

The Ninth Commandment

**“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”
(Deuteronomy 20:16).**

I. Taming the Tongue

“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless” (James 1:26).

I would like to begin this section with Scriptures that speak for themselves.

“Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh” (James 3:3-12).

“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are whisperers*” (Romans 1:28,29).

“And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not” (1 Timothy 5:13).

Most Common Sin

Although there is a great proclivity in both the world and the church to violate all the commandments of God, there is very little doubt in my mind that the violation of the Ninth Commandment (although there is a general theoretical agreement in the church that improper talking is sin) is the most common grievous sin invading the church. The inability to know, or lack of willingness to care about, when the conversation has moved into the realm of ungodliness is a very common transgression among Christians.

A Tale from Two Women

Years ago I was having a conversation with a church member who began saying some pretty negative things about a mutual friend. I remember her speaking to me in such a way as to give the impression that she was merely musing on her own. The criticism was something I knew to be false and I sought to clear up the misconception. Less than two weeks later I heard another lady (the first lady's friend) make the same criticism about the same person. I don't need to be a prophet to realize that these women spoke to each other about the third party. This common sin causes great damage in the household of Christ.

Collecting Feathers

There is an old story about a man who had been telling rumors, rumors he thought to be true about a certain pastor. It finally came to his attention that what he was saying was false. Filled with remorse he found the pastor and apologized for the things he had said, and asked if there was anything he could do to make it up to him. The pastor asked him to meet at the top of the church tower the next afternoon. The man met him and the pastor handed him a feather pillow, asked him to cut it open, and throw the feathers from the tower. The man complied. The pastor then asked the man to meet him there the following night. At this meeting the pastor asked the man to collect the feathers he had released the night before. Of course this was impossible. The man then realized how words cannot be retrieved. He realized how damaging it is to speak falsehoods.

II. Preserving Truth

The duty involved in this commandment is the duty of preserving truth. I shall not speak in detail about truth. Suffice it to say that Christ referred to Himself as truth. The word of God is truth. Truth, like law liberates, i.e., sets you free. Truth accounts for much more than we can ever imagine. Charles Hodge states,

“Truth is, so to speak, the very substratum of Deity...So it is the foundation of the physical and moral order of the universe.”¹

The Necessity of Truth

From the laws of nature & order to the laws of ethics, logic and thought, truth is essential. Truth is an extension of the character and nature of God. If God did not extend His truth into the natural order, that which is food today might be poison tomorrow. Truth is the essence of humanity. A man who violates the truth, sins against the moral foundation of his very being. As a false god is no god so a false man is no man. Jesus taught that the Devil is the father of lies (John 8:44).

The First Sin

The first sin of man was based upon the falsehood of Satan.

“Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said” (Genesis 3:1).

The serpent questioned the integrity of God’s truth and his lies began.
The search for truth will always lead to the true God.

“And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

III. Protecting Reputations

The Eighth Commandment addressed the protection of property. The Ninth protects reputations, which are, arguably, more precious. We are required, in this commandment, to maintain and promote the truth between man and man. We are also required to preserve our own, and our neighbor’s, good name.

False witness

In its purest sense a false witness is one who goes before a civil tribunal and perjures himself against another person.

“A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol III*, (Eerdmans, reprinted 1989), p. 437.

of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. ‘If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. And the judges shall investigate thoroughly; and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. And the rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Deuteronomy 9:15-21).

It was such a heinous crime to perjure yourself that you would receive the punishment you were hoping your victim would receive.

Destroys Relationships

Of all the commandments, this one that may be the most destructive in terms of personal relationships.² If you’re found to be a liar, you can no longer be trusted. A husband or a wife can work through almost any problem or sin in a marriage, but as soon as one is shown to be a liar, it is no longer ‘us’ who is working through the problem. This sin removes a person from the unity of the battle.

IV. Okay Lies

There is disagreement, even among the great theologians, as to when it is okay to lie. I don’t want to spend undo time on this so I’ll summarize. There does seem to be a Biblical precedent for deception. Some examples of okay lies might be the deceiving of a mad dog in order to destroy him, or the deceiving of a villain in order to prevent a murder, or deception in a military battle, etc.

Jesus

Jesus clearly uses fiction when He tells a parable. He also uses deception to give a lesson.

“And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He would go farther” (Luke 2:28).

² Except for murder of course.

Rahab, Hebrew Mid-Wives, God's Instructions to Samuel

Other examples would be the lie of Rahab in Joshua 2. Through a lie she protected the men of God. There is also the example of the lies of the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1. Through their lies they protected the babies of the Hebrew nation when Pharaoh would have killed them. Both of these examples of lying found the reward of God rather than His curse.

In 1 Samuel 16:1,2 we actually read of God instructing Samuel to deceive Saul. Again, there is Elisha's deception of the Syrians in 2 Kings 6:19 when God blinded them and Elisha led them into Samaria.

Violating an Obligation

We can conclude that this commandment is blatantly violated when there is an intention to deceive, along with the violation of some obligation. The Hebrew midwives were under no obligation to speak the truth to Pharaoh. A general at war should not expect truthful strategic statements from his opposing general.

Deception seems to be approved when it is not malicious and when it is designed for good, e.g., telling parables or preparing for a surprise party. Deception may be acceptable when the person deceived is abjectly evil and seeking to use the information to perpetrate ungodliness. This is a very difficult call. We should not seek to justify ourselves or look for loopholes in the law of God. I bring it up these examples simply because biblical precedent demands it.

V. Playing Favorites

Summary Laws

Bearing false witness has a legal ring to it. We must realize that the Ten Commandments are summary laws. A summary law is the basic statement of the law but it does not cover every specific violation contained in the law. For example the Sixth Commandment addresses adultery, but further examination of the Scriptures reveals that law extending to fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, etc.

