

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, The Ten Commandments

Session 10 : Commandment 9 – No False Witness

This is Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino and his teaching on the Ten Commandments. This is session number 10, commandment nine, no false witness. We have come to the ninth commandment.

Now you shall not bear false witness against your neighbors. Now, back when I was in elementary school, in Sunday school class, I sometimes could be a bit of a problem child. But we had a Sunday school teacher who was going through the Ten Commandments.

And on his little chart of all the Ten Commandments, we got to number nine, and it was, You shall not lie. And our Sunday school teacher explained to us, you must always, always tell the truth under every circumstance. And so I asked him, in my usual smart aleck way, I said, well, Mr. Smith, Mr. Smith, what if you're at the house and you're alone and somebody comes and bangs on the door and says, there's a man chasing me with an ax, hide me, hide me, please.

He said, and the person comes into the house, and you hide them in the closet. And then the guy comes and he bangs on the door and he's got the ax. And he says, Where is she? Did she come in here? What am I supposed to say? Do I have to tell the truth? And he said, Well, I think you should just say nothing at all.

Yeah, that puts a poor little kid in a pretty bad predicament there, having to stare down this guy with an ax while you're standing there saying nothing at all, because you cannot tell him, no, there's nobody here, because that would be a lie. And that would be breaking the Ten Commandments. I am happy to tell you that that is not really what this commandment is about at all.

In fact, I think that thou shalt not lie is probably a very bad translation because it is misleading and it raises a lot of questions, which this commandment was never really meant to address. Now, the actual wording, of course, of the commandment is, You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Well, bearing false witness seems to imply a pretty constricted setting.

It seems to imply a courtroom setting. And that might well be the principal idea which is being communicated here. Now, I will say that this is like all of the Ten Commandments.

This one gets fleshed out in other places in the Torah, in the Pentateuch, and then beyond that in the prophets and in the New Testament as well. But the wording in

this particular case seems to imply the courtroom. We would say, you shall not commit perjury.

Now, that would be the most direct way to understand this in terms of our modern world here. Once again, we find that this notion of false testimony was an obsession of many of the ancient Near Eastern law codes. The law code of Ur-Nammu is very straightforward, by the way, Ur-Nammu.

If a man appeared as a witness and was shown to be a perjurer, he must pay 15 shekels of silver. Oh, this is very, very liberal compared to some of the other passages. If a man appears as a witness but withdraws his oath, he must make a payment to the extent of the value and litigation of these cases.

Yeah, I mean, Ur-Nammu's law code was very, very generous in this particular case. Hammurabi, not so much. If anyone ensnares another, putting a ban upon him, but he cannot prove it, then he who ensnared him shall be put to death.

So in other words, if you have accused somebody of a capital crime, ensnaring them, you know, and then you cannot prove that they did it, then you are put to death. If anyone brings an accusation against a man and the accused goes to the river and leaps into the river, if he sinks in the river, his accuser shall take possession of his house. Once again, this is trial by river thing.

You know, the idea being the river god will exonerate the innocent. But if the river proves that the accused is not guilty and he escapes unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser. Once again, emphasizing the importance of spending time at the YMCA if you happen to live in ancient Babylon.

If anyone brings an accusation of any crime before the elders and does not prove what he has charged, he shall, if it is a capital offense charged, be put to death. So this, we will find, is similar to the position in the Old Testament as well. And once again, just remember, you know, 1750 BC, this is at least 350 years before the time of Moses, probably closer to 500.

But what we're finding here is that, unlike Ur-Nammu, the law code of Hammurabi says if you're going to endanger somebody's life by accusing them and testifying that they committed a capital offense, you better be doggone certain that you can prove it. And if it is proven that you lied knowingly, then your life would be forfeit. And we do find, as I say, a very similar kind of prescription in the Torah, Leviticus chapter 19.

You shall not swear by my name falsely. Once again, this is in that section in Leviticus 19, where he goes through and kind of comments and expands on each of the Ten Commandments. This is going to be very important for this morning.

You shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the name of the Lord your God. That's, you know, the commandment, don't take the name in vain. You shall do no injustice in court.

You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great. But in righteousness, you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people.

And you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor, meaning accusing them of a capital offense. I am the Lord. Deuteronomy 19, if a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties due to the dispute shall appear before the Lord.

Note, they're not going to the river. They're going before the Lord, probably before the tabernacle or something of that sort. Before the priests and the judges who were in office in those days, the judges shall inquire diligently.

And if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. And you can see this is very similar to the Code of Hammurabi.

