

Michael McGowan

Exodus 20:16 – “The 9th Commandment”

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“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

I was studying for this sermon last week—

Sitting in our rocking chair in the living room...

Reading a book on truth-telling communities—

When someone knocked at the door.

After I got the dog contained, I opened the door...

There was a gentleman from World Vision (humanitarian aid org.) asking for donations or sponsorships.

I told him, “My wife actually used to work for WV and we give regularly.”

[alarm noise] Lie!

We give to special disaster causes...

But we are not regular givers...

And I knew this!

But the lie came out so smoothly and so automatically.

As I was closing the door after this very brief interaction...

It hit me...I felt that sting of conviction...

Here is am...preparing a sermon on telling the truth...

And in the middle of my preparation I tell a blatant lie...

Go figure!

Most of us probably wouldn't consider ourselves liars...

But reading the 9th commandment exposes us.

In its original wording and context...

It was written with legal terminology.

The 9th commandment was meant to protect justice in the community—

You couldn't have justice if you didn't safeguard the truth and protect against lies—

But we see in Scripture that this gets expanded...

It moves beyond the legal meaning to address lying in all of its forms...

And this is what's captured in LD 43 in the Heidelberg Catechism.

And this is why we get uncomfortable with the 9th...

Because we realize that we break this commandment often.

Let's look at some ways that we break this commandment.

The catechism says, do not **“Twist one's words.”**

How often does it happen where we have a dispute with someone...

And we recount this dispute with a trusted friend...

We go through all of the details of who said what.

Is it our tendency to lay out the facts exactly as they happened?

Or do we recount those details that help to justify our point?

Maybe add in some exaggeration...

To make *us* look good.

We paint pictures of *them* using malicious words and tones that of course put them in the wrong...

While we do everything right.

We may not be lying in the typical way that we think of lying...

But our distortion of the truth for our benefit is a lie.

This is breaking the 9th commandment.

We are not to be twisting anyone's words.

The catechism also says, “Do not **gossip**.”

Kevin DeYoung says we can gossip in one of two ways:

1. We pass on a rumor that can't be substantiated...can't be proven true or,
2. By passing along a true report unnecessarily.

For Christians this becomes a little sticky...

Because a lot of the time we honestly want to pray for someone...

And it's hard to pray for a need without knowing the need.

But are there times when we disguise gossip in the clothing of a prayer request?

“Pray for Bill because I saw him come stumbling out of the bar on Friday.”

“Pray for Jill because I heard she's having marital problems.”

Are these prayer requests, or is it something we *have* to share?

Before we decide to pass on a report, it's probably good to ask a few questions:

1. “Does this person want me telling this about them?”
2. “Is this going to cause the person I'm telling to have a negative view of the person I'm telling about?”
3. And, “Why am I telling this?”

“What's my motivation?”

Am I sharing because this information is begging to come out...

I can't hold it in any longer?

Because this gossip is way too juicy?

Or maybe because it makes me feel important when I have information others don't have?

We are told not to gossip.

The catechism also tells us not to **slander**...

Slander being the act of “spreading false reports about someone.” (DeYoung)

So if there is someone you don't like at school...or work...or even church...

And you knowingly say something that isn't true about them—

Or maybe you exaggerate a defect of theirs—

This is slander.

Slander hurts three people at once. (Thomas Watson)

It hurts the one that is slandered;

It hurts the one who receives the report...

Because it causes bad thoughts toward that person;

And it hurts us...the one who does the slandering...

If we are honest with ourselves...

We probably break the 9th commandment several times a day:

We lie to cover up things we don't like about ourselves;

We lie to make ourselves look better...

To maintain an appearance or reputation we've built;

We lie to get out of situations we don't like;

We lie to get something;

We lie to avoid punishment;

And sometimes we lie to hurt other people.

So why is this a problem?

Of course, lying is a problem because God commands us not to do it...

But I think there is something else going on here.

When we lie, we are giving our allegiance to a kingdom other than God's...

When we lie, we are playing on the wrong team.

(Are you playing for the Oilers or the Flames?)

Before Genesis 3 (the fall), all we knew was perfect fellowship with our Creator.

God created us to live in his good world...

He defined our reality and everything was right...

We lived with the Truth.

But then the deceiver came...

“Did God really say that?” –deception and distortion of the truth entered into the story.

We bought into the deception and we willingly disobeyed God...

And all that we knew of perfect fellowship with God/the Truth crumbled into pieces.

With the fall came our tendency to distort God's reality...

To embellish;

To exaggerate;

To gossip;

To slander;

To deceive;

And to lie.

When we lie, we show our allegiance to the evil one.

Listen to these words from the Gospel of John 8:44:

The devil was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for *there is no truth in him*. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is *a liar and the father of lies*.

The devil's first language is lying...

This is the opposite of God's language...which is truth.

And this *should be* the language of God's people too.

With the giving of the 10 Commandments God is addressing his new people.

He just rescued this group from slavery in Egypt...

And now he is setting them apart as his special people.

They are going to be for him a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exo 19:6)

God was going to use this special group of people to point the world back to him...

He was going to restore relationships through them...

He was going to show the world his new reality...

God's kingdom breaking into the world.

And the same thing goes for us.

God made us who were not a people into his people. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

He stepped into our broken reality in the man of Jesus Christ—

He took all of the pain and brokenness in his body on the cross—

He defeated it and created a new reality for us...

Through the sacrifice of Jesus, we are God's people now...

