

Ten Commandments
Lesson 10 Article

A final implication of paradigmatic law: not all laws will be equally comprehensive in scope. That is, some will be very broad in their applicability (love Yahweh your God) and some much more narrow (do not bear false witness). **One might ask, “Why not say ‘don’t be dishonest in any way,’ which would be broader and more comprehensive than ‘don’t bear false witness?’”** But that would be missing the way paradigmatic law works: through a somewhat randomly presented admixture of rather specific examples of more general behaviors and very general regulations of broad categories of behavior, the reader/listener comes to understand that all sorts of situations not exactly specified (either because a law is so broad or so narrow) are also implicitly covered. In other words, when all the laws are considered together, one’s impression is that both the very narrow, precise issues and the very broad, general issues fall under the purview of God’s covenant. The wide variability of comprehensiveness is intended to help the person desiring to keep the covenant to say, “I now see that in the tiniest detail as well as in the widest, most general way, I am expected to try to keep this law—in all its implications, not just in terms of its exact wording.” Some commandments are thus less broad in scope *in the way they are expressed* than is necessary to cover all the intended actions; others are so broad in scope *in the way they are expressed* that one could never think up all the ways they might be applied. This is just as it should be. The narrow and the broad taken together suggest the overall comprehensiveness of God’s covenant will for his people.¹²

This commandment is also reinforced in Lev 5:1 (where false testimony appears to include refusing to divulge pertinent information at a trial, thus creating a false impression of what the facts really are) and Deut 19:18. A decent society requires a reliable court system and court processes. Because crimes and disputes do occur, it must be the case that they can be adjudicated and the criminal behavior or unfairness thereby stopped. If witnesses in a trial, whether civil or criminal, do not tell the truth, it is extremely difficult for judges to render proper decisions. In other words, the court system of a nation depends on the honesty of its people.

This is the first commandment to employ the word *rēa* ‘, “neighbor,” in its general juridical sense of “anyone else you happen to come in contact with” rather than the more narrow sense of “someone living near you” (cf. Exod 3:22; 11:2; 12:4). In laws and formal rules, neighbor has nothing to do with proximity or familiarity; your “neighbor” connotes any other human being you may have dealings with, actually or potentially.

Does extrapolation from the paradigmatic principle of this law imply that dishonesty in general, not merely in court cases, is also forbidden? The answer must surely be *yes*, reasoning not merely from the general concept of paradigmatic law but from the way that stealing, false testimony, and dishonesty in general are linked together in Lev 19:11.¹

¹² An obvious parallel in the NT is Paul’s lists of gifts in Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12. Some gifts are narrow in scope; others are broad. Moreover, the two lists are not identical (any more than the laws of Exodus-Leviticus and Deuteronomy are identical). But as a paradigm for the entire corpus of gifts, Paul’s lists eloquently tell the reader that any and all special abilities a person has been given by God that could help build up his church should be developed and employed to that end.

¹ Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Vol. 2: Exodus*. The New American Commentary (444–445). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.