No Partiality

The violation of the Ninth Commandment moves beyond the courtroom and into any social interaction.

“You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly. ‘You shall not go about as a slanderer among

your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:15,16).

We tend to give certain people the benefit of the doubt depending upon the nature of our association with them. This passage tells us this shouldn't be. If we know a person intimately, it is easier to have a predisposition to either excuse or accuse them. We must seek to evaluate each situation from a common starting point. If we don't make a determined effort to achieve this, we will find ourselves more open to gossip and slander when it is addressed to certain people. This isn't to say we shouldn't have greater suspicion of a pathological liar, but that we should seek fairness.

We also learn the principle here that there should be no favoritism, or discrimination, based upon income, or social status.

VI. Truthful Yet Slanderous

Slander Can Be Truth

Slander can be lies, fabrications and half-truths. They might also be things that are true. Even the truth can be sinful. John Calvin wrote,

“...but if the reproach be the ebullition (state of boiling) of our anger, or the accusation proceed from ill-will, it will be in vain for us to allege in excuse that we have advanced nothing but what is true.”³

To say that we are speaking the truth, or that we also “said it to their face,” is no defense for an ungodly motivation. Calvin went on to write,

“We must also go further, and not be suspicious or too curious in observing the defects of others; for such eager inquisitiveness betrays malevolence, or at any rate an evil disposition.”⁴

A Dump for the Dirt

Christians must make every effort to stop improper chatter. If you're the type of person who receives a lot of 'dirt' you must ask yourself why. It is usually because people think that you'll enjoy hearing it, or because they think they have an advocate in you as a co-grumbler. This type of talk is self-serving and reveals an evil disposition. Don't cater to it. Take a deep breath and tell them to take their information to the proper person, or keep it to themselves.

³ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. III* (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 180.

⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. III* (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 181.

VII. Rejoicing in Righteousness

It seems to be the nature of man to gravitate toward the negative. It is much easier to get someone to agree that the cafeteria lunch is garbage rather than fine cuisine. There is something that comforts our carnal nature to agree with others that a certain person is flawed in his character. We must resist this and try to focus on righteousness. Read the instruction and examples of the Apostles Paul and John.

“(love) does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:6).

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Romans 1:8).

“I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment to do from the Father” (2 John 4:4).

“For I was very glad when brethren came and bore witness to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. 4 I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth” (3 John 2:3,4).

I would challenge you to examine what you're about to say. Are you speaking to edify, encourage, lift up and rejoice or to vent and find an advocate for your grievance? Let us examine the words and wisdom of Solomon.

“The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, And they go down into the innermost parts of the body. Like an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross Are burning lips and a wicked heart. He who hates disguises it with his lips, But he lays up deceit in his heart. When he speaks graciously, do not believe him, For there are seven abominations in his heart. Though his hatred covers itself with guile, His wickedness will be revealed before the assembly. He who digs a pit will fall into it, And he who rolls a stone, it will come back on him. A lying tongue hates those it crushes, And a flattering mouth works ruin” (Proverbs 26:22-28).

“He who speaks truth tells what is right, But a false witness, deceit. There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a

sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips will be established forever, But a lying tongue is only for a moment. Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, But counselors of peace have joy. No harm befalls the righteous, But the wicked are filled with trouble. Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, But those who deal faithfully are His delight” (Proverbs 12:17-22).

VIII. Purging Unclean Lips

What flows from our lips may be most tell-tale in terms of human depravity. Jesus teaches us that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). It is no wonder that we find it so difficult to pray aloud what we seem to be so comfortable uttering to one another. Our lips alone would be enough to condemn us on the great and terrible day of the Lord. One thinks of the inauguration of Isaiah.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His *robe* filled the temple. ² Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one cried to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!’ ⁴ And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ So I said: ‘Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I *am* a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.’ ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal *which* he had taken with the tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth *with it*, and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged.’”

Beholding the holiness of God caused Isaiah to come undone. He didn't resolve to try harder or be a better person. He didn't take comfort in the fact the others were greater liars than himself, but rather viewed the lies of his fellow humans as a greater indictment against him. The wheels had come off his cart, and all he could do was lament. Like my four-year-old daughter, when she has a bad dream at night. Her fear might overwhelm her. She can't even make it out of her room. All she can do is sit in her bed and cry and wait for mommy or daddy to come and rescue her. Such is the case for all, who by the grace of God, have eyes to see (even in a veiled sense) the holiness of God.

The coal is too holy even for the angel to touch. It carries it with tongs and touches the lips of sinful man and behold your iniquity is taken away and

your sin is purged. Reminiscent, this is, of the angels who heralded the birth of the Savior who takes away iniquity and purges sin. The Savior, **“Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth” (1 Peter 2:22)**. Isaiah took no comfort in his brothers of unclean lips. But found peace with God through One, who would call him brother (Hebrews 2:12), whose lips knew no deceit. Our faith must be in the righteousness of a holy God who has the power to save. Amen.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you found that improper talking is common in the church? Why do you suppose this is?
2. Discuss the damaging effects of gossip.
3. Why is truth so important? What is meant by the statement, "As a false god is no god, so a false man is no man." Do you agree?
4. How was mankind set up for the fall?
5. The Eight Commandment protects property. What is protected by the Ninth Commandment?
6. Discuss God's disposition toward a false witness (Deuteronomy 9:15-21).
7. Why is lying so detrimental in relationships?
8. Discuss "Okay lies".
9. When should we give certain people the benefit of the doubt over others?
10. Is it possible for slander to be truthful? Discuss.
11. Why are some people a dump for dirt when it comes to gossip?
12. Why is it against our nature to rejoice in righteousness?
13. Discuss the inauguration of Isaiah. What was his role? What was his disposition? What happened to him?