If you had intended to deprive your neighbor of property by false testimony, then you would end up being deprived of property. If you had meant to have your neighbor killed by a false accusation, then you would be put to death. Now, the principle we will find is extended beyond just the classroom, here, or the courtroom, I should say.

The idea of bearing false witness, even though the language is very much the kind of language we would find at home in a court, does not just mean testimony in the court, as we'll find out as we look at some of these other passages. Primarily, we're not even really talking here about lying. And this is very much borne out in that passage in Leviticus 19.

It's about using words that are meant to bring harm to another person. That is the primary intention behind this particular commandment. What we find is that, really, it's about lying. I don't think that we've talked about some of the difficulties that arise if you're lying to protect someone, for instance.

Are you lying to protect someone's feelings? You know, if somebody's child has drawn a picture, and they show it to you, and they say, Isn't it beautiful? And you

say, Oh, yes, that's lovely, dear. You're so talented. You could be lying through your teeth.

But you're not being malicious. So, what you're doing is not sinful. You know, if the wife tells her husband, Yes, dear, you really are more handsome now than you were in college.

You know, most likely what she's telling is not true. Is she violating this commandment? I don't think so. Primarily, this is not about telling a fib.

It is rather about using words that are designed to bring harm to your neighbor. And that's really what God has in mind here. So, moving on then.

Do not give false testimony is just going to be the tip of the iceberg. And once again, when we see some of these other passages in the Torah, where they expand upon the Ten Commandments, they expand upon this one as well. The Torah draws several different applications from this basic principle.

Now, let's go back to the basic one, the forensic application, which is the idea of not committing perjury, okay? We read that passage already that spoke about how you are going to treat perjury. The results of perjury could be devastating to your neighbor. I mean, if you get somebody together and you testify against somebody, you could deprive them of their life.

There's a lovely story in the Apocrypha about Daniel. And Daniel in the Apocrypha, by the way, in the additions to the book of Daniel, oftentimes appears more like a detective than a prophet. But in this case, two lecherous old men have been spying on a young virtuous woman, and they decide that the two of them are going to make a deal where they are going to try to blackmail the woman into sleeping with them.

Because what they do is they say, you know, hey, if the two of us testify that we saw her committing adultery in her yard, then she'll be put to death. So, we can gang up on her here and make her sleep with us by blackmailing her. And so, these two men get together and they tell this woman, you're going to sleep with us, or we're going to say that you committed adultery.

And the woman says, no, she says, I would rather die than sacrifice my virtue to you guys. And so, she starts to scream and the men, and a crowd gathers, and the men claim that they saw this woman in the garden committing adultery and that the young man ran away. And so, Daniel happens to be described here as being a very young man, happens to be in the crowd, and the Lord kind of touches him and lets him know that these guys are lying.

And so he comes up to you, and he says, Tell you what we're going to do. Let us separate these two men. And he takes the one man aside and he says, So tell me, where did you see them committing adultery? And the man says, Oh, they were under that tree right over there.

And then he gets the other man, and he brings up, and he says, so tell me where were these two committing adultery? He says, Oh, they were under that tree right over there. And so they know that the men were lying, and the men are put to death, and the young lady is exonerated. And Daniel is raised in the eyes of all the people as being this wise man who can discern truth from falsehood.

So that's clearly a case where perjury could have had some really bad results. And that's one of the reasons why the Bible has this requirement that any capital crime had to be testified to by two witnesses. Couldn't have just a single person.

Unfortunately, the downside is that sometimes people could collaborate and get their story straight, and then bring charges against somebody. So, we find this in the case of the story of Nabal's vineyard as well in the book of Kings, where there is a neighbor of King Ahab and Ahab likes that man's vineyard, and he wants that man's vineyard. And the man refuses to sell his vineyard because it's his ancestral inheritance.

And so, Queen Jezebel sees Ahab kind of sulking around. She says, What's wrong, Ahab, honey? And he says, Oh, it's that mean old neighbor. He won't show me his vineyard.

And she said, Oh, don't worry, I'll take care of him. And so Queen Jezebel bribes two men to say that they heard him blaspheming the name of the Lord. And so Naboth was stoned to death, and Ahab got his property.

Unfortunately for Ahab, God saw the whole thing go down. So yeah, perjury could have some very devastating results. No one could be convicted of a capital offense on a single testimony, but even then, as we see, the results were not assured.