We are a part of his reality:

He is bringing truth to a world of lies and deceit;

Love to a world of hatred;

And healing to a world of brokenness and pain.

We are active participants in God's new, redeemed reality.

See, when we lie, we align ourselves with the kingdom of darkness...

With the kingdom that Satan established.

When we lie, we distort the reality that God created and is currently bringing into the world...

We erode the kingdom that he is establishing...

And we attempt to tear down his work.

For those wondering if this is a black and white issue—

If there are ever permissible times to tell a lie—

Here is a brief aside.

Was it okay for the Hebrew midwives to lie to Pharaoh about the Hebrew babies? (Exo 1:17-21)

Was it okay for Rahab to lie about hiding the spies in Jericho? (Jos 2:1-7)

Was it okay for some of your Dutch ancestors to lie to the Nazis during WWII?

Is it okay for a mother to hide her son and lie to an abusive, alcoholic father?

Based on the response of God in our first two scenarios—

Where these people are commended for their actions—

I think we have to say "Yes!"

These are permissible lies.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer—

Who was executed as a Lutheran pastor by the Nazis during WWII—

Approaches this issue from a covenantal perspective. (Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*)

And it's obvious that his place in history shaped his approach to the ethics of truth-telling and lying.

Under his covenantal approach the obligation to tell the truth...

Is determined by the particular relationship we have with the person or institution.

So for instance, says Bonhoeffer, parents are in a relationship with their children...

And they both have obligations toward each other.

Children are obligated to tell their parents the truth about everything that is hidden and secret.

Parents are obligated to tell the truth to their children...

But not in the same way.

Children would not understand and might be too troubled if they knew everything parents worry about...

So parents tell the truth to children...but we limit what we say to what fits their capacity and right to know.

Every relationship calls for different obligations of covenant partners.

Your obligation to the waitress at BP is different than your obligation to your spouse...

The truth is to be spoken in both instances...

But what is shared is not the same.

When the Nazis came looking for Jews during the war...

Your ancestors had no covenant obligation to tell them where they were hiding.

And we have no covenant with evil to help accomplish Satan's will.

God's divine will and his priority for life and peace and justice always takes precedence.

And because we live in a world where both God and Satan exist...

We know that there will be times when honoring God's purposes will require us to lie.

But don't think this is the norm...to lie and deceive...

We get too tripped up with this.

In our current situation, we are people who struggle to tell the truth...

We live in a culture where deception is the norm...

Where it's common and acceptable to put a spin on things.

There is a great deal of pressure on us to keep up our appearances...

To make it seem like we are put together and have life figured out...

Like nothing bothers us and everything is “okay.”

The society we live in makes lying acceptable and even necessary...

But this is not the kingdom that God is establishing...

This is not the reality that God creates.

Lying is not the way he’s wanting his people to live.

God is calling his people to live counter-culturally.

He is inviting us to participate in his kingdom of Truth.

To work with him as he reclaims this world as his own.

So how do we do this?

How do we become people of truth?

Let’s talk about a few ways:

First, and most important, we connect with the Truth.

Trying to become people of truth on our own is impossible.

We’re too far gone.

Our condition as broken creation is too critical.

Our natural tendency is not to be people of truth...

Our natural tendency is to lie, deceive and cover up.

We are sick people in need of healing...

So we need to go outside of ourselves to get better.

God is inviting us to turn to him—

Not just once when you were “saved” as a young adult or as a child—

But turn to him every waking day of our life.

Connect with the Truth through prayer.

Connect with the Truth by reading the Bible.

Keep connecting with him in Sunday worship...

Every time we confess our sins to God we practice truth-telling...

We tell him the truth of our sin and he assures us of his love again.

The Spirit of Truth is living in those who put their faith in Christ Jesus.

God has taken up residence within us...

Conforming us into the image of Christ, who is the Way the Truth and the Life.

When we daily connect with God, we're reminded of who we are.

We are children of God and nothing can take that away from us.

So when we do mess up—

Because all of us will—

When we do make a mistake...

Or when we're not proud of something we've done...

We don't need to hide it...

We don't need to cover it up with a lie.

We still belong to God.

He still loves us.

And nothing can separate us from his love.

So let's make connecting with the Lord a regular part of our day...

He'll conform us into his image...

And give us the courage and stability in him to be truth-tellers.

A second way to become people of truth comes to us from Christine Pohl...

Whose book I was reading when I lied to WV representative.

She recommends monitoring your speech for a week.

Keep a journal of things you say that aren't true:

Half-truths and spins;

Exaggerations;

Blatant lies—

And then go back and reflect on why you're doing it:

Are you trying to make yourself look better?

Are you hiding something that needs to come out into the light?

Are you afraid of hurting someone's feelings...

Concealing reality from them, thinking they can't handle it...

Maybe a form of co-dependency.

Finally, and we'll end with the positive end of things...

The catechism says to "advance your neighbor's good name."

Or as Ephesians 4 says, let your words build others up. (4:29)

It's not just avoiding the bad...

It's doing the good too.

Take an active step in building up the people around you.

If you've noticed someone working hard...

Let them know that you've noticed.

Write them a note or speak a word of encouragement...

Make it a priority this week to intentionally encourage one person this week.

Build up your neighbor's good name.

We are God's people, called out from all of the world to live in his reality.

He has broken into this world...

And is establishing his kingdom on earth...

And he's inviting us to join in his work.

So may the Spirit work through us to reveal his truth and love to those around us.

Amen.