

The Ten Commandments
Lesson 20: No False Witness
Treasuring Truth In Every Relationship And Circumstance

Introduction

In a time when we often hear about white lies, half-truths, mild exaggerations, and stretching the truth, the ninth commandment provides God's word of correction and counsel. It is His call to honesty in what we say. God is truth. He speaks the truth, He wants His people to speak the truth in all situations, in every relationship, and in every encounter. **Exodus 20:16** states, *"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."* While this command focuses primarily on not giving false testimony against a neighbor in a legal setting, the heart of this command prohibits any kind of lying or deception (the starting point for any false testimony). By extension, the ninth commandment calls us to avoid all that is false and damaging to relationships.

God loves truth. His command not to bear false testimony comes from the depths of His heart. It is His nature to be honest; He can act in no other way, and He calls His people to do the same. Hiding the truth, deceiving with innuendoes, telling half-truths or only part of the truth—all types of deceit displease God. Each is a sin against His holy character.

As we study the Scriptures in this lesson, we will see how serious this matter of lying is to the Lord and to His people. We will also see how this command applies to our lives today. How are we to obey it in one-on-one relationships, in family relationships, in church and community life, and in the business world? We will seek the answers to these and other questions as we explore the full meaning of the ninth commandment.

Living honestly and truthfully means freedom—freedom with the Lord, freedom of conscience, and freedom in relationships. Such a life is a treasure of immense value which any person can receive.

1. Dealing With False Testimony

We must remember that at the heart of this command is God's prohibition against any kind of lying or deception. A deceitful heart is the seedbed of a false testimony. First, one makes the choice to hide the truth or deceive, then to craft the lie, and, finally, to give birth to the false testimony. Every part of the process stands in strict opposition to the God of truth who commands truth in every relationship and circumstance. As we study the legal tone of the ninth command, we will also discover the issues of truth versus deception that are the foundation of this command.

- a. What do the Scriptures reveal about God and His relationship with truth? How is He contrasted with men and women? Look at the following scriptures and summarize the main characteristics about God or about people found in each.
 - i. **Numbers 23:19**
 - ii. **2 Samuel 7:28**
 - iii. **Isaiah 65:16**
 - iv. **Romans 3:4**
 - v. **Titus 1:2**

The Scriptures are clear, *“God is not a man, that He should lie”* (**Numbers 23:19**). When He says He will do something, He does it. He speaks words of truth. Isaiah calls Him *“the God of truth.”* He is found true in all His ways and in all He says, while every person is a liar at some point. Writing to Titus, Paul’s words assure the Christian of the hope of eternal life because *“God...cannot lie”* (**1:2**). **Hebrews 6:18** declares that it is *“impossible for God to lie.”* Because God is true, we can better understand the seriousness with which He gives the ninth commandment and every prohibition relating to lying or deception.

- b. Read the ninth commandment as it is given in **Exodus 20:16**. What harm can come from disobeying this command?

God commands, *“you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”* Never distort the truth or deceive in any way. Lies harm others. This command is given to stop someone from giving a false testimony about another. The one who gives a false testimony does so deliberately. Minor mistakes in reporting facts are not what we are talking about. The liar knows the truth and chooses not to tell it. Under Mosaic Law, in most cases in which the witnesses were called to testify, the death penalty was the sentence meted out to those found guilty—so the testimony of a false witness (someone who lied) could mean the death of an innocent man or woman. A false witness in a trial could, in fact, be committing murder by his or her testimony.

Why do people give false testimony or tell lies in general about others? There are many reasons. Some tell lies to benefit themselves, perhaps for material or monetary gain or for an intangible benefit (the attention, goodwill, or acceptance of others). Others may lie to get off the hook by shifting the blame to someone else. Still others lie because they intend to harm others, acting from prejudice or seeking revenge for a real or imagined wrong. Whatever the reason, lying about another person is demeaning and even deadly. Every lie helps destroy the soul of the person who tells it. And every lie has the potential to destroy another person. Lies can cripple those who hear them, because lies deceive or confuse, hindering clear communication and causing further misunderstanding.

- c. The Scriptures have much to say about lying and deceit. Look at **Exodus 23:1-3** and **6-9**. Summarize the guidelines given. How does God show His concern for all types of people? What do you discover about God’s call to truth and justice in these verses?

