

The Truth About a Lie

9th of the Ten Commandments

The Ninth Commandment is stated in Exodus 20:16 God says, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” The Commandment is restated in the New Testament, when we read in Ephesians 4:25, “Wherefore put away lying and speak every man the truth with his neighbor.”

God gave human beings one gift which most of the other created beings do not have, and that is the gift of speech. The fact that man can speak is one of the factors that lifts him far above the animal kingdom. Animals can plan and build, and play and fight, and sense when you are afraid and when you are not—but they cannot convey ideas through the power of speech. The ability to speak is one of the most useful gifts ever given to the human family. Through words, we can bring comfort and courage to others. But through words, we can also wound and crush and even kill.

The Ninth Commandment has to do with the misuse of the tongue, especially when the tongue is used to injure other people, or to tell an untruth, or to misrepresent facts. We are not to bear false witness. That is, we are not to tell an untruth; we are not to use words which tend to injure the reputation of others. In its most narrow sense, the Commandment teaches against the crime of perjury (that is, giving a false testimony before a court of law). But in its broader sense, the Commandment has to do with telling the truth all the time.

People around us often regard telling an untruth as a harmless slip of the tongue. To them, telling a lie is not a very weighty matter. But that is not the way God looks at it. Of all the Ten Commandments, perhaps the one we are inclined to break the most often, is the Ninth. A survey done by the University of Minnesota says that the average person uses 11,000,000 words per year, or 30,000 words per day. And thus many who would never dream of stealing from a supermarket, or cheating on their income tax, or committing adultery with another partner—find it difficult to miss a day without saying something unnecessary or untrue about another. Truthfulness is a virtue that we must seek to cultivate. It should be our constant aim to build up the habit of absolute accuracy in all that we say, for God says, “A false witness shall not go unpunished, and he who utters lies will not escape” (Proverbs 19:5).

1. Reasons Why we Tend to be Deceptive

A “lie” is any intention to deceive. It can be much more than a **spoken** untruth. It can be practiced by a word, an action, or even by total silence. God says in Psalm 119:104, “I hate every false way.” And yet deception is quite common all around us.

One reason that deception is commonly practiced is because of human depravity. Dr. Leonard Keeler was the inventor of the famous Keeler Lie Detector Test, and he concluded from testing many thousands of persons that people are not basically honest. Jeremiah the prophet said the same thing more than two thousand years ago. He said that man’s heart (his nature) is “deceitful above all things, and

desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). We find it easy to be deceitful because our natures are tainted with sin.

Another reason it is easy to be untruthful, is because of fear. Sometimes a person tells an untruth to escape the consequences of something he has done. He denies that he said or did something wrong because he fears being found out.

Another reason for lying is carelessness. A person can make false statements so often that he becomes almost chronically inaccurate in nearly all that he says. He does not so much deliberately set out to tell untruths; he just carelessly makes statements that are not always reliable, and thus his statements are untrue and constitute a form of lying.

Still another reason for lying is boasting. Very few of us can resist the temptation to tell about a personal experience, but that we tell it in such a way that it shows us in a better light than the facts really warrant. We tend to make ourselves a little bit more respectable than we really are. The proverbial statement on boasting is related to the ant and the elephant. After crossing a bridge—an ant, riding on the elephant’s back—said, “My, didn’t **we** shake that bridge!” (The old bridge shook from the weight of the elephant, but the ant wanted some credit for it too).

Most of us know that telling an untruth can really get us into all kinds of trouble. For one thing, to remember a series of lies is hard work. If you are accustomed to telling untruths, it is hard to remember all the falsehoods stated in the past, and so when you talk to the same person again—you can’t remember what you told him the first time. The task of “bearing false witness” can become very difficult.

Then too if we tell a lie, our untruthfulness may be discovered, and always (in back of our minds) there is a nagging fear that we will be found out. Being untruthful leads to feelings of guilt, and no real happiness can come to an individual that way.

Also, telling an untruth can sometimes be downright embarrassing. Some years ago, near closing time, a shopkeeper had one chicken left in a barrel of ice water. (In those days, they did not have nice display stands for meats, all refrigerated and well-lighted). Near the close of the market day, a customer came in and asked the shopkeeper if he had any chickens left. “Sure,” he said, grabbing the lone chicken and resting it on the scales. He said, “Here’s one-one dollar and thirty-five cents.” The lady said, “Do you have a larger one?” The merchant replied, “I’ll see,” as he returned the same chicken into the barrel. He jostled it around for a few seconds (he only had one chicken), and then pulled it out, laid the same chicken on the scales, and said, “Here’s one for a dollar eighty-five.” Do you know what the customer said? She said, “I’ll take **both** of them.”

Telling an untruth can be hard work; it can be embarrassing; it can lead to a nagging fear of being found out. But we must remember most of all that the Bible says “Whosoever loves and makes a lie” shall not enter Heaven. The reasons then for being untruthful are a tainted nature, a sense of greed, a feeling of fear, a tendency to boast, and just plain carelessness.

