

The Ninth Commandment

Q. What does God require in the ninth commandment?

A. That we do not lie or deceive, but speak the truth in love.

Text: Exodus 20:16 – “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Augustine – “The tongue inflicts greater wounds than the sword.”¹

Before we look at the various applications of this commandment in our own day and age, we need to consider the original audience, and what these words would have meant to them in their context.

The Hebrew verb אָנַח (*‘anah*) means “to answer,” and was often used in the context of a court case to mean “to testify for/against” someone.

The Hebrew noun רֵעִי (*rea’*) translated “neighbor” reminds us of the covenantal context of the command, and that the violation of it erodes the very foundation – trust and love – and fabric – justice and righteousness – of the community.

- This reminds us that though we must bear truthful witness towards all people in all circumstances of life, the breaking of this commandment is most harmful when done against those closest to us, and that if the covenant community² is to build itself together in love, truthfulness is essential.³

The preposition often means “with, among, by”, but HALOT notes that it can also be translated as “against” when hostility is implied, which shows that often, lying is not some neutral ‘accident’ but is the fruit of a malicious heart.³ This is why

¹ Latin: *Majora sunt linguae vulnera quam gladii.*

² Notice how this picked up and applied to the NT covenant community – the church – by Jesus (**Matthew 18:16**), Paul (**2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19**), and the preacher of Hebrews (**10:28**). See also **Revelation 11:3**. ³ Notice that the very first exhortation Paul gives for what it looks like to put on the new man as the image of Christ is truthfulness: “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another...Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for building up what is needed, so that it will give grace to those who hear.” (**Ephesians 4:25, 29**)

³ Notice the very next verses after Ephesians 4:25 and 29: “BE ANGRY, AND DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity...And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were

Solomon can say, “A faithful witness will not lie, but a false witness breathes out lies” (**Proverbs 14:5**)⁴.

Finally, the phrase **עֵד שֶׁקֶר** (*‘ed shaqer*) literally means “a witness of deceit,” and is translated by the NET, NIV, and CSB as “false testimony.”⁵ HALOT notes that the noun *shaqer* carries the meaning of “lie, falsehood, deception” – both in word and action – and includes the ideas of something being pretended or unreal.

Back in Moses’ day, witnesses were everything, and were vitally important in executing justice – or injustice – at the gates, determining the fates of individuals within the covenant community with regards to individual case laws and disputes against one another.

As DeYoung notes,

“We often think of the ninth commandment as “Do not lie,” and that is the gist of it, but it’s specifically put in the context of a courtroom...[Witnesses] are important today, but we also have audio recordings, videos, fingerprints, and DNA testing. They didn’t have any of that, but they had eyewitnesses. If someone stood up to accuse a person of wrongdoing, and a second person stood up with the same accusation, the life of the accused could be in jeopardy.”⁷

- **Deuteronomy 17:6** – “On the mouth of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the mouth of one witness.”⁶

sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and anger and wrath and shouting and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” (**Ephesians 4:26-27, 30-31**)

⁴ The Hebrew literally reads “A witness of truthfulness/faithfulness” (**עֵד אֱמֻנָה**) will not lie/deceive/cheat, but he will breathe/blow forth falsehoods/lies a witness of falsehood/deceit (**עֵד שֶׁקֶר**).”

⁵ The NLT translates the verse: “You must not testify falsely against your neighbor.” ⁷ Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 144.

⁶ Note the context. In **16:18-20**, Moses commands Israel to appoint honest judges who will be able to render justice and righteousness within the community, “that you might live and possess the land which Yahweh is giving you.” Having honest judges and honest witnesses enabled Israel to “render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace” (**Zechariah 8:16**, ESV).

- We see the tragic example of this principle, and how justice can be perverted, in the murder of Naboth in **1 Kings 21**.

- See especially **Matthew 26:60-61**, where two deceitful witnesses accuse Jesus of blaspheming the temple, which ultimately results in Him being condemned to death by the high priest.

- **Deuteronomy 19:15** – “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; at the mouth of two or three witnesses a matter shall be established.”

In the OT, there are six different ways the Hebrew says, “false witness,” which occur in some sixteen different passages. This is therefore not a small theme in the Bible.⁷

All this simply reminds us that the true and living God – whose throne is founded upon righteousness and justice⁸ – cares about justice and righteousness in, through, and amongst His people, whom He created and re-created to be His image⁹ and the representatives, administrators, and ambassadors of His rule on earth (as it is in heaven).

