

The 9th Commandment: Truth

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[0 : 0 0] Well, lying is very normal in society these days, and we've coined all sorts of words and all sorts of phrases to help separate the truth from the lies.

So we hear about conspiracy theories, we hear about fact-checking, we talk about misinformation and disinformation in the search for the correct information.

I read last week that Twitter is trying to crack down on misinformation, so they're testing a new feature that allows users to report posts that are misleading, because social media companies have been accused for a long time of not doing enough to stop the spread of disinformation.

And we've seen this especially during the COVID pandemic, as well as in the last two US elections. I wonder if you know what the Oxford Dictionary 2016 word of the year was?

The word was post-truth, and it's defined as an adjective relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

[1 : 1 2] So, in other words, deciding what is true is based on feelings and not just facts. And that's why it's common for people to talk about my truth, or what is true for me.

As well as the Oxford Dictionary's 2017 word being post-truth, the Oxford English Dictionary 2016 word, the Oxford English Dictionary 2016 word of the year was fake news.

And it's defined as a noun, it is false, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting. So it's clear that as people and as a society, we want the truth, and we really hate being lied to.

But having said that, we are aware that telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, is, if we're honest, actually a big challenge for us personally.

And so whilst we condemn lying out there in society, in the world, we can be quite comfortable telling lies ourselves. And of course, we justify to ourselves by believing our lies aren't really that serious.

[2 : 2 6] After all, they are just white lies, aren't they? But all of this proves why we need the Ninth Commandment. In it, God says, you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

So while we want this for society, we don't always want this for ourselves. And yet we pay a costly price when we ignore the Ninth Commandment. It matters because the lies we tell and the truth we speak doesn't just impact our relationships with other people, but they impact our relationship.

Because we get an example of what it means in the actual commandment itself. Notice how this is the first commandment to explicitly mention your neighbor.

So there is a public or there is a community aspect to this commandment as well as a personal one. So public, first of all. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor indicates a legal setting.

So the commandment forbids bearing false witness in a court of law. Because the justice system in ancient Israel, the way back, worked on the basis of eyewitness testimony.

[3 : 36] So you were either convicted or you were acquitted on the basis of the testimony of witnesses. And of course, that is how justice continues to be established today, doesn't it?

But remember, this was a time without forensic science. So there was no fingerprinting. There was no DNA testing. Certainly no CCTV. So everything came down to the integrity of the witnesses.

So speaking the truth was crucial in a society if there were to be any justice. So breaking the Ninth Commandment was bad for everybody.

And that's why the Ninth Commandment is followed by various laws in Exodus and then in Deuteronomy that expand its meaning. So in Exodus 23 verse 1, we read, Do not spread false reports.

Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness. So being a false witness helps the guilty. And this is followed.

[4 : 39] Exodus 23 again. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd. So giving in to peer pressure perverts the course of justice, we're told.

And in Israel, this was literally a matter of life and death. And so following on in Exodus 23 again, verse 7, Have nothing to do with a false charge.

And do not put an innocent or honest person to death. It was so serious that God gave safeguards to ensure that people told the truth.

And you find these in Deuteronomy. For example, Deuteronomy 17. On the testimony of two or three witnesses, a person is to be put to death. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.

So for the death sentence, there had to be more than one witness. But also, if a person was sentenced to death, then the witness had to throw the first stone. So we read the hands of the witness must be the first in putting that person to death.

[5 : 43] So it is one thing to accuse somebody. But if you've got to start the execution, then you better be telling the truth. And what if the accusations were proved to be false?

Then the witness was punished instead with the same penalty. So Deuteronomy 19. The judges must make a thorough investigation. And if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party.

You must purge the evil from among you. So I hope we can see that it's very clear that God takes truth-telling seriously.

And so do we. Because we don't want people giving false testimony in our courts, do we? That's why lying in a court of law is a serious offence.

Just ask Jonathan Akin, former cabinet minister, or Geoffrey Archer, former member of the House of Lords, who were both jailed for perjury. Because if we can't trust our legal system, what hope have we got for a just society?

[6 : 51] None. It is absolute chaos if those who govern and rule and are responsible for justice can't be trusted. And you just need to look at Afghanistan right now to see that.

And so God's commandment proves that if a society is going to flourish, then we need truth in public life. But this commandment goes beyond the public courtroom.

It is also personal. There's a personal aspect that applies to everything that we say to our neighbors, as well as everything we say about our neighbors.

And for neighbor, we should read everyone. And so the ninth commandment is telling us every kind of false testimony is prohibited. And yet we know that lying happens all the time within families, at work, between friends, even in churches.

And so there are all kinds of ways that we can break this commandment. Let me just list some to help us grasp the wider meaning of what is being said here. So there's slander.

[7 : 59] There is deception. There is gossip. There is flattery. And all of this can cause great harm to other people. Because we can damage reputations by what we say.

We can be unfair in our criticism of others. We can have deceitful intentions in order just to suit ourselves. We can exaggerate other people's failures.

