

9th Commandment

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to Exodus chapter 20, where we'll find the ninth commandment, verse 16 of that chapter.

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. Pilate asked the fundamental question, what is truth?

But it seemed he didn't really wait for an answer, whether indeed he was actually looking for an answer or not. But he did in fact ask the crucial question, what is truth?

Truth is the subject of this ninth command. We're told not to give false testimony. And of course, false testimony is the opposite sin to the positive virtue, the positive good of telling the truth.

Truth is the positive thing protected by this commandment. It is the good thing that is spoiled by the sin of lying. Now especially this commandment deals with the right of my neighbor to truth, particularly concerning his own reputation or his own good name.

[1 : 27] We are told not to bear false testimony against our neighbor. So then, it's not just truth-telling in general, but particularly the question of telling truth with regard to our neighbors.

Telling truth with respect to other people. That's in view in this commandment. And indeed, we may say that the most serious case of lying is selected for the commandment.

Just as we saw, for example, in the case of a commandment, you shall not murder. The most serious case of the type of sin involved in that area is selected.

We notice that Jesus showed that also the sins of hatred and unjust anger. All of these things are covered by that command. Similarly here, it is the most serious case of lying that is selected.

That is the case of perjury. Lying in a court of law, bearing a false witness against our neighbor, particularly in that way.

[2 : 42] But as we've seen with the other commandments, if the most serious case is selected for the commandment, it covers all the other lesser cases as well.

The area that this commandment deals with is, of course, the area of speech. Particularly the area of speech. We know that it's possible to tell lies without opening your mouth at all by the way you look or by the way you point or whatnot.

But primarily, this is concerning, this commandment concerns the whole area of communication, and particularly speech. Just as we've noticed that other commandments deal with a particular area of human life.

We've noticed, for instance, that some deal with the area of family life. Honor your father and mother. You shall not commit adultery. Well, this commandment deals with the whole question of communication, and how we communicate with one another, and what we say concerning one another.

First, then, I would like to begin with trying to deal with the question that Pilate asked, because this is fundamental to this commandment, any way we look at it.

[4 : 01] If truth is the positive thing that is urged upon us by this commandment, Pilate was asking the right question, what is truth?

But we notice that Pilate really, as far as we can understand, was not looking for an answer to that question. And by asking it in the way in which he did, a kind of dismissive way, he was really betraying his own attitude of mind concerning the question of truth.

In other words, he was showing that he was the typical Roman skeptic of that day. Pilate was not alone in this. He fits very well into the current background of contemporary thought in Rome and throughout the Roman Empire, among the more educated and powerful classes.

These were people who had become very cynical with regard to the old superstitions of Roman religion. And of course, they came in contact with the religions of other peoples as they traveled throughout the empire on the empire's business.

And so they came to see that lots of people had lots of different kinds of ideas about religion, about morality, and they came, many of them, to the conclusion that there is no such thing as truth.

[5 : 23] There is no such thing as something being absolutely right and something being absolutely wrong. And that is the kind of attitude that Pilate is showing here as he asks the question, what is truth?

Now, that is an attitude that is extremely contemporary for our own situation today. Because before we could really begin to talk to most people today about the question of lying or about the question of giving false testimony, we would have to first of all establish what the whole concept of truth really is.

Because for many people today, they have the same kind of attitude as Pilate had. What is truth? Everybody's got different ideas, different religions, different ideas of what's right and wrong.

There is no such thing as absolute truth. There is only what is called relativism. That is, something maybe relatively true. You've got to qualify it always by some other thing.

You've got to look at what a person says, and you've got to make certain qualifications about it. You can't accept it at face value. Now, of course, there is a point here that we have to recognize, a very practical and important point.

[6 : 47] That, indeed, we have to always be careful, and we always have to query what people say, and we've always got to remember that no human being is completely infallible, that they're going to be even able to tell the whole truth, because it's completely impossible for us as limited human beings to tell, we may say, the exhaustive truth about something.

But exhaustive truth is different from absolute truth. You may say something that is absolutely true, but it will not exhaust everything that could be said about that subject.

We could say, for instance, that we are meeting here today in Bon Accord Free Church. That is absolutely true. But it's not telling you everything about this particular meeting.

It's not telling you all that we're doing, or all the people who were here, and so on. And to simply say that, to throw out the whole idea of truth, simply because you cannot exhaust every possibility about a particular item, seems to me particularly foolish.

