



# The Ten Commandments

## (43) The Ninth Commandment

### (1) "Do not bear false witness"

Exodus 20:16

Deuteronomy 19:15-21

Rev. Jerry Hamstra  
Riverside ARP Church  
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In our ongoing series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, we have come to #9 which is, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." In this sermon we will consider the direct and obvious meaning of these words. As we have seen in all the commandments, there is a direct and obvious meaning, but there is also a principle underlying the direct and obvious meaning which is applied in various ways throughout the Scriptures. The Ninth Commandment has to do with our use of our words to either harm other people or to build them up. The direct and obvious meaning of the Ninth Commandment has to do with using words in a court of law in a way that unjustly harms another person. The idea of false witness in the Bible has to do with telling lies in a court of law with the intent that an accused will be convicted of a crime that he did not commit.

I use the term court of law, but there was nothing quite so formal in ancient Israel. The elders of a community would meet at the city gates and they would hear accusations and make judgements on the basis of the testimony of witnesses. And though it was relatively informal compared to the courts of our time, it was a system of justice and serious penalties, including the death penalty, were imposed. And it was very important for the wellbeing of society that the system of justice was actually just.

Ever since the fall there has been the need for some kind of system of justice. Ever since the fall some people have committed crimes against

other people and in order for there to be any order in society it has been necessary that there be some system of law and order and justice so that those who committed crimes be punished and others deterred from committing crimes against their neighbors. In ancient Israel God had given a body of laws through Moses and various instructions about how those laws were to be enforced. And the Ninth Commandment is related to all of that because a big part of determining who was guilty or innocent depended on the testimony of witnesses. And for the whole process to be fair and just, it was absolutely necessary that witnesses tell the truth.

The Ninth Commandment exists because witnesses do not always tell the truth. Just as there are people who are willing to commit crimes against other people, there are people who are willing to tell lies so that their friends will not be punished for crimes they have committed. Further there are people who are willing to tell lies so that innocent people will be punished for crimes that they did not commit. We see a particularly striking example of this in the story of Naboth's Vineyard which is told in 1 Kings 21.

This is a story about Ahab king of Samaria. He wanted to buy Naboth's vineyard because it was next door to his palace and Naboth was not willing to sell it because it was the inheritance of his fathers. Ahab acted like a spoiled child. 1 Kings 21:4 says, "And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food." Jezebel, Ahab's wife, was not willing that someone like Naboth would be allowed to defy the king's wishes. And she was not about to allow justice to get in the way of getting the king what he wanted.

So, she orchestrated a plot to get rid of Naboth through abusing the justice system. She instructed the elders of the city to find a couple of men who would falsely accuse Naboth of cursing God and the king. That was a crime punishable by death. The elders of the city did as Jezebel asked. Naboth was convicted of cursing God and the king on the basis of false testimony, he was stoned to death and Ahab got Naboth's vineyard. This is an example of the kind of thing the Ninth Commandment was forbidding. The Ninth Commandment required that people not bear false witness – that they tell the truth as witnesses

before the elders of the city so that there would be justice rather than injustice in the land.

The breaking of the Ninth Commandment also played a role in the conviction of Jesus to death. In his account of the trial of Jesus, Matthew tells us in Matthew 26:59-61, "Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, 'This man said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days."'" It was on the basis of this false witness that Jesus was sentenced to death.

These examples show us what is at stake in the Ninth Commandment and its narrow meaning. We belong to a race of sinful people and this is one of the places where sin leads. There are people who are willing to bear false witness to achieve their goals even if that means condemning innocent people to death. Such are the results of sin. The Ninth Commandment is included in the Ten Commandments to discourage this sort of thing and to encourage a system of justice that is actually just.

It is clear that terrible harm can be done to people by other people willing to bear false witness against them and one of the reasons for the Ninth Commandment is to promote justice in the land. Witnesses telling the truth is vital for justice in any society. The importance of this for justice is seen in that still today, perjury is a very serious crime. For there to be a society with some degree of order and justice, it is vital that witnesses in court cases tell the truth – that they do not bear false witness.

Because of the importance of witnesses telling the truth, the penalties for bearing false witness were severe. If a person was found to be a false witness, the penalty that he was seeking for the accused would be imposed on him. Deuteronomy 19:18-20 says, "The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you."

Another indication of the importance of truthful witnesses for justice is the requirement of more than one witness in order for a charge to be established. Deuteronomy 19 also speaks of this. Verse 15, "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witness shall a charge be established." We live in a world in which the existence of systems of justice is necessary, but it is also clear that there are people in the world – in every society - who are willing to harm other people through abusing the system of justice. And the consequences of that are very serious both in terms of the harm done to individuals, and in terms of the kind of society that results if there is not a serious attempt by the powers that be to ensure that there is justice in the courts.

