

The Ninth Commandment (1997)

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The Talmud tells the story of a king's two jesters whose sage and pithy wisdom were the talk of the kingdom. One day, in a philosophical mood, the king sent them on an errand. "Simon, my fool, go out and bring back the best thing in the world. And you, John, go out and secure for me the worst thing in the world."

In a short while both jesters were back, each with a package. Simon bowed low, "The best thing in the world, sire!" and unwrapped his package to reveal a tongue. John began to laugh and quickly unwrapped his bundle. "The worst thing in the world, O king," and he, too, presented a tongue.

Speech is arguably man's greatest gift and at the same time his most dangerous ability. It is impossible to estimate the good it has done when great men and women have truthfully instructed and inspired others. By contrast, we cannot measure how much evil the tongue has perpetrated, for falsehoods disguised as truth have destroyed reputations and even nations.

God devotes two of the Ten Commandments to the evils of false witnessing, the third and the ninth. These seem to be broken with impunity—sometimes even by those who are aware of their application—because the drives that motivate people to break them are so powerful.

God commands in Exodus 20:16, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," but liars and lying abound. Everybody knows that marketers lie about what products can do. Books, magazines and movies feature liars of many different stripes. The media and the public have caught prominent government figures from presidents on down lying about important issues.

According to an article by Jan Mendenhall in the June/July 1997 issue of *Aspire*, college kids lie to their moms in 50% of conversations. Dating couples lie to each other a third of the time, and spouses deceive each other in about 10% of major conversations. Twelve percent of four million Americans lost their jobs for "misrepresentation." A November 1997 survey conducted by the publishers of *Who's Who Among American High Schools Students* reveals that 76% of the students listed in their publication (supposedly the elite achievers) admit having cheated. Two-thirds of these believe it is "no big deal" to cheat to get a good test grade—and 65% of their parents agree!

We use a large number of euphemisms to soften the act of lying. Some are: duplicity, fabrication, evasion, stringing someone along, inaccuracy, exaggeration, fudging, rationalization, falsehood, "whopper," deception, misrepresentation, dishonesty, putting someone on, putting up a front and fibbing.

An Israelite Without Guile

John 1:47 is an interesting commentary on mankind regarding this sin, which is so common that it seems to be "in the genes"! "Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!'" Jesus seems pleasantly surprised. He describes a person

without deceit, a simple, innocent person without subtlety, candid and sincere. Is this a compliment or mild sarcasm? Or is He saying, "Here is a genuine Israelite, one in whom is no falsehood"? If so, He means, "This is how an Israelite should be!"

Regardless, Nathanael's lack of guile impressed Jesus, indicating its rarity. Lying is such an integral part of our lives that we have coined such expressions of disbelief as "Is that so?" "Do you really mean it?" or "You don't say!" because so many tales we hear stretch credulity.

We expect politicians to be crooked, to lie, to be evasive, to use their position to become wealthy by making undercover deals with business or crime figures. We expect police officers to be "on the take" and for businessmen to give little in return for as high a cost as the traffic will bear. Corporations conspire and deceitfully hold prices on manufactured goods higher than they should be. Major multi-national corporations routinely misrepresent their products.

Indeed, those who rebelled during the tumultuous 1960s justified their rebellion as disillusionment over the obvious hypocrisies of leaders becoming wealthy from an ever-prolonged, senseless war. Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson were caught openly lying at news conferences, and a strangling web of intrigue and lies caused Richard Nixon's resignation. As the trial of Oliver North revealed, people in government commonly lie "in the national interest." Referring to national interests, Winston Churchill once said, "Truth is so precious that it must be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies." We live with this, thus cynicism abounds.

A survey by the Joseph and Edna Josephson Institute of Ethics reported by the *Charlotte Observer* in 1991 found:

A third of the high school students said they were willing to lie on a resume, job application or in an interview to get a desired job; about one in six high school and college students admitted they already had done so. Four of five high school students and three of five college students said they had lied to their parents at least once in the past year.

Against that backdrop, it is not surprising that the students rated honesty only moderately high on their priority lists. Barely half the high school students—54%, precisely—said being honest and trustworthy was an "essential" value to them. In fact, honesty rated sixth among their priorities, behind getting into college, getting a high-paying job, having "trusted personal relationships" and "being respected for your integrity."

It appears that honesty is not considered an essential aspect of personal character, but a mere social nicety that can be flouted at will, just as people might lick their fingers at the dinner table with no real harm to anyone.

National Hypocrisy

Isaiah 29:13-15 says:

Therefore the Lord said, "Inasmuch as these people draw near to Me with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men, therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work among this people, a marvelous work and a wonder; for the wisdom of

their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden."
Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the Lord, and their works are in the dark; they say, "Who sees us?" and, "Who knows us?"

