

The Big Ten: The Truth Hurts...And Heals
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 27:11-14; Ephesians 4:22-32; Exodus 20:1-17

Friends, our final Scripture tonight is Exodus 20:1-17. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to use the study guide found in your bulletin. Let's listen to the Word of God together. "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 have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. "You shall not murder. "You shall not commit adultery. "You shall not steal. "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.""

"Liar, liar, pants on fire!" Remember that gem from the playground? It's a weird phrase, isn't it? It's a fun rhyme, but what do pants on fire have to do with lying? I did some homework this week to find out exactly where it came from. The first time anyone can find it in literature is in 1943 as "liar, liar, your tongue's on fire!" By 1945, it morphed into the version we all know.

But what's fascinating is the most popular origin story for the phrase. It's attributed to a poem written by William Blake in 1810. It's called *The Liar*, and it opens, "Deceiver, dissembler, your trousers are alight/From what pole or gallows shall they dangle in the night?" It's really funny...and more research proves the poem didn't exist until the year 2000...which means the most popular explanation for the phrase "liar, liar, pants on fire" is a great big lie itself, a forgery that people want to believe because it sounds historical.

We're to the part of the Ten Commandments about lying, and it's where we start running into trouble. We can understand why God wants to be honored, why He commands we follow no other gods or make idols. We get honoring our parents, and we feel in our gut that murder and adultery and theft are wrong. But does God really command us never to lie? Is that even ethical? Let's take a closer look and find out.

The ninth commandment commands us not to give false witness, false testimony, against our neighbor. “Neighbor” here is universal – anyone you know and interact with. As a law, it means not to give a false report in a courtroom in front of a judge against someone. We’re used to tons of different kinds of evidence available to us – we live in the *CSI* era where no one has to see a crime for it to be solved. But in the ancient world, eyewitness testimony was a must. There was no DNA, no fingerprinting, no boot prints in the mud or forensic evidence. Honesty in a court is still very important, but when the law was given, the only thing that made justice possible was the good word of a witness. It was so serious that Deuteronomy 19 commanded that someone caught lying before the judge be given the punishment that would have been given to the person accused of the crime.

But there's more to the command than strict law. God orders us not to speak falsely against others, period, whether or not we're appearing in court – He makes that clear in Leviticus 19:16, which talks about libel and slander – speaking to damage somebody's reputation. Our own justice system has made it difficult to determine what slander is because it's so commonplace. Every magazine on the grocery aisle and every “news” website runs stories full of half-truths that make the lies seem real. But half-truths are still lies. When we're angry with someone, we can tell the absolute truth and still twist it so it damages them. God bans this too. In Exodus 23, God says not even to give ear to this kind of thing. Sometimes, listening to gossip makes a party to it. When we stand by when someone’s reputation is attacked, we give credence to it by our own reputation.

With this command, God’s commands move from the direct to the indirect. False testimony is an extension of the other eight commands we've studied. Lying about others can be as destructive as attacking them head-on. Spreading falsehoods about someone can steal away their livelihood. It dishonors those who raised us to be honest. We may not murder or steal or curse our parents, but lying is only one step removed from each one.

Lying is seldom punished by courts, which is why God makes it clear beyond the law what He expects of His people. I stopped counting after four dozen references in the psalms, proverbs, and prophets how God despises lies and how liars attack God’s people. In the New Testament, Revelation 21 paints a glorious portrait of the new heaven and earth that God will bring about at the end of time. The only negative thing in that chapter is a list of all those who will suffer the second death rather than live in the Kingdom of God – and included in the list are the liars. The punishment for being a gossip and slanderer may not come with a fine or a jail sentence, but God promises to repay the careless words we say.

