

The Ten Promises - *“The Truth Will Set You Free”*

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Jan. 17, 2021

(Based on Rev. Darrell Johnson's sermon series *The Manufacturer's Specifications*)

We're continuing our series on the Ten Commandments drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's book *The Manufacturer's Specifications* and today we're considering the ninth commandment, **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”** Yahweh, the Living God, had rescued thousands of Hebrew slaves from captivity in Egypt. Yahweh had liberated them from oppression and slavery for freedom and wholeness.

Out in the Sinai desert the newly-emancipated people faced a very practical issue: Now that we have been set free, how do we live together in community? It is the issue people face after any revolution. Now that we are free, how do we protect, nurture, and live out our freedom?

Out in the Sinai desert Yahweh answers that need. From Mt. Sinai Yahweh speaks the Ten Commandments. The Creator, Redeemer and Lover of our soul sets up ten solid pillars upon which to build a truly human society.

At the end of World War II, Elton Trueblood, a prolific Quaker philosopher/theologian, wrote a book on the Ten Commandments entitled, Foundations for Reconstruction. After the defeat of the forces of oppression, how now does the world live together? Trueblood argued that in the Ten Commandments - in the Law given to Moses - the Eternal God has laid out a solid foundation for a free and just

society. In the Ten Commandments, the Manufacturer has laid out the foundations for a righteous life, a life rightly-related to God and rightly-related to one another.

One of those “Foundations for Reconstruction” is the ninth commandment, **“You shall not bear false witness.”** Need I illustrate the need for this commandment?

Why does God put it in the negative? Why does he say, **“You shall not bear false witness”**? Why not put it positively, **“You shall bear true witness on behalf of your neighbors”**? Because as Martin Luther says in his Larger Catechism:

“...it is a common evil plague that everyone prefers hearing evil to learning good of his neighbour.”

Luther continues:

“...And although we ourselves are so bad that we cannot suffer that anyone should say anything bad about us, but everyone would much rather that all the world should speak of him in golden terms, yet we cannot bear that the best is spoken about others.”

Luther is right, isn't he? And so the Protector of our lives has to put it the way we have it in the Law: **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”**

The Lawgiver experienced the disobedience of the ninth commandment first-hand when He became one of us.

Jesus, *Y-shua*, Yahweh-to-the-Rescue, experienced people bearing false witness against Him throughout the whole of His earthly life. False things were said about the circumstances of His conception and birth. False things were said about His character. False rumors were spread about what He said in His sermons, and it all culminated in His trial where the court listened to no one but false witnesses (see Mark 14:55ff).

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” The question is why is this included in the ten *“Foundations for Reconstruction”*? It is clearly an important issue. But is it really important enough to be included in “The Big Ten”? What is the big deal? Why include a commandment about verbal offense against others along with clearly essential matters like not taking another’s life, or spouse, or property?

For two fundamental reasons:

A. False witness - untruth - destroys community.

B. False witness - untruth - goes against the character of God, and thus against the grain of our humanity as created in the image of God.

Let’s look at these reasons.

A. The ninth commandment has to be included in the good Law because false witness destroys community as

nothing else does. Untruth undermines the fiber of relationships.

Charles M. Swezey, a former Professor of Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, argued that not bearing false witness is *“a precondition for order in society.... Life is not possible without a minimal trust in the veracity of words... The institutionalization of this practice is a social condition for the survival of society”* (Interpretation, Vol. XXXIV, No. 4, Oct 1980, p. 407). The promise to *“tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”* is absolutely critical for a just society. It is absolutely critical for any healthy, giving relationship.

The original setting in which Yahweh spoke the ninth commandment was the courtroom. Each of the Hebrew words in the commandment are technical legal terms - *“ed sheqer.”* *“Ed”* means “evidence,” as in the presenting of evidence during a trial. *“Sheqer”* means “false, fraudulent, deceiving,” in the sense of “groundless, without basis in fact or reality” (Robert P. Mills). In the ninth commandment, the Judge of all the earth, the Judge of every woman and man, is telling us that justice, and thereby authentic freedom, is subverted by false witness.