We can accept the praise that belongs to somebody else. We can be economical with the truth by deliberately leaving out important details or facts. We can twist people's words.

We can spin doctors so people only hear a particular point of view or perspective. We can allow others to jump to the wrong conclusions without correcting them.

We can embellish stories. We can keep quiet and let others take the blame. We can forward on edited emails. We can overstate our own achievements, academic work, otherwise.

[9 : 01] We can fail to keep the promises that we've made. And we can keep silent when we ought to speak. Essentially, anything that comes out of our mouths that misleads or misquotes or misinterprets or misjudges makes us guilty of breaking the ninth commandment.

And so can you see how it impacts society publicly, but it also impacts us personally? So that's the first question. What does it mean? Second question, why does it matter?

It matters because of God and us. It doesn't just matter because life will generally go better for you if you tell the truth instead of lies. Although I guess that's probably true.

Life generally does work best if people tell the truth. So that may be the case. But the commandment matters because of the nature of God himself. So God is the God of truth.

Remember, God spoke the Ten Commandments. And so they come from him, as we've seen. And because they come from him, then they reflect God's nature.

[10 : 09] They reflect his divine character. And so they flow from him. And because they flow from him, the God of truth, and he gives them to people, then God demands truth from the people.

He speaks these words to. And so we are to be people of truth. So telling lies doesn't just harm other people. It is a total disregard for God himself.

Truthfulness matters because we exist. We were created to worship, love, serve, honor, and obey God. And so in the Bible, we're told God does not lie.

It's one thing he will never, ever do. And it's emphasized again and again in the Bible. So we're told, let God be true. And every human being, a liar.

Remember Jesus' words. He said, I am the way and the truth and the life. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. So the very nature of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is truth.

[11 : 16] God is truth. And God speaks truth. So when Jesus prayed to God, he said, your word is truth. So God is the God of truth.

Now, in contrast to God, there is the devil or Satan. And the devil is the father of lies. Listen to what Jesus said about him. He said, there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks his native language. For he is a liar and the father of lies. So the devil is the author of lying. And he told the first ever lie way back in the Garden of Eden at the very beginning.

He said to Eve and Adam, did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden? So he's a deceiver. And he made Adam and Eve doubt the truth of what God said.

And then he twisted the truth of what God said by saying to Eve, you will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

[12 : 24] So the devil subtly misled our first parents, making them disobey God. And he has been trying and lying and deceiving the human race ever since, seeking to cause us to turn away from God.

And so that's why this commandment matters. God is the God of truth and the devil is the father of lies. And so when we lie, we're not just following the example of the devil, but we're actually doing his dirty work for him against the God of truth.

So no wonder God hates lies. Listen to how strongly God feels about lies in Proverbs chapter 6. This is verse 16 to 19.

There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him. Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

So in this short list of things that God hates, included in it are a lying tongue and a false witness who pours out lies.

[13 : 45] So these two things are listed alongside murder, wickedness, and evil. So God hates lies and lying.

And so we shouldn't be surprised to read at the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, that everyone who loves and practices falsehood is excluded from heaven. So this commandment matters because of the nature of God.

But it also matters because of our own sinful nature. So our problem is that we are so used to lies, we get them all day, every day, we're so used to lies that we can even manage to convince ourselves that we aren't telling them.

We can tell them but think that we aren't. And this is something that Dan Airely picks up on in his book, *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty*. Airely is a professor of psychology and behavior at Duke University.

And his research for this book highlights that we are prepared to be dishonest, we are prepared to lie, and we are prepared to cheat if given the temptation or the opportunity.

[15 : 01] But it's just that we don't want to admit that we do it. So he says, we cheat up to the level that allows us to retain our self-image as reasonably honest individuals.

So on the one hand, we want to see ourselves as honest and honorable people. But on the other hand, we want to benefit from cheating, so we're prepared to lie to the extent that we're able to get away with it.

And so Airely says, as long as we cheat by only a little bit, we can benefit from cheating and still view ourselves as marvelous human beings.

And so he calls this kind of balancing act the fudge factor, where we lie, but we convince ourselves that we haven't, because we have somehow managed to justify our lies to ourselves.

We can lie just enough to still be a nice person, but to get what we really want. Which basically indicates that we tell lies to ourselves.

[16 : 05] We lie to ourselves. Airely doesn't say this, but it's because of our sinful human nature. That is what we're like. We like to think that we're actually better than we really are.

And so the ninth commandment, like all the others, demands an obedience that is more than skin deep. It's more about what we say or what we don't say. In one of the Psalms, David confesses his sin, saying, you delight in truth and the inward being.

And so this commandment goes right to our hearts. It matters. It matters because of the nature of God, what he's like. But it also matters because of our own sinful human nature, what we are like.

Okay, our third point. First, what does it mean? Second, why does it matter? Third, how do we obey? If we're ever going to get anywhere in obeying this commandment, then we need to know the truth about ourselves.

