

Series: Ten Keys to the Joyful Life
#9: “Truth or Consequences”
Ephesians 4:25,29 and Exodus 20:16 (NRSV)
By John Gill

Sometimes our society can lull us into the mistaken notion that the Ten Commandments are not relevant for living in today’s world. And then you pick up the newspaper and read a story like this:

The story¹ was about a man who was murdered because someone broke the Ninth Commandment. It happened in Lakeland, Florida. The article began this way:

“A man whose young son told him someone in a red car tried to lure him away from a bus stop spent two days hunting for the vehicle before killing his neighbor – a father of four and the wrong man, authorities said Tuesday. Kenneth Stephenson, 31 died from five gunshot wounds early Saturday after he drove home from work in his red Chevrolet Beretta.”

It goes on to say, *“On Monday, 19 year old Matthew Wiley told investigators he was the one in the red car, but claimed he never tried to pick up Price’s 9 year old son,” said Polk County Sheriff’s Captain W.J. Martin. ‘He came to us. He told us a group of kids at the bus stop were making obscene and rude gestures at him,’ sheriff’s spokesman, Michael Stanley said. ‘He stuck his head out the window and yelled that he was going to tell their daddy.’ Price’s son was at the bus stop with three other youngsters, Stanley said. The children said a man and a woman were in the red car and the man told the children to get into the vehicle, but they refused, according to a police report. Stanley said authorities don’t know how the story told to Price got twisted, whether the children perceived events differently or embellished on what happened.”*

To me, it sounds like the children broke the Ninth Commandment... they “bore false witness against a neighbor,” and because of their lies, an innocent man is dead.

When we consider the Ninth Commandment, it seems a little out of place. After all, when you put it up against some of the other commandments, like murder and stealing and adultery, lying seems like “small potatoes.” What’s the big deal about telling a little white lie... we all do it sometimes, don’t we? No one gets hurt...right?

Wrong. There are consequences when we lie. Lying can be just as devastating as murder – as those neighbors in Lakeland can attest. We may like to believe that “sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt us,” – but it’s just not true.

The Letter of James in the Bible makes that point strongly: “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire... no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” No, this Ninth Commandment is very serious business! So, let’s take a closer look:

When you study this commandment, it becomes clear that it is expressed in the legal language of a court of law. On its most basic level, the commandment condemns perjury – that, when asked in

court to give testimony, you “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God.”

And certainly, it does mean that. But throughout the history of the Jewish people, this commandment has always been interpreted to apply to all of life, not just our legal testimony. The Jews have based this view on the Old Testament texts, themselves.

As you may already know, the Ten Commandments actually appear twice in the Bible – first in Exodus 20, and then later in Deuteronomy 5. Now, for the most part, these two renderings are the same – but when it comes to the Ninth Commandment, there is an intriguing variation in the version in Deuteronomy. In our English translations, the two read exactly the same. But our English words translate two entirely different Hebrew words which, taken together, shed light on the full meaning of this commandment. In the Exodus version, the Hebrew word in question literally means, “lying or untrue” words. But the comparable word in Deuteronomy’s version can be translated “insincere, frivolous or empty” words. In other words, the Ninth Commandment as recorded in Exodus deals with the nature of the evidence given: - is it truthful and factual testimony? But as it is rendered in Deuteronomy, the meaning is much broader – it warns against ANY kind of “insincere, frivolous, or empty speech” that may bring harm to others.

Now this is very significant because, if this commandment is just about perjury, then we’re off the hook! We would never lie on the witness stand. Therefore, we can very self-righteously point to those who lie before the court... We can wag our fingers at them and decry them for “bearing false witness.”

But what if this commandment covers ALL kinds of malicious or dishonest speech? What if God is just as concerned about slander, or telling half-truths, or defamation of character, or misrepresentation of the facts, or even idle gossip – as he is with perjury? That’s a completely different matter! We may not be guilty of perjury, but every one of us here this morning is guilty of “insincere, frivolous, or empty speech.”

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said bearing false witness is "speaking falsely in any matter" including "lying, equivocating, and any way devising and designing to deceive our neighbour," or to speak "unjustly against our neighbour, to the prejudice of his reputation."²

So, whether we realize it or not, our “lesser” forms of breaking this commandment can also have devastating consequences.

No one here this morning would ever pick up a knife and stab someone in the back, but we wouldn’t think twice about using cutting words or gossip – words that can cause deep and lasting wounds in others. Yes, every one of us is guilty of breaking this commandment.

Just like the other nine commandments, there are countless ways to break this one. William Barclay lists at least eight different kinds of lies:

1. Lies that come from malice towards others
2. Lies that result from fear (like the boy in Lakeland, perhaps)

3. Lies for profit (“the end justifies the means” or the way the cigarette companies lied about the health risks of tobacco for so many decades)
4. Lies of silence (the Old Testament also condemned FAILING to give testimony)
5. Lies of boasting (don’t we all do that – “fish stories”)
6. Lies based on half-truths (many politicians are guilty of this, as are we)
7. Lying to ourselves (self-deception, we won’t own up to the truth)
8. And most seriously, Lying to God (as if we could!) Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, taught that the first principle of prayer was “Don’t lie to God.”

You see, we lie all the time, and by doing so, we are breaking the Ninth Commandment. God is right in condemning “bearing false witness” because lying has serious consequences – both for ourselves and for others.

By this point in our series, you should have been able to detect a pattern. The Old Testament Law warns, “Thou shalt not...” The New Testament equivalent teaching takes the negative command and turns it into a positive challenge for living:

- Don’t just refrain from worshiping idols, but devote yourself to worshiping God in spirit and in truth.
- Don’t let hate lead you to murder, instead love your enemies and pray for them.
- Don’t just keep from taking from others, but have a heart of generosity towards others.
- Don’t just not cheat on your spouse, but do everything in your power to build up your relationship.

You see how it works?

The same is true this week. The Old Testament says, “Don’t bear false witness.” But the New Testament counters, “It’s not enough to refrain from lying, we must use our words to build up others...” Not just, “Don’t lie,” – instead, “Always speak the truth!”

Listen again to the scripture from Ephesians: *“Putting away falsehood let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up...”*

And James puts it in plain and simple terms: *“No one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?”*

Friends, what comes out of your mouth? Fresh or brackish water? Truth or lies?

When you get right down to it, that’s what the Ninth Commandment asks us: Does what you say about others – in court or in conversation – build up, or tear down?

You see, it’s not enough NOT to lie. We need to be people of the Truth – or we’ll pay the consequences.

Prayer

Forgive us, Lord, for the damage we do to others, to ourselves, and to our relationship with you when we fail to speak and live by the Truth. We pray this in the name of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ Daytona Beach NewsPress, September 20, 2005

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2008/december/bearing-false-witness.html>