

## Ten Rules for Life | Ninth Commandment: You Shall Not Bear False Witness against Your Neighbor | Exodus 20:16

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(Discussion questions on page 8)

*National Geographic* magazine ran an article in 2017 titled, “Why We Lie.” One of its main points was—*everyone lies!* Lying is a skill, the article explains, we learn in childhood then hone in adulthood. We use lies to improve our image, protect from harm, and to get what we want.

Another point the article makes is that it’s increasingly hard to know who to trust: “Our ability as a society to separate truth from lies is under unprecedented threat.”<sup>1</sup>

Some lies are infamous—think of Richard Nixon and Watergate, or the 1919 White Sox throwing the World Series. But most are subtle: half-truths, misrepresentations, exaggerations, blame-shifting, a little plagiarizing, not reporting everything on our taxes.

But the Bible is soberingly clear: “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD” (Prov 12:22). How could it be otherwise—for God is all truth: Jesus describes himself as “the Truth” (John 14:6); the Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:17); “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb 6:18).

And falsehood weakens and threatens the structure of things—like termites in the beams of a house; cracks in a dam; mold in the walls. Lies eat away at the structure and stability of a society, a community, a life.

Into this milieu of human habit and cultural mistrust, we come to the ninth commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16). A commandment, we will see, that calls a people out of a world of lies in order to be bastions of truth.

We’ll begin considering its meaning by noting first its immediate context—the Command against lying, protects Justice.

### I. The Command Protects Justice

The immediate setting of the ninth commandment is courtroom testimony. We see this in the language used: A “witness” is someone called upon to testify. To “bear witness” is to testify before others as to the truth of a matter. “Against your neighbor” implies that we are dealing with those who live together within the covenant community—“Neighbor,” used here, is like “fellow citizen.”

The center of the ninth commandment, therefore, forbids perjury—lying under oath about a fellow Israelites—someone who is supposed to be able to count on you to work for their good.

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<sup>1</sup> Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, “Why We Lie: Honesty may be the best policy, but deception and dishonesty are part of being human,” in *National Geographic*, June 2017.

In the ancient world, legal procedures depended heavily on eyewitnesses' testimony. There was no forensic evidence, video surveillance, audio recordings, satellite images. Everything depended on the trustworthiness of witnesses.

The danger in such a setting was false accusations. In the Law, God safeguarded against such abuses in many ways. He required multiple witnesses for a charge to be established: "Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established," (Deut. 19:15). A person found guilty of bearing false witness was liable to the same judgement of the one he falsely charged: "if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely,<sup>19</sup> then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother" (Deut 19:16-19). And, in the case of a capital offense, "the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death" (Deut 17:6-7).

I want to draw out two things from this first point—that the ninth commandment—prohibiting false witness—protects justice.

One is this underlying dynamic: the relationship between *trust* and *society*. False accusations and false testimony were taken extremely seriously by God, because they are so *devastating*--to the life of an individual and to the fabric of society.

One of the fundamental requirements for a civilization is a basic level of trust. If we cannot trust our neighbors to tell the truth under oath and in court, if we cannot trust the courts to make unbiased decisions, if we believe judges or witnesses can be bought and manipulated, then we are no longer safe.

Friends, in your efforts to be a trustworthy person—in school, with your family, at work—you play a real part in what holds a society together.

A second thing to consider, is a particular way this command applies to anyone in a position of rendering *judgement*—a judge in a courtroom, a teacher or professor who assigns grades, a parent who determines privileges or disciplines. This command warns against *partiality*. Partiality is falsehood in that it means making judgements, or bearing witness, in a manner marked by unfair bias.

The Bible forbids showing partiality to powerful or the poor:

You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor (Lev 19:15).

The Bible forbids bending truth because of the pressure of the crowd:

You shall not ... bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice. (Exod 23:1-3).

In all matters related to justice—do not be swayed by anything but the truth. Do not bear false witness.

[T] That is how the command begins—it protects justice, and by doing so, protects the fabric of society. Let us also consider how it expands to implicate all speech.

## II. The Command Governs All Speech.

Across scripture, the further implications of the ninth commandment become evident—God forbids all forms of falsehood—especially in how we speak.

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. <sup>12</sup> You shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD (Lev 19:11).

As Calvin said, “if the eighth commandment (against stealing) ties the hands, so this one ties the tongue.”

We can consider how this commandment governs speech in a few ways: it forbids false words about ourselves, false words about others, and the careless use of truth.

### (1) False Words about Ourselves

When it comes to lying about ourselves, we may not go as far as Jacob did, when he deceived his elderly and blind father by claiming to be his brother Easau (Gen 27:18). But we may lie about ourselves in more subtle ways: by cheating in school, plagiarizing in our work, exaggerating our stories, not being precise on taxes or timesheets. We may lie on our resume.