Hypocrisy is an oft-repeated indictment against Americans as a people. "In God we trust" and "One nation under God," we boast. But taken as a nation, neither is true. By the thousands, citizens swear on Bibles daily in the courts, but our courts are a mockery of justice. Americans attend church on Sunday, but it is business as usual Monday through Saturday.

We grew up in this, and it has conditioned our approach to life. In these verses in Isaiah, God accuses His people of playing games with His truth by not facing up to its standards. Jesus quotes verse 13 in Matthew 15:8-9, and in both cases the context is strikingly similar: Deceived or hypocritical people mishandle the revelation of God. The major problem, though, is that it remains unchecked, and eventually, the deception or hypocrisy becomes set as the way of life.

God, the Rock

Moses says of God, "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He" (Deuteronomy 32:4). John writes similarly about Jesus Christ, "Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war" (Revelation 19:11).

Our God is a God of truth. He is the Rock, the immovable Foundation of this way of life. The Hebrew word for "Rock" indicates firmness, stability and faithfulness. What would it be like to worship a God whose "truth" changed from time to time? Could such a God be trusted? The Greek word for "True" in Revelation 19:11 means much the same thing, but it carries the additional sense of "real" or "genuine." There is nothing—absolutely nothing—false, deceitful, evasive or variable in His character, His Word or His example.

What does this mean practically? Who are the most important people in a community, state or nation? Not the doctors, lawyers, teachers, entertainers, military personnel or businessmen. Considering how much God's Word concentrates on the preachers and kings, God indicates these two win in a landslide.

It might be difficult to say which of these two is more important, but a slight edge seems to go to the ministry. Christ came first as a rabbi and Savior, teaching and living the values that form the foundation of God's way. At His return, He will come to administer them. This is why God devotes so much space to these two in the Bible. The preacher must teach and live the values, and the king must live and administer them.

Without true values, civilization will not continue long but descend into revolution and anarchy. God's Word, His doctrine, is true and faithful just as He is. It is a reflection of His nature and character. Any society or family built on it will prosper and become great in godly terms. Jesus' first coming left mankind without excuse regarding the eternal question, "What is truth?"

Jesus says in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Many can say, "I have told you the truth," but Jesus not only told it, He embodied it. He put truth into a visible, concrete form so all who want to see it can.

What credibility that gives to one's teaching! A person can teach us a mathematical, grammatical, spelling, geographical or historical truth, and what his character is like matters little. But if a person teaches moral truth, his example, character, conduct and attitudes are all important. Who wants to be lectured on purity by an adulterer or on honesty by a liar and thief?

Jesus lived what He taught with total purity and never a shadow of turning. He was absolutely stable, firm and reliable, the real, genuine representative of eternal life, the way of life that He will establish on earth at His return.

Real Truth

John 17:17 says that God's Word is truth. The Greek word translated "truth" is *aletheia*, which most closely resembles our English word "reality." It means "the manifested, unconcealed essence of a matter." A living, saving faith depends upon the premise by man that God is true in His being and character. The truth forms the basis for a person's conversion.

Consider this: There is a Personal, Living, Almighty God whose ways and laws are reality in spite of the way things may appear to our senses (II Corinthians 5:7). They are intrinsically right and true. Therefore a person who is honest, who is willing to speak the truth, who will acknowledge and submit to it when he sees it, will eventually be converted to be like God.

We are God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:10). God, as Creator, is making us kings and priests to administer and teach a way of life based upon revealed truth. Because He desires to share and perpetuate what He is with an entire Family of children bearing His characteristics, He cannot have anybody in His Family who does not embody truth as Jesus did.

"You shall not bear false witness" thus has far-reaching spiritual applications. It is not a commandment that we can carelessly ignore as being insignificant compared to other "more important" ones. The word "bear" indicates "spread", "carry", "render" and "give". At first, it seems to involve only perjury or gossip, but other Scriptures show it covers giving a false witness, example or impression *under any circumstance*, including hypocrisy and self-deception. It includes the giving of testimony (verbally or by example) in any case that tends to produce injury. The ninth commandment regulates man's relationship to other men much as the third commandment does in man's relationship to God. This commandment directly involves faithfulness and loyalty in our mouth and example for God before men.

A Good Name

Proverbs 22:1 tells us, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold." On this verse, the Jewish commentary, *Soncino*, says that a person's good reputation, his name, is his most valuable asset. This is because of the integrity it took to produce it and the benefits it provides for one after he has it.

The Bible shows that God jealously guards His name and acts to ensure that it remains untarnished. His name represents what He is, and so it is with us as well. When we hear a name, images of what that person is immediately come to mind. In our mind's eye, we might recall a person as tall or short, male or female, learned or ignorant, black or white, angry or passive, beautiful or plain, vocal or quiet, honest or lying, responsible or irresponsible. Many character traits may flash through our minds in a moment or two.