If people were determined to bring harm to their neighbors via their words, they could do so. They could get around that requirement. And that is, again, one of the reasons why we have to think about these Ten Commandments more as vows that the people make, an agreement that they make in their own hearts that they're not going to do these things that can bring harm to others.

Penalty for perjury, again, the penalty that the accused would have received if they had been convicted. We already read that in the Book of Deuteronomy. So that's the forensic application.

How does it apply in court? The moral application now also can simply refer to don't tell lies about people that are designed to hurt them. Now, the words here could be interpreted either way. The word false witness can also simply mean a mendacious account.

A witness can also be simply an account in Hebrew. So, this could be either talking about a court testimony or it can simply be talking about somebody telling lies about somebody. It's a little disconcerting when you think about it, and also a little bit comforting in some sense that a number of figures in the Old Testament, including God, have a little problem using deceit sometimes to either protect people or to advance the work of God's kingdom.

And, you know, this is where it gets a little troubling because we know that the Lord is a God of truth and yet God has people like Abraham, who, you know, tells those little fibs about whether or not Sarah is his wife or his sister. We have Rahab, who hides the spies of Israel and is blessed because she was willing to lie to the people who came looking for them. We have Michal, the daughter of King Saul, who protects David by lying and telling people that he's sick.

And then there's this very bizarre case in 1 Kings, chapter 22, where God sends a lying spirit into the mouths of the false prophets so that they may cause King Ahab to fall and meet his doom. Yeah, and we want to believe that truth, of course, is better than fiction, but there seem to be some cases where a falsehood said with good intention is more virtuous than simply trying to speak or say something which is true but hurtful. The Bible often condemns people who use lies to hurt others.

This is a very common theme throughout the scriptures, the Psalms, and Proverbs in the book of Jeremiah. Falsehood is repeatedly condemned. So we've got the idea of the forensic approach.

We've got the ethical question, the moral question. How about the interpersonal issue involved here? Leviticus 19, in commenting and expanding upon this particular commandment, tells us, Do not go among the people as a talebearer or as a gossip, we might say. What are we talking about here? The Hebrew word that is translated as "gossip" in this verse is *rakil*.

Rakil can refer to either a false account or it can refer to a true account. So if somebody is gossiping about somebody, it doesn't necessarily have to be something that is false for it to be hurtful. A gossip reveals secrets, but a trustworthy spirit keeps a matter private.

That's the same word there, *rakil*, the nominal form instead of the verbal form here. But Proverbs 16:28, a troublemaker sows discord, and a gossip separates best

friends. How do they separate best friends? By revealing things that they shouldn't have revealed, things that were better kept private and secret.

So some truths are better kept to oneself. Even if it's true, it can still be used to hurt other people. So again, I think the strict interpretation of this is referring to lying, which does not take into account the entire biblical witness about what this particular passage is talking about.

Not only does it refer to lying, but it also refers to gossip. And if you're not going to take my word for it, how about Jesus's word? Matthew chapter 15, verse 19, for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, okay, the 10 commandments, right? Adultery, okay, sexual immorality. Yeah, that's also in the 10 commandments.

Theft, the 10 commandments, false witness, and slander. So Jesus goes beyond just the idea of the false witness, and he expands the ninth commandment to include not only lies and perjury, but also rumors. Gossip can have a very bad effect.

People seem to prefer gossip to be false rather than to be real or true or something of that sort. But people sometimes don't understand just how deeply the trouble can be rooted. A lot of people enjoy gossip for a number of reasons.

But my grandfather was a minister a long time ago, and at one of the churches where he served, a lady was telling everybody in the church who would listen to her about how suspicious it was that sister Gert was getting a ride home with Reverend Haskins every Sunday and every Wednesday night after prayer meeting. Seemed that they were awfully cozy, didn't they? Well, eventually the rumor got around to my grandfather's ears, and he informed the entire church that it was not he who was taking sister Gert home, it was actually his wife, my grandmother, who was taking sister Gert home. Well, you know, back even in those days, that didn't stop the gossip and rumor mill because now, of course, it was my grandmother who was messing around with sister Gert.

My grandfather ended up leaving that church. He could do nothing there. The ministry was undermined by a woman who loved to sound like she was in the know and loved to spread stories.

And, you know, we wonder, why is it that people love to gossip? What is it that causes people to like to do these things? There are actually a number of studies that have been done on this, and what will cause rumors to spread quickly, what kind of things impede rumors, but yeah, and what it is that will make people believe rumors, and there are a number of interesting findings. I'm not going to go into all of them here because it takes as far as a field of the Bible itself, but there just seems to be a sense among people that sharing the rumors somehow makes them special, sets

them apart from other people. Charles Allen wrote a book a number of years ago called *God Psychiatry*, and they had some very interesting observations in that book.

