

NO LYING

Exodus 20: 1-17

Today we're looking what is the ninth of the Ten Commandments, which is just one verse from our reading – verse 16:

“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.” (Exodus 20:16 NIV)

The most literal meaning of this commandment is its judicial meaning that we mustn't tell untruths about our neighbour before a court of law or where it might damage their reputation. But, who is our neighbour? Well, this commandment uses the Hebrew word *rea*, or neighbour, in the sense of anyone you happen to come into contact with rather than the more narrow sense of someone living near you. Here we need to remember that Jesus himself gave the word “neighbour” the widest possible meaning in the parable of the good or ‘compassionate’ Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Let's start off by looking at this commandment in its judicial context.

This commandment was particularly important in the context of the justice system in the ancient world. In those days people who were charged with a crime had little protection. They were not presumed innocent until proven guilty, but rather presumed guilty until proven innocent. There were few standards for the presentation of evidence and often the accused didn't have much chance to mount a defence. Actually the Jewish legal system was one of the better systems. Many ancient courts could convict on the basis of the testimony of a single witness, but Jewish courts were better, they required the testimony of at least two witnesses.

In the days before surveillance cameras, fibre analysis and DNA testing, almost everything depended on the testimony of witnesses. It came down to one person's word against another and since many offences were capital crimes, often the defendant's life was at stake. The word of a false witness could literally be fatal. Look at the example of Naboth who was put to death on the testimony of false

witnesses by King Ahab, just so that Ahab could profit by taking over Naboth's vineyard (I Kings 21:1-16).

One protection for the accused was in the execution of judgement. In relation to the death penalty the accuser had to throw the first stone (Deuteronomy 17:7) and if the allegations proved to be false the accuser was punished (Deuteronomy 19:18-19). God's people were not allowed to bear false witness against one another. As the prophet Zechariah said "Speak the truth to each other and render sound judgement in your courts." (Zechariah 8:16b).

We need to remember that today. Where there is no truth there can be no justice. The whole system of justice is also relevant. Jochem Douma (author of a well respected book on the Ten Commandments) says of the Ninth Commandment:

"we must always include reference to the significance of the system of justice. Past interpreters of the ninth commandment never hesitated to mention various persons who have a role in administering justice.a *judge* that he be incorruptible and not judge rashly.... They required of the *accuser* that he never accuse somebody unnecessarily, out of antipathy or revenge. They expected the *witness* to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. The *lawyer* was forbidden to call black white and white black, even when he had the valuable function of coming to the aid of the accused and demanding that proof of guilt—if there was any—be airtight. These interpreters required the *accused* to confess his guilt where such guilt was proved."

In other words, everyone involved in the entire legal process has an obligation to maintain the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Well, unfortunately, I don't think that bears much resemblance to our legal system today.

But, you know a courtroom isn't the only place where we can give false testimony. Over the last few weeks we've seen that the Ten Commandments work by referring to the most extreme form of the particular sin they're talking about. So for example the sixth commandment forbidding murder extends to being extremely angry with someone. Similarly, I believe the Ninth Commandment doesn't

just forbid untruth in the juridical context, but forbids any kind of lying or dishonesty in general. Look at what Leviticus 19:11 says: ““Do not steal. "Do not lie. "Do not deceive one another.”

(Leviticus 19:11 NIV)

this is not precisely following the words of the Ten Commandments, but the way stealing, lying and dishonesty are linked together makes it clear that the concepts of false testimony and lying or dishonesty overlap – just as common sense would imply.

This is confirmed by the prophet Hosea who accused the Israelites of “cursing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery”. Hosea was clearly referring to the Ten Commandments, but he didn’t use the Hebrew word for “false testimony” (*shaqar*) but instead used a more general word that refers to any kind of lying (*kachash*). So I believe it’s clear that the Ninth Commandment means “You shall not lie”. And it’s not just about lies that are told in the courtroom, but about lying rumours we whisper to our friends, the rumours we whisper in the pews in church – remember the commandment refers to falsehood *against* our neighbour. But, it also extends to any kind of untruth.

There are many, many different ways to lie. *Roget’s Thesaurus* (a kind of dictionary of synonyms and antonyms) offers an impressive list of synonyms for lying. A falsehood can be described as an invention, an equivocation, a falsification, a fabrication, or a prevarication. Dishonesty also comes in all different sizes. There are the big lies—the whoppers and the grand deceptions. Then there are all the little lies we tell—the half-truths, the flatteries, and the fibs. What we say may be true, as far as it goes, but we leave out the details that might put us at a disadvantage. Or we say something that is technically true, yet nevertheless intended to deceive. We overstate our accomplishments, putting ourselves in the best possible light. At the same time we exaggerate other people’s failings, thinking and saying the worst about others. We mislead, misquote, and misinterpret. We twist people’s words, taking things out of context. In these and so many other ways, we exchange the truth for a lie.

Our speech is corrupted by our sin; so it has the power to do great damage. The Apostle James said that the tongue “corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6). Like a massive forest fire set by a single careless individual, a lying tongue consumes everything in its path. James also said, “no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8). It’s not an exaggeration to say that the tongue is the most dangerous part of the body!

Paul often told us to watch what we say. He warned the Corinthians about “quarrelling ... slander, gossip” (2 Corinthians 12:20). He told the Galatians that “discord” and “dissensions” were acts of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:19, 20). He told the Ephesians to get rid of “slander” and “malice” (Ephesians 4:31). These sins are breaches of the Ninth Commandment.