The Lord commanded that no one give a false report about another. Testifying falsely to follow the majority or prevailing sentiment in a dispute or lawsuit is a perversion of justice. We are not to lie for a poor person who is involved in a dispute with a rich opponent, just as we are not to favor the rich over the poor. We are not to take bribes and tell lies as a result of taking them, nor are we to bribe others to lie.

In general, we are not to slant the truth or pervert justice that is due any person—rich or needy, innocent or guilty, a stranger or loved one, a foreigner or someone from our own country. God commanded the Israelites, when it comes to outsiders, to treat them like you would treat yourselves and remember that you were once strangers in Egypt.

- d. **Deuteronomy 17:6-7** and **19:15-24** present strict guidelines concerning testifying for or against someone accused of a crime. As discussed in the lesson on the sixth commandment, two witnesses were necessary to convict suspects for crimes carrying the death penalty. What additional guidelines are found in these two passages?

- i. How should a lying witness be punished according to **Deuteronomy 19:19 and 21**?
 - ii. What is God's purpose in issuing such severe punishment for witnesses who lie according to verse 20?
 - iii. Bribes can influence the testimony of witnesses. The Lord has a lot to say about bribing someone to lie or taking a bribe to lie. What does **Deuteronomy 10:17** say about God and bribes?
- e. **Deuteronomy 10:18** focuses on God's concern for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. What do these verses say about justice? How does this tie to what we see in verse 17?
 - f. What does a bribe do according to **Deuteronomy 16:19**? What does God call His people to do in verse 20?
 - g. What effect does a bribe have on the one who takes it according to **Ecclesiastes 7:7**?
 - h. How do these principles connect with God's instructions for judges in **Exodus 18:21-23** (also mentioned in **Deuteronomy 1:16-17**)?

APPLY: Bribes, lies, and deceit not only occur during legal settings. They are found in many avenues of life. Have you ever told a lie, withheld the truth, or done something else outside the rules to gain some advantage for yourself or someone else? Have you ever been governed by the motto, "You look the other way this time, and I'll return the favor"—perhaps, in sports, business dealings, political maneuverings, or even "church" politics? It may be a subtle choice, even considered minor by most, but if God would question it, shouldn't you?

- i. **Leviticus 19:11-12; 15-18** gives general principles that apply not only in legal proceedings, but in everyday encounters—whether in the neighborhood or on the job. What guidelines do you find in those verses? What is at the heart of these guidelines according to verse 18?
- j. Jeremiah 17:9-10 focuses our attention on the heart of the problem of deception. What is the heart of all lying?

The Scriptures place a high premium on the truth, not just as a matter of information or accumulated knowledge, but as part of building strong, lasting relationships. Truth between two people builds trust, bringing great freedom and little fear between them, sustaining the relationship through stormy times and periods of calm. Lies and slander destroy trust, because they lead to damaged relationships, even destroying relationships. Sometimes these lies destroy a little at a time, and sometimes they produce a fatal blow all at once. God is always true, never deceitful. He commands the same from of His people—never lie; do not deal falsely in any dimension of life.

Watch out for hatred in the heart or the temptation to be vengeful, to carry out a grudge. When a problem exists, deal with it in truth, knowing that sometimes a loving and righteous rebuke is necessary. That is better than continuing in dishonesty or hiding the truth. This applies to the home, neighborhood, church, and community—anywhere relationships are.

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2. It's An Everyday Decision—Truth or Deceit.

Let's explore some further implications of walking truthfully. This is a matter that has faced men and women since the Garden of Eden. We will begin by going back to that place and seeing how crucial it is that we hold to the truth. It is an everyday decision. God knows that the temptation to lie or walk away from the truth is always present. Therefore, He has given us scriptural examples and exhortations to follow and pitfalls to avoid. We will see those in this portion of the lesson.

- a. Look at the encounter between Eve, the Serpent, Adam, and the Lord given in **Genesis 3:1-13**. What is the first mark of the serpent given in verse 1?
 - i. In the conversation with Eve, what is the predominating tone, according to verses 1-5? What lies are spoken?
 - ii. What did Adam and Eve do after they had eaten the forbidden fruit according to verses 7-8?
 - iii. Look at verses 9-13. How did the Lord confront them, and how did Adam and Eve respond? How truthful were they?
 - iv. What do we learn from this first encounter with deceit and lies?