All of this gives us some insight into the nature of sin and evil. There is an evil in us as human beings which is frighteningly selfish and callous. There is within us a willingness to harm others for our own ends without concern for fairness or justice. There are obviously different degrees of this, but it is very sobering to consider the greatness of the evil within the human race that there is so often a willingness to perpetrate injustices against other human beings for selfish ends. The fact that injustice is such a huge reality in the world speaks to the great evil of our sinful fallen human nature. It is true that there is also goodness in humans, not in the sense of ultimate goodness before God, but in the sense of doing good to other people rather than harming them. But it is sobering to think of the vast scale of injustice in the world and of the willingness of so many to callously harm others for their own ends.

In the light of that it is significant that a huge part of the biblical hope is for a world of justice. It is very significant that many of the prophecies concerning the coming Saviour include the idea that he would reign with fairness and justice. Think of the well-known prophecy concerning Jesus that we find in Isaiah 9:7 "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore."

Think also of the way that Matthew quotes from Isaiah 42:1-3 and applies it to Jesus in Matthew 12:18-21, "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

One of the great hopes associated with Jesus is a world of justice. And this hope is related to the concern for justice that is expressed in the Ninth Commandment. And it is interesting that this was also a subject in Jesus' ministry while he was on earth. To the Pharisees and scribes he said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For your tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." There is also Jesus' parable of the persistent widow in which Jesus encourages persistent prayer which we find in Luke 18:1-8. It is interesting that what the widow was praying for so persistently was justice. Her request to the judge was "Give me justice against my adversary." The situation Jesus is describing is a widow before a judge who is seeking justice. The implication is that there is someone just out of view in the story who is perpetuating an injustice against the widow.

And listen to Jesus' conclusion: Verse 7-8, "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily."

All of this is significant as we seek to understand and apply the Ninth Commandment. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Clearly this means that we are to be true witnesses if we are every called to be witnesses in a court of law. We are not to be among those who perpetrate injustices upon other people through false testimony or by extension any other way. But as this command is regulating the administration of justice, it is concerned with the big picture of justice in society and we have seen how the hope of the Bible

which is centered on Jesus includes a hope for the big picture of a society in which justice reigns under the reign of King Jesus.

So if salvation is about freeing us from the bondage of sin so that we are enabled to begin to keep the law of God, salvation in terms of the Ninth Commandment includes the ability of people to seek justice for others rather than perpetrating injustice upon them and when that vision is extended to the scale of the whole society we have the picture of a just society under the reign of king Jesus.

Now in following this theme it is important that we notice how Jesus went about fulfilling the prophecies of a just society and a just world. He spoke about justice as we have seen. But significantly he did not seek to reorganize society. He spoke about the kingdom of God, but he did nothing directly to reshape the political landscape of his day. Instead Jesus' mission went to the root of the problem. What Jesus accomplished would eventually result in huge changes in society including political changes, but Jesus' own focus was on dealing with sin at its root. Jesus' mission had to do with breaking the power of sin in the heart of man so that the law of God was written on the hearts of the people he had come to save.

Hear what Jesus said about the heart of man in Matthew 15:19, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." False witness comes out of the heart of man. Or again, Luke 6:45, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." And in line with this truth, Jesus' mission was focused on breaking the power of sin in man's hearts so that instead of the heart spewing evil, it would produce good.

Jesus spoke about the need to be born again in John 3. In John 7:37ff he said that those who believed in him would receive the Holy Spirit. Passages like these refer back to Old Testament promises such as Ezekiel 36:26 where God promised that in the day of salvation "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." This is what Jesus' mission was all about. This is what he

accomplished by his life, death and resurrection. He lived a righteous life. He paid the penalty of sin. He overcome sin and death. And the result of that is that those who believe on him are both forgiven of the sins they have committed and renewed in their inner man so that they begin to live lives that reflect the character of God, the law of God and the kingdom of God.

This is at the heart of what Jesus did to bring about the prophecies of a world of justice and wellbeing for all. To bring about that vision for the future of the world, Jesus began with the heart of the matter – he dealt with the root problem of all the selfishness and cruelty and injustice in the world. He dealt with sin. He broke the power of sin. And he called men and women and children to believe on him, repent of their sins and live out of the renewing power of the gospel. Jesus' way of fulfilling the vision of a world of justice began with the salvation of sinners and the gathering of them into the church.

In the light of this perspective it is important to note the great task that Jesus left with his church just before he ascended into heaven. He declared to his disciples that the Father had given him the supreme authority over all things. Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus is the king who had come to reign with justice over the world – to bring about a world of peace and justice. How was he going to bring that reign to fruition? Through the great commission. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always to the end of the age."

