

## I. Quotes

A. It is never my custom to use words lightly. If 27 years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die. *Nelson Mandela*

B. I'm not upset that you lied to me, I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you. *Friedrich Nietzsche*

## II. Introduction

A. Twenty years ago, when we moved To Lake Bluff from Washington, we told people that we were moving to Chicago. Two days after we arrived in Lake Bluff, we told the boys that we were going to take them to Chicago. They were 11, 8 and 4 and so we planned a day that included Navy Pier, the John Hancock Building and things like that. We wanted to give them a sense of Chicago.

1. But they said, "we're already in Chicago." And we said, "No, we are in Lake Bluff."

2. And they said, "We told our friends we were moving to Chicago."

3. And we said, "Yeah."

4. And they said, "But we're not in Chicago."

5. "Not really."

6. "So we lied to our friends? You tell us not to lie, but you lie!"

B. It turns out it's really hard to explain to 4, 7 and 11 years why you say you're moving to Chicago when you are moving to Lake Bluff. For some time, they remained convinced that we had lied to our friends. So, maybe I've not very qualified to speak on the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment, which says: you shall not lie. Or, to be more precise, it says: **You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor**

III. The gist of the ninth commandment is a prohibition against making statements intended to lead somebody to believe something that you don't believe.

A. Technically, the commandment is framed for a court room, because in order to have a just society you need just courts. And in order for just courts, you have to be able to establish what actually happened. And in order to establish what happened – to get to the truth – especially in an era before DNA testing, finger prints and audio-recordings,

you need to be able to verify things based on eye-witness testimony. And so you end up with policies governing evidence and testimony and oaths.<sup>1</sup>

B. The context for the ninth commandment is pretty specific,<sup>2</sup> but as with the other commandments, they get expanded in the New Testament,<sup>3</sup> often in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus consistently clarifies them and simplifies them and also expands them. In Mt. 5:33 he says:

**1. Again, you have heard that it was said to the people of long ago, “Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord. But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your “Yes” be “Yes.” And your “No” be “No.” Anything beyond this comes from the evil one.<sup>4</sup> But I say to you – don’t swear at all, by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or the hair on your head – just honor your word.**

C. Two quick asides before we take a deep dive into this passage:

1. First, there have been groups – such as the Essenes, who hid the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Anabaptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses – who have understood this verse to mean that we should never take any vows. Even a vow in court. I think they are wrong.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 17:16; Zech. 8:16, I Tim. 5:19.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the Old Testament we see the steps that are taken to that end: 1) In Jeremiah 32 we find Jeremiah buying a field from his cousin – it’s part of God’s way of telling the Jews that the Babylonian captivity is not going to last – and already there are a number of the principles of verification already in place. Jer. 32:9 – 12 reads

<sup>3</sup> We see this in a number of places: 1) in Acts 5 we see how seriously God considered the truth in the account of Ananias and Sapphira; 2) in Ephesians 4:24 Paul writes: Put away lying, speak the truth; 3) On top of this, there are other passages that celebrate the truthfulness of God’s nature, and in John 14:6 we find Jesus stating that: I am the way, the Truth and the life – e.g., in Jn 15:26 He describes the Holy Spirit, the Helper, the Comforter, as the Spirit of Truth that proceeds from the Father; 4) On top of this, there are many places that note that discuss truth against the back drop of Satan, who is the Father of Lies (Jn 8:44) – he is the one who traffics in disinformation, duplicity, half-truths, exaggeration, gossip, rumors and slander.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus says, you have heard that you are supposed to honor your oaths – he is summarizing a number of OT passages here. He doesn’t quote any of them outright, but summarizes: 1) Ex. 20:7 – the third commandment; 2) Lev. 19:12; 3) Numbers 30:2; 4) Deut 5:11.

<sup>5</sup> I think there are times to take oaths: 1) Luke 1:73 we are reminded that God has made oaths. Such as the one he made with Abraham; 2) in Acts 2:29 we read about the oath he made with David; 3) we read the same thing in Hebrews 6:17; 4) In Mt. 26:63 we see Jesus speaking under oath during his trial: The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. // What we need to understand is that at the time of Christ they were developing a very tricky and complicated set of rules about taking an oath that were all designed to allow you to lie. The goal was

2. Second, there is a big debate over whether it is OK – or even right – to tell a lie – such as, in war. I think there are sometimes when it is.

a) For instance, the commandment reads: **You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.** I think the last three words allow us to lie in times of war. Those debating this point typically frame the question: Is it right for a Christian to lie to a Nazi to save a Jew? I think yes.<sup>6</sup>

b) I also have no problem with people playing jokes that include a lie or playing games in which you try to deceive the other team.

