

The 9th Command: Truth is Sacred

Exodus 20:16

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It might be irony or just good providence that our series on the Ten Commandments lands the ninth command on Mother's Day weekend. The ninth command is about our communication—our words and using them in ways to build others up.

A mom in our church recently shared something that happened in her home. Her elementary-age daughter had a project at school to make a card for her mom. So this daughter made a card and later brought it home and showed it to her. It said, "*You are the best mom ever.*" Nice, huh? That's using words to build up. Every mom would appreciate hearing that from her daughter. This Mother's Day weekend, don't forget to build up your mom.

About five minutes after her daughter gave her the card, she asked, "Mom, can I have my friend over for dinner?" Her mom said, "No." The daughter looked at her in disbelief, ripped up the card and threw it away.

This is why we need Mother's Days. This is also why we need the ninth command. It's a command about words and using them to help, not harm others. How easily we communicate to harm others and, we think, benefit ourselves.

These Ten Commandments have an internal structure and logic. The first command summarizes all the others, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" (Exodus 20:3 ESV) If you get that one right, you don't need the rest. Unfortunately, we don't get it right, so we need all the rest. The first four deal with my vertical relationship with God. The last six deal with my horizontal relationships. The sixth command reminds us that human life is sacred. The seventh command tells us sex is sacred. The eighth command says personal property is sacred. Now we come to the ninth command: truth and truth-speaking are sacred. Here it is again, "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" (Exodus 20:16) All the translations use essentially the same language to translate this. So the ninth command deals with our words and the heart motives behind our communication.

What is "Bearing False Witness"?

Let's see what "bearing false witness" actually means. Remember, when Israel received the Ten Commandments, they were nomads for 40 years. There were no marshals, courts, or legal system like we know it. Yet, there were crimes committed and disagreements among neighbors and family. Things happened that required justice. So God established a legal code for Israel that rested on mutual accountability, and when necessary, witnesses telling the truth. God knew the human heart and made this law: "*On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.*" (Deuteronomy 17:6; see also Numbers 35:30)

One person's testimony could be corrupt, so as a safeguard, God said it always took two or three to condemn someone—especially to death. The law also required that the witness who accused must be the first to throw the stone to execute them (Deuteronomy 17:7). This raised the stakes. It's one thing to lie. It's another to murder.

To bear false witness is to speak what is untrue; it's to be duplicitous, deceitful, and misleading. Noteworthy is that in Moses' retelling of the law in Deuteronomy 5:20, he repeats this command only with a Hebrew word for false that means "insincere." This reveals what is sinful about speaking falsely—a deceitful purpose behind the words. (J.I. Packer, *Keeping the 10 Commandments*, p. 95.) Have you ever said anything that is untrue but you thought it was true? If you are buying a watermelon and tell the checkout lady, "The price on the watermelon said \$5," do you really think that's the price or are you are trying to mislead her for your personal gain? One is honest, but mistakenly so; the other is dishonest and purposefully so.

Like all the other commands, there is an outward moral action whose vice or virtue is tied to the heart motive that lies behind it. If every time we speak we have to say what is absolutely true, no weathermen are going to heaven. "False witness" is both words that are false and motives that are selfish.

Is what I am saying consistent with reality as best I know it? Am I faithfully representing the facts? Am I honest? Do I communicate verbally and nonverbally with integrity and truthfulness? What is a lie? "I would say that a lie is a word or act that intentionally deceives a neighbor in order to hurt him." (John Frame, *The Christian Life*, p. 835)

Jennifer and I visited a museum that had the sculpture below. At the time I thought, *Someday I could use that as a sermon illustration.* Today is the day!



Examples of intentional deception include: exaggeration, half-truths, insinuation, flattery, treachery, betrayal, cover-ups, slander, gossip, fabrications, covenant- and promise-breaking, and misleading of all kinds.

