

Exodus 21:16

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[0 : 00] I want this morning to look at the ninth commandment and you'll find that in the book of Exodus in chapter 20 verse 16. Exodus 20 and verse 16, page 78 of the church bible.

Exodus 20 verse 16, the ninth commandment which says, You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. From a very young age we have probably become used to hearing the phrase or the proverb, Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never harm me. And no doubt we have taught it when we are young as a way of trying to remain defiant in the face of taunts and teasing and people telling lies about us.

And that's all well and good. But probably as you've got older you've realised that to some extent there's a lack of truth in that proverb.

As you've seen the damage that has been done to people because of malicious words, malicious talk and perhaps even of course damage done to yourself or done by yourself to others.

[1 : 27] As to say as you get older you might be more inclined to sympathise with what Augustine said, now largely forgotten words I suspect, The tongue inflicts greater wounds than the sword.

The ninth commandment as being part of the ten commandments certainly shows us that God is interested in speech, is interested in what is said and what is not said as much as he is in other aspects of our behaviour.

So I want us this morning to look at the ninth commandment, look at it under three sections. The first is under law, then society and finally in the church.

So first of all, speech and our words in terms of the law. Now a country like our own of course regards free speech as being very very important.

And in fact you might think that in a country like our own where free speech is important that the law would not be particularly demanding or there wouldn't be very many laws relating to what we say and the words we use.

[2 : 51] Free speech is important, therefore we don't want to pass legislation that would somehow restrict that. But of course that's far from the truth and it is of course a very delicate balance to allow free speech on the one hand and yet to discourage lies and malicious talk.

We might feel that free speech is so important that we should be allowed to say basically anything that we would like to say. And yet we would be appalled, we would be horrified if that approach was taken in a court of law.

That anyone can walk into a court of law and say anything that they want to, anything that they like. That would rightly shock us. We would see that it would be impossible to decide cases if it was knowing that people had freedom of speech in the court.

Say whatever came into their minds, whatever opinion they thought or they fancied at the time.

They are free to say it. And so it's no surprise then that we have laws of perjury and that to commit perjury to state falsehoods as though they were truth in a court of law is a very serious crime.

And yet of course we might also be unpleasantly surprised if we had some sort of miraculous ability to see into the minds of people in a courtroom and see who was lying and who was telling the truth.

[4 : 41] Just because we have laws which regulate speech in certain areas, i.e. in a court of law, sadly it doesn't mean that human nature is incapable of lying once a person is put in that situation.

Of course there are other laws that relate to our speech, to our words, in addition to perjury. These would include more recent legislation passed on things like religious hatred or incitement to religious hatred, going further back in terms of racist language and racist abuse and so on and so forth.

So all of these laws are directed towards what we say, even how we say them. Things go even further of course in that it is possible through the civil courts to sue for slander or defamation of

character.

And that recognises, or the law recognises, that someone's name, their good name and character is an important thing. Slander attacks the reputation of a person by falsely denigrating them.

And there is therefore recourse through the civil courts to try and right any perceived wrong. Of course, many of the cases that we see in court relate to celebrities and at times they may seem trivial and they're simply fuelled by pride.

[6 : 24] But we must not forget that God doesn't simply look at a person's bank balance and say, well, they're worthy of protection and they're not.

Whether that be the fact that they're poor or the fact that they're rich. In fact, just following on from the Ten Commandments or fairly hard on the heels of the Ten Commandments in chapter 23 of the book of Exodus in the first three verses you'll see what God has to say about false reports and slander.

Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd and do not show favouritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.

That actually comes as probably a bit of a surprise, doesn't it? Do not show favouritism to a poor man in his lawsuit. We often think more in terms of the possibility of favouritism being shown to a rich man or a rich woman even in law that there can be that temptation to side with those who are deemed to be powerful or to have influence and that it's too much, too risky to go up against them. And certainly that needs to be tackled. The reality of that fear, that danger has to be faced and those who have responsibility for judging cases and so on are no doubt trained in these things and are helped to be fair and to put aside the pressures of wealth and influence.

[8 : 16] And that certainly comes from Scripture, from the Bible. But it is interesting, that verse, is it not? That there the focus is do not show favouritism to a poor man. So, even under this ninth commandment it's not right just because a person is rich and famous that they are fair game that they should then be regarded as fair game for slander, defamation of character just as much as the poor equally are not to be fair game for such things.