3. If you care about either of these issues, go online, get the sermon and read the footnotes.<sup>7</sup> There are bigger issues in front of us today.

D. As we have seen in the other nine commandments, the commandments expand once we start to unpack them. The ninth commandment is not just about formal oaths in court – “I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Nor are they limited to formal and informal oaths – “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”

E. The ninth commandment is a call to honesty and integrity and the power and importance of what we say.

to mislead others by pledging yourself to something just short of God – for instance heaven or Jerusalem. They’d think you were serious but because you didn’t actually swear to God you had, in effect, crossed your fingers.

<sup>6</sup> If telling the truth binds you into hurting people or disobeying God, such as with the Hebrew Midwives who lied to save Jewish babies, these should be times we break our word. Note, Rahab also told an untruth to save lives

<sup>7</sup> The church has been divided on this issue through the years. If you read *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom, you know that she and her sister disagreed on this point. Corrie thought that it was OK and her sister thought that it was not. And so when the Nazis, who had broken into their house to look for Jews, were unable to find any hiding there, a young soldier looked at Corrie’s sister and said: Are there any Jews here? She said yes? And he said, “Where are they hiding?” And she said, “Under the table?” And he looked under the table and didn’t see any and scoffed and walked out. Now there were Jews under the table, they were just hiding in a secret compartment under the floor. I think that it is OK to lie to your enemies. I also think it’s OK to lie when you are telling a joke. But we have to be very careful about who we define as an enemy. The Parable of the Good Samaritan makes it pretty clear that Jesus sees most people are our neighbor, even if we don’t get along. An enemy is not someone you are mad at. It is not a business competitor. It’s someone who is shooting real bullets. And I think it is supported by a number of biblical passages in addition to Ex. 20:16. In Joshua 2 we read that Moses sent out spies (people who had to misrepresent themselves in order to do their job - you have to lie to be a spy). But there is no condemnation for this at all. // Also, in James 2:25 we read praises for Rahab, the prostitute who hid the spies when they were about to be caught and then lied to those looking for them. “Was not even Rahab, the prostitute, considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?” // For the record, there are plenty who disagree with me on this. Augustine, who was in many ways the greatest philosopher and theologian of the early church. And John Wesley, the founder of Methodism

IV. It's worth noting that the ninth commandment - as you understood it walking in – calls us to not lie, but lots of lying is going on. I read a lot of depressing articles this week about lying.

A. Well, that's a lie. I read some and I skimmed others – which is part of my point.

1. According to *The Character Gap*, an Oxford Press book by sociologist Christian Miller, a professor at Wake Forest, about a third of the things we hear are lies, and ninety percent of people admit to lying – a number gathered via self-reporting, which means they may be lying and the number is lower. Miller writes about: how often people lie, what kind of lies they tell, why they lie, when they lie, what they lie about and how to tell when someone is lying.<sup>8</sup> His notes that lying is complicated and so are we, before concluding that thought a lot of lying is going on – and we are not as virtuous as we'd like others to think, we are not as vicious either.

2. In an article by Tom Bartlett in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,<sup>9</sup> he notes the crisis in the academic community – especially the sciences, and more specifically still, in the social sciences, where peer review journals are now reporting that as high as sixty percent of the studies they have published cannot be replicated. In other words, in reputable journals like *Science* and *Nature*, sixty percent of the articles are based on lies – on data the author made up.

3. When I read that, it immediately led me to wonder, if I could trust the statistics in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* – or was that fact made up, which highlights the problem.

B. Of course, we know there is a problem. For now let's set aside our own heart and experience, and just focus on the news, where we have:

1. News reports about the prevalence of lying – which is what I was looking at this week.

2. News reports stating that a previous report turned out to be a lie: such as this week's story about the Go Fund Me Campaign for the homeless man who helped the lady get gas – which led to a lot of people wanting to help out the homeless guy, to the tune of \$400K, and which has now been exposed as a lie and all three of them are in jail;<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> According to an article by Travis Bradberry (“What to Do When You Catch a Liar”), we are very bad at spotting lies. And even those trained to do so, including CIA officers – can only spot a lie 60% of the time.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Bartlett, “I Want to Burn Things to the Ground,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 11, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Another example would be the report about the couple that got their DNA tested and found out they were fraternal twins separated at birth;

3. There are news reports that some claim is a lie – think of all the people charges and counter charges of *fake news*;

4. And then there are news reporters who are exposed for lying – like Brian Williams, who claimed he was in a helicopter that was shot down and then lost his job when it turned out that – and other stories he had told – were lies.

