

Sermon 80, What Is Forbidden in the Ninth Commandment, Exodus 20:16

Proposition: The ninth commandment forbids lying because Jesus loves truth.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the ninth commandment covers a lot of territory relating to our own and our neighbor's good name, especially in witness-bearing. Literally translated, it says "You shall not answer against your neighbor as a false witness." But though the commandment contains many directions in which we could go, and says much about the right way to speak and forbids wrong ways of speaking, I want to narrow the focus this morning and speak specifically of one major sin: Lying. The tongue can no man tame, but if we start to understand what lying is and why it's always wrong, we have a better chance. Through the power of the Holy Spirit of truth, you and I can be people of truth who put away lying. So let's trace some major aspects of the lie this morning with the goal of rooting them out of our lives and repenting of them. The ninth commandment forbids lying because Jesus loves truth — and if we love Him, we will love the truth too.

I. Lying: An Assertion Contrary to the Speaker's Mind

Let us begin with a definition of lying. What is a lie? A lie is any assertion contrary to the speaker's mind. To tell a lie, in other words, someone need not intend to deceive. Lying and deception are closely related, but they are not identical to each other. Frequently lies are told to deceive, but not all deception is lying and not all lies deceive. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not going to address deception in general in this sermon. Morally, it's not a clear-cut issue. Jesus Himself "made as if He would go further," a form of deception toward the disciples who accompanied Him to Emmaus.

But lying most certainly is a clear-cut issue. When you understand it properly, as any assertion that is contrary to what you actually believe to be the case, then it follows clearly that lying is always wrong.

II. Lying: A Great Sin

Lying is a great sin, and the chief thing forbidden by the ninth commandment. Thou shalt not state as the truth anything which thou believest not, in all sincerity, to be the truth. So we could paraphrase the commandment as it relates to lying.

A. Contrary to Divine Truth

Why is lying a great sin? Because in the first place, it is contrary to the truth of God. God cannot lie. His agent David says this: "Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy; No one who has a haughty look and an arrogant heart will I endure" (Psa 101:5). Thus, Solomon affirms that "A false witness will not go unpunished, And he who tells lies will not escape" (Pro 19:5). Psa 5:6 adds, "Thou dost destroy those who speak falsehood; The LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit."

God abhors and punishes the sin of lying, because He is true and speaks the truth. He will never say something different than what He knows to be the case. And He made us to be like Him, specifically like His Son who is the truth.

B. Contrary to Human Integrity

Lying is also a great sin because it is contrary to human integrity. The moment you begin to assert as true something you believe to be false is the moment you torpedo your own integrity. That wholeness, whereby your thoughts, words, and actions match each other, has been ripped apart. Now your thoughts are different from your words, and your actions perhaps different from both. Your integrity is gone. So a lie is a sin against God and a sin against humanity. It is something that God hates. And it's astonishingly easy to fall into it. As Mark Twain put it, "A lie is an abomination to the Lord and a very present help in time of trouble." So it is, my friends, so it is.

III. Lying: An Easy Sin

The fact is that lying is a very easy sin to commit. I won't go so far as to say that we all do it every day, but I think it nearly indisputable that we all do it. Allow me to explain.

A. Shading the Truth

The first way in which we break this commandment is by shading the truth. That means, of course, nothing absolutely false — just a little spin, a little way of stating the facts or telling the story that overemphasizes one side and underplays the other. You know exactly what I'm talking about. There are a number of ways to do this.

1. Telling More than You Know

One major one is telling more than you know. As I frequently say in response to questions, “If I told you that I'd be telling you more than I know.” You are asked a question and you don't rightly know the answer. Rather than saying “I don't know the answer,” you make something up that seems plausible, based on some half-remembered facts, assumptions, and guesses. Folks, don't do it. The three most common words in American schools may truly be “I don't know,” and they ought to be more common on the lips of Christian men and women. If you don't know, admit it. Don't try to make something up to conceal the reality that you don't know.

2. Flattery

Another way of shading the truth is to excessively and aggressively compliment someone, exaggerating their good points and ignoring any weaknesses. That is called flattery, and it is much practiced in our feelings-based era. I cannot say that I have seen anyone in this church indulge in this sin. But I know that it is out there, and it is much used to make people do what you want. If you flatter them enough, they will play along with whatever you want.