So, honesty in speech is taken very seriously it's taken very seriously by the laws of our own country. But under this section on law I want to ask a question and that is are lies ever justified? Could there ever be a situation an occasion where it was okay and maybe even more than okay it was you might even dare to say right to tell a lie?

Two Old Testament cases illustrate my point here. The first is again found in the book of Exodus back in chapter 1 and verse 15 to 21 I won't read all of that but you can turn to it if you'd like a reminder Exodus chapter 1 and verses 15 to 21 and that deals with a law a law that was passed in Egypt by the Pharaoh and the Pharaoh stated that all male babies born to the Hebrews were to be killed at the point of birth they were to be slaughtered and there were two Hebrew midwives Shifra and Pua and they basically completely disregarded this law and when questioned obviously it was becoming obvious that this law was not being enforced when questioned their answer in verse 16 was sorry they asked the question in verse 16 in verse 19 they answer

Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive so in other words we just can't get there in time and it's all over and the babies are snatched away before we can get near them because the Hebrew women are so vigorous compared to the Egyptian women that was a complete lie of course but in order to ensure that such an obnoxious vicious and evil law was not enforced they felt the need to cover themselves it was important it was important that they remained as midwives in order to ensure that this was not carried out the second case is from the life of David and when his son Absalom rebelled against him and David and his closest followers had to flee from Jerusalem David left some spies in Jerusalem that would be near to Absalom and could get information out to him while he was hiding in the countryside but two of the couriers were discovered and they were chased and as they fled from Jerusalem they hid in a well and when the soldiers who were chasing them came and came to the house of the man who owned the well they questioned his wife and said have you seen the men now if she said no she would have lied because she had hidden them in the well so she didn't lie at that point but she said yes they've just crossed the river a complete and total lie yet in both these cases how many of us here sitting this morning would say that or would condemn the perpetrators of the lie how many of us would say the midwives were wrong the woman who hid

[12 : 31] David's couriers in the well she was wrong to lie you can never quite say that it's right to lie but I think we can see there are circumstances where we would find it impossible really to condemn the person who has lied because the lie was a lesser evil than the alternative both were said in a situation where we could say that the state is utterly corrupt in such a situation how do you discern the rule the proper rule and authority of law in more recent history we could ask ourselves were men like Schindler Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany were they wrong when on occasion forced to lie to the Nazi authorities but what we have to say is then that to justify a lie it can only be in the most extreme of circumstances it can only be in circumstances that surely we must pray we never have to face well certainly looking at the ninth commandment in terms of our society we can see that there are many many instances where failure to be honest or even deliberate spreading of lies or slander won't lead us to the law courts and the situation is not one of facing questioning under oath or whatever it's the stuff of everyday life and in many ways I suppose this is most important for us this morning because this is the sort of thing that we are more likely to deal with in our own lives you see in society there is an unbreakable link between truth on the one hand and trust on the other whatever sphere of life you name it that link between truth and trust is absolutely crucial and where there is a breakdown then there is pain and hurt whether that be in business or in marriage or in politics in the church as we look in a minute or two in sport in the world of media television and so on you break that link between truth and trust and you have trouble and you have hurt and you have pain of course trust is something that tends to be built up over time it doesn't necessarily have to be the case you may be a very trusting person and so you just trust anyone and everyone you meet some people would say that's a little bit unwise but others would say it's a better way to be I'm not going to pass comment on that but there is a tendency as or not for trust to be built up over time and when there's a consistent record of truth telling so we begin to see that what this person or perhaps what this business says is what they do it's what they deliver and so we trust them and we reach the stage where we can become quite confident and almost unquestioning since a person or a business or whatever has this strong reputation for trustworthiness what they say is what they do what you see is what you get and so on and so forth and yet the funny thing is about human nature isn't it that sometimes it's at that point that a person or a business or whatever or dare I say a politician might begin to take advantage of those who are trusting perhaps that is what has happened in politics in our own country is that the trust of people has been taken for granted too much and suspicions have arisen about the trustworthiness of our politicians so that often when you see surveys on these things who comes bottom of the list in terms of trustworthiness in the eyes of the people it's politicians now sometimes we sort of laugh a bit at that but it isn't actually that funny and if politicians are perceived to be people economical with the truth then is that not why we have a climate of political apathy no truth no trust and therefore no interest now in some ways what we're saying deals with other people and what's out there but what about our own hearts I have one or two friends who've got an unnerving habit of when they meet you coming up and asking what's the gossip and I suppose that's supposed to be an innocent enough question but the reality of course about gossip is altogether different and I suppose there isn't anyone in the building this morning who hasn't engaged in gossip from one time or another it's not the same as slander gossip because gossip of course could actually be true and yet it can be just as destructive as actual downright lies and slander can be gossip of course what is it it's a story possibly a true story but it's passed on for an unworthy reason or an unworthy purpose that reason could be as trivial and pathetic as simply for your own amusement forgetting completely that it involves another person involves their reputation it might involve their whole standing in a group of friends or in a community or in a place of work or in a congregation of the church but since we will get a laugh or our friends will get a laugh or they will think that we are funny or smart we'll pass it on anyway makes a conversation more interesting more interesting person to be with because you've always got the latest spices it up and sadly in a society like our own gossip is rife is it not certain sections of the media actually seem to actively promote gossip they want us to think that it's good a piece of academic research a couple of years ago that came out suggested that gossip was good for us it was good for your health well I don't know if that's the sort of healthiness that we should be pursuing Charles Spurgeon the Victorian Baptist preacher once in advising a former student who was just about to start a ministry and a charge his first ministry he advised him that he should have an operation in fact he should have two operations one to remove an eye the other to remove an ear