C. My point here is that there is need for a simple sermon saying, do not lie. But there is a lot to be gained by taking a half step back as well.

V. I want to make three big points and share one observation.

A. One: There is truth. It exists. The commandment is to tell the truth. It's worth noting, there is such a thing as truth.

1. For some of you, this is an obvious and unhelpful point. You are thinking, “of course there is truth.” For others, these are fighting words. And you want to jump up and say, “Do not think for a second that you’re going to force your truth on me.” You reject the idea that there is capital T truth. We all have our own truths. And we need to guard against those who think their truth is truer than your truth.

2. My point is, it's not just the accuracy or truthfulness of a story that is debated. *Is the story real or fake? What does Snopes say?* We live in a world where truth is questioned. The question is less, “what is true?” and more “what is truth?”

3. For the record, this isn't entirely new, after all, in John 18 – where Jesus is questioned by Pilate - they end up in an exchange where Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?” *Quo est veritas?* So debates about the nature of truth are not new, but in the last fifty years (and especially in the last five) we've entered a new “post truth” era. Indeed, *The Oxford Dictionary* chose “post truth” as their 2016 word of the year, and *The Economist* put *post-truth* on the cover of one of their editions that same year.

4. We could plunge into a philosophical discussion about the nature of reality and explore our epistemological assumptions, but I will spare you. Instead, I simply open by saying: the Bible in general, and the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment in particular, assume that truth exists. Indeed, God is real and true, and truth is grounded in Him, and Jesus is the way, the Truth and the life.<sup>11</sup>

5. This does not mean that we always know the truth. Indeed, part of the truth that the Bible teaches is that we often live in darkness. It's not just that we

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<sup>11</sup> I Samuel 15:29

are misled by our adversary – who is an enemy of truth and the Father of lies - but we do a pretty good job of being misinformed and confused all by ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

6. Point One: Truth exists. We may live in a post-truth, post-modern moment. But truth is still true even if no one believes it.

B. Two: We are expected to embrace truth. We are expected to seek out truth and embrace it. To conform to it.

1. Please understand, we are not ultimately free to define truth. In this country we have a right to our own beliefs and opinions – our own perspectives and perceptions. And those rights are precious and rare. We are free to define our beliefs, though many end up very agitated when reality doesn't cooperate. They try to force their beliefs or feelings on reality and end up not liking the consequences. That is a separate topic.

2. My point here is that as Christ followers, we are called to embrace truth. To conform our will and convictions to God. In an ultimate sense, we embrace Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life.<sup>13</sup> We adopt and embrace what he taught and what he modeled. Jesus is the perfect person – the standard and the one who defines truth. There is truth and we are called to embrace it.

C. Three: Words matter – there is truth; we are expected to embrace it; and words matter. What we say matters.

1. We see this in a variety of places, such as the Exodus and Matthew 12 passages I have already read. For instance, we see it in Proverbs (that talks about what we say). We see it in Matthew 12, where Jesus makes it clear that every thing we say matters – that we will be held accountable for every idle word we speak.<sup>14</sup> In James 3 we get an extended treatment on words.

**a) Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.<sup>2</sup> We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.**

**b) When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to**

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<sup>12</sup> You would expect that this would make us a bit more humble, but that only occasionally happens.

<sup>13</sup> Note: I am not developing this point in the sermon, but this statement makes it clear that truth is a person, which suggests that truth is richer and broader than being simply a propositional statement or concept.

<sup>14</sup> The argument developed in the New Testament is that not many should be teachers, because being a teacher means more judgment. The reason is, teachers use lots of words, and words count, they have consequences.

**go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.**

**c) All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**

**d) With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.**

2. When you look at all the Bible says about what we say, there is a lot.<sup>15</sup> I am only going to make one observation here: words have power over people so we need to be careful with them

3. You know that words have power over those hearing them. You've heard the statement, "Sticks and Stones can only break my bones, but words can never hurt me," and know that that statement is wrong! It's wrong theologically, socially and psychologically. It should be, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can pollute, distort and destroy my soul."<sup>16</sup>

4. My point today is perhaps less understood: words also have power over the one speaking.

5. In the short run – when you sin, you hurt others. But in the long run, sin hurts us the most. Careless words may deceive others, causing them harm. Our lies hurt people. But the greater power is over our character.

