

**Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 28, 2019, by Youth Director Mike Bittenbender**

The Ninth Commandment

Exodus 20:1-2, 16

Good morning and please be seated. Well, here we are. Commandment number nine. After this morning, with only one more left, we will be in the end game for this series. The reading for this morning comes to us from Exodus Chapter 20. The main text is Verse 16, but as I've done in the past, we're going to go to reread Verses 1 and 2 and then jump down to 16. This can be found on page 54 of your pew Bible-- that is Exodus Chapter 20, Starting at Verse 1 and 2, and then we'll skip down to Verse 16. May we give our reverent attention to the reading of God's holy word:

And God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

May God bless the reading of his holy word.

O Lord God, as we come before you this morning open up our hearts and our minds and our ears for you to speak to us through your Word. Speak through me. May the meditations of my heart be glorifying to you and glorifying you. Amen.

This commandment [the ninth commandment] is often shortened to say, "You shall not lie." And that's not a bad way of putting it. However I think that digging into the context of what is happening with Israel and God and then seeing what else we can glean from Jesus regarding this is important. It is important to know that these commandments are given to the people of Israel. As they are being set up as a nation, they have been brought out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. They are receiving this law and then they will be sent to the promised land where they will be God's people. These ten commandments were the foundation for a new civilization that God was establishing and He used moral law to do so here and so by using terminology such as "false" and "testify" and "you shall not give a false witness," we get a courtroom or legal aspect to this commandment. See, God knew that humans are at their worst when we lie, so God is trying to establish this kind of moral code, this foundation for how things are going to happen or how things are going to work in a court of law.

So we're obviously in the Old Testament. When an accusation was brought against someone, CSI was called to do fingerprinting DNA tests. Pictures were taken and surveillance footage was taken so as to gain all the evidence they could. Wait. That didn't actually happen back then. The main way that courts and elders would decide a case was by witnesses, typically, more than one, hopefully three or more. In Leviticus law, the accusation of one man would not stand in court, however if there were two witnesses, then the matter could be decided.

Deuteronomy 19:15 says one witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offence. If they may have committed a matter, then that matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. God is starting out this new nation with a command that will help govern how judicial issues are settled. He instructs His people not to falsely testify about someone else. Now some of you may think, "Can't someone just hire a couple of people to corroborate an accusation or something like?" That actually happens later in the Old Testament.

But I'd also like to share what Deuteronomy continues in Chapter 19, Verse 15. It says that if anyone with malicious intent takes the stand to accuse someone of a crime, there will be a thorough investigation and if it is found that someone bore a false witness, then the sentence that the false accuser requested would actually be given to the false accuser himself.

So the scenario of someone getting people to falsely accuse someone to corroborate with false witnesses actually took place in first Kings Chapter 21, which tells of a neighbor's vineyard and how King Ahab wanted that vineyard, and how the neighbor refused the King's offer. This angered King Ahab, who shared this with his wife Jezebel. Jezebel then orchestrated a plot that saw two men stand up and accuse the nearby vineyard owner of cursing God and the king. Since there were two witnesses, the neighbor was taken outside of the city and stoned. This is the exact thing God wanted his people to avoid and what the ninth commandment addresses.

The word "neighbor" is also rather interesting here. Do not give false testimony against your *neighbor*, which begs the question, who is our neighbor? When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus' response is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. And then someone asks who is our neighbor. Jesus answers the question with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' example of who our neighbor is, is defined by anyone.

We come in contact with and need not be giving false testimony to our neighbor. We should not be tearing people down around us with our words. Ron Mail, the author of *The Tender Commandments*, tries to highlight God's love when he says that whenever you say something to an individual or about an individual that is less than what God would say to that individual, you are bearing false witness. It's a hard one. Think about what God would say about you. Before we accuse or speak about someone, would it be in line with what God would say? Kevin DeYoung in his book on *The Ten Commandments* points out that the commandments often give the worst way of sinning-- murdering someone, adultery, and stealing, as the worst ways of offending the previous few commandments.

Jesus expands them to heart issues as well, not only murdering someone, but even thinking ill of someone. Not just committing adultery, but even looking lustfully at another woman.

Here we have giving false witness. Yet there is more to this commandment than just how it applies to a court of law. God cares deeply about justice. God sent Eliza to Ahab at the end of that story to inform Ahab that God was angry and was going to dole out his justice upon him, but when he repented and humbled himself before God, He withheld his punishment on Ahab. For God, throughout scripture, reminds us that he is a just a God and also desires us to act justly. Why does God take the truth so seriously? It's part of the nature of God. God is truth. Jesus himself says I am the way the truth and the life.

See, the way of lies is from the devil. He's called the Father of Lies. We are to become imitators of Christ so that our lives reflect more and more the nature of Jesus and this means speaking truth on all occasions. When we begin to lie, we give the devil a foothold. When we lie or slander or gossip or tear someone down, that is the work of evil one. Ron Mail says this: be very, very careful what you say about people. This illustrates how well God knows us. He knows the danger and potential for harm of an undisciplined tongue. He knows the unspeakable damage it can do.

Proverbs 18:21 says death and life are in the power of the tongue. Our words carry meaning. Our words can either build someone up or tear someone down. The idea that sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me just simply isn't true the way we talk about people. The witness that we give about someone's character actions or beliefs carry a lot of weight.

The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the ninth commandment this way: I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard. Rather, I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works, under penalty of God's heavy wrath. In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth, speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbor's honor and reputation.

What is so important about a name? Proverbs 22 Verse 1 says a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches and favor is better than silver or gold. A good name is being someone who is seen with a good reputation, good character, honest, and demonstrating integrity. Someone who keeps their words. Riches and material possessions can often be replaced, a good name though, once trounced through the mud, is hard to get back.

