

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles  
**Our Struggle for Truth**

*"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."*  
Exodus 20:16

Our text says: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." Exodus 20:16.

That's the ninth commandment of the big ten. And it says something important about our struggle for honesty and truth. But behind the struggle for honesty and truth is the bigger and broader issue of integrity. And it seems that few really know just what that is.

No wonder that we as Americans lie and are lied to more than we think. *USA Today* tells us that 91% of Americans lie routinely.<sup>i</sup> We lie to parents, friends, siblings, spouses.

We lie about feelings. We lie about income. We lie about sex.

We lie about others. According to *Reader's Digest*, 71% of those interviewed admitted to lying about the appearance of family members or friends, in order to avoid hurting their feelings.<sup>ii</sup>

Do you think that *USA Today* and *Reader's Digest* are telling the truth?

## **Naboth and Jezebel**

The immediate meaning and application of this commandment has to do with lying in a court of law. Remember King Ahab? He had a neighbor, named Naboth. The story is found in 1 Kings 21. One day Ahab talked to his neighbor Naboth about selling his land. "I want it for a garden," the king explained, "because it's so convenient to the palace." Ahab offered Naboth cash. Or if he preferred, a better piece of land as a trade.

But Naboth replied, "Not on your life! This land has been in my family for generations."

So Ahab went back to the palace angry and depressed. He refused to eat and went to bed with his face to the wall!

But his wife, Jezebel, told him: "Get up and eat and don't worry about it. I'll get you Naboth's vineyard!"

So she devised a deceitful scheme. She told the civic leaders of the city to call the citizens together for fasting and prayer. (Sounds so religious, doesn't it!). But the prayer meeting suddenly turned into a civil trial. Jezebel had planted two liars among the people. At the opportune moment, they accused Naboth of cursing God and the king. Naboth was immediately dragged outside the city and stoned to death.<sup>iii</sup> So Ahab got his silly vineyard.

This is what the ninth commandment prohibits: *lying in a court of law*. As in the case of Naboth, such false evidence can lead to the wrongful punishment or even death of an innocent defendant. And this is a miscarriage of justice.

Skip ahead by several thousand years, from innocent Naboth to guilty Nixon. As Richard Nixon accepted his party's nomination to run for the office of President of the US, he said: "Let us begin by committing ourselves to the truth, to see it as it is, and to tell it like it is, to find the truth, to speak the truth, the live the truth." But nine years later Nixon had a different take on this: "When a President does it, then it is not illegal."<sup>iv</sup>

But it's not every day that you and I find ourselves in a court of law. I personally have served as a witness in a court of law only once in my life. However, the underlying spirit of this commandment goes much further than the courtroom. It applies to all of our personal relationships, demanding the highest degree of integrity and honesty in all of our verbal and non-verbal interactions.

Bottom line, commandment number nine of the "Big Ten" prohibits ...

*"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."* =  
...affirming to be true what you know or believe to be false;  
...affirming to be false what you know or believe to be true.

It even goes beyond this to include any attempt to mislead or deceive another person. This can be done by speaking false words, in certain cases failing to speak true words, or speaking words that hide our true intentions.

Some of the biggest lies ever told come from our lips almost unthinkingly:

- ◆ The check is in the mail.
- ◆ You get this one; I'll pay next time.
- ◆ My wife doesn't understand me.
- ◆ Trust me, I'll take care of everything.
- ◆ Of course I love you.
- ◆ It's not the money; it's the principle of the thing.
- ◆ I never watch television except for PBS.
- ◆ But we can still be good friends.
- ◆ She means nothing to me.
- ◆ I'll call you later.
- ◆ Sorry, we can't come to the phone right now.<sup>v</sup>

Before going any further, however, I know some of you are asking: Is it ever right to lie or deceive? After all, if we're *honest* we have to admit that some of us are subtly *dishonest* on almost a daily basis.

I don't know about you, but when I leave my house, I leave a light on...if not several. Is it a sin to deceive a would-be thief? Or how often have you seen a "Beware of Dog" sign only to discover that the most dangerous animal in the owner's possession is a pet hamster. Maybe you proudly display one of these signs yourself on your own "petless" property!

As I was thinking about this the other day, I was in our living room peering at our front screen door. I suddenly realized my own lie to all who enter our house. There's a sticker that reads:

“Phillips Electronic Alarm Protects These Premises.” Well, I don’t have any such alarm system. Of course, for those of you who know my dog, you know that I don’t need one. But am I bearing false testimony to my neighbors or any would-be thief?

## Rahab and the Spies

If you’ve been following along in our Bible read-through, you recently read the account of the believing prostitute, Rahab, in Joshua 2. Joshua had sent spies from the Israeli camp to check out the situation in Jericho. By the way, what is a spy? A spy is a secret agent. A spy relies upon strategies of falsehood, in word, behavior or dress, in order to secretly gain information for the purpose of overthrowing the enemy.