The Bible includes many examples of lying including Satan to Eve in the Garden, Cain's insinuation of non-guilt toward his brother's absence, Jacob deceiving Isaac to get his brother's birthright, and Peter denying he knew Jesus to the servant girl.

The historic confessions and catechisms are so helpful with these commands because they are so thorough. Here is the *Westminster Larger Catechism* on the ninth command:

"Q. 144. What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?"

A. The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocence; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care

of our own good name, and defending it when need requires; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report." (*The Westminster Larger Catechism*)

If you want to obey the ninth command, just always do that! But it's not that easy, is it? Luther gave a helpful summary of three kinds of non-truths (two are okay and one is not), *humorous, helpful, and harmful*.

Luther's Three Classes of Lies

Humorous

This category includes joking and jesting that is not intended to harm and everyone realizes the intent. There is no immoral misleading. Did you hear about the squirrel in the rowboat? *Was there really a squirrel in a rowboat? Liar!* Actors are in a kind of deception playing a role. I remember an ad that highlighted this deception, "I'm not a doctor, but I do play one on TV." *Well, then I certainly want to hear your medical advice.* Or how about games and sports in which faking one way and going the other is not viewed as a moral category? Imagine Walter Payton without any fakes. Think of board games and other social activities where deception is not to harm but is playful or amusing.

Helpful

This category is a little tricky, but there are times when we will mislead not to harm but to help, encourage, or bless. How about the surprise birthday party where you tell them you are going to dinner but you are really going to a party? Is that a sin? No. Check the motive.

This gets more difficult with what is often ethically debated—is it ever okay to lie in order to, for example, save a life? Was it wrong for Rahab to tell the Jericho soldiers that the Israeli spies headed out of town when they were actually hidden in the thatch on her roof? Or was it wrong for the Dutch Christians to hide Corrie Ten Boom as a child from the Nazis in Amsterdam? Or Schindler to deceive in order to save the Jews as portrayed in *Schindler's List*? There is debate on this point. Is what Luther would call a "helpful" lie okay? I don't want to spend much time on this because it is a debatable point and most of us will never encounter such a dire life or death type decision.

There are biblical examples of God actually ordering deception in war (The battle at Ai) and cover stories (Samuel anointing David). Was God lying? No. The command says "neighbor," not enemy combatant or person trying to kill you. Pastor John MacArthur once had a man slip through the locked doors and various secretaries and walk right into his office carrying a knife. He said, "Tell me where John MacArthur is right now." He stood up and he said, "Let me go and see if I can find him for you." He left the room and called security. Should he have said, "I cannot tell a lie, it's me"?

The dangerous and broken world we live in creates some context where moral requirements clash. Read about Bonhoeffer's moral dilemma as he struggled with whether to join a group to assassinate Hitler (which he did). There are moral matrixes that seem to be impossible knots. We should give grace to those in history who found themselves in them. Most of us will never face a choice between lying and contributing to the holocaust type decision.

Harmful

Most of us struggle with this category. This is what the ninth command addresses. This is words or actions that intentionally deceive a neighbor, coworker, government, whoever, in order to hurt them. Why does God care? Why does God care about truth-speaking?

The 9th Command and the Character of God: God is True, True, True

The angels and some of our praise songs highlight God's holiness with repetition: he is holy, holy, holy. Totally holy. There is no impurity in him and he has no inclination toward lying.

The ninth command is about God and his essential character. God is true, true, true.

- *"In hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began."* (Titus 1:2)
- *"God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"* (Numbers 23:19)
- *"So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us."* (Hebrews 6:17-18)

Why is it impossible for God to lie? His character neither can nor needs to. Mark Twain said, "If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything." Lying is for hiding. Lying is to manipulate. Lying is to make yourself look better than you are or gain some kind of benefit. When you are a sovereign God, you don't have to lie. You don't have to deceive to make yourself look glorious. He is all glorious. He doesn't have to hide anything. *"God is light and in him is no darkness at all."* (1 John 1:5) Mankind loves darkness and nuance and hiding. But God delights in the truth because he is himself true, true, true.