And the reason why people have thrown out the whole idea of an absolute truth today is not because of any kind of practical reason like that. It is rather for a philosophical reason, and that is people do not want there to be the idea that there is an absolute truth.

[8 : 26] They do not want there to be such an idea that there is something that is absolutely true, and there are other things that are absolutely false.

Because if that is the case, then all our behavior is to be judged by such an absolute standard. And it's much easier to have a kind of variable standard, something that's true for me.

How often we hear that expression. Something that feels right for me, or something that's true for me, or something that society at large thinks is right. That is the kind of way in which people are coming to think of this whole idea of truth.

Now we may say, well, doesn't that all sound a little bit abstract and impracticable? What's the point of such ideas? What effect does it have on normal everyday life?

Does it have any effect? Well, I would suggest it has a very serious and vicious effect upon everyday life. We see it here quite clearly with Pilot.

[9 : 31] You may say, well, Pilot may have been rather cynical or skeptical with regard to the truth, but what did it matter after all? Well, it mattered in this regard, that it altered the way in which he practiced justice.

It altered the way in which he did his job. And his job was a very serious and responsible one. He was the final law officer in that part of the Roman Empire.

He was the one who had to sit in judgment upon the cases that were brought before him. And in the providence of God, he was the one who had to sit in judgment upon the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And why Pilot has come to be such a figure that is rejected and despised by people is because of his reaction to that particular case of law.

And in that particular case, we see the outworkings of his abstract, impractical, maybe philosophy, but it works out in a very practical way.

[10 : 51] It works out with him having the practical attitude, what does it matter ultimately? What does truth matter ultimately? If there is no absolute truth, if there is only this person's idea against that person's idea, if there is only the question of what people think, if there is only the question of what is good for me, well, what does it matter?

What does it matter if Jesus actually has done or hasn't done these things that people are saying about him? And of course, we see that working out in the way he dealt with the case.

He was convinced that Jesus was in fact innocent. He said it time and time again. I find no basis for a charge against him. He knew that it was all trumped up by Jesus' enemies.

Yet, he crucified him. No one else could give the word, the authority that would have a man crucified in those days.

Only the Roman procurator, Pilot, could do so. And he did so. Why did he do so? Well, simply because of the pressure that was brought to bear upon him by the Jews, saying that word might get back of this to Caesar, and Caesar didn't like there to be upstart kings in any of his provinces, and so on and so on.

[12 : 17] But of course, ultimately to Pilot, it didn't really matter, because there is no such thing as absolute truth. Now we begin to see how practical and down-to-earth this is.

Now we begin to see how thankful we ought to be in a society like ours for the great impact upon the Christian gospel and the word of God in our society, so that, up until the present time at least, there has been this regard for truth-telling, and particularly at the levels of the law and of government.

And still to this day, there is great outrage if people can be found out to be telling lies, to be concealing things, even at the very highest levels of government.

Now we ought to be thankful for that, and it is the impact of the word of God upon our society that has brought that about. In societies where there hasn't been that impact, well, there is not the same regard at all for truth-telling.

Because after all, if you believe that the world is an illusion, such as is regarded in Buddhism, if you have that as your philosophy, well then ultimately, what does it matter?

[13 : 30] Whether you tell the truth about things happening in this world or not. After all, in that system, what is truth? Pilot's question comes back again. So then we begin to see how practical this whole question is, this whole commandment is, right into the very fabric of our society today.

It is impossible to have a just, or a free, or a democratic society if this commandment is thrown out of the window. And this commandment stands with all the others.

It is there as part of the law of God, part of the Ten Commandments, which we saw at the beginning as we looked at these Ten Commandments, has become the foundation of our Western society.

And it is the foundation that is being steadily undermined by the changes in people's outlook, the changes in people's philosophy, their rejection of the word of God.

So then, that is one attitude to the question, what is truth? But of course, the attitude of the Lord Jesus, as he stood before Pilate, was indeed a very different one.

[14 : 47] He was talking about truth. He was talking about the fact that he was the king of truth. He had come into this world for that very reason, to bear witness to the truth. In other words, he was saying quite categorically, there is such a thing as the truth.

There is such a thing as absolute truth. And the first part of that is quite simply, the existence of God. This is the thing that is presented as fundamental to the whole question of truth in the Scriptures, by our Lord Jesus and by everyone else.