And one of the observations, which is kind of troubling and makes you think sometimes when your lips are flapping, he said, great minds talk about ideas, mediocre minds talk about things, and small minds talk about other people. I think there's a lot of wisdom and a little bit of truth in that comment there. Have you ever thought about how rumors spread? Maybe you remember this commercial; it was back in the early 1980s.

There was a commercial for a shampoo, and I'm not going to give them an endorsement here, but you might be able to remember this. But anyway, so the commercial goes, I told two friends about Sub-Z shampoo and they told two friends and so on and so on and so on. Well, I decided to do a little math one day, and every now and then, I do that.

But I decided that to figure out if one person tells somebody on Sunday about their shampoo and that person and another person, they tell two friends and then each one of those friends goes out and tells two friends on Monday and each of those people tells two friends on Tuesday and each of them tells two friends on Wednesday, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. How many people would know the story at the end of two weeks? How many people would know about Sub-Z shampoo? Maybe somebody could do the math in their head really quickly. I actually had to run the figures and all that kind of thing.

But the number is 31,967. If each person tells only two people a rumor, within the course of two weeks, almost 32,000 people have heard the story. And that's with everybody just telling two people.

In a month, the entire city of Chicago will have heard the story. That's the power of the bell curve. You know, so now imagine if it was something really, really juicy, you know, not something that is, you know, just, you know, hey, look at my new shampoo, but some really juicy bit of gossip.

Is somebody going to be satisfied telling just two people? No, it's going to spread fast. And how much damage can be done by somebody sharing a bit of destructive news? Just want to inform you, dear, so you can pray. The rabbis had a very interesting story about this kind of situation, a legend that sort of illustrates what kind of effect gossip can have.

So as the story goes, there's a man named Yaakov. He became very angry at the local rabbi for something. So he decided to begin a rumor about the rabbi.

A few days later, a man that Yaakov barely knew came up to Yaakov in the street, and he pulled Yaakov aside and said, Yaakov, did you hear about what a drunkard our rabbi is? Well, at this point, Yaakov, hearing his own rumor, begins to feel a little bit guilty. And so he decided that maybe he should try to make amends. So he approached his rabbi, and he asked the rabbi for forgiveness.

Well, the rabbi says, I will forgive you, my son, but in order to be forgiven by God, you will have to perform an act of penance. You will have to perform a task that will show how sorry you are. And the first part of your penance is this.

You are to take a pillow, a big new feather pillow, and you are to cut it open and to remove its feathers. And then you are going to take those feathers and you are going to lay one on the doorstep of every house in town where your rumor has spread. Then, in four days, you are to come back to me, and I will give you the rest of your penance.

So, Yaakov, being very repentant, followed the instructions. He takes the pillow and cuts it open, and he lays a single feather on every doorstep. He knew by now everyone in town had heard the rumor.

And so he was very certain that he made sure that the feather was at each doorstep. And then the first day came and went, and then the second and third day, there was a storm, but the fourth day was nice and sunny. And so Yaakov made his way back to the rabbi's house and knocked on the rabbi's door.

The rabbi opens, and Yaakov says, I have done as you commanded, rabbi. Now, what is the second half? The second half of my penance. And the rabbi answers, and he said, Now you are to go and collect all of those feathers, and you are all to put them back again and make the pillow as it was before.

And Yaakov was shocked, and he said, Rabbi, what you've asked is impossible. He says, What you are saying cannot be done. There is no way I can make the pillow like it was before.

There is no way that the damage can be undone. By now, the feathers have been scattered far and wide. And the rabbi says, And now my son, you know what your words have done to me.

Your words have spread far and wide, and the damage that they have done can never be undone. Gossip is a fun activity, and many people think it to be harmless. But we need to be careful about what we say about people, not just about lies and not just about half-truths that could possibly destroy somebody's reputation.

We need to even care about those truths that we mutter, those truths that might be better off kept to ourselves because our words can take wing and fly to places we never expected or they might even come home to roost, ending up back in our own doorsteps and bringing us some embarrassment in the process. Jesus warned us, "You shall give an account for every idle word. I cannot help but believe that this is really the major principle behind this ninth commandment.

The principle, not just of not perjuring ourselves in the courtroom, but the greater principle of being careful about the way that we use our words and the way that those words might bring injury to our neighbors.

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