

# **The Ten Commandments:**

## **The Ninth Commandment**

# **The 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.**

## **Introduction**

**You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**

- Exodus 20:16 (NRSV)

**You shall not testify against your neighbor as a lying witness.**

- Exodus 20:16 (Brevard Childs)

# The 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

## Introduction

The commandment contains several technical legal terms, suggesting its original meaning was a warning against false accusation in a court of law (Childs)

- *ed saqer* (lying witness or false witness)
- *nh* (testify or answer)
- *rea* (neighbor = referred to full citizen within the covenant community)

# The 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

## Introduction

Protection of the Accused in Ancient Israel:

- witnesses to a crime testified before a court of elders
- at least two witnesses required for evidence to be valid (Num. 35:30, Deut. 17:6, 19:15)
- the witnesses had to start the execution in capital punishment cases (Deut. 13:10, 17:7, 19:16-20)
- punishment for a lying witness = the punishment for the crime of the accused

# **The 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.**

## **Old Testament Extension of the Commandment to Lying (Slander, Deceitfulness)**

**You shall not steal, you shall not deal  
falsely, and you shall not lie to one  
another**

**- Leviticus 19:11 (NRSV)**

**You shall not go around as a slanderer  
among your people. . . I am the LORD.**

**Leviticus 19:16. (NRSV)**

# **The 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.**

## **Old Testament Extension of the Commandment to Lying (Slander, Deceitfulness)**

**Israel has sinned; they have transgressed  
my covenant. . . they have acted  
deceitfully. . .**

- Joshua 7:11 (NRSV)

**There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no  
knowledge of God in the land. Swearing,  
lying, and murder, and stealing and  
adultery break out . . .**

- Hosea 4:1-2 (NRSV)

# **The 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment.**

## **Jesus' Extension of the Commandment**

**Again, you have heard that is was said to  
those of ancient times, 'You shall not  
swear falsely. . .'**

**But I say to you, Do not swear at all. . .**

**Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No';  
anything more than this comes from the  
evil one.**

**- from Matthew 5:33-37 (NRSV)**

Swearing, oath-taking presume a tendency to  
lie. Jesus requires a truthfulness in his  
disciples that makes oaths unnecessary.

# At the Heart of the Commandment

At the heart of the Commandment:

- an absolute commitment to Truth



# At the Heart of the Commandment

*“Negative” side of the Commandment. We must:*

- not lie or deceive
- not be silent before falsehood

*“Positive” side of the Commandment. We must:*

- be witnesses to the truth
- promote personal relationships,  
communities, societies where truth can  
be told

# Lying and Deception

*Dictionary Lie:* To say / write something untrue, with the intention to deceive.

The heart of the commandment is a *commitment to truth*. The sin of a “lie” lies in the *intention to deceive*, not the means of deception (voice, writing, facial expression and tone, or innuendo)

# Lying and Deception

## Is Withholding Truth Like Lying?

Is it a “lie” to deliberately withhold truth to keep alive or nurture a possible *false impression* in the mind of others?

- Letting a misunderstanding that is false continue without trying to correct it
- Creating a false impression by “true” statements that have a double meaning

# Lying and Deception

## Is Withholding Truth Like Lying?

Is it a “lie” to deliberately withhold the truth, not for purposes of nurturing or keeping alive a false impression, but to impart an *incomplete or unbalanced understanding*?

- Is an “absence” of truth (a “vacuum” of truth) a kind of “falsehood?”
- Is an “incomplete” or “unbalanced” understanding a false understanding? Is the presentation of a “skewed” reality using partial truths the same as a lie?

# Lying and Deception

## Sins Against Truth

1. Slander - to make false charges or misrepresentations of Another to defame or damage their reputation
  - *motzi shem ra* = drawing out a bad reputation
2. The “evil tongue” (*lashon hara*) and “the dust of the evil tongue” (*avak lashon hara*). Using a partial truth or exaggerated truth to tear Another down
  - gossip (*rechilut*)

# Is Lying and Deception Ever Permissible?

How far must we take our commitment to truth?

Is lying / deception ever permissible?

Are there values that override our commitment to truth?

# Is Lying and Deception Ever Permissible? White Lies

**White Lies** (*devarim shevalev* = “words in the heart”). Statements understood to reflect a sentiment of the heart, not necessarily a pure, literal truth

- “What a beautiful baby”
- “Fine, thank you,” in response to “How are you?”
- “You don’t look a day over forty.”

# Is Lying and Deception Ever Permissible? White Lies

We justify these “lies” because:

- as “words in the heart” the *intention* is not deception.
- it is *understood* by the listener not necessarily as a literal truth
- the *greater good* of keeping peace, of not damaging Another’s feelings overrides the “minor lie”
- our *motivation* is not selfish interest, but concern for Another



# **Is Lying and Deception Ever Permissible?**

**Lies to protect Another from serious  
harm**

WWII: lying to the Gestapo to protect the a  
Jewish family hiding in the antic

# Is Lying and Deception Ever Permissible?

Immanuel Kant's Position:

- it is never permissible to lie. The duty to truthfulness is *unconditional*
- a lie:
  - harms society because “it vitiates the source of law”
  - harms the liar by destroying his/her dignity

# Is Lying and Deception Ever Permissible?

Most moral theologians would justify a lie  
when telling the truth would cause  
Another serious harm

# Is Lying and Deception Ever Permissible?

Questions to ask if a lie is to be a permissible action:

- What is the conflicting moral value that justifies our lie? (for example, the life or feelings of Another). Does it override the duty to Truth?
- Is the victim of the lie or deceived harmed by it? Are there other unintended victims?
- What motivates our lie? (Concern to protect Another, or selfish interest?)
- What is the consequence to the “fabric of trust” in the community?

# Truth and Community

**“Viable human community depends on truth telling” (Brueggemann)**

In the sense of the original, narrow meaning of the commandment:

- Truth in the courtroom is essential to a healthy judiciary system
- A healthy judiciary is essential to a viable community

# Truth and Community

The commandment is **“a recognition that community life is not possible unless there is an arena in which there is public confidence that social reality will be reliably described and reported.”** (Brueggemann)

# Truth and Community

In the sense of the broader meaning of the commandment:

- members of a community should not distort or skew reality to each other.
- public truth must accurately portrait reality

Relevance in modern life:

- propaganda
- forms of “spin doctoring”
- advertising

# Promoting Truth

(from Timmerman)

Truthful living in our personal relationships, families and communities requires that we:

- choose our words with care so we don't distort things
- *listen*, lovingly and carefully, so we know what words to choose
- keep our word. Don't promise more than we can keep



# Promoting Truth

(from Keenan)

We need to create a “space where truth can be told”

- in our personal relationships
- in our families
- in our communities
- in our culture

# Promoting Truth

(from Keenan)

Our culture does not invite truth-telling

- intolerance and ridicule inhibit honesty
- litigiousness
  - failing to apologize because admission of fault invites legal prosecution
- the “tattered cloak of privacy”
  - we say we believe in a right to privacy for public officials, but insatiably lap up invasions of that privacy
- we have no credible leadership urging us to promote truth

# Promoting Truth

**“if we would . . . learn more about tolerance, human failure, the real possibility of broken promises. . . if we learned to allow others to speak, acknowledge, opine, or even, if necessary, confess and repent, we could become a society promoting truthfulness.”**

- James F. Keenan, S.J.

# Promoting Truth

As Christian, we have a special call in promoting truth: evangelism

- “we follow truthful living by the way we represent Christ to others in our words and actions” (Timmerman)

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