

“Sticks and Stones...”  
Exodus 20:16  
December 11, 2005  
Dr. Jerry Nelson

In the late 1800s the French writer, Guy de Moupassant wrote the short story, entitled, “A Piece of String.”

It was market day in France and a large crowd of peasants and noblemen were making their way to the nearby town.

One peasant, being a thrifty Norman, saw a piece of string on the ground and stooped to pick it up thinking it might be useful in the future.

As he bent over to pick it up he saw his neighbor the harness maker looking at him.

There was no love lost between these two men and embarrassed at being seen to pick up something as worthless as a piece of string, the peasant quickly slipped it into his clothing and then kept looking around as if still seeking something which he apparently didn't find and went on his way.

Later that morning everyone in the town square heard the announcement that a noble lady had, that very morning, on the same road to town, lost her black purse with money in it.

A reward was offered for its return.

Just moments later the local gendarmes found the peasant and ordered him to the mayor's office where he was told that the harness maker had seen him pick up the purse on the road.

The peasant protested his innocence but to no avail because the harness maker said he not only saw him pick it up but also saw him look around to see if any money had fallen from the purse.

All that day and the next the word spread that the peasant had taken the purse and everywhere he went he tried to tell about the string but no one believed him.

The next day the farmhand of another gentleman returned the purse telling how he, the farmhand, had found it on the road but not being able to read to know to whom it belonged, he took to his master that evening.

When the peasant heard that the purse was returned he felt vindicated and said to all who would listen,

“What grieved me was not the thing itself, do you understand, but it was being accused of lying. Nothing does you so much harm as being in disgrace for lying.”

But to his utter dismay, people thought the farmhand was an accomplice that the peasant had paid to return the purse.

Everywhere the peasant went he was treated as a thief.

In his own defense he retold the story over and over again.

“And so he lengthened his recital every day, each day adding new proofs, more energetic declarations and more sacred oaths...which he prepared in his hours of solitude, for his mind was entirely occupied with the story of the string.

The more he denied it and the more artful his arguments, the less he was believed.”

Moupassant ends his story with these words:

“It preyed upon the peasant and he exhausted himself in useless efforts.

He was visibly wasting away.

(Hecklers) would make him tell the story of ‘the piece of string’ to amuse themselves... His mind kept growing weaker and about the end of December he took to his bed.

He passed away early in January, and, in the ravings of death agony, he protested his innocence, repeating:

‘A little bit of string -- a little bit of string.’”

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but **words** can never harm me.”

Surely only a child could possibly believe that.

1700 years ago St. Augustine wrote, “The tongue inflicts greater wounds than the sword.”

1100 years before that Solomon said in Proverbs 25:18 “Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor.”

600 years before that God said, Exodus 20:16, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”

“There is nothing more contrary to (the opposite of) God than a lie.”

(Watson, The Ten Commandments, 170)

Puritan, Thomas Watson wrote that in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

I believe that statement captures why the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment is so important.

In the hierarchy of sins that I mentioned last week wherein we consider murder to be the highest and worst of sins and stealing significantly below it in importance, we place lying even lower.

In fact lying is so much a part of our culture and our lives that we find it somewhat odd that such a common and insignificant issue should make it into **THE** 10 Commandments.

But Watson captures the significance of the issue, and I repeat:

“There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie.”

We are all tempted to think of truth telling as simply a good idea and lying as usually a bad idea but we might treat the subject lightly if we don't see that the issue is rooted in the very person of God.

This commandment didn't evolve from some ethics course in an ancient university; it came God himself. AND God is truth.

Truth is quite simply what conforms to reality.

- God actually exists.
- We exist with names, bodies and relationships.
- There is history and there is a future.
- Life is not an illusion but also life is not only what we see.

25 years ago, this past week, John Lennon was killed.

Many tributes were given to him and his songs.

One, of which much has been made, is his famous song, "Imagine."

Imagine there's no heaven,  
It's easy if you try,  
No hell below us,  
Above us only sky,  
Imagine all the people  
living for today...

The attractive melody of that song attached to the attractive idea of peace makes it seem so right but it is so wrong.

It perpetuates a lie not the truth.

It imagines that earth, sky, people and today are all there is.

There is no heaven or hell, no God, and no life beyond now.

What an empty, hopeless, and tragic existence.

But God is (he exists); the evidence for his existence is all around us and most supremely the evidence is in his Son, Jesus, who came to earth, died and rose again.

- And that God has said there is a past before which nothing existed except him – he is the source of all reality and of all truth that conforms to that reality.
- And that God has said there is a future, which will be forever – a heaven and a hell.
- And that God has said that he created humanity to bear his image.

And we bear his image when we recognize truth, live in truth, and speak truth.