However, though the commandment begins at the gate of the community, it does not end there, for the gate is not the only place where we can hurt or harm our neighbor with our deceitful, lying, untruthful, and slanderous lips.

Breaking the Ninth Commandment would also include:

1. Slandering others

⁷ Cf. DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 146.

⁸ See **Psalm 89:14; 97:2**; cf. its application to Messiah’s rule in **Isaiah 9:7; 16:5**.

⁹ Because God is the God of all truth, and loves truth, Solomon can say “An abomination to Yahweh [are] lips of deceitfulness, but doers of truth/faithfulness [are] His delight” (**Proverbs 12:22**, my translation).

James 4:11-12a – “Do not slander one another, brothers. He who slanders a brother or judges his brother, slanders the law and judges the law.”

Watson: “The scorpion carries his poison in his tail, the slanderer carries his poison in his tongue...To pretend friendship to a man, and slander him, is most odious.”¹⁰

Those who indulge in the habit of running down their neighbors by making false statements or by enjoying lies and false reports are guilty of slander.¹¹

WHY do we do this?

- When we engage in slander, we defame others in order to exalt ourselves. Slander is but the audible expression of self-worship, thus confirming – once again – Luther’s assertion that the breaking of commandments two through nine stem from breaking the first.
- **Proverbs 26:23-26, 28a** – “*Like* an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross are fiery lips and an evil heart.¹⁴ He who hates disguises *it* with his lip, but he sets up deceit within himself. When he makes his voice [sound] gracious, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart. *Though his* hatred, his evil will be revealed in the assembly...A lying tongue hates those it crushes.”

Begg’s words are helpful:

Stirred by hatred or jealousy, the slanderer gathers little groups in the corner of the room...calculated to destroy the reputation of those who are not there to defend themselves.¹²

¹⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1692 [repr. 1981]), 169.

¹¹ See Begg, *Pathway to Freedom* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2003 [repr. 2021]), 203. ¹⁴

See (again) Jesus’ words in **Matthew 15:19-20**.

¹² *Ibid.*

We see the heart of this treacherous sin in the words and actions of David's son Absalom in **2 Samuel 15**. By publicly maligning his father's character and motives, he subtly undermines the nation's trust in its king to prepare for his long-planned *coup d'état*.

As DeYoung notes, slander also includes [publicly] assuming [and communicating to others] the worst possible motives for other people's intentions and refusing to ever give people the benefit of the doubt:

This happens all the time. Something happens to us, and we just assume, "She didn't talk to me because she's really mad at me," or, "The way he wrote that email – he must be thinking such and such." We develop elaborate hypotheses and speculations, and when we tell other people, we pass it along as truth.¹³

So serious a sin is slander, regardless of the form it takes, that David says that those who practice this are not allowed to approach God:

- **Psalm 15:1-3** – "O Yahweh, who may sojourn in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy mountain? He who walks¹⁴ blamelessly,¹⁸ and works righteousness¹⁵ and speaks truth in his heart.¹⁶ He does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend."

This is why his son Solomon says, "the one who spreads slander is foolish"¹⁷ (**Proverbs 10:18**)¹⁸

¹³ DeYoung, 148.

¹⁴ The participles ("the one walking" and "the one practicing") highlight that this is his or her way of life. ¹⁸ The Hebrew טָמִים (*tamim*) carries the idea of wholeness and fullness (CSB = "who lives honestly"; ESV, NJB = "blamelessly"; NET [cf. NLT] = "whoever lives a blameless life").

¹⁵ Literally, "the practicing-of-righteousness-one."

¹⁶ Literally, "word/speech of truth/faithfulness in his heart."

¹⁷ Most EVVs translate "is a fool." Though this is certainly true, "foolish" is perhaps a better translation, as fools in the OT are synonymous with unbelievers, whereas even believers at times can [inconsistently] act like fools, that is, be foolish. The verb translated "spread" literally means here "to cause to go/spread out."

¹⁸ Cf. **Proverbs 18:7-8** – "A fool's lips come with strife, and his mouth calls for beatings. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are the snare of his soul." ²³ Watson, 173.