he should then get a dog's muzzle placed over his mouth and speedily head down to the tailors and get the tailor to make him a special jacket with a bottomless pocket in it why did he do that so that he could turn a blind eye to what he saw in his congregation he could turn a deaf ear to what he heard and what he was told in his congregation and the muzzle would prevent him from repeating any of it to anyone else should he be tempted and if all that failed he had his special jacket where he could simply drop it into the bottomless pocket and as

Christians in general we could all do well to heed Spurgeon's advice it's not of course an excuse or a mandate to conceal criminal behaviour from the appropriate authorities but I think you get the point so when the commandment tells us not to give false testimony against your neighbour falseness isn't simply a question of truthfulness as I say gossip it can often be true but there are other questions that we need to ask ourselves is there a purpose in passing this on if there is what is that purpose is it a worthy purpose it's the quality and the value of the information that we are prepared to use and pass on that we have to consider and if we take the commandment further along that road we see that it has implications spelled out in many a

[22 : 06] New Testament passage spelled out in the section of Ephesians chapter 4 that we read earlier we have to be careful as Paul says coarse speech whether that's in joking or in obscene language violent threatening language flattery loose promises taking oaths easily and so on all of this comes under God's concern for what we say the words that come out of our mouth just as he is concerned for the way in which we live our lives our conduct and our behaviour well finally then to consider the ninth commandment in terms of the church and everything that we said could be applied to the church of course it affects daily life there's even that possibility of ending up in the law courts that would affect the church and its members just as much as it applies in wider society however there's some things that I think are more specifically related to church and church life that are maybe helpful for us to consider religious lies you could call it religious lies that might include false prophecy false counseling exaggerated testimonies of conversion and holy talk that is in fact counterfeit holy talk the old testament reserved the ultimate penalty for those who prophesied falsely for a prophet who claimed to speak from god but did not the church does not pass death sentences of course but it does have the ultimate sanction of excommunication and yet it appears to me anyway that that is almost never used in cases of false prophecy today when we advise or counsel others we must be very careful about what our advice and our counsel consists of it's important that as a result of counseling a person feels better that they can see the road ahead more clearly that some of the difficulties begin to get straightened out and so on of course that is presumably the goal of counsel and advice but if it's simply to make people feel better if that's all it's about then there's a danger that we'll use anything that we can get our hands on to make a person feel better but truthfulness surely applies here you cannot use what is false just because it might seem to work and so we have to stay close to scripture and have scriptural grounds for what we say if we're going to give counsel and advice for years

I was put off testimonies and testimony evenings because I had heard a few that were exaggerated now you might sometimes feel that you're listening to an exaggerated testimony but at the end of the day you don't know because you don't know the person and unfortunately sometimes that's what the best testimonies are reckoned to be you get a complete stranger to come and give their testimony and it's great because nobody could say anything else against them because they don't know them and you'll never see them again and as I say that actually put me off the whole thing because there were occasions when I had been in places where I did know the person and I knew that some of the things weren't actually true that really put me off I'm glad to say that in recent years my faith has been restored a little in the value of people speaking of their experience how they came to know the

