

CHAPTER 12

You Shall Not Bear False Witness

protecting the truth in your family

Introduction

The moral law is so thorough in how it guides human relationships. Whereas the eighth commandment dealt with possession the ninth commandment will help direct the use of language in specifically in relationships between people. This chapter deals with how words should be spoken truthfully particularly as they have tremendous impact and effect peoples' reputations. As is the habit of this study, the chapter begins with an examination the breadth of this commandment.

Witness Bearing in the Bible

The Bible again directs the concept of truthfulness toward God himself. In fact, God is identified as the truth. Chapter 10 already discussed that concept somewhat when considering what Christian families should allow to be called good in terms of entertainment. However, this truth also has obvious implications for the area of witness bearing. The Bible answers the question of why people ought to be truthful. The answer comes back clearly: people should tell the truth because God is

truth. Christians tell the truth because if they do not, their actions contradict to the nature of God. In the book of Psalms, the writer cries out, asking God to teach him his ways: “Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.”¹ This verse teaches that God’s way is to walk in the truth. Lying is foreign to his nature and he cannot lie. Lying has another source. It finds its origins in the devil. Jesus confronts the people of his day harshly with this reality. He knows their true familial association by the fruit of their mouths. “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”² God is not a liar, in fact it is impossible for him to do so, according to Hebrews 6:18. Instead when man lies, he imitates the character of God’s enemy, the devil. The Bible directs those of the family of God to live according to the Lord’s holy character.

When the Bible commands various standards of truth telling it does so based on an identity which is found in Christ. Christians do not tell the truth in order to be added to God’s family, but because they are in God’s family. In the Old Testament God provides many prohibitions against deceptions and false witness bearing. In the historical narratives of the Bible examples of how bearing false witness can be used for self-glorification are clearly displayed. For example, when Ahab wants to secure Naboth’s vineyard, the strategy employed by Queen Jezebel is that of false-witness bearing. She arranges for two scoundrels to be strategically placed at a feast where Naboth, the owner of the vineyard, was given a prominent seat. In the course of the feast these men were to stand and testify that Naboth cursed God and the king, neither of which were true. The result was Naboth’s death, and Ahab and Jezebel’s condemnation.³ The fruit and root of false witness bearing laid out in that account are devastating for Naboth, Ahab, and Jezebel. Those who bear false witness seek to promote their own reputation at the expense of their neighbor’s. Naboth’s reputation was tarnished to such an extent that he was killed. It is one of many Old Testament accounts that addresses the consequences of untruthfulness.

In the New Testament this idea is also widely condemned. The foundation for truthfulness is identical in both Testaments. Paul gives one example when he says, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”⁴ Christians are not to lie because their nature has been changed. They are no longer identified with the kingdom of darkness. They have been

¹ Psalm 86:11 (ESV).

² John 8:44 (ESV).

³ 1 Kings 21:1-24 (ESV).

⁴ Colossians 3:9-10 (ESV).

transferred out of that kingdom. Now they are part of new family and they ought to look like their Father. They are renewed after the image of their creator.

Good & Necessary Consequence

In centuries past, men have worked through questions surrounding this same commandment, and have been able to demonstrate the breadth of application that comes with this commandment. The *Heidelberg Catechism* is somewhat more reserved than the Westminster Standards. However, #112 of the *Heidelberg* still addresses this commandment along broad lines including in its prescriptions against lying and rash condemnations. When asked what is required to honor the ninth commandment, the catechism answers: “I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one’s words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard. Rather, I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil’s own works, under penalty of God’s heavy wrath. In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth, speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbour’s honour and reputation.” Without giving specifics, *Heidelberg* establishes the attitude that must be ours when we approach the issue of honesty. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* is far more thorough in its treatment.

In its *Larger Catechism*, the writers of the Westminster Standards pull together the Scriptural applications of the ninth commandment. What is most interesting in their teaching is the time these seventeenth century pastors take to drill down even into attitudes of which false witness bearing is only a symptom. It is significant to remember that actions are often only a reflection of the condition of the heart. The selfishness that sits at the core of sin comes bubbling and is expressed in actions. That is what Jesus teaches when he says that “...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”⁵ The ugliness of a person’s sinful expression is a window into the priorities of his heart. When children refuse to obey mom and dad their behavior is showing their desire to be autonomous. When husbands refuse to lead in their families they show their desire to pursue their own interests first. So when the *Larger Catechism* points out the underlying attitude behind false-witness bearing, it puts a spotlight on the root sin. In #144 the part of the treatment of this commandment is that people are to have “a charitable esteem for our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering their infirmities,” and the list continues. At the heart of the breaking of the ninth commandment is man’s failure to love his neighbors as himself. When people understand the attitude, they recognize resulting behaviors more easily.