Well, these spies arrive at the house of a prostitute, named Rahab, who welcomes them in...not for sex, but for spying. Someone, however, informs the King of Jericho of where the spies are and he dispatches a police squadron to the Rahab’s house, demanding that she surrender the two spies.

But Rahab told the officer in charge, “The men were here earlier, but I didn’t know they were spies. They left the city at dusk as the city gates were about to close, and I don’t know where they went. If you hurry, you can probably catch up with them!”<sup>vi</sup>

But the fact of the matter is, Rahab had taken the spies up to the roof and hidden them beneath piles of flax that were drying there. So the constable and his men went all the way to the Jordan River looking for them, but without success.

Rahab told a bold, brash, outright lie. And she is not the first or the last one to do so in the Bible.<sup>vii</sup> But here’s God’s take on what Rahab did:

Rahab the prostitute ... was made right with God by her actions--when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. James 2:25 NLT

Rahab didn’t bear false testimony *against* her neighbor, as is prohibited in the ninth commandment. She bore false testimony *on behalf* of her neighbor. And God rightly commends her for it.<sup>viii</sup>

How is that? Here’s the principle that I pull out of this example (as well as others in the Bible): In certain extreme, exceptional cases the Christian is under no obligation to speak the truth to those who have forfeited the right to truth. The faithful witness of many Christians who hid innocent Jewish children during the Nazi occupation of Europe testifies to this.

So maybe those “BEWARE OF DOG” signs for those with fictitious canines are not all that bad!

But the case of Rahab is the exception, not the rule. What’s the rule? Listen to Paul’s words to the believers in Ephesus:

Since you have ... learned the truth that is in Jesus, throw off your old evil nature and your former way of life, which is rotten through and through, full of lust and deception.

Instead, there must be a spiritual renewal of your thoughts and attitudes. You must display a new nature because you are a new person, created in God's likeness--righteous, holy, and true. So put away all falsehood and "tell your neighbor the truth" because we belong to each other. Ephesians 4:21-25 NLT

Falsehood is literally "the lie."<sup>ix</sup> Paul is not speaking simply of telling lies – whether big lies or little "white lies." He is talking about a lifestyle of deceit and cover up. He is talking about dishonesty with ourselves<sup>x</sup>, others and God.

When God first created man, he made truth-telling natural to us. But ever since Adam and Eve our minds have been working overtime in our attempts to lie. One of the first sins evident in the life of a child is to tell a lie.

For a period of time early in our marriage I lived a lie, not telling my wife about my growing addiction that compromised our relationship. That's living a lie. Some believers (maybe some here this morning) are living a lie in an attempt to cover up their sin or to conceal their sin from another, such as their spouse

Still another way in which we live falsely is by covering up our real feelings or emotions. Someone asks me, "How are you doing?" and I reply, "Just great!" But on the inside I'm about to die. That's a lie. That is living inauthentically. We are called to authenticity in the Christian life. That doesn't mean spilling your guts with just anybody. But it does mean an appropriate level of vulnerability and transparency

Another way in which we are untruthful to one another is when we say we are going to do something, and then don't follow through. In some societies, "saving face" is an expression of living falsehood. We are so concerned about the impression made on another, that we say one thing and then live another

But Paul says in verse 21 that we "heard Christ" and were "taught in Christ," just as "the truth is in Jesus." Our conversion, which takes us out of the old community with Adam as its head and placed us in the new community with Christ as its head, is described as introducing us to "truth." This is not merely doctrinal truth, what we are to believe. But it is also ethical truth, how we are to behave.

We are to put off lying because we are "members of one body." One has said that "a lie is a stab into the very vitals of the Body of Christ."<sup>xi</sup> When we lie, or when we live a lie, we are not merely hurting ourselves. We are also hurting others. Why? Because in Christ we are inseparably connected to each other. What I do affects you and what you do affects me.

In a little over an hour, most of you will be sitting down for a Sunday noon meal. Your body, by means of your hand, will take the fork in one hand and the knife in the other. But let's suppose that your eye lies to you mind about where your mouth is. What's going to happen? You'll probably stab your nose with your fork! That's the way it is in the Body of Christ. When we lie to one another, we are "stabbing" one another.

No wonder the Bible says that God hates lying.

There are six things the LORD hates--no, seven things he detests:

1. haughty eyes,
2. **a lying tongue,**
3. hands that kill the innocent,
4. a heart that plots evil,
5. feet that race to do wrong,
6. **a false witness who pours out lies,**
7. a person who sows discord among brothers. Proverbs 6:17 NLT

But notice number 2 and number 6: “a lying tongue” and “a false witness that pours out lies.” Of the seven that depict the epitome of sin, two speak of lying! But why is this?

As for each of the Ten Commandments, I suspect the answer is found in the character of God. Our God is a God of truth and all truth resides in Him. The Bible reminds us:

God is not a man that he should lie;  
Or the Son of Man, that he should change his mind.  
Has he spoken and will he not make it good?  
Or has he promised and will he not fulfill it? Numbers 23:19<sup>xii</sup>

Throw out God and you throw out truth. No wonder that Allan Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* says, “There is one thing a [college] professor or can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”<sup>xiii</sup>

No wonder 64% of Americans say, “I will lie when it suits me if it doesn’t cause any real damage.”<sup>xiv</sup>

In our post-Christian, relativistic world, what is true for you is your truth and what is true for me is my truth. And so if you and I go to the roof of this massive building, and we step off at the same time, if we both honestly believe that we will hover in the air and not fall to the ground ... well, that might be “*my truth.*” Though I don’t think you would take me up on my offer!

But Jesus breaks through all such nonsense. “I am *the way, the truth and the life.*” It’s the claim of an absolutist. It’s politically incorrect. It’s the claim of truth.

Here’s another one that’s not politically correct. Jesus says: “If you do not believe that I am He (i.e. God the Son), you will die in your sins.” And that promise of dying in your sins if you do not believe in Jesus, is as certain as falling to the ground if you jump from this building.

The other side of the coin is this. If God is the God of all truth, then Satan, the Adversary is the father of all lies. “You will not surely die,” he whispers to that primeval couple in the Garden. “After all, did God really say?”

“Man’s integrity is dissolved when God’s integrity is questioned,”<sup>xv</sup> John Murray reminds us. Strip away God’s truth and mankind is left in a sea of meaningless relativism where deception and dishonesty become the norm.

...and the consequences are less than desirable.

“A lie is like a snowball,” wrote the great Reformer, Martin Luther. “The longer it is rolled on the ground the larger it becomes.”<sup>xvi</sup> Or take the words of Walter Scott, the famed Scottish novelist of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century:

“What a tangled web we leave. When first we practice to deceive.”

And that tangled web ultimately leads to death. Adam and Eve died. Ananias and Sapphira died. And you and I will die when we believe lies and practice lying.

But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and *all liars*-their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death. Revelation 21:8

But you and I can avoid that horrible destiny. How? Jesus put it this way: “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Do you want to be free today? Right now? Free from a life of deceit and meaninglessness? Free from living the lie? You can. Come to Jesus today, right now, and let Him change your life.

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<sup>i</sup> “Numbers Tell the Story,” *USA Today*, January 9, 1992, sec. 4D as cited by Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 443.

<sup>ii</sup> www.PreachingToday.com. Source: “How Honest Are You?” *Reader's Digest* (January 2004); submitted by Van Morris, Mt. Washington, Kentucky

<sup>iii</sup> Account adapted from 1 Kings 21 in *The Living Bible*.

<sup>iv</sup> Nystrom, 85.

<sup>v</sup> Compiled from multiple Internet sites; submitted by Jerry De Luca, Montreal West, Canada to www.preachingtoday.com

<sup>vi</sup> Text adapted from the *Living Bible*.

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1:15-20, Jael's trickery of Sisera in Judges 4:18-21; 5:24-27, Solomon's "wisdom of God" in 1 Kings 3:28, Jeremiah's lie to the princes of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 38:24-28, David's crafty counsel to Jonathan in 1 Samuel 20:6, 28-29.

<sup>viii</sup> See the excellent article on this topic by Jim West, “Rahab's Justifiable Lie,” *Christianity & Civilization* 2 (Winter 1983): 66-74.

<sup>ix</sup> Paul may be citing Zech 8:16 in this verse.

<sup>x</sup> Cf. Ps 119:29 *Keep me from lying to myself; give me the privilege of knowing your law.* NLT

<sup>xi</sup> John Mackay as cited by John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 185.

<sup>xii</sup> Ours is a faith resting on the hope of eternal life ... “which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time” (Titus 1:2).

<sup>xiii</sup> Cited by Randy Alcorn, *The Grace and Truth Paradox* (Sisters: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 56.

<sup>xiv</sup> James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 25-6, 49, 66 as cited by Randy Alcorn, *The Grace and Truth Paradox*, 53.

<sup>xv</sup> John Murray, “The Sanctity of Truth,” [www.the-highway.com/truth\\_Murray.html](http://www.the-highway.com/truth_Murray.html)

<sup>xvi</sup> Martin Luther, “Martin Luther--The Early Years,” *Christian History*, no. 34.