Lord how God has continued to work in their lives which of course is an extremely important aspect of testimony in any case how the Lord is still at work in your life not what happened 35 years ago and somehow that was the end of it but my faith has been restored because in our own congregation in Govan Hill as part of our communion weekend and a Friday evening we always have two testimonies now I admit at least on one or two occasions we made the mistake of getting the complete stranger in and I don't think that these were the best evenings but we just normally get normal people who are at least known to some of the people in the congregation they don't have to be known to everybody but somebody some people know them and they can relate to them and we hear what they have to say and it has benefited people in the congregation it's even helped some to

make their own profession of faith because they saw the reality of what was being said not the fantasy or the focusing simply on the excitement in conversation in the church there can be a pressure in some ways this is not a bad thing but it can become a bad thing there can be a pressure to be holier than we really are now obviously it's a bad thing to be under pressure to be holier than you really are what I'm saying is it's not a bad thing to see that there is something to live up to that we have the highest standards set by our

Lord Jesus Christ and that we are conscious of falling short of them and we want to progress and we want to grow so that is a good thing but there can be this creation of a false pressure which means you must present yourself as holier than you really are but there's absolutely nothing to be gained in such an attitude such a way of masking yourself and indeed you see real holiness what is real holiness real holiness is something marked by honesty honesty about our spiritual condition not living up to what you think the expectations of others might be there is another lie that we can tell and it's the lie of silence we can actually lie without even opening our mouths that could again apply in any of the areas we've looked at could apply in the law courts and wider society and places of work in our homes and in the church it's true

I think it relates particularly to the fact that we are members of the church of Christ it's that danger that when either Christ or his people are being slandered some way or another and there's many ways in which that can be done but it's happening some way or another we say nothing and by saying nothing our silence is taken as our approval of what has been said by others controversial subjects arise and yet the Bible has a clear statement or clear teaching in relation to them what do we do we are silent we opt for peace and say nothing the danger being of course that it's peace where there is no peace that doesn't mean that if someone is about to blow your head off with a shotgun it's the time to talk there can be times for silence but I think again we are aware of some of the situations that we found ourselves in where our silence is our lie finally then we can say that fundamentally lying is an offence against our creator it's an offence against our creator because it destroys his image in humankind when we lie about other people about what we haven't seen or we haven't done and so on we are either destroying the image of

[31 : 31] God in another person or we are destroying the image of God in ourselves the devil Satan is said in scripture to be the father of lies it also tells us that he is the accuser he is the one who accuses those who believe and trust in God before him is he a false accuser that's a question we have to ask Satan is the accuser but is he a false accuser we may look at ourselves look at the lies that we have told the false testimony that we have borne and saying if Satan accuses me of that he can't be a false accuser he's telling the truth and yet scripture is quite clear Satan is not only the accuser he is the false accuser of the brothers and sisters in Christ because in Christ all is clean for the believer all has been forgiven all has been washed away many human accusers join Satan in his work they want to accuse the church and they want to accuse its members they want to accuse those who profess to have faith in Christ we must be very careful not to join them either by accusing our fellow brothers and sisters or by too easily giving ammunition to those who wish to join

Satan in his accusing work what of the work of Christ Christ has enabled all of our sins all of our lies to be forgiven what can we say about it we can say that of the work of Christ we have one who had to die because of our falseness and our false words and yet he who had to die because of our falseness is the same one who defends us against the accusations of Satan he who was denied by men and women he Christ will acknowledge us instead if we trust in him before his father and before the angels in heaven amen let's join together in prayer Lord God we thank you for helping us to look at your word we realise the depth of your word and we pray that you would help us to take that on board this morning not to run from it not to hide from it to face up to it where it challenges us where we may feel uncomfortable but we pray that we would not be content simply to have a certain uneasiness but you would draw us towards the

Lord Jesus Christ and that we would see that we really do need him we really do need a saviour pray that everyone who leaves this building this morning would be able to say that in Christ they have one who has saved them from their sins Lord be with us as we close our worship this morning and bless us as we sing in praise to your name Amen