

False witnesses: A plea for truth telling

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When was the last time you heard a sermon about the Ninth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”? The recent congressional hearings on the use of performance-enhancing drugs by professional athletes would certainly serve as a good sermon illustration. On the one side sat star baseball pitcher Roger Clemens, who testified unequivocally, “I have never used steroids, human growth hormone, or any other type of illegal performance-enhancing drugs.” On the other side was Brian McNamee, Clemens’s former personal trainer, who stated, “I injected those drugs into the body of Roger Clemens at his direction.”

Someone must have been lying—that is, bearing false witness, damaging another’s reputation and perhaps, in this case, his ability to earn a living.

Augustine said, “When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things remain doubtful.” Lives are ruined by slander and falsehoods. Communities unravel when malicious gossip is slung around. Nations are led astray when their leaders use half-truths or mistruths to win approval for policies and actions. The Center for Public Integrity recently documented 935 false statements made by top members of the administration on 532 separate occasions in the buildup to and prosecution of the Iraq war.

The election season offers another context for thinking about false witness. Political candidates frequently portray their opponents in the worst possible light, offering shorthand terms—“in favor of surrender,” “backer of amnesty,” “socialized medicine”—designed to tarnish another’s position, not address reality.

A perennial human tendency is to compare ourselves at our best to others at their worst. People of faith are guilty of this version of bearing false witness: “Christians are people of peace,” some Christians say. “Muslims are given to jihadist extremism.”

Sometimes we have to tell hard truths about others. But the first test of truth telling in conflict is whether what we say about the other person, political position or religious tradition is consistent with how that person, political stance or religious tradition would understand itself. We may not like or agree with another's position; we can still avoid bearing false witness.