First, the *Larger Catechism* rightly points to the obligation to protect the truth when it comes to obedience to this commandment. Whether in relationships in the family, the church, or the larger

⁵ Matthew 12:34b (ESV).

culture, the obligation of God's people is not only to be truthful amongst themselves, but also to ensure the truth is maintained around them. This idea is brought out most clearly in the book of Joshua. Israel has crossed the Jordan River and God has gone before them to deliver the city of Jericho into their hands. After charging his people to devote everything in that city to destruction, God brings down the walls of that city and Israel is victorious. The next conquest is a far less significant city: the city of Ai. Much to Israel's surprise they are defeated in their first attempt to conquer this Canaanite city. When God is consulted, Achan's guilt of holding back the "consecrated things" is laid bare before the people and his deception is exposed. He is summoned before Joshua and the people, and Joshua's statement to him is very telling: "My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me."⁶ Joshua associates the telling of the truth with giving glory to God. In essence, he reminds deceptive Achan that he is to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. However, Achan has chosen to deceive. He has taken from the spoil of Jericho and has hidden it in his tent. And Israel as a whole is held accountable for his actions. It is other Israelites who lose their lives in battle because of his sin. Although the sin is committed by an individual there is a level of corporate responsibility.

When examining the root cause behind Achan's sin it is clear that his primary motivation flowed from love of self. It is quite likely that on the outside, Achan was performing all the proper rituals. However, when faced with temptation, he decided he wanted to satisfy his own desires rather than God's. This attitude is not unique to Achan. It is found in every human being, every time he sins against God. Particularly when it comes to the ninth commandment, every time man permits the sin of false-witness bearing to continue unchallenged he is essentially saying that he cares more for keeping the peace in the relationship with the person who is bearing false-witness than for upholding God's standards of right and wrong. It truly is that simple. And when it comes to families there is an element of corporate deterioration if parents allow this sin to go unchecked.

What Will This Look Like in My Family?

Before dealing with the parental response to breaking the ninth commandment, this chapter will consider the primary ways this commandment is broken in families. In day-to-day parenting there is not usually a formal courtroom setting, although the "he said, she said" interaction does definitely crop up from time-to-time. However, this commandment does apply to the interactions that take place in the home. Most children have lied to their parents about whether or not they have tidied their room, or other such trivial matters. Children often try to deceive parents in order to avoid consequence of some kind or another. Most parents can tell a stories of children tattling on their sib-

⁶ Joshua 7:19 (ESV).

lings. The reason they can is because children are sinners, just like their parents. There are no perfect families, children or parents. However, as I have said before, that does not justify permitting sinful behavior to go on unchecked. The presence of sin should not be surprising. However, the parents' response to their children's sin is more significant. Therefore, parents should make sure they understand the most common violations of the ninth commandment in their homes both regarding the root sin behind them and also as to what would be a good response when these sins show their ugly heads in their families.

Lying

Lying is a deliberate misrepresentation of the truth with the obvious purpose of furthering a specific agenda. People have been willing to choose this behavior since the fall. Cain is the first undisputed example of a liar in the Bible. Genesis 4 records the account of Cain luring his brother into a field where he murders him out of jealousy. When God asks Cain where Abel is Cain denies having any idea. Cain's purpose is to avoid the consequence rightly belonging to him after murdering his brother out of envy. Although the behavior behind children's lying is often much less grave than Cain's the motivation, its root is identical: the avoidance of personal responsibility. Instead of seeking to do what is right in God's eyes, they are seeking to do that which serves themselves.

When little Johnny takes that last desert which was being saved for Dad (a serious offense indeed) and is questioned about where it went he knows full well what his options are. He can either admit that he has eaten it, or he can deny he has eaten it and hope he is not found out. If this child has been taught well from the Word of God he will know his chief end is to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, and might.⁷ The child, by lying, neglects his most basic task in life, which is to honor God. However, because he is acting within a human relationship, the implications are broader.