3. Criticism

The flip side of flattery is criticism. This too is another means of manipulation, but rather than excessive praise, it makes use of excessive blame to motivate. Parents especially are guilty of this one. When your child does something of which you don't approve, do you assail their fault verbally for a long time? Or do you give a short rebuke, then forgive and move on? Criticism can be and frequently is a way of holding everyone around you hostage to your feelings. You let it be known that if someone says something of which you disapprove, you will let that person have it at length. You will “tear him a new one.” Folks, insofar as what you say in these struggle sessions is incomplete, unbalanced, or incorrect, it is a form of lying. In the heat of the moment it may not be contrary to your mind, but I guarantee that in your more sober moments you realize that dilating verbally to your husband on his faults for two and half hours is so one-sided as to be indistinguishable from a lie.

4. Exaggeration & Carelessness

Another form of lying is exaggeration or just plain carelessness about accuracy. Both flattery and criticism are forms of exaggeration, where you take something and blow it out of all proportion to its actual size and importance. Taking a fact that you heard — something innocuous, like “The population of Mexico is 132 million,” and bumping that up to something like “There are almost 200 million Mexicans ready to surge across the southern border and swamp the American way of life” is simply a lie. Exaggerating 132 million into 200 million, misstating their intentions (the vast majority of Mexicans, like other people, have no interest in living anywhere but the country of their birth), and so on is just plain lying. It may accurately reflect your state of mind, and in that sense you could try to tell me that it is not technically a lie. But as we said last week, you are

responsible to keep your thinking in line with the truth. If you get to the place where you believe that there are 200 million Mexicans, you have abandoned the truth a long time ago. Not caring when you are convicted of exaggerations is just as bad, or worse, than the original exaggeration. You and I are responsible to speak the truth; when we let a penchant for exaggeration run away with us, we are breaking the ninth commandment.

5. Incomplete Confession & Repentance

This final one is really a biggie, one that comes up all the time. The Larger Catechism puts it like this: “hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession” (WLC 145). Do you hide some of your sin, or some part of your sin, when confessing? Do you make excuses for your sins: “The woman you gave me!” Do you extenuate your sin — “It looks bad, but here’s why it isn’t really so bad and I’m really a decent person, even though I did x, y, and z”? The fact is that pretty much of all us hide, excuse, and extenuate our sins, even to ourselves and certainly to others and even to the Almighty.

Don’t do this. Confess your particular sins particularly, especially to God but also to the person you’ve sinned against. That is the only Christian way to deal with sin.

B. Ignoring the Truth

There is another class of lies that go beyond simply sidelining the truth. These lies flat-out ignore the truth.

1. Treating Assumptions as Facts

The first that we as Christians should shun is the habit of treating assumptions as facts. I discussed this at length last Sunday; suffice it to say here that you have no business taking your guesses and treating them as gospel truth. They aren’t. To say that they are, or to act as though they are, is to tell a lie to yourself and to those who are observing and listening to you.

2. Listening to False Reports & Fake News

Another major form of lying is to listen to the lies of others. People generally stop talking when there is no one listening. All the conspiracy theorists, all the immoral claims of politicians and bureaucrats — these people are lying, and if you listen to their lies you are encouraging them. You are sharing their guilt when you listen to and believe their lying claims. Whether it’s something ridiculous, like Donald Trump claiming that the largest crowd ever attended his inauguration, or something sinister, like QAnon claiming that celebrities and politicians run a global child sex-trafficking ring, or something utterly self-serving, like Barack Obama saying “If you like your doctor, you can keep your doctor,” you have no business listening to and repeating these lies. I’m not saying, obviously, that it’s a sin to know that these people have made these claims. I’m saying that the sin lies in believing the claim without checking up on it.

This goes for people you don’t know, journalists and politicians and celebrities far away. It goes in spades for people you do know. If you’re a boss and you have an employee with a suspicious habit of absenteeism, you’re a fool if you simply believe his excuses every time. If you’re an elder in the church and you have a family where the wife has bruises and the children act really cowed and nervous all the time, you’re a fool if you listen to the inventive stories and excuses of the smiling, handsome dad. The same goes for authorities across the board, at every

level in every institution: If you believe the perpetrator rather than the victim, you are guilty of breaking the ninth commandment. No matter how much more comfortable it is to believe that the handsome, articulate one is not guilty, and that the powerless, sad, helpless one is guilty as sin, you are complicit with the perpetrator's lie if you let yourself believe any such thing.

