

(Devotional #31) **Christian Liberty and the Law – The Ten Commandments:**
The 9th Commandment: Respect for the Truth
(Exodus 20:16)

Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are His delight – Proverbs 12:22

A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who lies will perish – Proverbs 19:9

You shall not steal nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by My Name, so as to profane the Name of your God; I am Yahweh – Leviticus 19:11-12

Do not lie to one another, seeing you have put off the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of the (its) creator – Colossians 3:9-10

THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOR – Exodus 20:16

(“**Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor**” is the King James translation of the 9th Commandment.)

All ten commandments reflect the character and nature of God – *i.e.*, they are consistent with His Divine Attributes. For example, the 1st and 2nd Commandments, forbidding the worship of any god other than Yahweh, are grounded in God’s Attribute of Self-existence. The 3rd Commandment that forbids profaning God’s Name, is founded on God’s Attribute of Holiness. The commandment, ‘*Thou Shalt Not Kill*,’ recognizes the sanctity of life, since God Himself is the source of all life, having imparted to man His own ‘*image and likeness*’ ... and so on. In like manner, the 9th Commandment that forbids ‘*false witness*,’ rests on God’s Attribute of **ABSOLUTE TRUTH**.

The number of Scriptures that assert, ‘**GOD IS TRUTH**,’ are many; here are but a few:

- **DEUTERONOMY 32:4** declares, “*He is the Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are righteous ... (He is) A GOD OF TRUTH and without iniquity; just and right is He.*”
- In **JOHN 14:6**, Jesus said, “*I am the way, THE TRUTH, and the Life ...*”
- In **JOHN 1:14**, the Apostle writes of the Messiah: “*And the WORD became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and TRUTH.*”
- “*But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, i.e., THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about Me.*” (Here in **JOHN 15:26**, **God the Holy Spirit**, who shares in the Divine Attributes equally with God the Father and God the Son, is called, ‘**THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH**.’)

There is an interesting phrase in Titus 1:2 that is pertinent to our discussion of the 9th Commandment. The phrase is, “**GOD, WHO CANNOT LIE.**” Notice the phrase does NOT say, “**GOD, WHO DOES NOT LIE**” – it says, “**GOD, WHO CANNOT LIE.**” Do you see the difference? If Paul had written, ‘*God does not lie*,’ not lying would become a divine choice – *a righteous choice for sure* – but a choice just the same, indicating that though God does not lie, He could lie if He chose to do so. ‘*Does not lie*’ would tell us *how God chooses to act at any point in time*, but it would not tell us as much about His divine nature as the phrase, ‘*God cannot lie*.’

Why can God not lie? **GOD CANNOT LIE BECAUSE ONE OF HIS DIVINE ATTRIBUTES IS ABSOLUTE TRUTH!** When we speak of ‘*God’s Attributes*,’ we must remember, a divine attribute is absolute, perfect, and eternal. A divine attribute is timeless, unchangeable, and always in play.

James describes God the Father with these words: *(He is) “the Father of Lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning¹.”* This may sound a bit cryptic, but what it means is, ‘*God’s Nature is Eternal and Never-changing*’ (**HE IS IMMUTABLE**). God’s acts never contradict who He is, and His actions always are consistent with His Attributes. ***This is why it is impossible for God to lie²!***

Because God cannot lie, and because all the commandments reflect God’s own nature, He demands this same level of honesty and truth from His people as we interact with each other.

The 9th Commandment is designed to protect members of the covenant community from falling victim to false accusations. On a practical level, the 9th Commandment refers specifically to a legal proceeding in which a witness is required to testify before a Court of Elders. The witness can be a truthful witness or a lying witness. This is consistent with how Brevard Childs translates Exodus 20:16: “***You shall not testify against your neighbor as a lying witness³.***” Truthfulness in a court of law was considered paramount throughout the Ancient Near East, but it was acutely so in Israel.

This is crucial because there were no policemen in Israel, and the court system was less formal. If a man were robbed, frequently the perpetrator was his neighbor – someone the victim knew and associated with daily; therefore, one did not call the police but instead went to the local elders of the town or city and brought a charge against the one who had stolen his property. Both the accused and the alleged victim produced witnesses and the leaders passed judgment. If found guilty, the sentence was enacted immediately, usually initiated by the plaintiff. This ‘9th Word’ ensures a just verdict by prohibiting false testimony before the elders. Leviticus 19:11 expands the commandment to apply more generally to lying: ... *(do not lie to one another)*.

As we have seen, the Ten Commandments address both our relationship with God and our relationships with our fellow man. In a sense, the 9th Commandment follows this pattern in its relationship to the 3rd Commandment. The 3rd Commandment (“***You Shall Not Take the Name of the LORD Your God in Vain***”) protects God’s reputation (*signified by God’s Name*), while the 9th Commandment protects the reputations of our neighbors (*as well as our own reputation*).

Solomon reminds us in Proverbs 22:1: “***A good name is more desired than great riches.***”

In fact, the two Hebrew terms, שָׁוְיָ (*pronounced SHAV’ and translated ‘VAIN’ in the 3rd Commandment*) and the phrase עֵד שָׁקֵר (*pronounced ‘ED SHAQER and meaning ‘LYING WITNESS’ or ‘FALSE WITNESS’ in the 9th Commandment*), are virtual synonyms.