6. At one level, idle words or lies or other forms of bad speech – gossip, bragging, whatever – at one level they hurt us by hurting our reputation.

a) One of the problems with telling lies is, you get a reputation for being a liar, and then life gets a lot harder. About twenty years ago, one of my siblings had a "creative period" during which they took great liberties with the truth. And when that was discovered – as it almost always is –

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<sup>15</sup> We do not say you shouldn't lie b/c: 1) it doesn't work; 2) or it's immoral; or 3) it's beneath us – i.e., you were taught better. No – we say it breaks a greatness and dignity God put in us

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Tim Keller for this observation and several to follow. See his sermon on the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

there are consequences. One of them is that liars are not trusted, and trust takes a long time to earn back.

7. At a deeper level, I think there is a bigger warning here. There is a sense in which words are the building blocks of thoughts and actions, and we give them power by speaking them out.

a) This is not “name it and claim it” thinking, like you might find on TV. That we speak things into reality.

b) But it is down that line. What we say – and think about – shapes us. Positive, truth-filled, biblically-grounded thoughts direct us down one path. Lies and anger and small-minded selfish self-talk, directs us down another path.

8. I’ve never quite known what to do with those who say, “If you think you can or if you think you can’t, your right.” On the one hand, those words strike me as glib clichés. On the other hand, it has always seemed like there is some truth there.

9. We work out a lot of our life out by talking, out loud or to ourselves. The process of talking with a friend, writing in a journal, praying – voicing our thoughts and feelings – is important. And those words matter.

10. We need to bring more discipline to this than we may realize. We need to think about, write about, sing about things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.<sup>17</sup>

VI. I have one final observation.

A. I have argued that there is truth, we need to embrace it and that words matter. I want to make one final point. Our words are not just to be true, they are to be loving.

B. There are a handful of ways to break the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment. I suspect they include not just straight up duplicity,<sup>18</sup> but “white lies,<sup>19</sup>” deceptive half-truths,<sup>20</sup> not keeping our promises, gross exaggerations and more.

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<sup>17</sup> Phil. 4:8

<sup>18</sup> Integrity = integer, to be same one place as another, to be whole, duplicity is to be multifaceted.

<sup>19</sup> Harmless lies – polite lies, euphemisms such as, “I’d love to go but I have a commitment,” or “Your writing is too sophisticated for our readers” often end up demeaning the people we are talking to. We treat them like children.

<sup>20</sup> X, Y and Z know Mr. Jones did not rob the bank. When police come and ask: X says he robbed it; Y says, ‘I saw him in vicinity (which was true) and Z said nothing at all.’ All three have violated the 9<sup>th</sup> C. If X said something factually wrong; Y was misleading; and Z failed to bear witness for his neighbor. We need to be for your neighbor – deception by any means is trampling on the person, it keeps you dependent



C. But let's not miss something important and related – being loving. The spirit behind the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment includes caring for others. And this is stated even more clearly in Ephesians 4:15, where we are told to “speak the truth in love.” The image here is that a plane needs two wings to fly – our speech needs to be true and loving, which is what God is. He is perfectly true and perfectly loving.

D. Those two can be hard to keep together, but God goes to great lengths to do so.

1. I believe there is a kind of truthfulness that is repugnant to God. I hear people defend saying cruel things under the guise of carrying about the truth. I'm not sure how to navigate every situation. What is obvious is that God went to great lengths – indeed he went to the cross – so he could hold truth and love together.

2. He couldn't snap his fingers and say “let there be forgiveness.” It would have compromised truth, so he went through an unfolding plan that took centuries to hold them together.

3. We need to work to never speak truth without love and to not traffic in love without truth. Keeping them together is very hard. It may take a lot of thought and prayer. But truth without love or love without truth both break commandment.

VII. So, let me end by encouraging you – first of all by noting that you can trust everything God says. There is no shadow in him, no duplicity. He is truth itself. Secondly, to chase truth.

A. To be honest with yourself. It has to start here. And perhaps most of us fail here. We tell us ourselves lies - we are so bad that we are beyond help or that we are so good that we don't need help are both popular. But there are many others. We need to be much more self-aware than we are. It's not fun and it's not common but it's important.

B. Second, to be honest with God. Read the Psalms for help with that. Come before him like David does, with complete honesty. Tell him everything on your heart. Do not hold back. God knows your thoughts anyway, bringing them out into the light of day is the way to allow him to help you face them

C. And lovingly share the truth with others.