The words we don’t say are also important. In Isaiah 58 and 59, God tells us not to keep justice to ourselves but to proclaim the truth. Leviticus 19:17 tells us to rebuke our brother so that we are not guilty of his crime. The Westminster Larger Catechism says that the ninth commandment forbids the sins of concealing the truth, of undue silence in a just cause, or holding our peace when iniquity calls for justice. The fullness of the command requires us not to give false witness against someone by keeping the truth to ourselves.

As I said earlier, though, this commandment brings up ethical questions for us. Murder and adultery? Those are always wrong. But lying can bring about good. Is God commanding lying even when it would harm others? When we read Scripture not just as a bunch of disconnected rules but as the history of God's dealing with humanity, when we read everything, we see that the rule has notable exceptions.

The key is the phrase, "*against* your neighbor." Lying is almost always done with intent to harm. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred. There is an exception for the hundredth time. It's rare enough that there is no law about it. It's simply proven through the historical record found in Scripture that a lie is justifiable before God when it saves your neighbor.

One example is found in Exodus 1. The Hebrews are enslaved, and they've become far more numerous than their Egyptian captors. In an attempt to control them, the Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys when they're born. They don't do it. When they're called before Pharaoh to explain, they say, "Those Hebrew women are so hardy, they're done giving birth before we even get there." Huge lie. The next two verses say, "So God did well to the midwives, the people increased, and the midwives had their own families." God blessed the midwives for lying in order to preserve life. The sixth commandment trumps the ninth.

Something similar happens in Joshua 2. The Hebrews are about to take the promised land of Israel, and they've sent spies to Jericho. The prostitute Rahab, who has come to fear God, hides the spies and lies about their whereabouts, making good their escape. She is rescued when the Israelites take Jericho and becomes one of them. Jesus is a direct descendent of Rahab.

Christians have wrestled with lying in order to save lives for centuries. I've been reading recently about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian who joined a counterintelligence agency in Nazi Germany in order to undermine the SS. He was quick with a Nazi salute whenever it was required of him, but it was all an act in order to smuggle Jews out of the country while plotting against Hitler. He was a kind, thoughtful man who struggled with what he felt called to do, but his "lying" saved many lives, even at the cost of his own.

Both the biblical record and the record of the church account for lies told for the greater good. So why does the Bible paint such a negative portrait of lying? It's because we are always prone to sin. We wish the exceptions were common, but they aren't. Lying is second nature to us. We do it all the time. As we look at the ramifications of the ninth commandment today, I want us to come face to face with the reality that we lie mostly because we dislike the truth. I've lied today. So have you. When I say that, my first reaction and probably your first reaction is mild outrage. "No I haven't!" But it's true. It's ingrained in our culture.

What's the first things we say to each other? "Glad to see you!" and "How are you doing?" top the list. Do we really mean the first one? No! We don't even think about it! It comes out without thinking. "Glad to see you." Some of you, I'm glad to see; some of you, maybe not. Let's be honest – there are a lot of times we aren't glad to see somebody. You have bad news...I'm not glad you're here. You're depressed or sullen or angry...nope, not glad. You're too talkative, too annoying, too whatever...not glad. And if I *am* really glad to see you, you probably aren't glad to see me!

And “how are you?” Who came up with that as a greeting? It begs for a lie in return. “I’m good; how are you?” What if I’m not good? What if I can’t pay rent or my mom’s sick or the baby’s crying or I’m depressed? You don’t want to know! And I don’t want to know either! In our natural, sinful selves, we want everybody to lie and say that everything is fine. But not everything is fine. We live in a broken world, broken by sin, broken by lies, broken by pretending that everything is fine when it’s really not.

The world’s greatest problem is believing the lie that everything is fine. That’s because Jesus came to rescue people who know the world isn’t fine and that they aren’t fine and that the chief problem is them. Jesus saves folks who are sin-sick and weary and heavy-burdened. Jesus said He came for the sick, not for those who were well. What He didn’t say, the truth we have to learn, is we’re all sick. The sooner we’re honest, the sooner we can get better. The sooner we listen to each other and care for one another through the difficulties of life because we know Jesus is there for us, the sooner we can say with the old hymn, “It is well with my soul.”