"There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie" and nothing more conformed to his character than the truth.

Or as God said it, "I am the LORD your God... You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."

It seems to me that the importance of this issue of truth telling can't get much clearer or weightier than that.

There is yet another reason for not bearing false witness against another.

No other creature has been invested with the level of dignity that humans possess.

Humans alone, God said, bear his image.

When we thought about the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment (not misusing the name of the LORD), we remembered that we want to say or do nothing that will demean or defame the person of God.

We will always be careful to protect his reputation because he is worthy.

This 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment is in one way a reflection of the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

To demean or defame another human being is to demean and defame their Father in whose image they have been created.

To bear false witness against another human being is to bear false witness against God.

Think of it this way: Any human being you encounter is created by God and loved by God.

Can we imagine God's attitude toward any of us who would seek to harm someone he has intentionally made and deeply loves?

**“There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie”**

How seriously does God feel about this?

Look at what he said about someone who bears false witness against his neighbor.

Deuteronomy 19:16-20 “If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then **do to him as he intended to do to his brother**. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you.’

Exodus 20:16, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”

The very wording of the commandment suggests a legal setting.  
 When we hear “false testimony” we think of a court of law.  
 In those days the elders would hear testimony from witnesses about any cases brought before them.

Truth is foundational to a just society.

God knew any society would collapse if life, marriage, family and property were not protected by courts where truth could be determined.

We have laws that we expect citizens to obey to enable each other to live in peace, productivity and prosperity.

When someone seems to break one or more of those laws it is imperative that we be able to discern the truth.

And witnesses are central to this process of discovering the truth – that which conforms to reality.

As I showed you earlier, God takes the issue of witnessing very seriously.

We do the same.

That is why Lewis “Scooter” Libby is in trouble today.

In October, CNN reported, “Libby resigned Friday after a federal grand jury indicted him on five charges related to the leak probe: one count of obstruction of justice, two counts of perjury and two counts of making false statements. CNN Oct 29, 2005

Most of us will never be in a courtroom under oath.

Is the commandment only about legal perjury?

As with other of the commandments, God illustrates the commandment by using the most flagrant example, thereby including all forms of lying up to and including perjury.

So not only is perjury included in the commandment but all forms of lying, as other passages show us:

Leviticus 19:11 `Do not steal. `Do not lie. `Do not deceive one another.

Proverbs 6:17 “A lying tongue” is one of seven things the Lord hates.

So now we state it most simply: You shall not lie!

But we all know it is not quite that simple.

What about Rahab of Jericho who lied to protect the very lives of the spies of Israel?

What about Corrie ten Boom who lied to protect the lives of Jews she was hiding in her home during the holocaust?

For centuries theologians have agreed that there are words that don't conform to reality (they are untrue) that may not yet be lies of the kind prohibited in Exodus 20:16.

I want to suggest three kinds of lies that may not rise to the seriousness of the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

I know this is debatable but I only offer it quickly for your later consideration because I think the Commandment is describing something much more serious.

First there are **Joking lies**, sometimes told where the intention is simply humor.

Everyone knows the statement is not true and no deceit is intended.

However humor can sometimes be misunderstood and any preacher worth his salt knows you have to be very careful with jokes.

Jokes can also be used to convey real malice and we must know the difference.

Second are **Necessary lies**, the kind told in dire circumstances.

This is when I lie to protect my neighbor not to hurt him.

It is Corrie ten Boom or Rahab, that I mentioned earlier, or the midwives who kept Israelite babies alive in the Pharaoh's attempts at genocide.

This category is difficult indeed and we would probably do well to not judge another in this matter but trust God to help each of us in such situations should they arise.

Augustine and other following him have said even these lies are wrong; we must simply entrust our lives to God and tell the truth.

But entrusting our own lives to God and betraying someone else are two different things.

We must allow for the wisdom and grace of God in such situations.

Thirdly there are **Polite lies**.

These are the situations where your desire is to avoid humiliating someone or making them feel bad.

Customary etiquette or even respect might call for this.

Your friend asks what you think of his tie.

The truth is you think it's ugly.

"Hey, do you like the way my hair is cut?"

"You didn't actually pay for that haircut did you?"

You ask your colleague at work, "How do you think I'm doing?"

"Gene, your lack of basic intelligence and creativity have you on the verge of being let go." (Horton, The Law of Perfect Freedom, 226)

This kind of lying is also a difficult issue because even saying nothing can often leave a false impression. (See J Douma, Luther and Augustine on these three kinds of lying.)

But I will not be too hard on such speech because as J. Douma said it, "Politeness is an air cushion, there's nothing inside, but it absorbs life's bumps." (Jochem Douma, 332)



But there are two other kinds of lying that I think the Bible speaks directly to:

There are the **Self-serving lies**.