Watson's application is helpful:

The mandatory part of the commandment implied is that we stand up for others and vindicate them when they are injured by lying lips. Not only should we not slander falsely or accuse others; but that we should witness for them, and stand up in their defence, when we know them to be traduced. A man may wrong another as well by silence as by slander, when he knows him to be wrongfully accused, yet does not speak on his behalf. If any cast false aspersions on any, we should wipe them off.²³

Addendum #1: Passive-Aggressive Theological Slander

We can easily slander our brothers and sisters by unfairly misrepresenting their view, especially publicly – and often mockingly – on social media platforms.

Though we may convince ourselves that we are simply speaking the truth, it is still not right unless we are speaking it “in love” (**Ephesians 4:15**).¹⁹ If we are not careful in guarding our motives, we may be saying all the right theological things with our lips [or keyboards], while our hearts are yet far from God, for when we intentionally demean others, we insult God. It is possible to simultaneously be right yet unrighteous.

2. Gossip

Proverbs 26:20-22 – “With no wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, strife quiets down. *Like* charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the stomach.”²⁵

Again, DeYoung is helpful:

Gossip is passing along a report or rumor that cannot be substantiated. But gossip is more than that. We also gossip when we pass along a true report unnecessarily.²⁶

¹⁹ Notice in **4:16** that the body is built up “in/by love” just as much as it is built up in/by truth (**4:13-14**). Later, Paul says that the fruit of light consists in “all goodness and righteousness and truth” (**5:9**).²⁵ Cf. **Proverbs 18:8**²⁶ DeYoung, 147.

Moreover, gossip implicates more than just the one who loves to share it; those who listen to it also become guilty in, and partake of, this sin if they refuse to rebuke the one sharing.

WHY do we so often listen to gossip?

1. An evil heart

Moreover, we love secrets – especially bad, juicy ones. We can just as easily feel better than others by hearing a negative report about them as we can sharing it.

2. The fear of man

Often, though we know that the gossiper is sinning, we are afraid to offend them by gently rebuking them.

- **Proverbs 29:25** – “Trembling before man brings a snare, but he who trusts in Yahweh will be set securely on high.”

As DeYoung says, “our silence in the face of gossip is as sinful as the gossip itself.”²⁰

Which is why loving *all* our neighbors requires us to speak truthfully at all times, including necessary admonishments:

- **Proverbs 27:5-6** – “Better is reproof that is revealed than love that is hidden. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.”
- **Proverbs 28:23** – “He who reproves a man will afterward find *more* favor than he who flatters with his tongue.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

3. Flattery

Begg – “If gossip is saying something behind a person’s back that we would never say to his face, then flattery is saying to a person’s face what we would never say behind his back.”²¹

Proverbs 29:5 – “A man who flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his steps.”

WHY do we do this?

- Like all other sins, it stems from an inordinate love of self. We flatter our neighbors to benefit ourselves – whether acceptance, favor, dominance, safety, greed, etc. – or, worse, to harm others.²²
- Example of the famous folktale, “The Emperor’s new clothes.”

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- **1 Thessalonians 2:3-6** – “For our exhortation does not *come* from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. For we never came with a flattering word, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness – nor seeking glory from men, either from you or from others.
 - This is what the false teachers in Galatia seemed to be doing in the churches,²³ and seems to be what Paul is warning Timothy about in Ephesus.²⁴

²¹ Begg, *PTF*, 205.

²² Longman writes, “Just as a net is set out in secret and camouflaged from the prey, so flattery sets up people for a fall. Flattery, might, for instance, convince people that their abilities are superior to what they really are. Thus, when they try to act on their supposed abilities, they fall flat.” Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* in *BECOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 502.

²³ See **Galatians 4:16-18**

²⁴ See **2 Timothy 4:3-4**

- **Proverbs 5:3** – “For the lips of a strange woman drip honey and smoother than oil is her speech.”²⁵
- **Jeremiah 9:8** – “Their tongue is a slaughtering arrow; it speaks deceit²⁶; with his mouth one speaks peace to his neighbor, but inwardly he sets an ambush for him.”

Rather than being deceitful for our own selfish gain, we who represent Christ must be truthful for the good of others.

- **Proverbs 24:26** (NET) – “Like a kiss on the lips is the one who gives an honest answer.”

As Longman notes, “Flattery is different from encouragement because the latter is based on the truth. Flattery hypes...but does not help.”²⁷

And Solomon reminds us, “Lying lips are an abomination to Yahweh, but doers of faithfulness²⁸ are His delight.” (**Proverbs 12:22**)

4. Exaggeration/embellishment

Again, we often deceive others – even in a seemingly in a playful way – to either build ourselves up as the hero or tear others down as the villain.