2. Matters Not Classified as False Witness

Before we look at ways by which one can bear false witness, we want to notice some things not included in the Ninth Commandment.

a) It is not required that we count all falsehoods as lies. A lie occurs when one deliberately decides to deceive another by false words or actions. On occasion, we might be misinformed about ordinary things, and sincerely think that we are stating facts, and really have no design of sharing untruth with others. This is not lying. For example, if someone stopped by at our house, and I said that my wife was home—when actually, unknown to me, she had slipped over to a neighbor’s house to share a loaf of fresh homemade bread—I would not be lying. I would be giving some misinformation, yet doing it all in honesty, and with no intention to deceive.

b) It is not required that unpleasant truths can never be stated. There are times when one must state the facts about another person to the proper authorities—even if the facts are not very pleasant. True love does not gloss over the truth. A criminal and lawbreaker should be reported to the proper authorities (1 Peter 2:13-14). False prophets in the church should be exposed and warned against (Matthew 7:15-23). An immoral person is to be disciplined and perhaps even excommunicated (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). There was rigid discipline in the early church and this required the disclosure of evil conduct. The first verse of 1 Corinthians 5 says, “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you.” Paul did not say, “Judge not that ye be not judged.” Nor did he scold the Corinthians for reporting this violation of Christian conduct. The facts were authenticated; these were not idle rumors. The church needs to be open and honest about things as they are, rather than pretending that everything is all right when often things are not. But still, many of us at times tend to speak in a derogatory manner about others—and when we do it, we do it because it gratifies the old nature—and not because we are so concerned about the purity of the church.

3. Ways in Which One Can Bear False Witness

Mark Twain sat down one day and after considerable thought came to the conclusion that there are 869 ways of lying. Some of the common ways of bearing false witness are listed below.

a) Direct lies. The most common way of breaking the Ninth Commandment is to tell an untruth—just a plain unvarnished lie. Cain’s answer to God’s question regarding the whereabouts of Abel is an example. God said, “Where is Abel thy brother?” And Cain answered, “I know not” (“I don’t know where he is”). Peter, at the trial of Jesus, told an untruth. When the damsel said he had been with Jesus, Peter said, “I don’t know what you are talking about.” This shows how quickly and how easily our hearts can fall under the pressure to say the untruth.

Lying is not only forbidden in the Ten Commandments, but God’s voice is lifted against this sin over and over again. Psalm 31:18 says, “Let lying lips be put to silence.” One of the seven things God hates is “lying lips” (Proverbs 6:16-17). We are instructed to “put away lying and speak the truth” in Ephesians 4:25. And yet some talk about “bending” the truth and “coloring” the truth and “adapting” the truth. A nurse tells a patient that he is getting better, but he has cancer, and everyone knows that unless a

miracle happens, he cannot recover. A secretary is instructed to say to the salesman that the boss is out, when in fact, he is sitting just inside the office door. A parent tells his children that a peculiar old man (named “Santa Claus”) mysteriously appears and then disappears at Christmas time, when the whole thing is a deceptive scheme. People tell untruths in order to plan a “surprise party” for someone at anniversary time, etc. Statements are made that convey the wrong impression—and that is lying!

We can tell untruths by using the right words, but with a meaning different from the truth. A teenager “played hooky” from school one day. It was winter and there was snow on the ground. He drove a car to school sometimes, and that day he started toward the automobile, took a pin and stuck himself in the arm, and then went back to the house and did not go to school. When he returned to school the next day and was asked why he missed, he said, “I got stuck on the way to school.” He used the right words; he was stuck with a pin; but the school officials thought he was stuck in the snow with the car. Lying is telling or acting an untruth with the intent to deceive.

b) Slander. Slander is uttering a false charge which damages the reputation of another. This is usually done by twisting another’s words, or misquoting his statements, or by repeating a story that reflects on his character—without carefully checking the facts. Jeremiah tells of those who said, “Come, let us smite him with the tongue” (Jeremiah 18:18). A vast company of persons down through the years have been slandered by undisciplined tongues. It was a series of lies that contributed to the stoning of Stephen (in the New Testament), and led to the murder of Naboth (in the Old Testament). And while it was all part of the plan of God—Jesus suffered crucifixion because of insinuations and falsehoods and distortions of the truth.

We tend to run down another person in order to hide our own failures and to boost our own image in the eyes of others. If we can rub the glitter off someone else’s crown, it tends to make us look better. But our brother’s good name is just as sacred as his property; and just as we would not enter his house and smash his furniture and haul it away, so we should be careful about injuring his unmarred name.

c) Silence. Another form of bearing false witness is withholding information which would clear an accused person. There is such a thing as talking too much, but there is also a thing as failing to speak when we should speak.