Commandments 5-10 pertain to ‘a right social order’ and confer on the citizens of Israel four fundamental rights:

- (1) *The Right to Life (Thou Shalt Not Murder)*
- (2) *The Right to Home and Family (Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery)*
- (3) *The Right to Own Property (Thou Shalt Not Steal), and ...*
- (4) *The Right to a Good Reputation (Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor).*

¹ See James 1:17

² See also Hebrews 6:18: “So that by two unchangeable things, in which **IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR GOD TO LIE**, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.”

³ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, page 424

The 9th Commandment is grounded in respect for the truth – specifically, in truth as it pertains to others. One of the most fragile aspects of a person’s life is his reputation – and this is exactly what the 9th Commandment is written to protect.

James uses several metaphors to depict the damage that can be done to the reputation of others by careless speech⁴: ***“The tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire”*** – **James 3:5**. False witness usually involves the tongue, in that it is by means of false speech that reputations are damaged, sometimes irreversibly.

False witness – using the tongue to smear another’s character – is epidemic in America ... and not just in political circles. Lying has become a way of life, and too often it is encouraged. The sad truth is, ***“Americans lie. Just about everyone lies – 91% of us lie regularly. Lying has become a cultural trait in America. Lying is embedded in our national character– the majority of Americans – two out of every three, believe there is nothing wrong with telling a lie. Only 31% of us believe honesty is the best policy”***.⁵

Lest you think Christians are innocent, church people lie too! Otherwise, why would it be necessary for Paul to exhort believers, ***“do not lie to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices”***.⁶

A Pastor once ended his sermon by instructing the congregants to read Mark Chapter 17 sometime during the upcoming week. The following Sunday he asked the congregation how many of them actually had read the passage. Almost all the congregants raised their hands, signifying they had read Mark Chapter 17. The pastor then stated: “The Book of Mark ends after Chapter 16; there is no Chapter 17! He then proceeded to preach on the subject of lying.

Mark Twain once said: ***“When in doubt, tell the truth. It will confound your enemies and astound your friends.”***

The 9th Commandment in context is not a universal prohibition against lying, though there is little question this is an appropriate application of it based on everything we have said above; without question, the Bible is full of general prohibitions against lying.

The Book of Proverbs speaks to this frequently:

There are six things which the LORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: ... a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among his brothers – Proverbs 6:16, 19.

A truthful witness saves lives, but he who utters lies is treacherous – Proverbs 14:25.

The Book of Proverbs addresses proper and improper behavior toward those in the covenant community. Sometimes the term ‘brother’ is used (*Proverbs 6:19*) and sometimes the almost synonymous term ‘neighbor’ appears (*Proverbs 14:1, 3*). Both terms refer to ‘full citizens of the

⁴ See James 3:4-12

⁵ James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth*, pages 45-46.

⁶ See Colossians 3:9

*covenant community of Israel*⁷. The 9th Commandment is directed primarily toward guarding the basic right of the covenant member against the threat of false accusation in a court of law⁸.

There is a close relationship between the 9th Commandment and the 3rd (*see above*) and 8th Commandments. In Exodus 22:10, a man takes an oath before Yahweh that he has not stolen. Then, in Leviticus 19:11-12, there is a prohibition against falsely swearing, which profanes the Lord's Name, and this is tied closely to stealing, lying, and dealing falsely with other members of the covenant community. Jesus further cements the significance of telling the truth when He says:

*You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning – and (he) does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies*⁹.

In this statement by Jesus, we see the real reason God is opposed to lying, for when we lie, we are speaking the devil's language. Satan is not capable of speaking the truth, and he produces people who do not speak the truth – lying also becomes their native language. Lying in any form means aligning yourself with Satan. Only the person who is honest, both in his heart and in his speech, will be at home in the presence of God, who is **ABSOLUTE TRUTH** and who cannot lie.

David wrote:

Oh Lord, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill? He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart. He does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear Yahweh – Psalm 15:1-4

Practical Applications:

What can we do to ensure we are more prone to speak truth than to speak a lie?

- First, ask God to set a guard over your mouth and a watch over your lips. Don't assume you are immune to lying. (*Pray for 'mouth protection'*) – **Psalm 141:3**
- Second, apply the advice of James: ***"You must be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger."*** – **James 1:19**
- Third, when you speak, speak words that *'edify and encourage'* others. Speak words that give grace to the hearer.

We may live in a culture of deception, where lying, slandering, gossiping, and deceiving are acceptable, if not expected. But God has called us to be His people, even in this perverse culture. *He calls us to be 'people of the truth, people of integrity, people who live the truth and speak the truth – not harshly or arrogantly, but with grace.'*

The interrelationship of the commandments makes sense because they all reflect God's character. Societies cannot function properly apart from them, and the efforts to rid our culture of what is viewed as *'restricting personal choices,'* can only lead to chaos.

⁷ Brevard S. Childs, *Op. cit.*, page 424

⁸ See also Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 19:15; Psalm 27:12

⁹ See John 8:44