The same happens to others as they think of us. What we project to others has everything to do with what we believe and practice. What kind of witness are we giving? Is what we believe and practice as true as God's Word?

Thus, if we want to have a good name in the eyes of God and man, we have to recognize truth, understand it and make it a part of us by submitting to it. This is where truth in a person's witness begins. If truth does not form the foundation of a person's life, the witness will reflect it.

Mankind—from Adam on—has been unwilling to do this. God says our "heart is deceitful above all things and [incurably sick (NKJV margin)]" (Jeremiah 17:9). We keep lying to ourselves and others, thus our name is not good before God. It means that to have this good name, we, as God's regenerated children, must face our vanities and stop deceiving ourselves that God will "just have to take us as we are." We need to quit blaming our failures, problems and shortcomings on others, providing ourselves with justification for what we are and do.

Conduct is the "stuff" of which reputations are formed. Good conduct has truth at its foundation and integrity as its constant companion. From these two, a witness is produced. God wants our reputation before men to be built on His truth. Are we honestly doing this?

Proverbs 12:15 adds, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise." One who perceives the truth has a force, a beauty of character, which creates a favorable impression that opens doors and accomplishes things. Would we not rather loan money to a person we know works hard and pays his debts than a person with poor work habits who defaults on his obligations?

A wise person is one who recognizes truth, understands that he must meet his obligations and submits to it. This process produces a good witness whether the obligation to truth is met verbally or behaviorally. If a person will not do this, he deceives himself that he can somehow "get away with it," and his witness and name will demonstrate his poor character.

This principle holds true in every area of life upon which a name is built, whether in marriage, child training, employment or health. Many run from the truth about themselves. Nothing destroys a reputation quicker and more permanently than for a person to be known as a liar or a hypocrite.

Therefore, the commandment covers not only making a false witness about another or an event with the tongue, but also not bearing false witness about God by our conduct.

Why We Lie

To make a bad witness through ignorance or weakness is one thing, but to know better and deliberately mislead surely compounds the transgression! Why do we lie? We lie to cover up; we fear that something we wish to hide will be exposed. We also lie to rise above our feelings of inadequacy or inferiority, or to lower a third party in the eyes of others. This latter reason tends to elevate ourselves in our own eyes and, we hope, in the eyes of others.

Consider the use of cosmetics in this regard. Makeup is frequently used to hide, to cover up what we consider to be inadequacies of beauty. But by whose standard are we inadequate? Are we really being a true witness of ourselves?

Proverbs 26:18-28 covers various principles about lying. Study this section with Matthew 12:34 in mind, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks," as well as James 3:6, "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity." The deceitful heart is the real source of sin (Jeremiah 17:9), but the tongue conveys it to the outside world.

"Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death, is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, 'I was only joking!'" (Proverbs 26:18-19).

Foolishness is never a joke when deceit is involved. A person who does such things is as insane as a person who randomly shoots into a crowd. His actions may have serious consequences, even death, though it is not his intention. God considers it no excuse to say, "I didn't mean it."

"Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases." (Proverbs 26:20)

Talebearing usually involves slander, and slander feeds contention the same way wood feeds a fire. A slanderer uses falsehood to defame a reputation, which engenders conflict.

"The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body." (Proverbs 26:22)

Human nature greedily swallows gossip. God warns here that gossip is never superficial but that we thoroughly assimilate it to become part of us. Lies about others die hard because in our vanity we are so eager to elevate ourselves while mentally putting down another.

Here is a good maxim to live by: Never believe anything bad about a person unless you know it to be *absolutely* true; never tell it unless it is *absolutely* necessary; and remember, fear God, for He is listening while you tell it.

"Fervent lips with a wicked heart are like earthenware covered with silver dross." (Proverbs 26:23)

This verse to the end of the chapter speaks primarily of hypocrisy. Verse 23 describes a person who claims to be a friend yet deceitfully works against another through "clever" language. The lips "glitter," but the heart is false. Silver dross hides the reality of a clay pot just as clever words can hide a corrupt heart.

"He who hates, disguises it with his lips, and lays up deceit within himself; when he speaks kindly, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart." (Proverbs 26:24-25)

This continues the thought in verses 22-23, but it focuses on friendly words concealing hatred until the person sees the chance to pull the other down. He may speak graciously, but be careful! This sounds similar to the way the media approaches public figures, who are fair game for every abominable accusation, though they are unsubstantiated.

"Though his hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness will be revealed before the whole congregation. Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone will have it roll back on him. A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, and a flattering mouth works ruin." (Proverbs 26:26-28)

These powerful words caution that one who indulges in activity like this will have his hatred exposed—and probably by the same means he has used on others!

Galatians 6:7-8 teaches us another very important universal principle that bears strongly on lying: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life."

