



The Ten Commandments

(44) The Ninth Commandment

(2) Speak the Truth

Exodus 20:16

Ephesians 4:17-32

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Riverside ARP Church
June 23, 2019

This evening we will continue our on-going series on the Ten Commandments. This is the second sermon on the Ninth Commandment. The Ninth Commandment is, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” In the first sermon on the Ninth Commandment we looked at the explicit meaning of the words of this commandment. We saw that it has to do with telling the truth when giving testimony before the bar of justice. There have always been cases that had to be tried in whatever justice system was operating in a specific society and the ninth commandment in its most explicit and obvious application has to do with telling the truth in judicial situations and as such it reflects a concern for justice. When we considered this a few weeks ago we followed that theme through the Scriptures. The Ninth Commandment reflects God’s concern for justice and what concerns God must also concern his people and so justice is a topic that is relevant to us as the people of God. Justice, of course, is a very big topic, and there is very little we can do against injustice in the world, but we can seek to act justly in our own lives and pray for justice and do what we can through the political process and through supporting various organizations that are concerned with issues of injustice in the land and in the world.

Today we will begin to consider one of the broader applications of the Ninth Commandment and that is God’s requirement that we tell the truth. As we have seen with all of the commandments, there is the narrow application, but there are also many broader applications of

each of the commandments. Underlying each commandment is a principle and that principle is worked out in the rest of the Word of God. In the case of the Ninth Commandment the principle is that we are to use our words to build people up rather than harming them. We are to use our words in loving ways. And one of the ways that we are to use our words to love one another is to tell the truth. And so we are not to tell lies. We are always to tell the truth.

I'm not going to deal with the question of whether the "hidiers of Jews" in the second world war should or should not have told the truth when the Nazi's knocked on their doors and demanded to know if they were hiding any Jews. That is a subject for another day. Instead we will focus on applications of the command to tell the truth that are closer to home at the present time, the everyday and ordinary ways in which we are to be truth-tellers and resist the temptation to be truth-hiders. And a good place to begin is Ephesians 4:25, which says, "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."

Now one of the things that this verse in its context makes clear is that speaking the truth is a behaviour that is the result of salvation in Jesus Christ. Just like the Ten Commandments, the sections of the Epistles that deal with God's requirements for our lives are based in God's prior saving work for and in his people. The Ten Commandments are prefaced by the reminder that God was the God of his people and he had delivered them from the slavery in Egypt. The commands in the epistles are connected in one way or another to God's saving work for and in his people through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In verse 1 of chapter 4 of Ephesians Paul writes, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...." And that calling is described in the first three chapters of the epistle – a glorious exposition of the salvation that God has accomplished in Jesus Christ.

In the last part of chapter 3 of this epistle Paul writes, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen.” This is presupposed in the ethical exhortations that follow. The Bible is very insistent on the fact that we cannot obey any of God’s commands apart from the power that is at work in believers – which is the resurrection power of Christ, which is the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. That is a fact for all believers and that fact is presupposed in the verses such as this verse in chapter 4 which tells us to tell the truth. The kind of truth-telling that Paul is referring to here can only be done through the power of salvation in Jesus Christ. And even then, we can only attain a beginning of this in this life. But that power is a reality in all believers and that is the great encouragement to give ourselves to the calling to put away falsehood in our lives and to be more consistent in speaking the truth. The success we are enabled to achieve in this area is one of the blessings of salvation. It is a blessing to be people who avoid falsehood and who speak the truth.

Now I’m not sure why the ESV translates the first part of verse 25 as it does, but all the commentaries I checked agree with the way the NIV translates it which is different. The ESV says, “having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth.” That suggests that putting away falsehood is something that has already been done and that the exhortation is to tell the truth. There is a way of understanding this that is consistent with other biblical teaching, and which makes sense, but the consensus among the commentators seems to be that it is best to see this as two related exhortations which is how the NIV translates it.

So the NIV says, “each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor.” The consensus seems to be that Paul is giving two related exhortations – a negative and a positive. “Put off falsehood” and “speak the truth.” These two exhortations amount to the same thing, but the whole includes turning away from falsehood and positively telling the truth. So we are not to lie, and we are to tell the truth.

Now the reason that the Bible includes such commands is that we are tempted to lie and not tell the truth. This belongs to our sinful fallen nature. Because we are sinners there are times when we are tempted to lie and refrain from telling the truth. The reason is that we think that

there is some advantage to us to tell a lie and not be truthful. We know from the Bible that it is never for our true advantage to break any of God's commandments, but there is always some perceived advantage when we lie or are tempted to lie.

Let's consider a very obvious example. Mother asks child, "Did you finish your homework?" Child has not finished his homework, but really does not feel like doing homework so child says, "Yes, my homework is all done." Child has told a lie. The perceived advantage is not having to do the homework. That is the motivation for the lie. The lie may accomplish something that seems desirable. Telling the truth will mean having to do the homework which is not seen to be desirable. So telling the lie accomplishes something that seems desirable and telling the truth results in something that does not seem desirable. That is why there is a temptation to lie.

