

A WARNING ABOUT RUMORS AND FALSE WITNESS

In recent years we have seen the growing influence of social media, an increasingly lawless arena in which false accusations are plentiful, rumors are abundant, and accountability is rare. It is a serious error to accept accusations against fellow believers without confirming their veracity, but it is even more serious to pass on such things to others. We should all heed the Bible's strong words against bearing false witness (making false accusations) and spreading rumors (repeating stories of uncertain or doubtful veracity). Instead, we should exercise great care in what we speak. We should refrain from repeating rumors. Accusations without a strong factual basis should not be spoken or posted. Even if there seems to be a factual basis, we should exercise caution in what we speak to others. Otherwise, we run the risk of transgressing the Bible's injunctions against making false accusations and rumormongering.

Old Testament Warnings

In the Old Testament there are many warnings against bearing false witness and spreading rumors. One is in Exodus 20:16 which plainly says, "You shall not testify with false witness against your neighbor." This is the ninth of the Ten Commandments. It warns us that because God is truthful, He expects His people to also speak truthfully and to testify honestly concerning others.

The commandment against false witness is elaborated in Deuteronomy where the procedure to implement it is explained and the punishment for its transgression was prescribed. The passage reads,

If a malicious witness rises up against a man to testify against him of wrongdoing, the two men who have the dispute shall stand before Jehovah, before the priests and the judges who are serving in those days. And the judges shall investigate thoroughly; and if indeed the witness is a false witness, if he has testified falsely against his brother, you shall do to him as he intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall utterly remove the evil from your midst. (Deut. 19:16-19)

Trying the case involving a possible false witness was so serious that it required the participation of three parties—the priests, the judges, and Jehovah—to adjudicate the matter. The two men involved in the dispute were to stand before Jehovah, that is, before the judges and the priests. The judges were charged with investigating and discovering the facts of the case. The priests were required to take the case before Jehovah, who made the final decision through the priests and judges (see Joshua 7). If one was found to be a false witness, he would then suffer the punishment intended for the one he falsely accused. Further, Israel was required to "utterly remove the evil" from their midst. For example, if an accusation that would cause one to be severed from God's people, Israel, was found to be false, the accuser would be cut off instead. The procedure to try the case of a false witness and the penalty required for the offense show the severity of concocting or repeating a false accusation and should be a strong warning to those who falsely accuse or spread rumors about other believers.

Proverbs 6:16-19 lists six things that Jehovah hates and a seventh thing that Jehovah considers to be worse than the six things he hates. The last of the six hated things is "a false witness who utters lies." The six hateful things culminate in the seventh, which is an abomination to Jehovah, that is, "one who injects discord among brothers." Proverbs 26:20-22 speaks of a contentious "whisperer," a rumormonger, whose words kindle strife. Both the whisperer and the spreader of discord in this passage do the same thing. By their speaking they create contention and discord among brothers, an abomination to Jehovah. There are many Old Testament verses that condemn bearing false witness and spreading rumors. A few are Exodus 23:1-2, 7; Leviticus 19:16; Deuteronomy 5:20; and Proverbs 14:5; 16:28; 18:8; 19:5, 28; and 24:28. We should take these verses as warnings.

New Testament Warnings

The New Testament also has many admonitions against such evil speaking. In Matthew 12:36 the Lord Jesus warned the scribes and Pharisees saying, "And I say to you that every idle word which men shall speak, they will render an account concerning it in the day of judgment." The word *idle* means "inoperative" or "non-working." The phrase *day of judgment* indicates that this accounting will take place after the Lord's return (Rom. 14:10-12). If an account must be made for idle words, how much more shall it be required for making or repeating false accusations or rumors?

Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but only that which is good for building up." Then verse 31 continues, "Let all bitterness and anger and wrath and clamor and evil speaking be removed from you, with all malice." Rumors and false accusations are full of corruption and do not build up or minister grace to those who hear them.

Further, Paul was concerned about the damage that rumors and gossip could cause. He charged Timothy concerning "gossips and busybodies" who speak "things which they ought not" (1 Tim. 5:13). Later, Paul warned Timothy against some who were "diseased with questionings and contentions of words" which engender "envy, strife, slanders, evil suspicions, [and] perpetual wranglings" (6:4-5). Paul warned that contentions of words were "useful for nothing, to the ruin of those who hear" (2 Tim. 2:14). As believers we need to take care not only concerning what we speak but also what we hear or read, as rumors, accusations, and contentions can overthrow our faith and ruin us for God's economy (v. 18).

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "For we must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). Although salvation is secured by our believing in Christ, all believers will nevertheless stand before the judgment seat of Christ at His return. At the judgment seat, our works will be manifested, and we will either receive a reward or suffer loss (1 Cor. 3:13-15). This should warn us that as Christians we are expected to have a high standard of truthfulness and honesty. As believers we should take Paul's charge in Ephesians 4:25: "Therefore having put off the lie, speak truth each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another."

Our Application Today

Despite the Bible's warnings against bearing false witness and spreading rumors, these things sadly persist, even among Christians. Some of the most bitter denunciations circulating today are those made by Christians against their fellow believers (cf. Gal. 5:15). False witness and rumors are useful tools of the evil one, Satan, who is the accuser and the slanderer of the brothers, as well as the father of lies (Rev. 12: 10; John 8:44). He uses lies, false accusations, and rumors to damage the precious and practical oneness of the believers. We must not be ignorant of his schemes (2 Cor. 2:11). Rather, we must heed the Bible's warnings against false witness and rumors and maintain a high standard of truthfulness.

We must be circumspect about what we say, what we hear, and what we read. To uncritically accept what is said on the Internet, especially on social media platforms, is both naive and dangerous. We should reject anything that is merely rumor, that does not have a demonstrable factual basis, or that is merely an unsubstantiated account of an alleged event or supposed personal experience. This means that we should not "like" posts out of loyalty to the writer. It means that we do not share questionable posts with others. We must not bear false witness or participate in repeating rumors. Instead, we should soberly ask ourselves what is spoken or written kindles strife and injects dissent among brothers or if it ministers grace and building up.