Not only is Johnny showing the esteem, or lack of it, with which he holds God's commandments, he is also making a statement about his relationship with his parents. It is this truth that is often the most difficult part of dealing with lying. Children who lie show that, in the short-term anyway, getting away with behavior is more significant to them than the trust or good opinion of their parents. The child has probably not thought through this expression in detail. If parents ask the child why they lied about denting the car with their bike, eating the only cookies left in the pantry, or whether or not they had finished their chores, they would likely just answer, "I don't know." However, that does not mean that at the foundation of their decision is not a value judgment of what

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:5 (ESV).

is most significant in their lives. Lying says, “I will preserve myself,” but it is not the only behavior betraying that kind of motivation.

Deception

Deception is almost identical to lying. The only exception is that, in deception, the person acts rather than speaks. I remember well giving one of my children a consequence of an early bedtime one evening. I just had to finish cleaning up some things on our driveway. As I glanced into the basement windows I could see the child taking some books off our shelf and arranging them under her clothing in such a way as to best smuggle them along, presumably in order to take some of the edge off the punishment. Many readers may remember being sent to clean their room only to have the parental detective squad find all the items to be cleaned crammed into a corner of a closet, or under the bed. In both examples, the offender has not spoken any lies, but attempted to avoid consequences or work through their actions. At root, the intention of lying and deception is the same. When engaging in this behavior, the child’s decision is not being driven by a deep love for God expressed in obedience to him, or even obedience to mom and dad, but rather being able to avoid the requirements placed on them.

Tattle-Taling

One of the earliest forms of false-witness bearing shows up almost as soon as children can put together full sentences and are able to assign blame to another human being living in his proximity. Often this will take place between siblings, but I have also frequently observed this behavior between unrelated children. The child comes bearing crucial evidence in convicting his brother, sister or friend. This kind of behavior is not necessarily dealing with untruth, but rather with a larger application of the ninth commandment. Remember the *Larger Catechism* charged Christians to rejoice in their neighbor’s good name and cover over his iniquity. However, when it comes to tattle-taling, children are hoping to accomplish the opposite.

When the child comes to with his list of grievances and sins against his sibling or friend, he is hoping to achieve some parental action against his victim. The heart attitude behind tattling is one of delighting in someone’s affliction, whether justified or not. When tattling children are not interested in the furthering of their sibling’s welfare. Of course, there may be legitimate occasions where children may come to parents or other authorities with information about another child that should be told. Perhaps Johnny is terrorizing his siblings, bullying them because he is bigger. It could be that a child is in some kind of danger. What will be noticeably different in each of those circumstances is the attitude with which the “complainant” will approach his parents. If their motivation is healthy, they will be grieved because of what is happening to their friend, or anxious about the danger their

sibling is placing himself in. In those circumstances the children are actually honoring the ninth commandment. Tattling can be discerned by the attitude. However hard children will try to mask it, there will be a glimmer of delight that will accompany their report. The words they are speaking are not untrue, but the motivation behind their speaking harbors sinful attitudes. As parents, we should recognize this behavior as equal to the sin of purposefully misrepresenting the truth. These behaviors above ought not to be a surprise because it flows from the basest of man's sin: selfishness.

Selfishness is a sin embedded at the core of the human race at the fall. People often betray a selfishness that is beyond rational explanation. Lisa has been my faithful wife for decades, has faithfully expended her energy at home to teach and raise the children with me, has sacrificed repeatedly for my benefit, and yet when she asks me to get her a drink from the fridge my first instinct is to ask, "Can't you get that yourself? I'm busy." Or if we are in a restaurant, I know that she loves to sample whatever it is that I ordered. But my first inclination is to want to keep every last bite on my plate for myself. Now, if you were to ask me if I valued a couple of French-fries over my wife, I would deny it. However, taken in isolation, my behavior certainly indicates as much. And yet Lisa is kind to overlook those childish expressions because she know that my love for her actually runs deeper than those things. So it is in parenting.

Often parents rightly see their children's isolated actions as harming their relationship with each other. And yet, parents have to remember that even with great tensions in the parent-child relationship, their children will still yearn for mom and dad's approval and love. Parents should be careful in the moment when they first discover deception. They should not come to the conclusion that their children do not care one wit about them. When parents wrongly interpret their children's behavior that way, it is easy for them to get their feelings hurt. And when feelings get hurt, better judgment is easily neglected.