There are lots of ways that we can tell lies. And there is always a reason – some perceived advantage for telling the lie. We can lie by exaggerating the truth. This appears to be a common lie among fishermen concerning the size of the fish that got away. The perceived advantage motivating that lie is the mistaken notion that people are impressed with fishermen who hook big fish even if they let the fish get away. Sometimes we lie by exaggerating because we want to impress others with some accomplishment.

So exaggerating is a form of falsehood. It is conveying an idea that is not quite true. And the motivation is often the desire to impress. There is an example of this sort of lie in the story of Ananias and Sapphira which is told in Acts 5. In the spirit of giving that characterized the church after Pentecost, they sold a piece of property and claimed to give all of the proceeds to the church. But that was a lie because they had kept back some of the proceeds for themselves. They claimed to have given all of the proceeds from their property while in fact what they gave was something less than the whole. Clearly their motivation was to impress others with their generosity. They wanted others to think that they had given more than they really had. And God struck them dead.

That was a pretty severe penalty. Thankfully God does not usually strike us dead when we are less than completely truthful. Otherwise we would

all be dead. But the story does show how seriously God takes this matter of being truthful.

So we might tell a lie to get out of something that we do not want to do. Or we might tell a lie to impress other people by inflating or exaggerating some accomplishment. We might tell a lie to avoid embarrassment. Someone asks us a question and the true answer is embarrassing and so we tell a lie. We might tell a lie for some perceived advantage in a business transaction. We could say that the car we are selling is in good shape when we know that it has a number of issues. We can tell a falsehood on our income tax return by not declaring all our income.

There is always a reason. But the ninth commandment requires that we always tell the truth.

Now I'm sure that we can all think of occasions where we have been guilty of lying in obvious ways. But if we think a little more deeply about this subject, we will find that there are more subtle ways of breaking this commandment. We can get at this by thinking of the contrast between falsehood and truthfulness when it comes to how we use our words to influence the way that other people think of us. There is nothing wrong of course when we want others to think well of us. Proverbs 22:1 says, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold." There is nothing sinful about desiring a good name. There would be something wrong with us if we wanted other people to think badly of us.

But the legitimate and healthy desire for a good name becomes sinful if our desire for a good name is so strong that we want others to admire us for perceptions about us that are not true. We can give false impressions about ourselves and our lives in order to encourage people to think more highly of us than corresponds to reality. Romans 12:3 says that we are "not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, but to think with sober judgment...." If we think of that idea in the light of the calling to avoid falsehoods and express truthfulness, we should avoid speaking in such a way as to have others think more highly of us than they ought to think. We should be aiming for truthfulness in the way that we present ourselves to others.

We are living in a day when the image that we project is often considered more important than the reality. David Wells has written a number of books in which he has explored the way that the people of our society think about reality and the effects that that has had on people in various ways. One of the things he discusses is that since our society has given up on the idea of objective truth, many people are more concerned about their image than about the reality of the kind of people they really are.

In his book, *The Courage to be Protestant*, he has a section which he calls "Self-Marketing." And here is some of what he writes, "The point now is to stand out in the crowd, to be unique, to project oneself, to catch people's attention, to assert oneself. Indeed, late in the twentieth century, a whole industry emerged to help people stage themselves as if the connections between the "person" who is public and out front and the person who is hidden and within are irrelevant.... [M]any people have worked at making themselves seem more important or more accomplished than they actually are. They work at dressing to convey a sense of power. They know the importance of body language. They drop names strategically. The appearance of success is simply more important than good character. In these and many other ways people seek to create impressions of themselves for reasons of personal gain, false as these impressions might be." (p. 118)

Notice the language of falsehood and truth in this description. People stage themselves. The person within is hidden while the something else is projected. People work to make themselves "seem to be more important or more accomplished than they actually are." What is most important is the "appearance of success." The impressions that people seek to create are often false impressions.

When God says that we are to "put away falsehood" and "speak the truth" he is also speaking into this area of our way of relating to the people around us. He requires that we are truthful also in the way that we present ourselves to other people. We are not to be seeking to create false impressions about ourselves. We should be aiming for some kind of correspondence between who we really are and the impression that we make on others.

Now this does not mean that we are required to be open and transparent about every sin and every weakness. It does not mean that we are required to be utterly transparent about every flaw in our character and every sin in our life. Rather we are to avoid falsehoods and we are to be people who are truthful about how we present themselves to the people around us. That will mean being somewhat transparent about our weaknesses and sinfulness. How much is revealed depends on the nature of the relationship – but what we always should be concerned about is avoiding giving false impressions and seeking to give true impressions when it comes to the way that we present ourselves to the people around us. We are to be truthful in the way that we present ourselves to the people around us. We are to be real, rather than fake.

Now the reasons that Paul here gives for this exhortation or command are very interesting and significant. Notice what he says: “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.” There are actually two reasons that Paul gives here for putting away falsehood and speaking the truth. The first reason comes before this text and the second reason comes at the end of it.