The serpent is described as *"more crafty than any beast of the field,"* pointing to the cunning and subtlety. The serpent began the conversation by questioning the Word of God, injecting a measure of doubt into Eve's mind. Then, he actually denied God's Word with the declaration, *"you shall not die!"*. The lies intensified. He questioned God's motives, implying that God was holding back something wonderful from Eve. He urged her to eat so that she could be like God. The deception worked. She ate and then Adam ate. Immediately both of them began a scheme of cover up, first with fig leaves, then hiding among the trees.

When God came, He asked Adam *"Where are you?"* which was not a question referring to their geographic location, but rather a call for an honest explanation about his hiding. Adam shifted the blame to the woman, and the woman pointed to the deception of the serpent. God wants us to be honest with Him and with one another.

Every person since Adam and Eve has faced the choice to lie or to tell the truth, to be deceitful and dishonest or to walk in honesty and integrity. One of the more noteworthy was David, the second king of Israel. David was known as a man after God's heart, who sought to apply God's Word in everyday life. He knew the Ten Commandments and the other Scriptures given through Moses, and we see that influence in many of the writings of David.

- b. David wrote **Psalms 15**. Read verses 1-5. In particular, what does David say in this passage about walking in honesty and integrity?
- c. David had to deal with deceptive and corrupt people who would lie to gain advantage. Read David's prayer in **Psalms 64**. Verse 2-6 describe the people he encountered. What are some of the words he used to describe them?

David understood how important truth was in his own life. He also had to deal with personal deceit. After his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and his murderous plot against Uriah, David confessed nothing until Nathan the prophet confronted him about his sins. Then, in deep repentance and confession, David dealt with his wrongs. We find his words in **Psalm 51**. Of particular importance is David's understanding of deceit versus honesty.

- d. Read **Psalm 51:1-6**. After acknowledging his sin, David expresses the heartbeat of God in regard to each of us. What is God's desire for each of us, according to verse 6?
- e. David's son, Solomon, had much to say about the importance of honesty and about lying, deceit, and dishonesty. What do you discover about God's attitude toward lying and dishonesty in **Proverbs 6:16-19**?
- f. According to the following verses, what is the attitude of the righteous man and woman concerning lying and deceit?
 - i. **Psalm 101:5-7**
 - ii. **Psalm 119:163**
 - iii. **Proverbs 13:5**.

Of the seven things "*the Lord hates*" and considers "*an abomination*," second on the list is a "*lying tongue*" and sixth is "*a false witness who utters lies*," both violations of the ninth commandment. Both are part of a life of wickedness. In **Psalm 101**, David stood in opposition to the one who "*secretly slanders his neighbor*" as well as those who practice "*deceit*" or speak "*falsehood*." In **Psalm 119:163**, the psalmist expressed the utmost disdain for deceit and a delight in God's truth: "*I hate and despise falsehood, but I love Thy law*." Solomon again expressed the nature of God and of those who walk with Him declaring, "*the righteous man hates falsehood*."

- g. Flattery is a form of lying, and the Scriptures are not silent about this subtle sin. Review these verses and summarize what you find, especially the results of flattery.
 - i. **Psalm 12:1-4; Proverbs 26:28; Proverbs 28:23; and Proverbs 29:5**.

Many in Israel did not follow the clear commands of God or the wise words of His leaders and prophets. Over three hundred years after David and Solomon lived, toward the end of the seventh century B.C., God called Jeremiah to prophesy to His people in Judah.

- h. What characterized the people of God to whom Jeremiah was writing according to **Jeremiah 9:2-9**?
 - i. What kind of relationship did the people have with each other according to verse 4-5 and 8?
 - ii. What was their relationship with the Lord? What did God declare according to verse 7 and 9?
- i. Read **Zechariah 8:16-17**. In verse 15, What did God call His people to do?

The Scriptures are clear about those who live dishonestly and about the many harmful consequences of lying. Describe the one who practices an unrepentant lifestyle of lying. Summarize your findings from the verses below?

- **Psalm 5:6**
- **Proverbs 19:5, 9**
- **Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:15**

God will deal with the false witness and the liar sooner or later. Sometimes the lie becomes immediately evident whether in a trial or in a life situation. Sometimes it stays hidden, but ultimately it will be dealt with. For the unrepentant liar, every one who *“loves and practices lying,”* the ultimate end is destruction away from the presence of the Lord in the lake of fire.

Homework: Read **Matthew 5:33-37; 15:15-20; 12:33-37; Acts 3:1-26.**

Lesson Topics: **Jesus Calls Us to Live In Truth & The New Testament Call To Living And Speaking The Truth.**