



Dr. James C. Howell
Exodus 3:1-14
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I believe all groups of people are divisible into various categories. You have people who, as a friend of mine puts it, they love to go and be part of a tour group, and other people would never be part of a tour group. You have people who talk into a telephone, and then you have people who only type into a telephone. You have carnivores and herbivores. You have Carolina fans and Duke fans. You have those who gloat and those who would rather not talk about it. People divide up into two groups. When it comes to the Commandments, there are two kinds of people, and some of you out there, you're in each of these categories. There are those who dig commandments. They dig rules. They're very optimistic about their ability to keep the rules, and they think other people should keep them, too. The problem in the world is people who don't keep rules. This exhibits itself in different ways. I'll watch my staff in the morning. We're required to park sort of remotely to save the better parking places for you. And so I watch my staff get out of their cars and come to the building. I've got some rule people. What they do is, it doesn't matter how roundabout the way, they go on the sidewalk, they wait for the light to change. There's no traffic on Sunday morning, but they're waiting for the light because they are rules people, and they do rules. The keeping of rules is a lovely thing. Then you have other people for whom rules are sort of interesting guidelines should they be helpful once in a while, and they take the shortest route and they don't necessarily wait for the light just because there are no cars coming. We have some of those as well. Rules people, and not rules people. What are we? There are some people, they're very optimistic about our ability to keep rules, and others are pretty pessimistic. They think we have shabby equipment inside. We're just not that good at keeping the rules, if we admit it. Who are we? What kind of people are we? There's a book that's reviewed in this morning's Charlotte Observer that I just finished. It's a book about Lincoln... This is so interesting. Lincoln and Darwin, Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin were born on the same day, 200 years ago this past Thursday. This book by Adam Gopnik, which is so eloquent, it's a wonderful book, he explores the impact of these two men on Western civilization and he entertains interesting questions about them. For instance, when Lincoln died, people who were gathered in the room heard Edwin Stanton, his very close friend, say something. But what did Stanton say? Some heard Stanton say, "Now he belongs to the ages." But others in the room thought he said, "Now he belongs to the angels." Did he belong to the ages or to the angels? Darwin spawned an interesting comment. There was a debate about Darwinism between T.H. Huxley and William Wilberforce in which Huxley asked his men, Who are we? Are we apes or angels? Are we for the ages, or are we for the angels? The Commandments, if you will, I think get misconstrued all the time. The Commandments, if we pay attention to them, give us a very important diagnosis of our nature of what is in our soul, and they also tell us very much about what is in the heart of God, and we miss it because one of the things that we've done in our culture is we have politicized The Ten Commandments. You have these debates..I used to have a regular religion and ethics column in The Charlotte Observer, and I wrote on this one time because there was a debate going on in Charlotte about posting The Ten Commandments in public places, and I wrote this piece on it. I made an attempt at clever ironic humor, which never works in the newspaper. I've discovered. So I wrote this thing in which I said, We better not put The Ten Commandments up because, good grief, when we put them up

we might have to do what they say. I thought this was a clever approach. And actually, it would be hard, if we think about it, to follow The Ten Commandments. It would totally revolutionize Western Civilization, would it not? I mean, coveting. Do not covet. As best I can tell, the engine of capitalism is coveting. If we did not covet, capitalism, it would just break down, it wouldn't work any longer. There are things like, Thou shalt not commit adultery, and that's one we ought to holler from the rooftops, right? The trouble that people get into...But Jesus ramped it up. Jesus said, It may be that you've not actually had a relationship with someone, but if you've harbored lust in your heart for another person, you're guilty of adultery. And man, advertising would break down, would it not? Because so much advertising is predicated on the fact that we harbor lust in our hearts. The Sabbath, the observance of the Sabbath. I mean, what would have to be changed in the city of Charlotte, North Carolina, if we took the observance of the Sabbath at all seriously? The Commandments tell us much about ourselves, and they tell us much about the heart of God and God's love for us and God's will for us.