Because the Judge knows our hearts, that is, as Martin Luther said, we naturally latch on to negative reports about others; Yahweh had Moses set up three safeguards for the judicial process - three safeguards to help people think twice about giving false witness in the courtroom:

1. First, there was the stipulation that a person's testimony had to be confirmed by two or three other witnesses (Deut. 19:15). God knows that we are more likely to tell the story straight in the presence of others who also know it. As we see in the four Gospels, Jesus affirms this stipulation. In Matthew 18:16, for instance, Jesus quotes Deut. 19:15, **"By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be confirmed."**

Jesus even submits His own testimony to this stipulation. In the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to John, Jesus summons four witnesses to substantiate His claim to have the authority to heal on the Sabbath (John 5:33-47).

But what about the possibility that the two or three other witnesses are lying?

2. The second safeguard: if a witness is proved false (to have lied), the witness is to receive the punishment he or she wanted for the person he or she lied about (Deut. 19:19). So if my false testimony sent you to jail, and if my lie is later discovered, I must go to jail and serve the time which the judge had sentenced you. Woe to me if I had lied at a trial of a person who received the death penalty!

3. The third safeguard was even heavier. The witness became the executioner (Deut. 17:7)! You can see the wisdom in this. For I become a murderer if I lied. I live then with a doubly-burdened conscience: I lied, and I killed an innocent person.

Now, although the courtroom was the original setting for the ninth commandment, the rest of Scripture shows us that the intent of the commandment reaches beyond the legal realm, into every part of our lives. The fact is, we are “on trial” all the time and we put others “on trial” all the time. The fact is, we are always being judged by others, and we are always judging others.

How often and quickly our behavior is wrongly interpreted by others, and how often and quickly we wrongly interpret the behavior of others. How often and quickly others think they understand our motives, but are wrong; and how often and quickly we think we understand others’ motives, but are wrong. And in the process our and other’s reputations and dignity are damaged.

So in the rest of Scripture the Lawgiver extends the ninth commandment beyond the literal courtroom into the “courtroom” in which we live out all of our relationships. We, therefore, find tests like Leviticus 19:11, “**You shall not lie to one another.**” And Leviticus 19:16, “**You shall not go about as a slanderer.**” False witness not only subverts justice, but it strains relationships. Indeed, it can destroy persons, “**With their mouths the godless destroy their neighbor**” (Proverbs 11:9).

When we were children we sang, “*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.*” We were lying to ourselves. Names hurt us far deeper than sticks and stones, “**Like a club and a sword and a sharp arrow is a man**

who bears false witness against his neighbor” (Proverbs 25:18).

Bearing false witness takes on all kinds of forms. Clearly it can involve outright lies. But it can also involve the “innocent” passing on a story about another person without first checking out the facts. How many people have been hurt by false rumors? Or hurt by true rumors that ought not be passed on?

There are even more subtle ways to bear false witness. A classic is by inference - that is, by leaving a false impression. Inferring something falsely, a simple off-the-cuff comment spawns suspicion; it plants seeds of distrust.

Another way we break the ninth commandment is by exaggerating. We stretch the truth to make the facts look better. The other side of this is telling half-truths - “innocently” leaving out certain details. No matter how we lie, and no matter what form the lie takes, it destroys relationships and it destroys community. Relationships are built on trust. And trust requires telling the truth.

The Living God takes all of this very seriously. And then Jesus carries this further, because it is not just truth that we need, but truth and grace. Remember what the Apostle John says in the prologue to his Gospel, **“The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ”** (John 1:17). If someone asks you about their

new hairstyle and you don't like it, remember you need to include grace with your truth.

For Jesus it is never just truth. It's always truth and grace, grace and truth. Truth without grace can become oppressive legalism. Grace without truth can become sentimental relativism. Like Jesus, we need to stand not with one foot in grace and one foot in truth, but with both feet in grace and both feet in truth.

Falsehood destroys relationships. That is why the ninth commandment is in the Big Ten. But the opposite is also true. Truth builds up relationships. Paul writes in Ephesians:

“We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of humans, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him [Christ]...”
(Ephesians 4:14-15).

Truth spoken in love builds up. Truth spoken in love sets free. That is the first reason Yahweh commands, **“You shall not bear false witness.”**

B. The second reason this commandment is in the “Big Ten” is more critical, more fundamental. It is the character of God. Like the other commandments in the Law, the ninth emerges from who God is. Yahweh is the true God and the God of truth (Psalm 33:4-5; Deut. 32:4). Yahweh

does not lie. Indeed, Yahweh cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Numbers 23:19). To lie would go against God's very being. Thank God! So Jesus calls Himself, **"the way, and the truth, and the life"** (John 14:6). And Jesus calls the Holy Spirit, **"the Spirit of truth"** (John 14:17).

