

Sermon 79, What Is Required in the Ninth Commandment, Exodus 20:16

Proposition: The ninth commandment requires us to speak, think, live, and love the truth.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are rapidly approaching the end of these Ten Commandments, at which point we will dive back into the narrative of Exodus and see the contents of the “Book of the Covenant” in the next four chapters. But before we get to the end, we need to talk about the 9th commandment and its strong statement against lying in a judicial context. “You shall not testify against your neighbor as a false witness,” God commands us. The falseness, in other words, is not just a quality of the words you speak. Ultimately, according to this commandment, falseness is a character flaw. It's a quality not just of your words, but of yourself. Lying is close to the bone; the false witness is you, and me, and all of us. This commandment requires us to do better. It commands that we be better. It is a commandment that mandates truth — truth in speech, in thought, in life and in love. How can we do better? Only through Jesus our Lord, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Let's dive in.

I. Speaking the Truth

We are required to speak the truth, brothers and sisters. One would think that this is straightforward. Our words need to correspond to the way the world really is. We need to say

only what we know to be true, and to say it in a loving way. That sounds like a low bar; it's actually a very high bar. Among the human race, only Jesus Christ clears it.

The commandment speaks directly of the worst form of lying, which is to bear false witness against your neighbor.

A. In Court

In other words, this commandment envisions a courtroom setting. Just as adultery is the worst of all sexual sins, so lying in court, when a judicial penalty is on the line, is the worst of all sins against the truth. In ancient Israel, according to Nahum Sarna, testimony was not given under oath. So oath-breaking comes under the third commandment, but lying in a judicial context (apart from the oath-breaking) comes under this ninth commandment.

Apart from our law enforcement officers, most of us rarely have occasion to testify in court. But when you do, God threatens the utmost penalty against those who distort or harm the truth in their testimony. Speak the truth in a legal setting. Lawyers, this goes especially for you; the command is not just to witnesses, but also to counsel, judges, clerks, defendants, and prosecutors. All of you have the chance to lie in court; God will not help you if you do. In fact, He will turn against you if you do.

B. On Social Media

We are also required to speak the truth on social media. I am fully aware that checking whether you are speaking the truth and putting a hot take on Twitter may not be compatible with each other. Reposting something about medicine, politics, or some crisis far away may involve you in repeating lies as well. So often the original post saying "Some horrible thing is happening!" has been updated and the solution of the problem has already occurred — yet people will still be seeing, and sharing, the original post about how Mikey is missing or Abby is in need of diapers pronto or you name it.

Brothers and sisters, it's incredibly easy to lie for yourself. It's even easier to repeat someone else's falsehoods. I beg you, do not repeat or share information that you cannot verify for yourself. By "verify," I don't mean saying "I can find three experts on this side of a disputed point." I mean establishing beyond a reasonable doubt.

By repeating something, you are putting it on your conscience. If it is not accurate, don't repeat it. And yes, repeating it is exactly what "share" means. You are making yourself morally responsible for the content of a post that you share, even if you think "Well, the origin of this post is clearly marked on it." So it is — but your friends who see it don't see it as coming from some politician or think tank or medical provider; they see it as coming from you. Whatever the misnamed Communications Decency Act says, when you post, host, and repeat information it is information for which you are taking responsibility.

I understand that this means that pretty much all of us need to say less on social media. I get that. In fact, I think it's a good thing. And I promise you that if our legal regime were adjusted to fit with this commandment, such that social networks became responsible for the veracity of their content, some huge amount of the damage they do would disappear overnight.

Social media is an extremely powerful tool that must be used with great care. It is a megaphone that takes your statements and makes them publicly accessible, in print, forever. Every idle word that men shall tweet will come back to haunt them long before the day of judgment.

C. In Daily Life

Finally, brothers and sisters, we are called to speak the truth in daily life. Before the bailiff administers the oath, before our fingers hit the keyboard, we are still required to tell the truth. We are going to talk next week about various popular ways of shading and misrepresenting the truth, but today, I simply want to remind you that we are called to speak only what we know to be true and no more at all times and in all circumstances. We Christians, redeemed from Egypt, are called to be people of integrity.

II. Thinking the Truth

One major way in which we do that comes even prior to speech. I speak, of course, of thinking the truth. This is under assault like you wouldn't believe among Christian people. There are three major areas in which our thinking of the truth is under attack, to put it mildly.

A. Guesses, Assumptions, Motives

The first of these is a huge temptation for some personality types, and much less of a temptation for others. But if it is an issue for you, I trust that you will recognize yourself in the description I'm about to give.

Some people love to sniff out motives; "Oh! So-and-so did that because her daughter is in my class and she wants me to give the daughter a good grade." This is a total guess. It is rank speculation. But to some people, this kind of thought is absolutely irresistible. They think it, indulge it, and make decisions on the basis of their conclusions about other's motives. There's only one problem: It's entirely guesswork. You may be very sure of your guesses. But at the end of the day, they are just that — guesses. They are not facts, and your evidence consists of putting two and two together and being sure that your guess is correct.

Don't assume motives. I really don't care how sure you are that you are correct in your assumptions. They are still assumptions, even if they are correct. To be genuine knowledge, a belief must be warranted. Your guess is not a sufficient warrant.

Do you make decisions on the basis of guesses and assumptions? Or do you make decisions only on the basis of warranted, evidence-based information? This is not an idle question. This is part of getting your thinking in touch with the truth. Saying "I want it to be so, therefore it must be so" is a lie and a violation of the ninth commandment.