So, what are some ways that we tear down a person's name through gossip, slander, and unwholesome talk? Ephesians 4 says, "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 may benefit those who listen, and do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. We are to put off falsehoods and speak truthfully. Unwholesome talk should not have a place in our lives but only what is helpful what is what is a way we can keep ourselves from taking part in these things.

Ron Mail says that when your mouth is filled with gratitude and thanksgiving, there simply isn't going to be room for false, bitter or cynical words. An attitude of gratitude can help us. When we are so consumed with giving thanks to God for all that he has done for us, there is no room for unwholesome talk.

One reflection I had the other day, while trying to figure out how to make two brothers get along, had me look at the Commandments a little differently. I want to mention this in light of this commandment. My two sons Adrian who turns 4 next month, and Tristan who is 9 years old, were having some trouble getting along. Little things turned into fights and arguments and

screaming and tears, which turned into them complaining to me and trying to get the other one in trouble. I decided I had enough and explained to them that if they could go the rest of the day being nice to each other they would get a treat, a candy bar. I believe I had even tried to make it a competition about whoever was nicer to their brother would get the candy bar as the day progressed things were quieter but I realized that they just weren't interacting with one another. One began to even ignore the other one, thinking if he could just get through the day without having to talk or play with his brother, he would win. Well, as many younger brothers are, Adrian was dying for his brother's attention and Tristan was rather dismissive. Not exactly mean, but I told Tristan he needed to be respectful of his brother and answer him when he asked him something. I reminded him of the competition and he said he wasn't being mean. It was then that I realized it wasn't about not being mean it was about being nice in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

We have these lists these ten commandments and a lot of them are thou shalt nots, don't do this, and don't do that. Jesus as I mentioned summed up the law with his command to love. Love the Lord your God and to love your neighbor as yourself. So Jesus flips the paradigm in the Old Testament. Following the law could be summed up by not doing a lot of things.

It almost seems like as though you could stand before God on the day of judgment and claim. But I didn't do that. I didn't murder anyone. I didn't commit adultery. I didn't lie steal or covet. But Jesus's command is one to action, one to love. It is not good enough to just say, at least I didn't do blank, but are we proactively going out and loving others with these commandments? That means are we encouraging and holding people up speaking well of our neighbors? Ephesians Chapter 4 adds to this instruction to put off falsehoods and to speak truthfully, not just don't speak poorly, but speak truthfully

We are all members of one body and not to let any of this unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. As I said, unwholesome talk should not have a place in our lives but only what is helpful in an attempt to get a little more practical.

Let me share you an acronym that I found in one of Reverend Graham Smith's sermons. On this, he kind of uses it as somewhat of a litmus test. It was pointed out to me that this is not necessarily original to Graham Smith, that a lot of people have mentioned this but I thought it was still pretty applicable here.

So the acronym is called T H I N K:

- The first letter, T, stands for truth. If what you say is not the truth you're a bald faced liar. Is it the truth?
- The letter H stands for help—will what you say help? Some things are true but not necessarily always helpful. It wouldn't be helpful for me to continue on talking to you all about the sins of my sons that they've committed over the past week, even as I just shared them fighting would not be helpful for me to share those things.
- The letter I stands for inspiring. Is what you say inspiring? Does it encourage or discourage?
- The letter N stands for necessary. Is what you say necessary? A lot of things we say would be better left unsaid
- The letter K stands for kind. Is it kind? Is it a kind thing to say?

When I had my wife read through this just to make sure some of this made sense she goes, Do you not hear me ask Christine this all the time?. I said no, this is groundbreaking. She says she's always asking is that the truth? Will it help? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? And is it kind? if it's not those things, perhaps we don't have to say them and risk bearing false witness, tearing someone down, slandering or gossiping.

The last six commandments help deepen relationships with those around us, remembering that the first four helped deepen our relationship with God. We are to be loving to those around us, those we come in contact with. We are to build them up with the words that we use the way we talk about them and represent them.

This goes deeper than just a court of law, but in how do we love others? Kevin DeYoung summarizes it this way. The ninth commandment is about more than lying. it is as Jesus summarized about loving your neighbor as yourself. if someone was twisting your words and soiling your reputation, wouldn't you want someone else to say, hold on a second. I know him? I'm not sure you have all the facts right. Or, I know her, let me give you a different perspective here. Wouldn't you want your neighbor to defend your reputation? Easier said than done has an emotional being.

Anger plays a part in some of this and I've been really conflicted about this. I was at a friend of mine's wedding and the pastor was giving a sermon on marriage. He gave an analogy of toothpaste and how toothpaste can sometimes cause conflict and tension particularly in an early marriage. Whether you put the cap back on right whether there's some toothpaste on the sides, but he said here's the important part. Once the toothpaste is out, there is no getting it back in. Once we say things, they are out there. That's why it's really important for us as Christians to be slow to speak, quick to listen, slow to get angry. And I have to say, I'm preaching to myself on this as well.

My encouragement is for each of us to take that extra second and think about what is the witness that I am bearing for the people around me. How am I loving them? How am I building them up? How am I encouraging them? And that's the hard thing to do. It's easy to tear someone down. It's easy. It's hard to build someone back up and that is my prayer for myself and for everyone here.

We are to bear a positive good witness to ourselves, to the people around us, to our neighbors, and to God.

Let's pray. Most gracious and Heavenly Father, thank you for the Ten Commandments and how we can learn to deepen our relationships with you and our relations with each other. And in this commandment, that we would seek to love everyone around us by speaking truth, by inspiring, helping, and by being kind. Help us to build one another up rather than tear down, to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry. We can only do this by the power of your Holy Spirit, so we ask for that. We ask for the strength to be loving to everyone around us. In Your name we pray, **AMEN.**