Notice that the text begins with the word “therefore.” That means that what Paul wrote before the word “therefore” is a reason for what comes after the word “therefore.” This is what he says before the word “therefore.” He says quite a bit, so I have to summarize. He says that they should no longer walk as the Gentiles do, but that they are to “put off [their] old self” and “be renewed in the spirit of their minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

This is one of the things that it means to be a Christian. As the outworking of the new life in Christ, Christians are to put off their old self and put on the new self and the new self is like God. One of the things that the new life in Christ enables us to do is to begin to reflect the character of God in our lives. One of the great goals of our salvation is that we will reflect the character of God in the way that we live our lives. This is perfected only when we are glorified, but it begins in the

here and now, and it involves the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and our own efforts by means of that power.

God is the sum of all perfections and we are created and redeemed to reflect his character in our lives. That glorifies God. And that is supremely satisfying for us because God is good, and it is a good thing to reflect that goodness. Well here we are to reflect the truthfulness of God. The Bible often speaks about God as the God of truth. He is the true God. He is faithful which means he is true to his word. And he is just plain true in the sense that he does not lie and that his words are all true and there is no deceitfulness or anything false about him. So in Isaiah 65:16 God is called the "God of truth." Numbers 23:19 says that "God is not a man, that he should lie..." A number of times in John's gospel Jesus says that his Father is true. He is completely true. He is the true God, but also there is nothing false or fake or untrue about him. This idea is also expressed in 1 John 1 where John writes that "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." This means more than that God is true. He refers to his holiness. But the imagery of light and darkness also include the idea of truth and falsehood.

The same language is used of Jesus. In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus is the truth. That is one of those ideas that we cannot understand exhaustively, but that we can understand to some extent. And for our purposes it is enough to think of how Jesus is always absolutely truthful in every possible way that it is possible to be truthful.

And so, when Paul says that we are to put on the new man created after the likeness of God he uses that as a motivation for us to put away falsehood and speak the truth. It is good to be true like God is true. To put away falsehood and to speak the truth is to reflect the character of God. That is pleasing to God. That glorifies God. And that is the purpose of life and the best possible way to live. The advantages of putting away falsehood and speaking the truth are far, far greater than any short-term advantages of lies, falseness, fakeness, or anything along those lines. The more truthful our lives, the more we reflect the character of God and that is the most worthwhile goal and the most satisfying way to live.

The second way that Paul motivates us to put away falsehood and to speak the truth comes at the end of verse 25. He says that we are to put away falsehood and “speak the truth to our neighbor, for we are members of one another.”

He is referring to the body of Christ. Romans 12:4-5 describe this idea. “For as in one body we have many members and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” So there is an important relationship between truthfulness and being members of the body of Christ.

Salvation is all about relationships. It is about our relationship with God in Christ. It is also about our relationships with other believers. We are all members of the one body of Christ. And putting away falsehood and speaking the truth is important and necessary for the kind of relationships that are the result of belonging to the body of Christ and thus belonging to one another. Falsehood separates people. Falsehood destroys trust. Truthfulness is necessary for close and harmonious relationships. Transparency is necessary for intimacy.

One of the aspects of a relationship is knowing and being known. The closer the relationship the deeper the knowledge of the other and the more we reveal of ourselves. Truth is at the heart of that. Falsehood destroys it. To connect deeply with others we need to be real – which means that we need to be true – which means that we need to be honest and transparent. This is why Paul gives the fact that “we are members of one another” as a reason to put away falsehood and to speak to the truth. One of the goals of salvation is glorifying God by living together in the body of Christ with deep connectedness to one another and for that to happen we need to be real and not fake. We need to be people who speak the truth, but also people who are true rather than false. There needs to be a profound honesty about us so that we connect to one another with our genuine selves rather than false images that we project.

This is a challenge because the truth makes us vulnerable. It belongs to our sinfulness that we hide the truth about ourselves and that we prefer the safety of pretense. But relationships require being real and being

true and while that is hard and sometimes uncomfortable, the deeper we connect with one another, the more substantial our relationships and that is the kind of community that reflects the richness of the life of God and that is the witness to the world of the kind of community that will be enjoyed in the new heavens and the new earth.

I hope that I have said enough to motivate us all to seek to grow in reflecting the truthfulness of God in our lives. The great thing about the Christian life is that the motivations for living it are very positive motivations. Certainly, there are warnings in the Bible and those are motivations for obedience as well, but the great glory of the gospel is that most of the motivations for Christians for obedience have to do with the attractiveness of God and the way of life that reflect his wonderful character. So, as we think of the calling to put away falsehood and to speak the truth, the motivations that are top of mind are the fact that we are being renewed in the likeness of God and we are members of one another in the body of Christ. These are good things. These are wonderful things. There is something profoundly worthwhile about reflecting the character of God and there is something wonderfully rich about being members of one another in the body of Christ and one of the ways that we enjoy more fully the fullness of the life that we have in Christ is to strive to grow in being people who are true and trustworthy.