

The Ninth Commandment

Q. What does God require in the ninth commandment?

A. That we do not lie or deceive, but speak the truth in love.

Text: Exodus 20:16 – “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Augustine – “The tongue inflicts greater wounds than the sword.”¹

Before we look at the various applications of this commandment in our own day and age, we need to consider the original audience, and what these words would have meant to them in their context.

The Hebrew verb ענה (*‘anah*) means “to answer,” and was often used in the context of a court case to mean “to testify for/against” someone.

The Hebrew noun רֵעַ (*rea’*) translated “neighbor” reminds us of the covenantal context of the command, and that the violation of it erodes the very foundation – trust and love – and fabric – justice and righteousness – of the community.

- This reminds us that though we must bear truthful witness towards all people in all circumstances of life, the breaking of this commandment is most harmful when done against those closest to us, and that if the covenant community² is to build itself together in love, truthfulness is essential.³

The preposition often means “with, among, by”, but HALOT notes that it can also be translated as “against” when hostility is implied, which shows that often, lying is not some neutral ‘accident’ but is the fruit of a malicious heart.⁴ This is why

¹ Latin: *Majora sunt linguae vulnera quam gladii.*

² Notice how this picked up and applied to the NT covenant community – the church – by Jesus (**Matthew 18:16**), Paul (**2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19**), and the preacher of Hebrews (**10:28**). See also **Revelation 11:3**.

³ Notice that the very first exhortation Paul gives for what it looks like to put on the new man as the image of Christ is truthfulness: “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another...Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for building up what is needed, so that it will give grace to those who hear.” (**Ephesians 4:25, 29**)

⁴ Notice the very next verses after Ephesians 4:25 and 29: “BE ANGRY, AND DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity...And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and anger and wrath and shouting and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” (**Ephesians 4:26-27, 30-31**)

Solomon can say, “A faithful witness will not lie, but a false witness breathes out lies” (**Proverbs 14:5**)⁵.

Finally, the phrase עֵד שֶׁקֶר (*‘ed shaqer*) literally means “a witness of deceit,” and is translated by the NET, NIV, and CSB as “false testimony.”⁶ HALOT notes that the noun *shaqer* carries the meaning of “lie, falsehood, deception” – both in word and action – and includes the ideas of something being pretended or unreal.

Back in Moses’ day, witnesses were everything, and were vitally important in executing justice – or injustice – at the gates, determining the fates of individuals within the covenant community with regards to individual case laws and disputes against one another.

As DeYoung notes,

“We often think of the ninth commandment as “Do not lie,” and that is the gist of it, but it’s specifically put in the context of a courtroom...[Witnesses] are important today, but we also have audio recordings, videos, fingerprints, and DNA testing. They didn’t have any of that, but they had eyewitnesses. If someone stood up to accuse a person of wrongdoing, and a second person stood up with the same accusation, the life of the accused could be in jeopardy.”⁷

- **Deuteronomy 17:6** – “On the mouth of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the mouth of one witness.”⁸
 - We see the tragic example of this principle, and how justice can be perverted, in the murder of Naboth in **1 Kings 21**.

⁵ The Hebrew literally reads “A witness of truthfulness/faithfulness” (עֵד אֱמוּנִים) will not lie/deceive/cheat, but he will breathe/blow forth falsehoods/lies a witness of falsehood/deceit (עֵד שֶׁקֶר).”

⁶ The NLT translates the verse: “You must not testify falsely against your neighbor.”

⁷ Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 144.

⁸ Note the context. In **16:18-20**, Moses commands Israel to appoint honest judges who will be able to render justice and righteousness within the community, “that you might live and possess the land which Yahweh is giving you.” Having honest judges and honest witnesses enabled Israel to “render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace” (**Zechariah 8:16**, ESV).

- See especially **Matthew 26:60-61**, where two deceitful witnesses accuse Jesus of blaspheming the temple, which ultimately results in Him being condemned to death by the high priest.
- **Deuteronomy 19:15** – “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; at the mouth of two or three witnesses a matter shall be established.”

In the OT, there are six different ways the Hebrew says, “false witness,” which occur in some sixteen different passages. This is therefore not a small theme in the Bible.⁹

All this simply reminds us that the true and living God – whose throne is founded upon righteousness and justice¹⁰ – cares about justice and righteousness in, though, and amongst His people, whom He created and re-created to be His image¹¹ and the representatives, administrators, and ambassadors of His rule on earth (as it is in heaven).

However, though the commandment begins at the gate of the community, it does not end there, for the gate is not the only place where we can hurt or harm our neighbor with our deceitful, lying, untruthful, and slanderous lips.

Breaking the Ninth Commandment would also include:

1. Slandering others

Watson: “The scorpion carries his poison in his tail, the slanderer carries his poison in his tongue...To pretend friendship to a man, and slander him, is most odious.”¹²

Those who indulge in the habit of running down their neighbors by making false statements or by enjoying lies and false reports are guilty of slander.¹³

⁹ Cf. DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 146.

¹⁰ See **Psalm 89:14; 97:2**; cf. its application to Messiah’s rule in **Isaiah 9:7; 16:5**.