The whole question is the existence of God. Now, people in modern times have seen quite clearly that that is the crucial question.

For instance, a Russian writer called Dostoevsky said, if God does not exist, then everything is permitted. Some British writer has said something very similar.

If there is no God, why be good? That is the crucial question. The crucial question of truth. Now, everything that is said in the Bible concerning truth is founded upon this fact of God's existence.

[16 : 03] Jesus said, I am the truth. Now, no mere man could say such a thing. He was saying it in the context where he says, I and the Father are one.

He was saying, I am God. I am the eternal Son of God. And I am truth. And that is the fundamental thing we have to get to grips with when we read of Jesus and when we try to figure out who he is.

He is coming not just as someone who is telling about truth. He does that. He bears testimony to the truth. But he's coming also as the truth.

So, when we look at the Lord Jesus Christ, we see what the ultimate truth is. We see what God is like. We see what his demands of us are.

We see what his commandments are as they are fulfilled by Jesus as he lives the perfect life. We see the character of God as well as his existence.

[17 : 07] We see what kind of God this is, who is the living, true, eternal God, who has revealed himself in this magnificent way in coming into the world.

So, that is the first item that the Bible draws our attention to with regard to truth. But the second thing is that this God is true and trustworthy.

In other words, in his actions and in his words, he is trustworthy. First of all, we see it in his action in nature.

This is the God who has created the whole world, created the whole universe. And when we investigate that universe, we discover that it is a reliable universe.

What I mean is this, that scientists could begin to look at this universe on the basis of what the Bible said concerning God being a God of law, God being the great legislator, and they could discover that indeed that was true.

[18 : 14] That in God's creation, there are laws, there are certain patterns. In other words, the creation that God has made is consistent with himself.

It is not a capricious universe that we live in. When we drop a book, one day it doesn't go down and the next day it goes up.

It always goes down because there is what we call a law of gravity. But these laws that we have discovered and these descriptions we have given to them are merely aspects of this great truth that it is God's world and it behaves in accordance with his character and his very existence.

It is true to what he is. It's consistent and therefore trustworthy. But also, of course, he is true in his words. He is true in what he says.

He is trustworthy in his revelation to us. The Lord Jesus said in praying to his father, thy word is truth. So that what God says in his word in scripture, what God says through the Lord Jesus Christ, what has been recorded for us here in scripture, this is reliable.

[19 : 33] It is truth. God speaks and it is an expression of what he is in himself. And there we have the fundamental basis for truth, for absolute truth.

And the opposite of that is the lie. Quite clearly, when Jesus said, I am the truth, the opposite of that was for people to claim that he was not, in fact, the revelation of God.

And that was the great lie. That was the lie of the evil one, the lie of the antichrist that the apostle John goes on to speak about in his letters. Here, we have the basis for truth.

So that there is what we call an antithesis between truth and falsehood, the truth and the lie. And it is upon that basis that we can have such a distinction, even down in the very practical everyday things of truth-telling and telling lies.

If a person does not believe in the importance of truth as such, then how can he believe in the importance of telling lies or telling the truth in any particular situation?

[20 : 47] And that, as I see it, is the great difficulty that we are in at the present time. It's not simply that men have become worse than perhaps they were before, that they may be less reliable than they were before, that they may commit more sins than they did before.

That may or may not be the case, because when you go back in history, you can see that in all times of history, men were sinful and committed all kinds of sins.

Our great problem today is the very distinction between righteousness and sin, between truth and falsehood, and whether there is such a distinction.

and that is why this whole area is of a very practical and very important concern to every one of us.

Well, then, I want to look next at the actual practice of truth. If there is in the scriptures the basis for truth and for truth-telling, how is this to work out in practice?

[21 : 58] Well, of course, there is what we may call simple truth-telling as opposed to telling lies. Now, let's give just an everyday example of this.

If you go to a garage with your car and you tell them that the brakes aren't working properly and you ask them to repair the brakes in the car, really, for there to be trust at a level like that, you expect that when you collect the car, the brakes are actually repaired so that when you drive out of the garage and you put your foot on the brakes, you're not going to suddenly crash into another car because you can't stop.

In other words, telling the truth is important at these very practical levels. It is important at these kind of levels that you can rely upon other people.

In such a case, it is a matter of life or death. Now, when you begin to not be able to rely upon people in such a way, then you're beginning to have real problems in your society, which we're beginning to have, perhaps more than beginning to have.

And therefore, we've got to be asking the question, what kind of society are we forming? And we've got to ask ourselves, where is it going? And really, the only ultimate direction that such a society can head in, once it has abandoned any concept of absolute truth, if it is to remain as some kind of stable society, is for someone to impose an arbitrary standard upon it.

[23 : 46] An arbitrary standard simply of power, of saying, well, I say so, or the government say so, and I've got the might to back up what I say. And of course, that's what we saw earlier this century with Hitler, and we've seen it also in communist countries.

Some simple arbitrary standard imposed simply for law and order. Now, that is the alternative to the kind of free Christian society that has been developed in this country, among others, on the basis of God's word.

So then, there is what I've called simple truth telling, as opposed to telling lies. And we see, and we can think of many other examples ourselves, of how such a thing is fundamental to good relationships between people, between businesses, between firms, and all the rest of it.

But also, the second area I'd like to look at is the question of truth and falsehood in the media. and particularly perhaps here we think of the television media as means of communication, but we can think of other things like newspapers and so on as well.

Here also is a great area of concern. It's perhaps relatively easy for us to find out our neighbor in a deliberate falsehood, relatively easy.

[25 : 16] falsehood. But how do you find out a television communicator in falsehood? How do you find out the producer or director of a program in his perhaps deliberate falsehood?

It's very difficult to do, because we are simply being presented with something, a picture of events taking place hundreds, maybe thousands of miles away, and we have no immediate way of verifying or falsifying what is actually being presented to us.

So we begin to realize we're in a rather difficult situation. On top of that, there is the very medium of television itself, which has tremendous power, but is also open to tremendous abuse.

It has tremendous power because it is not just the spoken word, it is also pictured. And the impact of something that you see has a greater immediate effect than what you hear.

If you see something in front of you with their eyes, you say, well, the camera cannot lie. That's the expression we use. If you can actually see something, well, it must be true.

[26 : 37] But then the question arises, how is that presented to your eye? How has that picture been selected? How has it been edited? How has it actually been taken?

Even what kind of angle has the camera had? Now, all these questions may seem rather very technical and impractical again, but, for instance, if we can take just one example, it would be very easy indeed, I'm not saying this has been done, but it would be very easy indeed for one television crew to go along to a particular event.

We can take, say, for example, a football match, and for them to focus in upon a particular aspect of crowd trouble, for instance, and to give the impression that that was the whole situation about that public event.

We could have another television crew focusing on perhaps the game of football itself, or focusing upon somebody helping a layman to his seat, or something like that.

And by the very selection, there was the impression given that this was either something good or something terribly evil. Take another example, crowd trouble, or for instance, like the picketing with the miners' dispute.

[27 : 58] You could have a television crew focusing upon every time a policeman seemed to treat a miner with perhaps seemingly great force.

And every time if that was focused on, the impression would be given, isn't that terrible, we're heading towards a police state. Similarly, a television crew could focus upon the opposite every time that a miner seemed to be using far too much force against the policeman.

And similarly, if that was the whole bent of the program, you would feel, isn't this terrible, we're heading towards anarchy. And it could, in fact, be the very same event.

Because in any confrontation like that, you're bound to get force being used on both sides. And the question as to how to decide whether such an event or whether such an aspect of society is right or wrong is not in the particular slant that may be given to a television program or indeed a television picture, but fundamental questions of what is law, what is right, what is morality.

And these cannot be answered by television pictures, but I would submit they can only be answered from the word of God. These then are questions that also should concern us regarding truth and falsehood.

[29 : 24] thirdly, of course, we have the legal system. Because here in this commandment we have selected particularly the sin or crime of perjury.

And of course, here is where we see that truth is so fundamental to a just society. We've seen it in the case of Pilate and his injustice in dealing with Jesus.

We see it with regard to the complete injustice of the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. We don't need to go into all the details, but we can be assured by those who are experts in it that the whole of that trial was completely unjust, completely against the rules that were actually laid down for that court itself.

Now, we can see there are examples of that kind of injustice, the twisting of just processes, twisting of the whole legal system to work unrighteousness instead of righteousness.

We saw it also when we looked last week at the behavior of Ahab and Queen Jezebel. When Ahab wanted that vineyard, he didn't go just manfully and take it by force, come whatever consequences may.

[30 : 47] No. His wife got it by working through the legal system, falsely accusing Naboth, whose vineyard it was, so that Naboth was taken not seemingly by violence, but taken by the legal process and put to death in that way.