Our greetings are just an example of how truth-telling isn’t common. From stretching the truth to make somebody feel better to little white lies to trying to protect ourselves all the way to gossiping about others and doing harm, we do it regularly. How do we turn the tide? How do we tell the truth in ways that are helpful? I have a couple of biblical thoughts for us as we close.

The first one is to take a step back – to think before we act. James 1:19 says, “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” There are times we lie to weasel out of a mistake we made or to get something that doesn’t belong to us. We should avoid those. But many of our lies come from speaking before we think. How do we stop gossip and lying and half-truths that hurt? We start by talking less.

Part of the problem is that we want to feel happy more than we want the truth. We should be careful not to encourage people to lie. When we ask our spouse, “How do I look in this?”, are we looking for the truth or a compliment? Be honest! We need to think about how we phrase our questions, greetings, and small talk. If we aren’t willing to hear the truth, let’s not ask for it!

We need to think before we speak about others. When we meet with folks, is our small talk filled with loaded questions? Are we asking for gossip? Church can be the worst place for it. How does it start? “Melanie needs prayer.” Well, who is Melanie, and what does she need prayer for? We all want to know. It’s worse if we do know them. What’s going on? What’s happening? Give me the lowdown! You know, if somebody needs prayer, we don’t need to know the details to be praying for them. If you’re angry with somebody and you need to work it out, we shouldn’t be brought into the middle of it; we should just be praying for reconciliation.

The best way to avoid slandering our neighbor is to not talk about them except in a positive way and avoiding the dirt somebody might fling at them. In Cameron’s class, they have lots of catchphrases to help them remember how to act towards each other. When one gets too nosy, Mrs. Hardies will say MYOB – “mind your own business.” We can stop a lot of false witness by following a truth we learn in first grade.

Here's the second point, the flip side...so what if the issue is a genuine sin? What if somebody has sinned against you? Leviticus 19:17 tells us to rebuke them honestly and frankly, but Matthew 18:15-17 gives us Jesus' own words on how to do it. Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, between you and him alone." Even if somebody is completely at fault, we have no right to go tell the world about it. Jesus said, "If he doesn't listen, take one or two other witnesses with you." No gossip or slander...just a faithful confrontation with others who know the situation. Only then, if someone still won't reconcile, can you tell it to the church – and that's to the elders to deal with the sin issue in their midst, not to defame the other person but to help them be reconciled to God and to other believers.

As James said, be slow to anger. Anger is probably the greatest reason we give false testimony. Being mad at someone gets us worked up, and we want to let it blow up; we want to share that anger with the world and make other people angry for us. We want others to agree with us and get them on our side. Anger makes us want to destroy people's reputations. We've got to let that anger go before it leads us into lies that could not only destroy others, but us.

If we want to go deeper, the key is not to focus on not lying. The key is to focus on Jesus. John's gospel has many themes, but one is that God is truth, revealed through Jesus Christ. John 1:17 says, "The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." John 8:31-32: "If you hold to my teachings, then you really are my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." In John 14:6, Jesus declares, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." John 14:17 and 15:26: Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the "Spirit of truth." John 17:17 – praying to the Father, Jesus says, "Make them pure by the truth; Your word is truth." John 18:37, Jesus tells Pilate, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

The truth of Christ hurts. We are not good people. We are sinners whose natural tendency is to lie. But the truth of Christ heals. His sacrifice on the cross, for our sakes, saves all those who turn to Him from eternal death and gives them freedom to change. It is not easy to become a truth teller who looks out for the good of others. But when we focus on Jesus, turning to Him in prayer, seeking His face, we will find His truth overcomes the fears that drive us to lie. His truth will cool the anger that causes us to speak falsely and replace it with the peace of His presence. And His truth will assure us that when we turn to Him, we will find forgiveness and salvation in His arms.