The bottom line here is that it's a sin to lazily reject doing your homework. Check up on what you hear. Suspend judgment on matters where you run into difficulty checking up on people. DO NOT, under any circumstances, simply believe the first report you hear. Doing that makes you a liar.

3. Wearing Ideological Blinders

Another way in which we ignore the truth is by wearing ideological blinders. When you do this, you subscribe to a particular view of the world and you only accept information, experiences, and evidence that conform to that view of the world. This can be on a large scale, with beliefs such as "The Jews are responsible for all the ills of the world" or "The LGBT lobby and the Democratic Party have no noble motives anywhere in their bodies." But it often does more damage on the small scale, with beliefs like "My husband is always trying to disrespect me." Whether your ideology is "People are all out to get poor little 'ol me," or "The people must own the means of production," or "That government is best which governs least," or "Smash the patriarchy," ideology blinds you to the truth.

What about "Jesus is Lord"? Is that an ideology? I believe not. An ideology is something that is incorrigible and unwilling to consider any contrary evidence, whereas the statement that "Jesus is Lord" is rightly paired, in the true tradition, with the statement that "Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures." The Lordship of Christ is equally ultimate with His suffering and death. That is what keeps the Christian message from being an ideological tyranny. It contains within itself, not quite its opposite, but certainly a challenge to its own narrative. If Jesus is Lord of Heaven and Earth, with all authority, how did a two-bit provincial governor crucify Him? We accept both, in a way that the true communist can never accept that socialism cannot exist without capitalism, or that the true feminist can never accept that feminism cannot exist without God-fearing patriarchy. They are wearing ideological blinders; the Christian freely admits that Jesus is weak enough to die, but also that He is strong enough to conquer death.

Don't succumb to any reductive ideology that insists that its mono-explanation is the one and only truth. The Christian faith is as large as Heaven and Earth; larger, in fact. Nothing else comes close.

4. Saying One Thing and Doing Another

Well, at sort of the opposite end from Marxist or feminist praxis and ideological commitment lies the everyday act of saying "I'll be there" and not showing up, or of saying "Let's get together sometime" and never acting to make it happen, or of promising to pay for your friend's gas to get you to the airport in Rapid and never getting around to it, or a hundred other ways in which we thoughtlessly make commitments and then fail to follow through with them. Brothers and sisters, these things are lies. And they are inappropriate for the Christian.

C. Resenting the Truth

The final way of lying I want to discuss is any failure to love the truth — or, better, any act of resenting the truth.

1. Pride

The first of these is pride. When you are sure that you are right, and even more sure that no one is worthy to correct you, you are walking in pride. Pride is the enemy of the truth, because truth deflates and destroys pride. Pride says you're greatest; the truth says that you are more likely pretty close to average. Pride says you're always right; the truth says you're wrong a decent part of the time. Pride says you don't need repentance and humbling and correction; the truth says you need them all, every day.

If you listen to the voice of pride, you will resent and hate the truth. And soon, you will no longer be able to speak or even think it.

2. Self-Will

The same goes for self-will, when you are utterly committed to having and doing everything your own way. When you are stuck in this rut, the truth that attempts to come in and say "Yelling at your child in front of the whole restaurant was an act of folly and evil" is a truth that you angrily reject. You wanted to do it, damn it, and you're going to stick to your guns! Brothers and sisters, beware self-will. Insofar as you are in its grip, you are a hater of the truth and thus a liar in the depths of your being.

3. Rejecting Correction

The final way we lie is by rejecting correction. I know a woman who believes, apparently on ideological grounds, that it is never right for an inferior to rebuke a superior. She never got that idea from Scripture — see Nathan and David, for instance, or the Israelite serving-girl and Naaman. But regardless, when her son rebuked her she attacked him viciously and told him to never do that again.

Folks, that is a sin against the truth. It's poisoned her relationship with her son. And it will poison her relationship with Jesus the truth unless she repents.

Don't reject correction, no matter what quarter it comes from. If you do, you are a liar.

IV. Lying: A Sin Removed by the Truth of Christ

So what do we do about lying? We go to Jesus the truth and let His truth remove our lies, His light destroy our darkness, His love cover and heal our hate. Jesus is the answer; He is the truth, and He will forgive your lies. Go to Him today, and walking with Him, learn how to speak the truth. You will, if you commit to Jesus the truth. Amen.