¹¹ Because God is the God of all truth, and loves truth, Solomon can say “An abomination to Yahweh [are] lips of deceitfulness, but doers of truth/faithfulness [are] His delight” (**Proverbs 12:22**, my translation).

¹² Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1692 [repr. 1981]), 169.

¹³ See Begg, *Pathway to Freedom* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2003 [repr. 2021]), 203.

WHY do we do this?

- When we engage in slander, we defame others in order to exalt ourselves. Slander is but the audible expression of self-worship, thus confirming – once again – Luther’s assertion that the breaking of commandments two through nine stem from breaking the first.
 - **Proverbs 26:23-26, 28a** – “*Like* an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross are fiery lips and an evil heart.¹⁴ He who hates disguises *it* with his lip, but he sets up deceit within himself. When he makes his voice [sound] gracious, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart. *Though his* hatred, his evil will be revealed in the assembly...A lying tongue hates those it crushes.”

Begg’s words are helpful:

Stirred by hatred or jealousy, the slanderer gathers little groups in the corner of the room...calculated to destroy the reputation of those who are not there to defend themselves.¹⁵

We see the heart of this treacherous sin in the words and actions of David’s son Absalom in **2 Samuel 15**. By publicly maligning his father’s character and motives, he subtly undermines the nation’s trust in its king to prepare for his long-planned *coup d’état*.

As DeYoung notes, slander also includes [publicly] assuming [and communicating to others] the worst possible motives for other people’s intentions and refusing to ever give people the benefit of the doubt:

This happens all the time. Something happens to us, and we just assume, “She didn’t talk to me because she’s really mad at me,” or, “The way he wrote that email – he must be thinking such and such.” We develop elaborate hypotheses and speculations, and when we tell other people, we pass it along as truth.¹⁶

¹⁴ See (again) Jesus’ words in **Matthew 15:19-20**.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ DeYoung, 148.

So serious a sin is slander, regardless of the form it takes, that David says that those who practice this are not allowed to approach God:

- **Psalm 15:1-3** – “O Yahweh, who may sojourn in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy mountain? He who walks¹⁷ blamelessly,¹⁸ and works righteousness¹⁹ and speaks truth in his heart.²⁰ He does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend.”

This is why his son Solomon says, “the one who spreads slander is foolish”²¹ (**Proverbs 10:18**)²²

Watson’s application is helpful:

The mandatory part of the commandment implied is that we stand up for others and vindicate them when they are injured by lying lips. Not only should we not slander falsely or accuse others; but that we should witness for them, and stand up in their defence, when we know them to be traduced. A man may wrong another as well by silence as by slander, when he knows him to be wrongfully accused, yet does not speak on his behalf. If any cast false aspersions on any, we should wipe them off.²³

2. Gossip

Proverbs 26:20-22 – “With no wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, strife quiets down. *Like* charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the stomach.”²⁴

¹⁷ The participles (“the one walking” and “the one practicing”) highlight that this is his or her way of life.

¹⁸ The Hebrew תָּמִים (*tamim*) carries the idea of wholeness and fullness (CSB = “who lives honestly”; ESV, NJB = “blamelessly”; NET [cf. NLT] = “whoever lives a blameless life”).

¹⁹ Literally, “the practicing-of-righteousness-one.”

²⁰ Literally, “word/speech of truth/faithfulness in his heart.”

²¹ Most EVVs translate “is a fool.” Though this is certainly true, “foolish” is perhaps a better translation, as fools in the OT are synonymous with unbelievers, whereas even believers at times can [inconsistently] act like fools, that is, be foolish. The verb translated “spread” literally means here “to cause to go/spread out.”

²² Cf. **Proverbs 18:7-8** – “A fool’s lips come with strife, and his mouth calls for beatings. A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are the snare of his soul.”

²³ Watson, 173.

²⁴ Cf. **Proverbs 18:8**

Again, DeYoung is helpful:

Gossip is passing along a report or rumor that cannot be substantiated. But gossip is more than that. We also gossip when we pass along a true report unnecessarily.²⁵

Moreover, gossip implicates more than just the one who loves to share it; those who listen to it also become guilty in, and partake of, this sin if they refuse to rebuke the one sharing.

WHY do we so often listen to gossip?

1. An evil heart

Moreover, we love secrets – especially bad, juicy ones. We can just as easily feel better than others by hearing a negative report about them as we can sharing it.

2. The fear of man

Often, though we know that the gossiper is sinning, we are afraid to offend them by gently rebuking them.

As DeYoung says, “our silence in the face of gossip is as sinful as the gossip itself.”²⁶

Which is why loving *all* our neighbors requires us to speak truthfully at all times, including necessary admonishments:

- **Proverbs 27:4-6** – “Wrath is cruelty and anger is a flood, but who can stand before jealousy? Better is reproof that is revealed than love that is hidden. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.”
- **Proverbs 28:23** – “He who reproveth a man will afterward find *more* favor than he who flatters with his tongue.”

²⁵ DeYoung, 147.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

3. Flattery

Proverbs 29:5 – “A man who flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his steps.”

4. Exaggeration

5. Rashly making promises and not keeping them

“I’ll be praying for you.”

Putting Off by Putting On

Conclusion: