

People of the Truth, not Lies

**The Ninth Commandment
Confession: Lord's Day 43**

Scripture: I John 2:20-23

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Morning Service**

People of God: This week I was sitting in a waiting room to have my car e-tested. As I sat there, I noticed the magazines that I could read, like National Enquirer and National Examiner. Their headlines screamed scandal. But how much of it was the truth? How much of these tabloids are just filled with lies?

Do we even care? We should. Not just for the sake of the individuals being talked about—though even a celebrity deserves to be spoken about in truth. But for society as a whole. When lying becomes engrained in society, when lying is just part of life, then truth suffers. And we are to people of the truth, not of lies. At least, that's what the ninth commandment wants us to be.

As we deal with this ninth commandment, I want to answer this morning, three basic questions: First, what does lying include? Second, why is lying wrong? Third, what does this commandment require from us as a positive response?

First, what does lying include? The actual commandment speaks about bearing false witness against one's neighbor—not lying as we often put it. That's because it has a specific context in mind--the court of law. Although different than our own system of laws and courts, Israel too had her system of ensuring justice was done. Typically, justice was administered at the gate of the city. There, at the entrance to the city, the elders of the city, men of wisdom, would listen and decide cases that were brought to them.

In Israel the type of evidence that could be presented in criminal cases came from witnesses. There were no finger printing techniques or other sophisticated ways of getting evidence. Nothing that you now see on CSI. Instead, they had to rely on witnesses. Since for many crimes the penalty was the death sentence, it was important to make sure that the witnesses were not lying. That they were not bearing false witness. As a result, two witnesses were required. These witnesses would be investigated to make sure they were telling the truth. If they weren't, they would receive the penalty the accused person was facing. In this way, the cause of justice was safeguarded, because two witnesses lying together could unjustly destroy a person.

What we have in the ninth commandment, then, is the worst case of lying, where truth is ignored and lying under oath results in someone's death. All other forms of lying are included in this. The catechism gives some other examples.

It mentions the twisting of one's words. That's when you distort what someone says. For example: a coach tells the members of the basketball team: "If you can make it tomorrow after school, I would like you to come to an extra practice." But what one of the kids tells his parents is "The coach says I have to practice after school tomorrow or else I'm off the team. So I guess I can't baby-sit like you asked." That's twisting words to make them mean what the person didn't intend to say.

The catechism also mentions gossip. That seemingly innocent idle chatter about other people, based on rumor and speculation. Did you hear the latest news about Jane? I heard that she had a fight last night with Mike at the arena. He swore so much at her that she gave him back her engagement ring and walked home. Did you hear the latest about Jane? I heard that she had a fight last night with Mike. He slapped her and she threw the engagement ring in his face. Did you hear the latest about Jane? I heard she had a fight with Mike. He knocked her out and took the engagement ring back. What is the true story? What really happened? With gossip, the truth is usually the first casualty.

From gossip it is easy to slip into slander. Slander is when untrue statements are made to deliberately damage someone's reputation. Or what about condemning someone without proof, without getting all the facts? There are other ways lying occurs, which the catechism does not mention, like half-truth or gross exaggeration.

Commercials often commit this sin. They promise something great but their product really is not able to fulfill such a promise. Beer commercials are probably the worst offenders. In one commercial, as soon as a guy opens a

beer can; he is surrounded by scantily dressed beautiful women. That's never happened to me. (Not that I drink much beer.) The commercial has lied to me.

As you can see, there are many ways in which lying can occur. Unfortunately, it seems that lying is increasing in our society. Truth is no longer considered a virtue. In fact, many people question whether there is even something called Truth. Truth is viewed as relative, depending on the situation and circumstances.

That leads me to the second question: why is lying wrong? The catechism hints at two reasons and I'd add a third.

Deception is wrong because it is a device that the devil himself uses. Jesus in John 8:44 says that the devil is

a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Lying was the means the devil used at the beginning of history to entice Eve to take the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. He twisted the command God had given Adam and Eve. God said do not eat from that one tree. The devil twisted that to refer to all trees. Then the devil lied. God warned about the consequences of eating from that one tree. But the devil said: You will not die. With this lie, humanity fell into sin. The devil continues to work his lying deception, promising a glorious life apart from God, when in reality a life apart from God results in eternal death. How can we participate in the devices the devil himself uses?

There is a second reason why lying is wrong. The catechism says lies and deceit would call down upon me God's intense anger. Why? Because God is a God of truth, not a god of lies. Isaiah declares in 65:16

Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who swears an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth. Similarly, Jesus said: I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Truth is part of the nature and character of God. Since God is a God of truth, he expects from his people that we are a people of truth. Lying is not to be found in our midst.

A third reason why lying is wrong is because it does great harm to society. Society depends upon truth as the basis for its operation. When that is lacking, society faces either chaos or a totalitarian state. Truth is needed in business. Whether it is a handshake or a written contract, if every business transaction ended up in the courts we would soon not be able to purchase anything. Or if bribes were needed to develop a property lot, expand a

business, or make changes to an establishment, then there would be no fairness in the system and the existing by-laws would become meaningless.

Truth is also needed in politics. We need the truth in debates over climate change, Afghanistan and the countless other issues that face us. But Canadians have become so cynical about politicians that they do not expect the truth to be upheld. But if we do not trust our leaders, how can they guide us through some of the difficult decisions that need to be made.

Truth is also needed in personal relationships. If there can not be trust and faithfulness between husband and wife, between parents and children, between two friends, then the relationship will sour and fall apart. Marriage in particular is dependent upon truth, not lies.

And so for the sake of God and society, truth not lies must be the basis of our personal lives and our society as a whole. But that raises the third question: what does this commandment require from us in a positive sense? We already know its negative requirement: that we are not to bear false witness or lie in any fashion that will hurt our neighbor. But with all the commandments there is a positive requirement as well.

Positively, the ninth commandment asks that we love the truth. The catechism says: "I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it." Truth is rooted in God and in his revelation. Jesus once said to those who believed in him:

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. (John 8:31-2)

The gospel truth is that there is a God, who created and maintains this world. The gospel truth is that we are sinners, but that in Christ we can receive the forgiveness of our sins. That truth sets us free, free from the bondage to the devil, free from the power of sin, free from the sting of death. The Word and Spirit guide us into the truth of God and the gospel message.

As God's people we know the truth. We must remain in the truth. The apostle John writes to Gaius, in his third letter:

It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. (III John 3-4.)

People have different standards or expectations of the marks of a true Christian. But one of the marks is a concern for the truth and walking in the truth.

But how is this love for truth to be shown? Paul says in Ephesians 4:15 we are to speak the truth in love. That is an important qualification. There are times when speaking the truth is done out of spite or revenge.

Sometimes in gossip the news that is spreading is indeed true, but what is the motive for passing on that news? Is it to build up the other person or help the person in question; if not, is it really speaking the truth in love? In what tone of voice is the truth spoken? Is it with warmth and genuine concern for the other person that you express your viewpoint or is the truth spoken with anger and malice. Speaking the truth in love will actually benefit your cause, because truth spoken in anger turns people off; but with love there is a possibility that you will be heard. That's especially true when you are witnessing to an unbeliever.

Speaking the truth in love means that there are times when one must remain silent. While sometimes remaining silent can be a form of false witness, in certain occasions, silence might be required. In visiting someone's home you do not have to comment on their choice of couch, even if you think it totally does not fit with the rest of the room. There is no need to give undue offense. Silence can be golden at times.

The catechism concludes its commentary by saying, "and I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name." Notice that the concern here is for our neighbor's good name, not our own. Let others defend that. We should defend our neighbors' good name.

Truth not lies is what our society needs. In our business dealings, we ought to be truthful people of our word. Not using deceitful schemes to make a profit, but being fair to all. In politics truthfulness ought to be a quality of our elected officials. In personal relationships, we ought to have that trust that is based on truth. A relationship based on a lie will not survive. For the sake of God and our society, we are to be people of the truth, not of lies. Amen.