When the Bible condemns gossip, it means something more than just casual talk. Gossip is talking about people in a way that damages their reputation with others. Reputations are important. The Bible says, “A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold” (Proverbs 22:1). Often the victims of gossip never get the chance to defend themselves.

Most gossip contains misinformation or lies, but even true statements can violate the Ninth Commandment. A true statement can be made to the wrong person for the wrong reason, but more often it’s a version of the truth which has a false malicious spin on it. This is harmful. As Martin Luther put it: “reputation is something quickly stolen, but not quickly returned”.

There’s another side to this too. It’s wrong for us to gossip, but it’s also wrong for us to listen to gossip – to quote an old rabbinic saying slander “kills three: the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken.” The Puritan Thomas Watson made a similar point when he said “He that raises a slander, carries the devil in his tongue; and he that receives it, carries the devil in his ear.” When someone tries to tell us gossip we should say “You know,

this is starting to sound like gossip; we need to talk about something else.” Or we should say “Wait, let’s pray about this”. All too often people who complain about others aren’t willing to do the hard spiritual work of helping them to grow in holiness and godliness. That’s what we should be doing instead of gossiping.

Now you know most commandments are two sided rules – they forbid something but also require something. The Ninth Commandment is no exception. It forbids lying and it requires us to tell the truth. That’s not always easy, especially in our post-modern society, which denies the reality of objective truth. People today believe that all truth is relative – my truth is as good as your truth. Actually that is the greatest deceit, the biggest lie, of all. God’s truth is eternal. The ninth commandment asserts that there is real objective truth. Charles Colson said that we’re in a post truth society. George Orwell said, “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” Well, we Christians are called to be revolutionaries, because we live in a time of universal deceit. These days the biggest lie is postmodernism, the idea that there is no universal truth only different versions of reality. That’s a big lie which makes it possible for academics, politicians and journalists – and indeed many other categories – to tell all sorts of lies. Fewer than half of young Christians believe there is any objective standard of truth and if most Christians don’t believe that then non-Christians certainly won’t believe it!

But, as Christians, we’re called to be people of the truth. If we’re scholars we must be careful with our quotations and fair with our criticisms. If we’re in business we must deal honestly with all. Whatever lies people usually tell in our line of work, we’re called on to tell the truth because we serve a truth telling God. God is true about everything. Everything that God has ever said—including every word on every page of the Bible—is absolutely, unmistakably, and entirely true. Therefore, we can always take God at his word, as the apostle John said: “Your word is truth” (John 17:17a). If God is true to us, then we must be true to him, and also to one another. The Scripture says, “Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. Do not swear

falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:11, 12). It also says, “each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:25). John Calvin summarized the Biblical teaching as follows: “The purpose of this [Ninth] commandment is: since God (who is truth) abhors a lie, we must practice truth without deceit toward one another.” Honesty really is the best policy, not simply because it helps us get along with other people, but because our interpersonal communication ought to be grounded in the character of God.

But, sometimes as Christians we are required to speak out. Sometimes sin needs to be confronted, and in those cases keeping the ninth commandment means “speaking the truth *in love*” (Ephesians 4:15, emphasis added). I’ve added the emphasis to *in love* because, unfortunately, the love is usually what’s missing. Here the Ninth Commandment means saying the honest thing – when it’s our duty to say it – in a loving way.

Nothing tells us the seriousness of lying better than the story of the Fall. The devil lied to Eve – Jesus said that Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44) – and the devil persuaded Eve of the truth of his lie of his denial of God’s goodness - and the result was the fall of man, the mess that we’re in right now and the need for Jesus to come and die for our sins. There are so many horrifying stories in the Bible of the consequences of lying. I think another really telling story is that of the death of Ananias and Sapphira. They lied about giving their wealth to the church to make themselves seem more righteous and worthy than they really were and they died for it. When the first Christians sold all their property and gave the proceeds to God’s work they were making a public gesture of total commitment to Jesus Christ. A man from Cyprus named Joseph did this and the church honoured him and gave him a new name “Barnabas” which means ‘son of encouragement’. Ananias and Sapphira must have seen this and wanted the same recognition too, but they falsified their commitment, they lied to God. They broke the Ninth Commandment. The results of their deception were very serious, they died for it.

If there's one thing God hates it's the lies that Christians tell to make themselves look better and more righteous than they really are. Our testimony is – or should be – that we are unrighteous, that there is no way we could ever be saved apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The real truth about us is that we are so guilty that the Son of God had to be crucified to pay for our sins. So why do we ever pretend to be anything more than sinners saved by grace? To act as though we're pure and righteous is a lie. But even more it is a denial of the grace of God, which alone has the power to save us.

Even though I'm up here preaching to you, I'm a sinner. I'm guilty of all kinds of sin. Most of the time I'm able to cover it up (at least I think so) but God knows. So, what's the truth about you? What lies have you been telling? What are the lies you tell yourself? What are the lies you try to sell to others? The biggest lie is the one we live with every day, the lie we work so hard to maintain and that's the lie that we are on the inside what we pretend to be on the outside. But Jesus said, "Woe to you, ... you hypocrites!... on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Matt. 23:27, 28).

You know, something wonderful happens when we're willing to confess the real truth about ourselves and all our sin. What happens is that we are able to see the real truth about Jesus and what he has done for our salvation. It is only when we tell the truth about our sin that we are able to see how much we need a Saviour—the Saviour who said, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). So let's admit the truth right now today. Let's admit our sins and repent of them and turn to God asking for His grace and mercy which he will freely give to us because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The death Christ died to pay the price for all of our sins, my sins your sins and the sins of us all. Let's repent and turn to Christ and receive God's grace and mercy today - right now, right here this minute.