If your neighbor is accused of some wrongdoing, and you know he is innocent—and you remain silent—you have borne false witness against him. If someone is discussing another, and you know that what is being said isn’t true—to remain silent is to share in the act of bearing false witness. If I keep silent, when my witness would clear another of a false charge, I am violating the Ninth Commandment. Silence is not always golden; sometimes silence is sinful.

d) Exaggeration. Exaggeration is the act of enlarging a matter beyond the bounds of truth. It is a form of lying. It soon becomes so commonplace that even ordinary expressions are tinged with exaggeration.

Little Bobby was telling about his day at the zoo. He said, “Mommy, the giraffe had a neck a mile long.” The mother replied, “Haven’t I told you a million times never to exaggerate!”

Newspaper accounts of social events are often exaggerated. Can you imagine the society editor of a local newspaper telling the truth about a wedding? For example: “Last night Miss Jones and Mr. Smith were united in marriage. The bride is homely and barely made it through high school. She knows scarcely anything about cooking a meal, and knows very little about housekeeping. The groom is the offspring of wealthy and indulgent parents. The couple seems to be in for more than their share of trouble, etc.” Most accounts are exaggerated. If the truth were stated, they would either have to change the editor or sell the newspaper. Truth has never really been very popular.

e) Gossip. Gossip is indulging in needless chatter about other people; it is talk about personal, intimate, and unnecessary things. A “gossiper” is one who seeks to keep up to date about other people’s business. He does not necessarily slander others, but whenever you see him, he has something new to tell about somebody else. The gossip knows who all the latest boyfriends are, when the next baby is due, how much a neighbor paid for his house, etc.

It is nice to keep up with ordinary events happening in the community, but “gossip” is a kind of idle chatter about the rather personal affairs of other people, and it carries with it some dangers. One little account says:

Gossip 1 told Gossip 2 that Mr. Smith **bought** his goods from Mr. Brown;

Gossip 2 told Gossip 3 that Smith **got** his goods from Brown;

Gossip 3 told Gossip 4 that Smith **took** his goods from Brown;

Gossip 4 told Gossip 5 that Smith **stole** his goods from Brown.

One who is always sharing information about others has a tendency to add a little bit more, and then a little bit more, until the final tale contains more falsehood than truth. That is how rumors get started. And that is why it can be dangerous to be a “talkative” person. The Bible says, “Some of you are tattlers and busybodies, speaking things which ye ought not” (1 Timothy 5:13).

f) Flattery. Flattery is insincere praise. A “flatterer” is one who says nice things to your face, but he would not say the same things behind your back, because he is merely a smooth talker and doesn’t mean what he says. Flattery is just another form of lying. The Bible says, “The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips” (Psalm 12:3).

So many things are said which are not meant. So many compliments are given without being felt. So many words are spoken which are not really the true opinion of the person who says them. Appreciation should be expressed to others. Praise should be given where it is deserved, but it must be stated out of a heart grateful for kindnesses which have been rendered, and not mouthed insincerely.

These have been ways by which one can bear false witness. They include direct lies, slander, exaggeration, gossip, flattery, etc. There are many other miscellaneous ways by which we can break the Ninth Commandment. There is, for example, the falsehood of hypocrisy. The Bible is clear in saying that one who calls himself a Christian, but is not living a consistent life, is lying. If we call ourselves followers

of Christ and claim to have fellowship with God, but we are walking in darkness and are practicing sin — “we lie, and do not the truth” (1 John 1:6).

It is not an easy thing to absolutely always tell the truth. We must be on guard at all times lest we fall into the temptation to become deceitful. The Bible says, “A false witness shall not go unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape” (Proverbs 19:5). The serious consequence of bearing false witness is severe punishment from God. When the Lord speaks about the Heavenly City (in Revelation 21), He says that no one who works abomination or makes a lie shall enter into it. And in verse 8 (of Revelation 21) we read: “All liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.”

The next time you are tempted to slander the character of another, or pass along a juicy bit of gossip, or exaggerate the truth—think about our Lord’s warnings concerning those who bear false witness. God honors and blesses those who are concerned about truth, and will bring condemnation upon those who practice falsehood.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. There are all kinds of clubs and circles today. I have heard about “sewing circles.” I have read about “dinner circles.” I would like to propose a “doorkeeper’s circle.” Those who join the “doorkeeper’s club” have for their motto: “Keep the door of thy mouth.” A favorite poem is this piece of childish verse:

There is a little door
That everyone can close;
And that’s the little door
Just underneath your nose.

The Ten Commandments were not given to save us. They were given to show us how sinful we are, and to drive us to the Savior. The New Testament says that God’s law was given as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. You cannot tame your tongue (James 3:8), but Jesus Christ can tame it. If you will come to Him in sincerity and honesty, He will forgive your sins, cleanse your heart, and help make your bitter tongue sweet.

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