field with their arms interlocked. Some Michigan players were on the field warming up, and objected to this green army pushing them off the field. They rebelled. There was pushing. One Michigan player stomped on the Spartan logo at midfield. On Facebook this week I saw two different ‘true’ accounts of this incident. The Michigan people outraged by the Spartans’ green line. The Spartan people outraged by the Michigan reaction. The view of the truth seemed to be completely determined by which side you cheer for. This is a relatively trivial example and so finding the truth probably doesn’t matter that much in this case, but the same bias exists around larger questions where the truth really does matter.

Through these laws, God pushes Israel to see the truth beyond their biases. The passage mentions five possible biases that might keep you from the truth.

- The crowd. We all want to fit in, be well thought of; don’t pervert justice by siding with the crowd. Speak the truth.
- Poverty. Don’t rule against a poor person just because they can’t benefit you if you take their side. Speak the truth.
- Wealth. Don’t despise someone just because they are rich and successful and side with the poor just to spite them (verse 3 - that happens!) Speak the truth.
- Money. Don’t let a bribe, or any other financial incentive, cloud your judgment. Speak the truth.
- Foreigners. Don’t oppress a person just because he’s not part of your tribe. Speak the truth.

And as kind of a bonus category, God throws in enemies. Don’t be biased. Be the kind of person who would rescue your enemy’s donkey if it were in trouble. Be suspicious of your biases. Have courage to speak the truth even when it doesn’t benefit you or your team.

Second: practice good, biblical truth habits. Remember the law from Deuteronomy 19 that I mentioned earlier: don’t convict someone unless you have two or three witnesses. May I humbly offer this witness law as a standard for all your email shares and your social media posts? If you want to post some political piece or some opinion piece on line, make sure it’s true. Shockingly, not everything on the internet is true. Lovers of truth will do extra work to make sure that what they share and send is true. There are established codes of journalism that good publications follow. Does this news source adhere to those standards? Do you know the journalistic standards of the people who made the story? Do they fact check their stories? Is there more than one witness, one source, to verify the story? Have you checked your story with a good fact-checking site? If we love the truth before we post anything the words of verse ought to ring in our head: “Do not spread false reports.”

Finally keep your eyes on Jesus. In your pursuit of truth, remember Jesus who is the truth. I think some of the reason we are tempted to give up on the truth and start bending the truth to our advantage is that we feel threatened. Everyone around us is bending the truth. Everyone around us is spreading falsehoods to their own advantage, if I am an honest person, I’m at a disadvantage. People will walk all over me. I know for a fact that more than half of the kids in my class are cheating on this test, the teacher is grading on a curve, and you want me to

play it straight?! We live in a society of deceitful foxes and you want me to be the truthful bunny rabbit?! I don't think so.

What's happening when you have these feelings? You are telling yourself that truth is weak. You are telling yourself that in the battle between truth and lies, the lies win. Looking at Jesus challenges that perception. Jesus is the truth, and he is sitting at the right hand of God ruling over creation. This world does not belong to the Father of lies; this world belongs to Jesus. The Truth is the Lord of the universe. Truth will be victorious in the end. Along the way, truth may be mocked, and truth may be wounded, but eventually lies and deceit will crumble under their own weight, and, as surely as Jesus walked out of the grave on Easter morning, truth and goodness will reign. Look at Jesus and it will remind you that no matter how painful and unpopular the truth may be, it is the way of hope. Don't be afraid. Don't let the lying get you down. Jesus is the truth and Jesus is Lord. May that unshakeable truth help you walk out the door in the morning with a smile on your face ready to spend the whole day doing hopeful things.

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