"When we speak, therefore, of the sanctity of truth, we must recognize that what underlies this concept is the sanctity of the being of God as the living and true God. He is the God of truth and all truth derives its sanctity from him. This is why all untruth or falsehood is wrong; it is a contradiction of that which God is." (John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p. 125.)

Lying is what sinners do to try and be God. *I can't trust God to meet my needs, so I'll cheat to get ahead. My identity in Jesus is not enough so I'll exaggerate the story or résumé to make me look good. I can't trust God for outcomes so I'll flatter others to manipulate my desired outcome.*

Instead, we ought to realize that God's truthfulness is why we don't have to lie. Everything he has said and promised is true and unchangeable. Jesus said that all of God's Word would be fulfilled right down to the jot and tittle, the punctuation marks (Matthew 5:18). As we realize the truthfulness of God, it is a guardrail against our need to deceive. He really is love. Jesus really is his Son. All who believe in Jesus really do have their sins forgiven. He really will meet all my needs. There really is a heaven and eternal rewards. The ninth command calls us away from a life of deception and toward a resting confidence in the truthfulness of God. As the hymn says, *"Jesus I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art."*

The Gospel – Transforming Liars into Truth-speakers

How do we fulfill the ninth command?

My parents came up with a very devious way to teach their children the need to tell the truth. In the DeWitt house growing up if any of us lied, my parents would say, "Oh that lie made your tongue dirty. We need to wash it." So in we would go to the bathroom and out came the bar of soap. And some of you know where this is going because you grew up with parents that hated you as well. They would take the bar of soap and rub it on my tongue with some water. Yes, Pastor Steve had his mouth washed out with soap. To this day, I remember that taste. It is one of the nastiest tastes there is. Kids, don't hate me because I used this illustration. If you're struggling with pastor hate, see the sixth command.

While that was a pretty good deterrent, it was no solution to the problem. Why? The problem was not the tongue, but the heart. For me to obey the ninth command, I needed to have my heart washed out with soap. *"A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart."* (Luke 6:45 NLT)

My tongue was merely saying what my heart was thinking. To truly be clean, I would need the spiritual soap to get down there. That's why all the jails and courts and punishments and warnings will not redeem one liar into a truth-speaker. Somehow we have to get the truth in our hearts. If the truth is in our hearts, then truth will be on our tongues.

"He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:5 ESV) This is God's soap. The ninth command condemns us and it can't make us truth-speakers and it certainly can't save us. "We must know the truth if we are to live the truth." (John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p. 130.) How do we get the truth in our hearts so that our communication can be truth-speaking?

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" (John 14:6) *"I am the way the truth and the life."* What is he talking about? A way to get your heart cleansed. A way to get your sins forgiven. Jesus said elsewhere, *"The truth will set you free."* (John 8:32) How do we get the truth that cleanses and saves into our hearts?

This is going to sound impossibly simple. We believe. This believing requires a radical turning from sin in what the Bible calls repentance. Essentially, I choose to believe the truth about Jesus, which brings the truth of Jesus into my heart and soul. There, like soap, Jesus scrubs my heart with gospel truth. Truths like, *"I will never leave you nor forsake you."* (Hebrews 13:5) Truths like, *"I am the life."* (John 14:6) Truths like, *"Come to me, all who are labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28) THE truth that He is Son of God, Savior of the world, my prophet, priest, and king. When the truth is *in* me, now the truth can flow *from* me in my words and actions which don't rely on deceit or flattery but on faith in God. I am now free to speak the truth in love. When truth has my heart, truth has my tongue too.

The gospel does what the ninth command cannot do—turns liars into people who delight in the truth and who speak it too. What a freedom! This has huge implications for how we do community with one another and use our words to edify and build up each other. We will talk more about that next week.

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