While I'm on this theme, let me mention one of my pet peeves in this area. It relates to relationships. You all have long-standing relationships — people you've known and in many cases lived with for decades. If you refuse to acknowledge and work with their personalities and limitations, your thinking is not in touch with the truth. For instance, in one couple I know the husband is a nice guy but rather mousy. The wife is very pushy and loves to go full mama bear on anyone she considers a threat to herself or her offspring. They've been married for thirty years. And the wife is still upset when the husband refuses to go full mama bear on someone.

I know another couple where the wife has no skills or patience with paperwork. The husband routinely asks her to file legal materials, to pay bills, to spend hours on the phone with the insurance company — and she inevitably messes it up. This husband is lying to himself. His thinking is not in touch with reality. He knows what his wife is like; they've been married 25 years. But he assumes that she has changed despite the weekly evidence to the contrary.

Brothers and sisters, if this is you then I beg of you in the name of God to repent! In violating the ninth commandment and lying to yourself, you are also violating the fifth commandment and failing to honor the people around you by respecting their limitations.

B. Sources

A second way in which our thinking can be dominated by lies is when we use sources irresponsibly. The single most common failing here is to say “I think I read . . . I think I heard” and then to rattle off something that you basically just made up on the spot. Sure, your memory vaguely tells you that there was something astonishing in what you read, but you don't remember it, so you make it up for the purpose of passing it on.

Another way in which we sin against the truth is in trusting inaccurate sources. Notice that I didn't say “disreputable.” Reputable and disreputable can both be wrong. But inaccurate sources are wrong all the time. Do you check your sources before you trust them? Do you let yourself believe information that may be suspect? I already mentioned this with respect to sharing information, but believing it is the first step. I implore you to check your sources and refuse to commit to suspect information.

Knowledge is true, justified, belief. It can be true even if it's not warranted, but you can't know it to be true without a warrant of some kind. What is your warrant for this belief? If you cannot produce one, then you do not know it to be true and you should not repeat it as if it were true.

C. Ideologies

If that is true about matters of fact, how much more crucial it is when it comes to ideologies! The ideas and competing worldviews that inform our thinking can be and in many cases are based on lies. I'm talking about popular views like feminism, socialism, and planks in the platforms of both major American political parties. The ideologies of materialism and hedonism are not true, and no Christian should believe them or make decisions based on them.

Brothers and sisters, make sure that your thinking is grounded in truth. The way to do that is to be grounded first of all in God's word and in eternity. When the most pressing concerns of your life are “What shall I eat? What shall I drink? What shall I wear?” then you are half a step away from materialism and from any ideology that promises to give you more to eat, drink, and wear. When the most pressing concern of your life is “I want pleasure,” then you are half a step from hedonism.

How can you stay away from false ideologies? By renewing your mind in response to God's revelation in the book of Scripture and in the book of nature. Natural revelation is revelation; what you learn by realizing your spouse's limitations and strong points is true and therefore is a friend of God — or, as Augustine said it so much better, all truth is God's truth.

III. Living the Truth

Well, since truth belongs to God and this ninth commandment requires us to be truthful, how do we live the truth? The answer is that we let the truth change our minds and shape our behavior. To live the truth is to do what the truth demands.

A. Changing When Rebuked

The first of these is undoubtedly our responsibility to change when we are rebuked. All of us have seen someone called out for their behavior, listened to them say “It won’t happen again,” and then seen it happen again — repeatedly. More to the point, all of us have been rebuked for something and then gone off and done it again — even, in many cases, when we agreed with the rebuke and really wanted to change. Brothers and sisters, to really live the truth, you and I need to be ready to hear rebuke and to change our ways in response.

This is not easy. But it is what the truth requires — to admit our sins, and to turn away from them toward the truth.

B. Making Decisions Based on Truth, Not on Wishful Thinking

The second thing that living the truth involves is what we’ve already talked about at length — making decisions based on truth rather than on wishful thinking. To live the truth is to do what the truth requires in our daily lives.

IV. Loving the Truth

And that, in turn, requires us to love the truth. I want to say just a few things about this.

A. It’s Work: Truth Won’t Just Happen

The first is that it’s work to find out the truth, embrace it, and live it. You will not find the truth just by diving deep into your own thoughts. You have to study, pray, search, and learn.

My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee;
2 So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding;
3 Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding;
4 If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures;
5 Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.
(Pro 2:1-5 KJV)

Finding the truth is no easier than finding hidden treasure. It’s just plain old work to research, study, learn, and understand the truth.

B. It’s Humiliating: Pride Resists the Truth

Not only is it work; it’s humiliating too. Our pride would rather think what we want to think than submit to learning the truth from an outside source. The truth corrects and challenges us, and we don’t like to be corrected and challenged.

C. It’s Required

But it’s required. You have to love the truth.

1. Speaking the Truth in Love

Hence Paul’s pairing of truth and love. Speaking the truth is good, but it’s not enough.

2. If Not Driven by Love, It's Not True Enough

That's the apostle's point: If your truth is not at the same time driven by love, it's not really true enough. Hence the mention of the neighbor for the first time in the ten commandments here in the ninth of them. It really is true that if you don't love the truth, you won't do the work to learn it, speak it, think it, and live it. It is even more true that if you don't love your neighbor, lying to him won't bother you. If you don't love God, lying to yourself won't bother you. Without love, in other words, the truth can't live.

D. It's Personal: Jesus Is the Truth

The final point here is really that it's personal. Because Jesus is the truth, you have to love Him in order to be someone who cares about, lives, and speaks the truth.

He died because of lies. False witnesses twisted His words and got Him condemned. But He also died for lies — for your lies and mine. In the death of Jesus we have forgiveness for our sins against truth. Love Him; know Him; walk in Him, and you'll abide in the truth. Amen.