We lie to impress people.

In 1993 the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey ran a help-wanted ad for electricians with expertise at using Sontag connectors, it got 170 responses even though there is no such thing as a Sontag connector. The Port Authority ran the ad to find out how many applicants falsify their resumes.

(www.horizonsnet.org/sermons)

Exaggeration as a form of speech can be properly used but when we use it to give a false impression, for our own aggrandizement, it is a lie.

We not only lie to impress others but we lie to escape punishment or embarrassment.

From early childhood to adulthood we will deceive in order to avoid the consequences of our actions.

And sometimes we lie to make a profit.

Whether it's a garage sale, the number of hours we invested at work, expense accounts, you name it – we are tempted to deceive.

A woman, coming home from work, stopped at the corner deli to buy a chicken for supper. The butcher reached below the counter, grabbed the last chicken he had, flung it on the scale, and told the woman its weight. She thought for a moment. "I really need a bit more chicken than that," she said. "Do you have any larger ones?" Without a word, the butcher put the chicken back into the cooler, groped around as though finding another, pulled the same chicken out, and placed it on the scales. "This chicken weighs one pound more," he announced. The woman pondered her options and then said, "Okay. I'll take them both." (In Chuck Jones sermon at w.horizonsnet.org/sermons)

Come to think of it, that kind of lying is also stealing forbidden in the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment.

**But I'm convinced there is yet another kind of lie, which the Commandment is dealing with primarily.**

The commandment says, "Don't give false testimony **against your neighbor.**"

This moves the Commandment out of the abstraction of lying into the concrete prohibition of the specific kinds of words that harm another.

A. This is the kind of lie the harness-maker, in my earlier story, told about the peasant. It was a lie that harms another.

Obviously the commandment prohibits saying or implying any untrue, damaging thing about another.

This is the situation where the report is made up and the speaker knows it.

B. But just as obviously wrong is the retelling of a false report. To refrain from lying is not only to refrain from making up something that is untrue but also to refrain from retelling it if we hear it.

C. Not as obviously this includes a prohibition of telling or retelling a **truth** about someone when the effect is to demean their reputation.

Many things that are true are none-the-less gossip and slander when the effect of them is another's hurt.

"I need to tell you something in confidence..."

"This has been secret for a long time but I think you should know that..."

"I know how much we all respect so-and-so, but can you believe..."

We say, "I didn't mean to hurt them." – Nonsense! We knew exactly what we were doing – the words are hurtful and harmful to the other.

One man wrote, "We indulge in this by making ourselves the people who are always right, making ourselves the people who always do good; we are the people, we say, who are always having injustices done to us, but who never do injustices to other people! For all lies

are not just things which crop up occasionally and pass through us without affecting us; they are an expression of what we are, and as such they mold our lives, quite literally making us into a lie!" (M.E. Andrews, "Falsehood and Truth" in Interpretation, 17 (1963), 436)

Luther said there is a great difference between knowing about (another's) sin and talking about (another's) sin. (In Douma, 317)

We don't have to pass it on even if it is true.

D. It is equally wrong to receive a bad report, without examination, as it is to give it.

Thomas Watson wrote, "He who tells it carries the devil in his tongue and he who hears it carries the devil in his ear." (Watson, 169)

Judging without the facts, jumping to conclusions, or assuming something is true without full knowledge are forms of lying even if it is to ourselves.

Most of the time no one requires us to pass judgment but we still do.

So often , even in our hearing, we accuse, we prosecute and we pass sentence all in one fell swoop.

E. Even failing to tell the truth about someone can be as lying.

You can wrong another by silence as well as by slander. (Watson, 173)

Leviticus 5:1 "If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible."

I think we can sum it up this way:

Better I should steal my neighbor's possessions than steal his reputation.

Some would not think of taking a man's life but not hesitate to take his good name.

This slander, this malicious gossip, this lying, this false testimony, comes so naturally to us.

How do we change that?

First, we go to the Word of God.

First, so that God's definitions of lying penetrate our consciences so we have a basis for evaluating our words.

Secondly, we go to the Word of God, so that God's Spirit can use his Word to change us.

1 Peter 2:1-3 "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation..."

God's expectation is that his Word will not only show us our guilt but will empower us for good.

Ephesians 4:25-28 "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Secondly, in addition to digesting God's word, **we must also see the damage lying does**; we must know that lying is not an insignificant matter.

There is the story of a pastor in a farming community who had been falsely accused of a scandalous act.

The story spread quickly with such opening phrases as: "Have you heard about the pastor?" "Can you believe it?" "You'd never guess it to look at him would you?" "His poor wife."

