

“Ten Commandments: Tell the Truth”

Proverbs 6:12-19 • James 3:1-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 15, 2020

In 1692 and 1693, hysteria swept through several tiny New England villages north of Boston when a number of people were accused of being witches. Before the turmoil died down more than 200 people were accused, 30 were found guilty, and 20 were executed, including my ancestor John Proctor. The girls who made many of the accusations later admitted that they had lied. In 1892, Charles Hudspeth was hanged for murder in Arkansas. He had been convicted five years earlier for killing George Watkins after Watkins wife Rebecca testified that she and Hudspeth were having an affair and that Hudspeth had killed her husband so that they could get married. The only problem is that some time the next year George Watkins was discovered to be living in Kansas. His wife Rebecca had lied.

Over the years many people have been wrongly convicted because of false testimony. Today, with the help of DNA testing, there are several organizations working to free people who are in prison for crimes they didn't commit. One of those organizations, The Innocence Project, has been able to prove the innocence and secure the release of 367 people since they began in 1992.

A false witness, someone who commits perjury testifying to something that isn't true, can ruin lives by convicting the wrong person while the real criminal goes free. Families are destroyed. That's why God commands: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." God is serious about truth. In our reading from Proverbs we discover that "a lying tongue, a heart that devises wicked plans, a false witness who breathes out lies, and someone who sows discord" are all an abomination to God. That's because God IS truth. Jesus said, "I am the way, *the truth*, and the life."

This commandment implies a scene in a law court. It prohibits giving false testimony. The reason is that a conviction for some crimes could

mean the death penalty. To execute an innocent person is a violation of the sixth commandment prohibiting murder. So God gave the Israelites rules to make sure that an accused person received a fair trial. You can see that many of the legal concepts we take for granted in this country – such as the right to a fair trial – were actually God's idea first. They're based on God's laws. Deuteronomy 19 gives instructions on conducting a fair trial. It says that one witness is not enough to convict, that it takes two or three. The passage then goes on to say that if the witness is malicious, testifying falsely in order to hurt someone, then that witness will have to suffer the punishment for the crime they accused. So if they falsely accused someone else of murder, they could be put to death for their false testimony. Like I said, God takes truth very seriously.

Unfortunately our culture does not take truth so seriously. Lying has become common and even expected. One of the biggest lies today is the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth. Politicians lie to get your vote or to discredit their opponents. Advertisers lie about the benefits of their products. Parents lie to their children and children lie to their parents.

James reminds us that the tongue is one of the smallest parts of your body. But what you do with your tongue can cause lots of pain and suffering. I'm sure you've heard the saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones but...words will never hurt me." The truth is that words can hurt. Especially words that hurt our reputation.

The Heidelberg Catechism is helpful in explaining what this commandment prohibits and what it requires of us. It says that the ninth commandment requires "That I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing. Rather, in court and everywhere else, I should avoid lying

and deceit of every kind; these are the very devices the devil uses, and they would call down on me God's intense wrath. I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it. And I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name."

So let's look briefly at what is prohibited. First and most obvious is false testimony that harms others. You should never say anything that is untrue about someone else. Slander is making false public statements that are damaging to a person's reputation. If you publish it in print it's called libel. But whether you have a public platform or not you should not say something untrue about anyone. That's pretty much black and white. But as the catechism reminds us this commandment prohibits twisting someone else's words, taking them out of context or changing their meaning. The news media does this frequently and you and I do it as well. We may be using the other person's words but we present them in a way that is not what they intended.

This commandment also prohibits gossip. The content of gossip may actually be true but can still be a violation of the commandment if it's done in a way that hurts others. A reputation can take years to build but it can be destroyed in a moment with gossip. Gossip always involves three people: the one speaking the gossip, the one that the gossip is about, and the one hearing the gossip. All three are guilty when there is gossip. If someone begins to tell you something that sounds like gossip, the best thing to do is to say, "I don't think I want to hear this and you probably shouldn't be saying it."

In the ninth commandment God prohibits harming someone else's reputation unjustly. One way to think of this in connection with the other commandments is that in the third commandment – you shall not take the Lord's name in vain – God is concerned with *His* name. In the fifth commandment – honor your father and mother – God is concerned with your *family* name. And here in the ninth commandment God is concerned with *your neighbor's* name.

You may not have thought about it but this includes not leaving false or misleading reviews online for businesses on sites like Yelp or Amazon.

The ninth commandment isn't just about other people's reputations. It also prohibits us giving false testimony about ourselves. There's two sides to this. On one hand we are prohibited from exaggerating our accomplishments, our experience, or our education. Making yourself sound better by padding your resume is a violation of this commandment. It may seem harmless but if you get an unfair advantage over others by lying you are harming them.

But I think this commandment also speaks to those of us who tend to do the opposite, thinking negatively about our self. Remember, Jesus said you shall love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and you shall love your neighbor *as your self*. When you think you have little or no value you are harming yourself, harming others who love you, and worst of all you are insulting God who created you in His image.

The third area we can violate this commandment is by giving false testimony or witness about God. In Acts 1 Jesus says, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The job of a witness is to tell what was seen, heard, or experienced. A witness who refuses to testify is, in a sense, a false witness. This is very similar to taking the name of Christian but not living like it. Jesus has given you new life so that you can be a witness to what he has done in your life. All of us are sinners. Each one of us regularly break these commandments, which is why we need a savior. To pretend otherwise is to bear false witness.

That leads us to the positive command. Remember, these commandments don't just prohibit us from doing something, they also require us to do something different. As the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us, we should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly

acknowledge it. But we must speak the truth lovingly. Too many people enjoy speaking the truth brutally, which also breaks this commandment. Finally, we should do what we can to guard and advance our neighbors' good name.

You and I are to live in a way that shows everyone that God is true and that he is

concerned with truth. When we do that we are being very countercultural. Being truthful is revolutionary. But we speak the truth in love because sacrificial love for our neighbor is the most countercultural thing there is and it's the best witness to the God who loves us so much he gave his life for us.

Amen.