George O’Leary: Over twenty years ago a major sports story was the resignation of Notre Dame football coach George O’Leary after just five days after being hired. It was discovered O’Leary had lied about having a master’s degree from NYU and about having three varsity letters in football from college—though he never actually played in a game.

The ninth commandment forbids falsehood in relation to how represent ourselves.

### (2) False Words about Others

Perhaps more importantly in today’s milieu, we need to note how this command applies to how we speak about *others*. After all, the commandment specifies bearing false witness “against our neighbor.”

False words about others come in many forms.

#### Slander & Gossip

We break the spirit of the ninth commandment when we **slander** or **gossip** about others—speaking behind another’s back to tear down, not build up. Scripture forbids this:

You sit and speak against your brother; you **slander** your own mother’s son (Ps 50:20).

The words of a **whisperer** are like delicious morsel; they go down into the inner parts of the body (Prov 26:22).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See also, “For I fear that perhaps when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, **gossip**, conceit, and disorder” (2 Cor 12:20).

“We delight in a certain poisoned sweetness,” writes Calvin, “experienced in ferreting out and in disclosing the evils of others.”<sup>3</sup>

And we often excuse slander or gossip, because what we are sharing may technically be true, or, we say, be said in the spirit of justice. But God sees the heart. When we use words to defame and tear down others, or to unnecessarily spread ill reports, we break the spirit of the ninth commandment. For, to cite Calvin again,

he who does not allow a brother’s name to be sullied by falsehood also wishes it to be kept unblemished as far as truth permits.<sup>4</sup>

### Misrepresent

False words against others also take the form of **misrepresentation**.

We misrepresent by shifting attention away from the facts of an argument and instead attack the person (*ad hominem* attack). “Don’t take his argument seriously—he didn’t go to a top university.” “You can’t trust his claims—people in his ideological camp always say that.” “Her view doesn’t matter; she has a reputation.”

People did this to Jesus: “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon” (John 8:48). “We were not born of sexual immorality” (John 8:41). In others words, don’t believe this guy because he’s not from the right tribe, or crazy, or comes from a family with a questionable past.

This is *falsehood*—because rather than speaking to the issue, we attack the person.

### Hasty-Generalizations & Loaded Language

We traffic in falsehood towards others when we make “**hasty generalizations**”—where on the basis of little data we make huge claims.

We also bear false witness when we use **loaded language** to describe another person’s words. Loaded language reframes what someone has said in terms that are emotionally charged or controversial, distorting the original point. Instead of engaging the argument, it replaces it with an exaggerated version that is easier to attack.

We see this often today. Someone may make a modest, nuanced observation about a difficult issue—“The immigration issue is complicated; I’m often not sure how to think about it”—and the response immediately escalates: “So you don’t care about law and order,” or, “So you don’t care about the vulnerable.” In this way, the original statement is not answered but recast into something false, making the speaker appear callous or extreme.

Gossip, slander, misrepresentation, generalizations, loaded language—these are all ways we break the spirit of the ninth commandment by bearing false witness about others.

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.8.48.

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### (3) Careless Handling of the Truth

Still on this second point—how the command governs all our speech—we need to note that it also forbids the *careless handling of truth*.

The ninth commandment forbids not telling the truth. But it does not command telling everyone, every bit of truth you know. It calls for *discretion*. Discretion is the quality of speaking in such a way as to avoid causing offense or revealing private information—or information that others either do not need to know or have no right to know.

Jesus doesn't tell his disciples everything: During their final evening before his arrest, Jesus says: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (Jn 16:12). His disciples ask him after his resurrection, "will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus responds, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7).

Telling the truth is not the same thing as sharing every bit of truth you know. Parents know this—they must exercise discretion with their kids. Certain professionals must be very careful with the information they possess. Leaders of all types must use tact and wisdom with what they disclose. This can never become an excuse for lying—rather, it is to differentiate between deception and discretion, which Scripture calls for:

A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly. (Prov. 12:23)

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. (Prov. 17:27)

Apply: Here, then, are some diagnostic questions for truthful speech in everyday life. Before you speak, or write, ask: Is this true? Is this fair? Is this necessary? Is this the right venue, tone, or timing for saying this? Would the person I am commenting on recognize and own their position as I state it? Is God pleased with my heart, out of which these words flow?

If we cannot answer these questions in the affirmative—we may be trafficking in lies and falsehood and breaking the spirit of the ninth commandment.

Sum: in considering the ninth commandment, we have noticed two important things so far. By forbidding falsehood in speech, the command protects justice and governs our everyday use of words. I want to turn to a final consideration as we close: *Practicing the Commandment in Christ*

### III. Embodying the Commandment in Christ

A great irony is the fact that Jesus is the only person who ever lived who never broke the ninth commandment, yet he was subject to false testimony and ultimately killed by men's lies.

Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death,<sup>60</sup> but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward<sup>61</sup> and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" (Matt 26:59-61).

And yet, after his death and resurrection, Jesus now stands as the only one who will ultimately defend us against the false accusations of the ultimate Accuser: Satan. Satan accuses us before God as unworthy, sinful, disingenuous, unfaithful. And Jesus—having taking all our sin and died for is—wraps his righteous arm around us and condemns Satan: “there is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

And Jesus not only defends us before dark accusations. Jesus also pleads our name before the Father—he intercedes for us, prays for us, promote us.

Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is **interceding for us**. (Rom 8:34).

He always lives to make **intercession for them**. (Heb 7:25).

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, **we have an advocate** with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. (1John 2:1)

And Christ now teaches us to be people of truth. Paul is so clear on this: before we knew Jesus, our “old self” was marked by lies: “**Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices**” (Col 3:10).

But now, as those who have put on the new self that is like Jesus, Paul says, “**Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.**” (Eph 4:25).<sup>5</sup>

For those of us who have a defender and advocate in Jesus, let me set before us two duties the ninth commandment calls us toward:

First, we ought to **protect** our brothers and sisters in Christ. We ought to stop gossip about them—we a cul-de-sac where Gossip goes no further. We ought to correct falsehoods about them, not further falsehoods about them. We must defend other believers.

One of the great challenges for Christians today—as the social consensus continues to fracture in America—is that we speak ill of other Christians. There is a time and place, and a way, to question someone’s theological position. But too often we bad mouth other churches—this is not in keeping with the spirit of the ninth commandment. We ought to strive to protect that good name of brothers and sisters in Christ, even if they hold certain theological positions that are different from ours (assuming we still fall within the boundaries of orthodoxy).

Second, we should **promote** our brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ *promotes* our name before the Father—we should promote the names of Christ’s people, too.

The opposite of *defamation* (of bearing false witness) is *affirmation*. Rather than de-faming someone, we use our words to firm them up. Notice how much Paul brags on other Christians:

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<sup>5</sup> Διὸ ἀποθέμενοι τὸ ψεῦδος λαλεῖτε ἀλήθειαν ἕκαστος μετὰ τοῦ πλησίον αὐτοῦ, ὅτι ἐσμὲν ἀλλήλων μέλη. Eph 4:25.

He celebrates the renown of the Christians in Rome: "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world" (Rom. 1:8).

He praises the spiritual giftedness of the Corinthians (who themselves could be quite rude to Paul):

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.... so that you are not lacking in any gift (1 Cor 1:4-5, 7).

Paul praises the sincerity of Timothy's faith, and that of his grandmother and mother:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. (2Tim. 1:4)

One response to this sermon would be to take some time today—either at lunch, or around the dinner table—and share with your parents or kids or friends, a few things you love about another church or Christians who go to another church in town. Maybe even think of a Christian you have been prone to criticize (who when you are honest, you do believe that are a true Christian), and say a few positive things about them.<sup>6</sup>

**Close:** In a world where trust is collapsing and words are cheap the Church is meant to be a community where truth is precious. We belong to the one who said, "I am the truth" (John 14:6). Therefore, our words should be trustworthy. They should be words that defend the absent—not accuse them. Words that heal reputations—not wound them. Words that tell the truth—especially about the Gospel—even when it's costly.

Imagine if today, Christians became known as the people whose words you could simply always trust—they refuse to gossip, refuse to slander, defend their neighbors, and speak the truth in humility and love.

This is the kind of people the ninth commandment calls forth. Let me close with this word from the prophet Zechariah, as a charge for we who follow the Man of Truth:

These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace. (Zechariah 8:16:)

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<sup>6</sup> Remember the words of James: With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be (James 3:9-10, NIV).

### Small Group Questions

1. The ninth commandment directly addresses courtroom testimony and the protection of justice. How does truthfulness—or the lack of it—impact trust in a community, workplace, or society? Where do you see the consequences of dishonesty undermining trust today?
2. The ninth commandment has implications for all of speech—it forbids gossip, misrepresentation, and careless words. Which of these forms of falsehood do you think Christians most easily fall into today (gossip, exaggeration, misrepresenting others, etc.)? Why do you think those temptations are so strong?
3. The call to tell the truth needs to be held alongside those times when we need to be careful with the information we have—we need to distinguish at times between deception and discretion. How can we distinguish between wise discretion and dishonesty or deception in our speech? How have you struggled in this area?
4. For Christians, our use of speech should be shaped by the One we follow—Christ. Christ defends us against Satan’s accusations; Christ promotes our name to the Father. What might it look like this week for you to use your words to be a protector and promoter of your fellow Christians?