In order to parent wisely and not out of reaction to sentiments, parents have to remember their task. Just as children are called to obey God, so are parents. The law gives a proper understanding of what God requires in terms of the expression of love toward him. But when man fails to obey, he is reminded of the depth of his dependence on God's grace and mercy for forgiveness and restoration in his relationship with his Savior. Christians are to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and, as Jesus teaches, their neighbor as themselves.⁸ That attitude must also be in the parent's heart as he deals with his children.

It is the love of God that makes restoration possible. God, in his love, forgives the repentant sinner, and parents are to be imitators of him in this regard. Ephesians 5:1 makes this truth abundantly

⁸ Mark 12:31 (ESV).

clear to us when it says, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” In our relationship with our Heavenly Father, his love, “covers a multitude of sins.”⁹ Parents must imitate him in their relationships with their fallen children. In love they also must cover over the multitude of sins their children have committed. This exhortation from Scripture is not always easy, but it is always right. Parents must learn to delight in aligning their lives to the mandates of Scripture. When children fail by sinning against the ninth commandment, it is an opportunity for parents to impress on them their need for God’s forgiveness through faith and repentance, which is the first use of the law. Then parents can also use the moment to teach them of the importance of honoring God in all of life by truthfulness, and to forsake selfishness. The ninth commandment should lead Christian homes into a lifetime of striving toward the promotion of truth between people, protecting the reputation of all people, with a charitable eye toward them, and seeking their success and grieving over their failures.

Correcting Sins Against the Ninth Commandment

Although it is important to remember mercy, for the sake of training children in the fear of the Lord, action and teaching is still needed. When children sin against the ninth commandment parents are required to give an appropriate response. Consequences that come into the life of the child are for the purpose of teaching them the negative value of their sin. Much of the paralysis that parents experience in dealing with their children stems from a lack of clarity as to how they can address sin. The sins that take place in the area of deception and lying can be among the most paralyzing. Children have a great willingness to persist in their choice to be dishonest in order to protect themselves from consequences, and it is difficult to produce objective evidence, unless you have decided to walk around with a camera recording all your interactions. Below are some suggestions as to how parents can address the sins associated with the ninth commandment at home.

Lying and Deception

The issue of lying can be complicated to diagnose. When two children are telling conflicting accounts of what has happened, the sin is clear, but the truth is not. All that is clear is that one of the two is lying. However, should the children persist in their lie, it is more difficult to come to a clear conclusion. Because all children are sinners, they will engage in behavior that is disappointing to their parents, also in the area of truthfulness. One of the more disappointing moments in parenting will come when children will choose to lie in the aftermath of a conflict. The situation is all too familiar. There is an explosion of noise coming from the room where the children are playing. Rightly

⁹ 1 Peter 4:8 (ESV).

so, parents call them and ask them what is going on. There will be occasions when children will decide to tell opposing stories at that point. “Well, John took my toy!” Quickly putting on a detective hat, mom then turns to John and asks, “Is that true John?” In response John looks at us with great passion and says, “Only when she was not playing with it anymore.” And so the he-said-she-said battle begins. To address this issue parents can simply stop their children and tell them: “Children, you are telling me opposite stories, so you cannot both be telling me the truth. Does one of you want to confess your sin of lying to me now?” The first few times using this exercise, children will likely not be willing to retract or confess any lies in the moment. If that is the case, simply have them sit on a couch in different rooms and tell them that when they have the same basic story without any consultation with each other to come find you. It may take some time the first few times, or even longer, but as parents consistently apply consequences to the offender based on how long they make the innocent party sit there, they will be less and less willing to engage in a behavior they know they will be called on. Of course, there remains the difficult work of impressing on them the biblical call to honesty and integrity. And just as in any area of life, parental decisions are fraught with danger. Parents must make sure they are accurate in their assessment of their children’s sin.