God cannot be fooled, and liars seem to forget His awareness. While they mind, or side with, the things of the flesh, they put themselves in jeopardy of reaping what they have allied with—death. We cannot treat His law with disrespect or contempt and get away with it. Just as gravity cannot be tricked, neither can God's law. We are accountable to it whether we wish to be or not.

What we do in life, life does back to us. We cannot escape it! If we sow to death, we will reap death. If we sow to life—eternal life—we will reap life. Jesus asked, "Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:16). A hypocrite cannot fool God's laws, only others and himself—for a while.

Self-Deception

Deceitful means insincere, hypocritical, underhanded, false, dishonest, treacherous, sneaking, double-dealing, tricky, cunning and crafty. Such a person is altogether untrustworthy. As we saw in Jeremiah 17:9, our heart is desperately sick or weak, implying it knows better but deceives anyway. Who can fathom its corruption, manifested in the incessant transgression of this commandment?

We understand that human nature is a reflection of the spirit of the prince of the power of the air, whom Jesus identified as the father or generator of lies (John 8:44). Satan had so deceived himself, he thought he could overcome his Creator! Proverbs 11:9 says, "The hypocrite with his mouth destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous will be delivered." Satan is a destroyer who passes this carnal attribute along to those who will follow him. Unless the hypocrite repents, he destroys himself too. That is the lesson of Proverbs 26:26-28. God will deliver the just person, however, because he yields to truth.

Proverbs 14:8 adds, "The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way, but the folly of fools is deceit." True wisdom is skill in living, carrying with it the ability to judge present circumstances with a view of future success. The prudent person consciously follows truth. He deliberately chooses the right and thus does not walk on blindly.

Folly is senselessness, silliness or irrationality. Why? Because the person deceiving is himself deceived. He does not realize his deceit will also crush him! What profit is in this sin? God has taken particular pains to impress upon us that it will boomerang and catch the perpetrator.

Job makes an interesting statement in defense of himself after being accused of being a hypocrite by his friends: "If I have covered my transgressions as Adam, by hiding my iniquity in my bosom . . ." (Job 31:33). He is asking his friends for evidence that he has hidden the truth of his sins from himself.

It is a relevant question because it is natural to be blind to our own flaws while clearly seeing those of others. Sir Walter Scott put it this way, "O what a tangled web we weave / When first we practice to deceive." The tangled web hangs not only outside a deceiver but within him as well, and his own lies trap him so often that he begins to believe them. He tells them so often or lives them so smoothly that he loses his grip on reality like a drug addict in denial.

Proverbs 16:6 counsels, "In mercy and truth atonement is provided for iniquity; and by the fear of the Lord one departs from evil." We overcome lying because God mercifully but forcefully brings it to our attention by revealing His truth. When we submit to His truth rather than our self-deceptions, we are beginning to overcome.

Commentators suggest an alternative translation of this verse: "By loyalty and faithfulness one escapes evil." The sense is that loyalty and faithfulness to God's truth are essential elements to escaping the second death. Obeying truth does not forgive sin, but it plays a part in cleaning our minds of the garbage of bad habits lodged in our character so that we are less likely to involve ourselves in sin. God's truth says we must not bear false witness, and that must be obeyed!

Psalms 15:1-3 sets a very high standard:

Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; he who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend.

David describes a person in whom is no false way at all, no pretenses, no deceit, no gossip, guile or hypocrisy. He neither makes hollow friendships nor speaks vain compliments. His heart, hand and tongue are unified in believing and practicing truth. He is faithful, responsible and trustworthy, a person of integrity because his heart is pure. Therefore, his speech and example witness of truth.

Paul writes:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (II Corinthians 4:1-2)

In these verses, the apostle clearly states our responsibility to God regarding the ninth commandment. We should manifest truth in every part of our life, making honest and diligent use of God's gracious gifts without craftiness.

Is our way Christ's? Can we say we have nothing to do with hidden and shameful methods and speech? He is not talking about acting with unscrupulous cleverness, but how we handle God's Word. Do we adulterate the Word which God gave us to live by and preach? Our lives should demonstrate that we present ourselves to human conscience in the sight of God. We should live our lives in the fear of God, knowing He is watching and judging our conduct.

We should be childlike and open to leave as little room as possible for people to misinterpret our motives, misunderstand our actions or twist our words from their real meaning. Does it make any difference what people think of us? Some take the approach that "I will do what I want to do, and what others think doesn't matter." This at times has the appearance of wisdom, but it matters to God. If He did not care, He would not show so much concern in His Word about being a good witness for Him and protecting our reputations or His. Much of our effectiveness as a witness depends on being trustworthy through honesty.

Brethren, keeping this commandment begins with not letting our deceitful heart trick us into doing or saying anything less than what is honest and true in God's sight. We must demonstrate a true witness regardless of what men may discern from what we say or do, or what painful harm the truth may do to our vanity.