Which means we need to own up to our sinful nature. We need to own up to our mistakes and our failure to tell the truth. Because we're all guilty of lying and deceit and slander and gossip.

[17 : 17] If we're honest with ourselves, we know that that is true. And if we can't honestly admit that, what are we doing? Well, we're only deceiving ourselves, aren't we?

In 1 John, John's first letter, we read this, And so the issue isn't do we lie, because we all do.

The issue is, why do we lie? Why do we lie to other people? And why do we lie about other people? And the obvious answer is that we are weak and sinful human beings.

But what is it that motivates us to tell lies? Martin Luther, the German reformer, gives a helpful explanation in his treatise on good works.

I read this in Tim Keller's book, Counterfeit Gods. So Martin Luther, he wrote about the Ten Commandments. And he said that the commandments begin with a commandment against idolatry.

[18 : 20] You shall have no other gods before me. And then he argued that the fundamental motivation behind law-breaking, behind breaking all the commandments, is idolatry. And so we never break all the other commandments without breaking the first one.

In other words, we fail to keep all the commandments because we can't keep the first one. And the reason is that we have idols, we have false gods that matter more to us than God himself.

And so when it comes to why we lie, well, we lie because we've made something more important than God in our lives. And so we lie because of the false gods that we worship.

For example, the false god we worship might be human approval. And so we lie in order to get people to accept us. The false god may be reputation.

So we lie in order to get people to like us. The false god may be power. So we lie in order to exert control over other people.

[19 : 26] The false god might be money or comfort. And so we lie in order to acquire more wealth for ourselves so that we will have a more comfortable life.

The false god may be success or career. So we lie to promote ourselves above other people. The false god might be beauty or looks or image.

And so we can lie on social media, on Instagram, Facebook, whatever. Filtering, photoshopping, editing. In order to present the image that we want the world to see instead of the person we really are.

And so can you see how all of these things can function like gods? And because they take a higher priority in our lives than God himself, then we are prepared to lie.

Because all these other things are more valuable to us than God is. And so we lie. And that's why we need to listen to Jesus and his straight talking.

[20 : 30] We read Jesus talking about taking oaths from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5. Jesus said we shouldn't swear oaths either by heaven or by earth or whatever.

Because an oath means nothing if in our hearts we are always ready to deceive. What is the point of taking an oath if we are going to lie? And that's why Jesus says we should let our yes mean yes.

And we should let our no mean no. In other words, there should never be a time in our lives when we are not prepared to speak the truth. Because anything less than truthful speech, according to Jesus, comes from the evil one.

So Jesus commands the truth on every occasion so that our yes really is our yes. And people can trust that when we say yes, we mean yes.

We can be trusted to say what we mean and mean what we say. And then not just Jesus, but the rest of the New Testament instructs us in this area. So James tells us that the tongue is the most dangerous part of the body.

[21 : 40] He says the tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Peter tells us that obeying the truth of Christianity produces sincere love for each other. That's why we're told, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

Then Paul tells us that we are called to be speaking the truth in love. Because if we follow Jesus Christ, the one who said that he is the truth, then speaking the truth should become instinctive for us if we follow him.

And that's what's involved in belonging to the body of Christ, belonging to the church. Just remember, the original context of this commandment was public. So God wanted his people to practice the truth, to be just in Canaan, where they were going, the promised land, amongst peoples who didn't know God.

And so the Israelites were called to be a holy people before pagan nations. So that through their lives, through their speech, through truth, through not bearing false witness, other nations could look on and see how they lived and what they said and how truth was important in order that these other nations could know the true God through them.

[23 : 14] And that continues to be the mission of the church today, where amidst all the lies and the deception, whether it be from governments or from big tech or from your neighbor next door, the church is called to be a people of truth.

George Orwell apparently said, in a time of universal deceit, truth-telling is a revolutionary act. So in a world of fake news, we have got good news to share.

News that is life-transforming and world-changing because it's true. And so the church must be the place in the world where people live out the truth and speak the truth in love so that more people can come to know the one true God.

And that is what our world needs. So let's not be deceived when it comes to the truth about ourselves. Of course, the devil's lies will seem far more appealing, but we delude ourselves into thinking we're a better person than we are, and we don't need God.

And our lies may succeed in deceiving others about who we are, but we only end up deceiving ourselves because we can't deceive God about who we really are.

[24 : 34] Because the hard truth is that we are guilty before God for all of our sins, including our lies. And yet the good news is that we don't need to go on lying or deceiving or pretending that we are better than we really are.

Because Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life. Jesus came to die to pay for our sins.

And it's said of Jesus that he committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth. So when Jesus was on trial for his life, people bore false testimony against him, and yet he remained silent.

Why? For us. Jesus was willing to die to bring us forgiveness for all the wrong that we have done. And so it's only when we grasp the truth about ourselves and believe in Jesus Christ that there is any hope for us.

Jesus said, If you hold on to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.