

The Ten Commandments 9. You shall not answer against your neighbor as a false witness

Last update Dec. 6, 2001

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

Exodus 20: 16 (RSV)

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1. The 9th 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)

1.1. Original Meaning of the Commandment

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)

Several measures protected the accused in ancient Israel:

- Witnesses to a crime testified before a court of elders.
- At least two witnesses were 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 was the punishment that would be given for the crime of the accused.

1.2. 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)

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)

1.3. Jesus' Extension of the Commandment

Again, you have heard that it 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.

1.4. At the Heart of the Commandment

At the heart of the Commandment:

- an absolute commitment to Truth

1.5. Restating the Commandment

A "negative" reading of the Commandment. We must:

- not lie or deceive
- not be silent before falsehood

A "positive" reading of the Commandment. We must:

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

2. Lying and Deception

2.1. What Lies at the Heart of the Sin of "Lying"?

The dictionary definition of "**To 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" is the *intention to deceive*, not the means of deception (voice, writing, facial expression and tone, or innuendo)

2.2. Is Withholding Truth Like Lying?

Questions:

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. Example: during the Civil War, some underage (less than 16 years of age) youths eager to volunteer for the army would write the numeral "16" on a piece of paper and stand on it before the army recruiter, so they could tell him "I'm over sixteen" without technically "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?

2.3. Slander and the "Evil Tongue"

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. Jewish tradition describes the "evil tongue" (*lashon hara*) and "the dust of the evil tongue" (*avak lashon hara*), in which rather than make a false charge, we use a partial truth or an exaggerated truth to tear Another down

- gossip (*rechilus*) often involves the "evil tongue."

3. Is Lying and Deception Ever Permissible?

3.1. Introduction

How far must we take our commitment to truth?

Is lying / deception ever permissible?

Are there moral values that override our commitment to truth?

3.2. 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. Some examples:

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

We justify these “lies” because:

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

The Talmud suggests that God tells white lies. It cites the story of God telling Abraham that Sarah would bear a son. Sarah, listening behind the tent entrance, “. . . laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'" (Genesis 18:12 NRSV) God then said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" (Genesis 18:13 NRSV). God leaves out that Sarah had also said Abraham was old.

3.3. Lies to protect Another from Serious Harm

Example:

In WWII, lying to the Gestapo in order to protect the a Jewish family hiding in the attic.

3.4. Kant's Position. The Majority Position

Immanuel Kant’s position on lying:

- 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

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

3.5. Questions We Must Ask

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?

4. Truth and Community

4.1. Truth Telling and a Healthy Judiciary

“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

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)

4.2. Public Truth and the 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

5. Promoting Truth

5.1. Promoting Truth in Our Personal Relationships, Families and Communities

(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

5.2. The Need for a "Space Where Truth Can be Told"

(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

Our culture however does not invite truth-telling. It does not provide much space where truth can be told. The problems are:

- Intolerance and ridicule that inhibit honesty
- Litigiousness of our culture
 - 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

“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.

5.3. Witnessing to the Truth of Christ. Evangelism

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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