This morning, as we think about The Ten Commandments, I want us to focus on just one. And it's one that I frankly have not paid much attention to in my life. But I think it's the commandment for the year 2009, and it is this one: Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor. Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor. Now when I was a little boy, if I'd heard of that, I thought it was about lying. Do not lie, do not tell a lie. George Washington said, "I cannot tell a lie, I did chop down the cherry tree." And it does seem to be a bad thing to lie, although lying is interesting as an ethical dilemma, isn't it? For example, the philosopher Kant said, "If an ax murderer asks you where is your son?" you are under an ethical obligation to lie to the ax murderer in order to save your child's life. Lying children...Well, probably not your children, but other children out there lie at times. And it's always interesting to me to watch children and when they lie and why they lie. I don't think they lie because they're horrible, evil, perverse people. I think generally they've done something that's a little out of the box and they're really concerned that they'll get in trouble and they really want to please you above all else, so they lie a little. Sometimes telling the truth is overrated, shall we say. Sometimes doing marital counseling and the problem that the couple has is they've told the truth too much. They're from the school that says communication is the key to a successful marriage, and so they tell the truth to each other and say things that are so hurtful, so harmful, they're true, but they're very hurtful and perhaps should not have been said. Gossip. Now sometimes gossip is saying something that is false, but very often gossip says something that is true, but yet it's very harmful. I think there should be an 11th commandment, which goes like this: Thou shalt not bear true witness against thy neighbor, especially when it hurts and humiliates and embarrasses your neighbor. But to bear false witness is not about saying false things, it's about bearing witness against the neighbor. What do we say about other people? What do we think about other people?

I've been trying to think this week about forms of false witness, and I've thought of a few. One of the things that happens to many of us, it happens to me. If this doesn't happen to you, I want you to report to me after the service because you're very unusual if this does not happen to you. You're wherever you are and you meet somebody who is ridiculously rich or very famous or very important or stunningly good looking, and something just goes haywire in our soul, and we just go, "Oh, hi. Oh..." And we fawn and we gawk and we're just so, "Oh, I'm in the presence of..." We do this. We can't help it, we just do. And then right after that you pass

somebody, they're not dressed all that nice and nobody's ever seen them or heard of them and nobody's ever treated that person as very important, you just walk right by them as if they did not exist. And I would say, in both of those cases, you have borne false witness against your neighbor. In one case, you have been suckered by the external trappings and have been awestruck by something that is superficial and silly on the outside, and in the other case, you have not noticed someone, who, in fact, is a precious child of God. You have borne false witness against your neighbor in both of these instances.

One of the things that I love about Black History Month – I hope you're paying attention to this and reading the articles that are coming out in the paper and other places – is that we review what I think is one of the most beautiful ethics in any country's history, and that would be the civil rights movement in the United States of America, which was a time when a people stood up and said, "We do have dignity." But they didn't just say, We have dignity, take it or leave it. They stood up and said, "We have dignity" in a way that invited everybody else to discover their true dignity. Rosa Parks, Methodist seamstress, is sitting on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955. J.P. Blake, the driver, comes back and barks at her to move to the back of the bus. She could have maintained her dignity by pulling out a gun and shooting him, but she did not do so, she just sat and said, "I have dignity, I'm not going to get up." And it was an invitation to others to discover not a bogus witness about themselves, but their true nature, their true identity. They said, Well, this can't go on the in busses, and so the black people in Montgomery said, Well, we'll just walk, thank you very much. They said, We have dignity, but it was an invitation to others to say you've got dignity also. We miss this more often than we like to admit.

I had a conversation with somebody the other day, and this absolutely stunned me. I was talking to someone in this economic climate who was saying people who are homeless are lazy and shiftless and it's their fault...Just was blasting the homeless, and I thought, in this world, can you not understand how all kinds of people could wind up homeless, and I didn't know how to respond to him, but I told him this: I said, "You know, I went the other evening down to Hall House downtown where our city's critical emergency need fund has pulled this building together so that homeless families can be housed here in these cold winter months, and a group from our church had gone to take a meal down there, and I went by to see if our group needed any help. They did not. So I took some time just to meet some of the residents there at Hall House, and I met this young mother. She had a two-month-old child named Brian, and Brian was a little fussy and she let me hold Brian and I rocked Brian and he went to sleep, and I thought, Man, having children... And then I had to had to give Brian back to her, and that was all right, too, you know. And she had a little daughter who was five years old, and everything that I asked her about she said, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," and she was doing her little bit of homework from kindergarten, and the mother was really an interesting person. She was all buoyant and optimistic despite the cards that she'd been dealt by life. She's out looking for a job every day, very close on a couple of jobs, very excited about getting her family back on their feet and independent. She was homeless because of the vagaries, the economy and a husband who was a total bum. But here she was, and we talked to each other, and when we parted it was very interesting. I had no sense at all that I was a have and I had come to help a have not. I had a sense that I had a new friend. We mirrored the image of God back and forth to each other. You see, the commandment says, You've got to pay attention to it, the commandment says, "Thou

shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” Who is your neighbor? Is your neighbor the person who happens to live on your block, or is the neighbor somebody else? One of Jesus’ best stories, called the Good Samaritan, explores who your neighbor is, and Jesus says, “Your neighbor might be the stranger. Your neighbor might be the foreigner.” Your neighbor might be the person that you look at them and it’s like a kid, you just think, “Eww, he’s got the cooties. I just don’t know about...” And Jesus says that’s who your neighbor is. I want us to think about this. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Your neighbor might be the stranger. Your neighbor might be the person who lives next door. Your neighbor might be the person who works in the cubicle next to you. Your neighbor might be somebody across the dining room table from you at home. Your neighbor might be the person you crawl into bed with at night. Your neighbor might be, think about this, your own self. Here’s a rule for the year 2009, Thou shalt not bear false witness against yourself. I think there’s a lot of this going on.