The phrase **"God is light"** gets to the point. Falsehood always seeks some measure of darkness. Falsehood always seeks, to some degree, to cover up or to hide. **"God is light,"** says the Apostle John. God's very nature is light. **"And in Him there is no darkness at all"** (1 John 1:5). Darkness is the complete anti-God state of being; the lie is the anti-God state of mind. Again Jesus refers to Satan as **"...a liar, and the father of lies"** (John 8:44).

Because God is light God hates lies. We read in Proverbs,

**"There are six things which Yahweh hates,
Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
And hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devices wicked plans
Feet that run rapidly to evil
A false witness who utters lies,
And one who spreads strife among brothers"** (Proverbs 6:16-19).

We read in the book of Psalms,

**“They who practice deceit shall not dwell within my house;
They who speak falsehood shall not be established before
my eyes”
(Psalm 101:7)**

It is not surprising then to find Jesus directing His fiercest words against the hypocrites (Matthew 23: 13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).

The psalmist expresses the intent of the ninth commandment when he prays, **“Behold [O God] You desire truth in the innermost being”** (Psalm 51:6). The Living God lives in and out of a truthful center. The Living God calls us to live in and out of a truthful center.

The practical question is, therefore, “How?” How can I live in and out of a truthful center? How do I live in integrity?

1.) By holding my tongue. Remember what our parents used to say? *“If you have nothing good to say, don’t say anything at all.”* Before speaking, bite my tongue for fifteen or twenty seconds in order to think about what I am wanting to say: Is this true? Is this helpful truth? The tongue reveals what is going on in the heart. But the tongue can also control what is going on in the heart. As Richard Foster puts it:

“The tongue is a thermometer; it tells us our spiritual temperature. It is also a thermostat; it controls our spiritual temperature” (Celebration of Discipline, p. 89).

The Psalmist prays, **“Set a guard, O Yahweh, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips”** (Psalm 141:3).

2.) I can live in and out of a truthful center by plugging my ears. Again Martin Luther recognizes our propensity to listen to negative reports about others. He advocates turning our ears into “graves” (quoted by Jan Lochman, p. 140). We simply refuse to listen to the rumors, the innuendos or the gossip.

3.) I can live in and out of a truthful center by putting myself in the other person’s shoes. How would I feel if the thing I want to say about the other were said about me? How would I feel if half-truths, or inconclusive reports or surmises were spoken about me? What am I doing then, preparing to speak less than the truth?

4.) Having held my tongue, plugged my ears, put myself in the other’s shoes, I can try to get in touch with why the truth is not good enough. Why is it that I feel I must stretch or twist the truth? Is it because I have been hurt and want to get even or because I am angry? But usually lying comes out of an inadequate view of self. Am I insecure, so I exaggerate to prop up my ego.

That may even involve lying about a co-worker to pull him or her down so I look better. Or am I self-righteous, so I feel I have the right to judge and spread my “verdict” throughout the community? Or am I fearful? If the boss

knew the truth - even absolute truth - she would fire me. So I change the facts to defend my job.

Of course you realize what else I am doing here, do you? I am saying that God is not big enough to protect me if the truth were known. I have to help God out by manipulating the facts. So, if the truth is not good enough for me, before opening my mouth I need to try to get in touch with why it isn't good enough; and then deal with that.

5.) I live in and out of a truthful center by coming to the Light. By coming into the presence of the Light of the World Himself, and letting Him expose me to myself - let Yahweh reveal my real motives. It is safe to do, for He only reveals our sin in order to cleanse it - to melt it away.

Our delusions about ourselves melt away in the presence of Jesus Christ. But before His diagnosis causes me to despair, He says, *"I love you. I died to forgive you. I have put a new heart within you."* *"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound."* I no longer need to hide from myself or hide from others or hide from God. I need no longer to cover up or exaggerate. I need no longer to pull others down to make me look good, for I am loved. The same Light that exposes my deceit loves me, and understands me, and forgives me, and sets me free. And then the truth is good enough:

“...If we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

We live in and out of a truthful center by consciously living every moment in the Presence of Jesus, the faithful and true witness (Revelation 1:5; 3:14; 19:11), who breathes His Spirit of Truth into our hearts. Who in turn bears His faithful and true witness to Jesus, and enables us to bear our faithful and true witness to Him also.

And as a result, we will find ourselves living out the positive form of the ninth commandment as we have it in Ephesians 4:29;

“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for building up...that it may give grace to those who hear.”