After a time, however the rumor was found to be completely false but many people in the town who had believed it were reluctant to change their opinion thinking, "There must have been some truth to it or why would everybody believe it?"

Weeks later the couple who had started the malicious rumor went to pastor and confessed their sin asking his forgiveness.

The pastor he would certainly forgive them but he also wished for them to do something for him.

He asked them to butcher one of their chickens and collect all the feathers in a bag.

Then they were to walk through the town dropping feathers as they went and finally they were to climb the water tower in the center of the city and scatter the remaining feathers in the wind.

“Will you do this for me?” he asked.

Mystified, they somewhat reluctantly agreed.

Just as they were about to leave, the pastor asked yet another favor of them.

“When you have finished will you please take the bag and go all over town picking up all the feathers you have dropped? Be careful to get all of them.”

It was then that the couple realized the point of the pastor’s odd request and they hung their heads in shame realizing they could never undo the damage that had been done. (Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments*, 211)

Thirdly, to stop our lying ways, we must pray for a love for others that will want only their good.

The surest way to keep from speaking ill is to love them; we would never life-damaging words against our own sons or daughters.

Might that be true of our brothers and sisters in the Lord.  
1 Corinthians 13:5-7 Love “is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects...”

Fourthly, to keep from lying, we ask for the Spirit’s power to control our tongues.

Psalm 141:3 “Set a **guard** over my mouth, O LORD;  
keep watch over the door of my **lips**.”

Thomas Watson said the tongue has three fences to keep it where it belongs: the teeth, the lips and the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

(Watson, The Ten Commandments, 169)

The 10 Commandments begin with God saying, "I am the LORD **your** God who brought you out of slavery."

God has freed them and us to be able to live differently.

Lying comes so easily to us, it is in the genes of our sinful nature inherited from our father the devil.

But when we are born again, a new power indwells us; we have a new Father, our God, who enables us to do what is from him.

Earlier I spoke of John Lennon's song "Imagine."

I want you to imagine something very different.

**Imagine a family and a church where people only spoke well of each other and others.**

Ephesians 4:29 Speaking "only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Imagine that, apart from those times when we are responsible for making decisions about putting people in places of authority or are responsible for the discipline of others in the home, church or employment, imagine we committed to never again saying or even insinuating a negative thing about another person.

Imagine if gone were the sarcasms, the jokes with an edge, the negative comments either outright or in the guise of concern or even in the guise of prayer requests.

Imagine if, when treated unjustly, we spoke only to the person who has offended us and then only if absolutely necessary.

Imagine!

I leave you with three statements:

"There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie."

Better I should steal my neighbor's possessions than steal his reputation for he is made in the image of God.

Exodus 20:16, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."

The Heidelberg Catechism of the 1500s answers the question: What is required in the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment?

“That I bear false witness against no man, nor falsify any man's words; that I be no backbiter (gossip), nor slanderer; that I do not judge, nor join in condemning any man rashly, or unheard; but that I avoid all sorts of lies and deceit, as the works of the devil, unless I would bring down upon me the heavy wrath of God; likewise, that in judgment and all other dealings I love the truth, speak it uprightly and confess it; also that I defend and promote, as much as I am able, the honor and good character of my neighbour.”

Literal translation of Exodus 20:16 “You shall not answer against your neighbor as a witness of falsehood.” (M.E. Andrews, “Falsehood and Truth” in Interpretation, 17 (1963), 424)

What to do if you are slandered: If you are slandered make good use of it. Check your heart to see if there is ANY truth in the accusation. If you are slandered let your reputation be your vindication. “As no flattery can heal a bad conscience, so no slander can hurt a good one.” God will clear the names of his people. (Thomas Watson, The Ten Commandments)

“Christian faith must show itself to be Christian faith by this advocacy of grace with all its ethical (entailments). Christians live by the grace which intervenes to liberate and acquit them, and in this way they taste their freedom...” (Jan Lochman, Signposts to Freedom, 141)

“The slanderer wounds three at once: he wounds him that is slandered; he wound him to whom he reports the slander, by causing uncharitable thoughts to rise up in his mind against the party slandered; and he wounds his own soul by reporting what is false.” (Watson 171)

Luther's Large Catechism: “For it is a common evil plague that every one prefers hearing evil to hearing good of his neighbor; and although we ourselves are so bad that we cannot suffer that any one should



say anything bad about us, but every one would much rather that all the world should speak of him in terms of gold, yet we cannot bear that the best is spoken about others.”

“Those, then, are called slanderers who are not content with knowing a thing, but proceed to assume jurisdiction, and when they know a slight offense of another, carry it into every corner, and are delighted and tickled that they can stir up another's displeasure [baseness], as swine roll themselves in the dirt and root in it with the snout.”