I talked the other day with a pastor. This is very interesting. We do this. We meet and we say, “How are things going at your church?” And this guy said, “At my church, people are going crazy.” He said, “We’ve had people who are normally very nice, they’ve lost their temper and they’re kind of rude to each other and this is going on and that’s going on. There are hard feelings about this.” He said, “I think it’s the economy or something. I don’t know. What do you think?” He said, “Do you have any of that going on at Myers Park?” And I said, “No, no.” I said, “At Myers Park, everyone is sweet and kind and they’re always overflowing with love and generosity for each other and there’s never any hard feelings over anything because we’re totally devoted to Jesus at Myers Park Methodist.” And he laughed, and I laughed, and I said, “You know, what I’ve seen during this economic time is two things that are interesting.” I said, “In the face of economic difficulty I’ve seen the nobility in people like I’ve never seen before. People rising to the occasion, people discovering their true priorities in their lives, and that’s been a lovely thing. But I’ve also noticed some fraying of nerves, some stress, some people acting out, being ugly to each other, saying things that they would not normally say, hurting each other’s feelings.” I think at this point in time, in the year 2009 in America, I think everybody’s a little bit crazy. You know that song, At Avenue Q, Everybody’s a little bit racist? The song now is Everybody’s a little bit crazy. The economy is just so loopy and people are so fearful and so anxious and so weary, and there’s so much uncertainty. Everybody’s a little bit crazy, and we wind up bearing false witness against each other. You’ve got to think about where people are nowadays. We have people who’ve been looking for work. Men who’ve been looking for work. They identify themselves by their work, and they always have. And we have men in our church, they’ve been looking for work, not for a week and nor for a month and not even for a year, but longer. And you hear that and you think, Oh yeah, looking for work for a long time, but you’ve got to think about that day after day, the grind, the crushing effect on your self image. Every day you get up, and there’s nothing really to hurry up and get dressed for, but you get up and you get dressed anyway and you’re trying to find work because you know you could do it, you know you could matter to somebody, and you go out and you try and you knock on a door and they say, We don’t want you, we don’t need you. And you go to bed, and you do it again the next day. We have people who have taken pride that they have been able to provide for their families and put a roof over their heads and have some retirement plan, and they see it all slipping away, and it’s a time of great fear and it goes on day after day. And we hear news of an economic stimulus plan, and we almost drown in the details and the scope of it. It almost feels more fearful than hopeful.

I've talked to people recently. I've talked to some parents recently who have loved their children dearly but they feel like they are utter failures as parents. And I've talked to people who loved somebody, or may be married to somebody, and that person looked at them one day and said, You're ugly, I never really loved you, you're really worthless, you're inadequate. They're beautiful people, but the person that they loved and trusted said to them, You're nothing, you're garbage to me. We have a lot of people out there with false witness being borne against them, and it seems to me it's the beauty of the Church, it's the great gift of the Church, that this is the one place where you come, and we're going to do our best not to fawn all over you if you're great-looking or really successful or have a boatload of money, and we're not going to avert our gaze if you don't have any money or your clothes aren't as nice. We don't care. And the reason, the reason is we are determined to bear true witness to each other. This is the place we're going to look at each other and say, You're a child of God, you're precious, you have the ineradicable image of God in you, you are beautiful, you are good, God holds you securely in God's hands no matter what happens to the economy, no matter how other people treat others, none of that matters. And the reason none of that matters is that when Jesus came down to Earth, Jesus did not walk around and say, Whew, rich, good-looking person, I want to be near him. No, Jesus came to lepers, the people others were revolted by and would not touch, and Jesus touched them and he embraced them and he loved them. Jesus came to that Zacchaeus, a successful businessman, he knew how to take advantage of little quirks in the economy and he made a fortune in Jericho, and people were very jealous of Zacchaeus and they didn't care for him at all, and Jesus saw him, and instead of shooting him out of the tree, Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, come down out of the tree, I want to come to your home today and break bread with you." Jesus didn't care if people were righteous or sinful or tall or short or old or young or Jewish or not Jewish, Jesus was impartial. He came to bear true witness to every person. You're made in the image of God. You have a glorious destiny with God and it is not at all related to the circumstances of life and what happens to you by chance or what other people might do to you. And we're the people who get that and honor that. So let me just say to you, God's word to us in 2009 is this: Everybody's a little bit crazy right now, so therefore, Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor. Thanks be to God.