From my own experience, I know the dangers of making assumptions. When our family was still a bit smaller, we had a boarder stay with us for a period of two years. He was a dear friend of our family and the two years he spent with us only strengthened our relationship. He would eat meals with our family, play games, babysit. In essence, he became one of the family. It happened one time that Lisa had saved me some special dessert. However, when I was about to eat it, I found the bowl in our sink, empty. I called all the children in and asked who had taken the dessert without asking. They all denied it, of course. So I followed the steps I have suggested above. All of them sat on the couch waiting for one to fess up to their transgression. I remember thinking that they were being really stubborn this time, refusing to accept responsibility. It must have been about thirty minutes later that our boarder walked in. He observed the scenario and asked, “What is going on?” I told him how one of the children had eaten the dessert but was not admitting it so we were waiting. He smiled sheepishly and said, “I ate the dessert.” Of course in those moments parents should feel badly for having punished children unjustly. It is right to apologize to them, and use it as a healthy reminder to make sure they are disciplining with right cause.

Tattle-Taling

Of the sins discussed in this chapter, tattle-taling is the easiest to address. The children are usually obvious in their choice and they are bringing the sin directly to the parent. They do not have discover the sin by stumbling across an inconsistency or some hidden evidence. The first step in dealing

with this sin is to come to a proper diagnosis of the problem. One way parents can determine whether they are dealing with a case of tattle-taling is to ask whether they have warned their brother about their sin. Have they told their sibling that God would not want them to do what they are doing? For example, if the charge is that a brother is speaking unkindly to his sister, has the sister said, “John, mom and dad have told us about talking that way to each other. You should not do that?” If the brother persists, he is doing so in the face of a proper reminder that has been given. Therefore, the first question parents should ask any prospective prosecuting young legal mind in their home is whether they have given their sibling this kind of counsel before coming to report the issue. If the answer is no, parents can be pretty sure they are dealing with a child who is rejoicing in the potential of causing trouble for their sibling. Sometimes their faces will betray their guilt. Whatever the case, parents want to be sure they are dealing with an instance of tattle-taling. Once they have made their determination, there are two steps to dealing with this issue in their children.

The first step is to bring immediate correction into the life of our child. They have transgressed, and to teach the grievousness of sinning against God’s law, parents have to give them a small picture of what persistence in sin will lead to. In our home that has meant that the tattler received the consequence they were hoping would be applied to the tattlee. For example, if they are hoping that the snack of their sibling would be taken away, instead the tattler’s treat is taken away.

The second step is more significant in the life of the child. Parents are seeking to teach their children what is at the root of their action. Tattling is seeking the harm of a neighbor; parents should teach their children to seek the good of their neighbor. They ought to teach their children truth to lead them in that direction from the word of God. In some cases this goal can be met through family worship by studying Proverbs as a book, or by doing a family study on kindness in Scripture. Much intentional discussion should circulate around what kind of form biblical kindness should take while you are not in the middle of a conflict. God demonstrates kindness to Lot, Naomi and Ruth, and others. Parents can talk about how God demonstrates his kindness to these people. They could also show their children Micah 6:8 where kindness is one of the central ways obedience to the law is implemented. Once parents have taught them from the word of God about the importance of kindness, they can address what is lacking in their character through creative consequences.

There will, no doubt, be many opportunities to teach children by being wise in encouraging right action after having given them instruction. Parents can encourage their children to help siblings with chores, play a game with them, read them a book, or some other activity that demonstrates their love for them. By doing so parents will provide the proper alternative to the sinful inclination toward selfishness. Granted, parents may only ever accomplish outward conformity at this point, they should

continue to pray for them in this area, asking that God would use their work to bring them to a full conformity to God's word, in thought and action.

Conclusion

Sinners against the ninth commandment takes different forms in the family. Whether children are tattle-taling as little ones or lying as teen-agers, parents must always help bring them back to the moral law. Christian families are to reflect God's character in their behavior.¹⁰ Even though children may not understand all they are required to do, it is exactly by requiring godly behavior, that parents can lead their children to understand the value of those character traits. So parents are to look for the root sin that sits behind the ninth commandment: promotion of self at the expense of another in all its different forms.

¹⁰ Ephesians 5:1 (ESV).

Study Questions

1. How does John 8:44 help give a biblical understanding of the concept of truthfulness and lying?
2. What are some different reasons a child may choose to lie? What do all these different reasons have in common?
3. In what way is tattle-taling related to the ninth commandment? How could it be corrected?
4. What is at the core of the sins of lying, deceiving, and tale-bearing? How is it manifest in each instance?
5. How can you tell the difference between a child who is coming to the parent out of real concern for their friend or sibling, and one who is seeking to delight themselves in their trouble?