It is in the light of this that we have to understand the Ninth Commandment and its implications for our lives. The Ninth Commandment at its most obvious level calls us not to be false witnesses when we are called to give testimony in a court of law. But we must discern behind that command a concern for justice and thus the vision of a just society. The hope of Scripture is that this is the plan of God through the fulfillment of the promise of a righteous king and a righteous kingdom in Jesus Christ. God's way of bringing about that kingdom focuses on the victory over sin through Jesus' mission and

through the gospel as proclaimed by the church throughout the world. What does this mean for us as followers of Jesus – as believers who have come to him for salvation?

It means that the vision for a just world begins with us in our own lives. We who are saved are the beginning of the new creation. We belong to the kingdom of justice and righteousness that will one day be the only kingdom. And it is our calling to demonstrate in our lives what that will look like. In connection with the Ninth Commandment it means treating others fairly, and seeking their wellbeing. It means that we are being delivered from selfishness and we are being delivered from a willingness to put the wellbeing of ourselves before the wellbeing of others. We are not only **not** to treat others unjustly; we are to seek their good. We will look at that in more detail in the sermons to follow on this commandment, but for now let us just see how the followers of Jesus are to demonstrate in their lives what the righteous kingdom of Jesus will look like when it comes in its fullness. Not in the sense that we can do that perfectly in this life, but in the sense that by the transforming power of the gospel we can show something of what the world will be like when instead of treating others unjustly we do the opposite and pursue the good of others before our own good.

Another implication of the Ninth Commandment is that we should care deeply about the injustices that are the cause of so much suffering in the world. Salvation is about the forgiveness of our sins and our own relationship with God. Salvation is about going to heaven instead of to hell when we die. Salvation is about fighting against sin in our lives and becoming more like Jesus. And part of what that means is that we care about the suffering of others. We care about big picture things like the vast scale of injustice in this world.

It is interesting that conservatives tend to be more interested in personal salvation and personal morality and liberals tend to be more interested in issues of social justice. There are all kinds of issues that are involved in that discussion, but when it comes right down to it, it is not either/or. It is both/and. The Bible deals with personal salvation and personal morality and if we neglect that we are not even Christians in a biblical sense. But the Bible is also very interested in the big picture and



its vision is a world in which there is no more injustice. And that big picture vision means that we as believers need to be thinking not only of our own salvation and not only about the salvation of others, but also about the world-wide issues of poverty and injustice and such things.

Now as I have already indicated God's way of working towards a just society is rooted in Jesus and the gospel and the salvation of individuals from sin. It is as individuals are saved that they begin to live lives of love rather than lives of selfishness and callous indifference to the pain of others. But that means that we also will begin to care about the suffering of others and so the vast issues of injustice in the world.

But what can we do? If the Ninth Commandment means that Christians should seek to promote justice in the world, what can we do about a problem that is so vast and overwhelming? Well we begin with our own behaviour, but besides that we need to think of this responsibility in the light of all our other responsibilities as Christians.

I've mentioned this before, and I think it is very important. One week we hear we are to do one thing and the next week we hear we are to do another thing and every week there is a different focus and it can be overwhelming and discouraging. We must understand that we are finite. We must understand that some Christians are called to focus on one area and other Christians are called to focus on another area. We are a church – a body with different gifts and opportunities and it is the church as a whole that is to fulfill the whole mission that Christ has given to her.

So when it comes to the injustices in the world, it is an area we should think about. The fact that so many are living difficult lives because they are slaves or they are being oppressed in some other way is something that we should think about and care about. We can learn a little more about what is going on in the world and we can pray for those who are suffering.

Some may be called to get involved in more direct ways. Young people could consider whether God is calling them to get involved in politics or a career working for an organization that seeks to address one aspect of the problem of injustice in the world. And we might consider supporting

some such organization. One of the ways that we do that already is through supporting Voice of the Martyrs. Persecution is one manifestation of injustice in this world.

We have many responsibilities and we can't do everything. But the biblical concern for issues of justice and oppression in the world should be reflected in some way in our interests and concerns. One of the ways that the gospel shapes us is by the biblical vision of the world that God is working towards. We have looked a little at the biblical hope of a world of peace and justice – a world in which people love and help one another instead of exploit and use one another. It is a glorious vision. It is rooted in Jesus and his victory over sin, but it is vast in its scope – a renewed creation. And that vast and glorious vision is intended to inspire us and to motivate us and to draw us out of our own little worlds to be passionate about the great plan of salvation that God is unfolding in the history of the world.

This is one of the ways of unfolding the implications of the Ninth Commandment. The most obvious thing that it requires of us is that we tell the truth if we are called to be witnesses in court. Most of us, I think, have never had the opportunity to do that yet in our lives. But the underlying concern is the concern for justice. And when we follow that theme in Scripture, we come to Jesus and his mission, the victory over sin, and the promise of a world of peace and justice. This is part of the story of which we are a part as followers of Jesus. And if salvation means becoming more like Jesus, that will be reflected in some way in our prayers and in our thoughts and in our actions.