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- Be careful about absolute statements like “always” and “never,” as this can paint an untruthful picture about someone’s character.
 - Be careful about making mountains out of molehills.

5. Half-truths

²⁵ Cf. **Proverbs 6:24; 7:5, 21**

²⁶ Hebrew, *mirmah* = “fraud/deceit/betrayal”

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Hebrew אֱמוּנָה (*emunah*): “truth, faithfulness, truthfulness.”

For example, we are prone to leave out crucial facts and details when relaying or conveying a story/information to others.

- “I bought a couple of things online.”

There is also a danger of unintentionally them on because we have not taken the time to investigate the matter to see if these things be so.

- **Prov. 18:17** – “The first to plead his case *seems* right, *until* another comes and examines him.”

Finally, we need to be careful in online debates, when we knowingly quote only a favorable portion of what someone else wrote or said; technically, we are not lying about their words, though we are most certainly acting in deceit.

6. Jumping to conclusions/assuming the worst

7. Rashly making promises and not keeping them

Proverbs 20:25 – “It is a trap for a man to say rashly, “It is holy!” and after the vows to make inquiry.”²⁹

This includes statements like:

- “I’ll be praying for you.”
- “We’re gonna leave in 5 minutes.”
- “Next time you do that, you’re gonna get a spank.”

²⁹ Though the context likely resembles that of Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 (i.e., making vows to God), the principle can be applied horizontally to making vows before others for the sake of show of our piety, zeal, righteousness, etc. For more, see the NET note for this verse.

Addendum #2: Manipulative “Prophecy”

Jeremiah 5:31 (NASB95) – “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely³⁰, and the priests rule by their *own* authority; and My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?”³¹

Jeremiah 23:16-17 – “Thus says Yahweh of hosts, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into vanity; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of Yahweh. They keep saying to those who spurn Me, ‘Yahweh has said, “You will have peace”’; and as for everyone who walks in the stubbornness of his own heart, they say, ‘Evil will not come upon you.’”³²

Micah 2:11 – “If a man walking after wind and lying had acted falsely *and said*, ‘I will speak, dripping out *words* to you concerning wine and liquor,’ he would be one who drips out *words as a spokesman* to this people.”³³

Putting Off by Putting On

The best way to keep deceit and lying from residing in our hearts is to fill our hearts with truth and faithfulness.

- **Colossians 3:8-17; Ephesians 4:17-5:2**

- This is how we, in the words of David, “cultivate truthfulness.”³⁴

As we are conformed into the image of Christ, we will find ourselves increasing “truthing in love.”⁴² Rather than harming our neighbor through deceitful witness,

³⁰ Literally, *basheqer*, “with deceit” (i.e., “deceitfully”).

³¹ NET = “But they will not be able to help you when the time of judgment comes!”

³² Cf. **Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11**

³³ NET = “If a lying windbag should come and say, ‘I’ll promise you blessings of wine and beer,’ he would be just the right preacher for these people.”

³⁴ My translation. Literally, the Hebrew reads “shepherd reliability/honesty/truth.” The second line of this Hebrew parallels the first: “Trust in Yahweh and do good / dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.” (LSB) ⁴² **Psalm 33:4** – “Indeed, the word of Yahweh is upright, and all His work is done in truth.” (my translation) ⁴³ True love “rejoices in the truth” (**1 Corinthians 13:6**).

we will – from a heart of love – help them through truthful witness.⁴³ Watson’s words are practical:

Imitate God, who is the pattern of truth. Pythagorus being asked what made men like God, answered, *cum vera loquuntur*, ‘when they speak the truth.’... Get love to your neighbor (Lev. 19:18). If we love we will stand up for others and vindicate them when they are injured by lying lips.³⁵

Conclusion:

Proverbs 10:19-21 – When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who holds back his lips has insight. The tongue of the righteous is *as* choice silver, the heart of the wicked is *worth* little. The lips of the righteous feed many, but ignorant fools die for lack of a heart.”

James 3:2 – “For we all stumble in many *ways*. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the entire body as well.”³⁶

May we make it our goal to be those who seek the truth, buy the truth, speak the truth, and live the truth, to the glory of God in Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria.

³⁵ Watson, *TTC*, 170-71.

³⁶ Of course, the cure the problem that begins the chapter is the heavenly wisdom depicted at its end. Only as we have this kind of “heart of wisdom” will we use our tongue to bless in truth, rather than harm them with deceit.