Now, when that kind of thing begins to happen, you have a much more serious state of affairs in a society than where there is simple violence and where there is simple crime.

Where you have crime and violence being justified in the name of the legal system, then you've got real trouble. And that is why that time in the history of Israel was such a crucial time and why God raised up Elijah as the great and foremost prophet to be a testimony against that particular kind of wickedness.

And we ourselves ought to be constantly on our guard against such influences developing in our own society because once the basis is rejected, then all these other building bricks that are built upon the foundation begin to crumble and fall.

And then, of course, also there is simply the reputation of our neighbor. This commandment deals with my neighbor's good name. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

[32 : 20] Now that's true in a court of law, it's binding there. But also this commandment is binding with regard to things like slander and gossip and speaking about people falsely in any regard.

My neighbor has a right to his own reputation, to his own good name. And I am not seek to destroy that reputation or that good name by what I say about him.

Now, how much trouble would be avoided in our society at large, in our industrial relations, in our ecclesiastical relations, in our churches, if we were to heed all the words of scripture concerning how we were to speak about other people.

If we really listen to these words and really put them into practice, then, for instance, we would not be ready to always spring to the worst conclusion about someone else.

We would rather say, well, I don't know about that. I'm not prepared to believe that, to be true about that person, until I have very good evidence for doing so.

[33 : 32] And I refuse to pass on any story concerning it, unless I know it, in fact, to be the truth, and even when I do know it to be the truth, what right have I to try to undermine somebody else's good name, unless, of course, for a very good reason?

For instance, if you're convinced that somebody is committing a crime, then you have a right to draw attention to that fact. But in general, what I'm talking about is simply the wrong use of our talking about other people.

It's right, of course, to talk about things that are happening, to talk about people, but let's make sure that we're doing so in a kindly way, and not breaking this commandment, giving false testimony against our neighbor.

And finally, then, we must finish on the note of the grace of God. Because, as we've seen right through, these commandments are not simply law.

They are law, but they are covenant law. They are the law of God's covenant people. They are the way in which we are to live, and they are part and parcel of his revealed covenant to us.

[34 : 48] Now, when we apply these standards to ourselves, we begin to see that, in fact, we do not live as God is wanting us to live. We are not pleasing God in every way.

And that should not drive us to despair, or to disinterest, but rather it should drive us to repentance, driving us to the God who has promised that he will forgive the person who confesses his sin.

And as we've noticed with the children, we have that great example of the Lord forgiving Peter, who is guilty of a particular kind of lying, denying that he knew Jesus.

Yet, Jesus forgives him, and he accepts him back into his service. And here's the other side of the grace of God. You see, there's the positive side to it. Peter was not just forgiven for the wrong that he did, but he was accepted now to use the very talent that he had been misusing to use it properly.

He had been using his speech to do wrong. Jesus was now telling him that he was to be his witness, his true witness, not his false witness, his true witness, to speak of him and to teach concerning Jesus to other people.

[36 : 13] And isn't that a marvelous thing, that in the very area where Peter had fallen down, that was the area where Jesus was giving him a commission, giving him service, giving him work to do, to actually please Jesus in that regard.

Now that is a tremendous aspect of the grace of God. Forgiveness is tremendous enough, the wiping out of what is past. But surely even more tremendous is that full acceptance that gives us a job to do, to get on with it, and to show our thankfulness to God by seeking to do what is right, by keeping his covenant law.

Let us pray. Our gracious Lord, we recognize that we are beset by so many difficulties in the world in which we live.

But none of these things are unknown to you. You know the cynicism of people's hearts and minds today with regard to truth, just as you knew that same kind of cynicism in ancient Rome.

Just as in ancient Rome that cynicism was not a barrier that stopped the gospel. So we pray that this may be the case in our own day and generation.

[37 : 45] that these great barriers of cynicism, of skepticism, of apathy may be driven down and overthrown by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Lord, we pray especially for those who are perhaps beginning to have some awakening out of such a background, who are coming to realize at the point of their own desperate and personal situation, that there are indeed questions and answers that they never dreamed of.

Gracious Lord, we pray that you would provide your word to them in all its simplicity and in all its power, that they may indeed be drawn to the one who is the living embodiment of truth, the one who is the only way for life and for liberty.

We ask these things in his name and for his sake. Amen.