

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, The Ten Commandments

Session 10: Commandment 9: No False Witness

1) Abstract, 2) Briefing Document, 3) Study Guide, 4) FAQs

1) Abstract:

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino's "The Ten Commandments Session 10: Commandment 9 – No False Witness" **explores the Ninth Commandment**, challenging the common interpretation of "thou shalt not lie." Instead, Tomasino argues that the commandment primarily **prohibits bearing false witness**, particularly in a **judicial context, akin to perjury**. The text **examines ancient Near Eastern law codes**, such as those of Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi, to illustrate the severe penalties for false testimony. Furthermore, it **expands the commandment's scope** beyond legal settings to include **slander and harmful gossip**, even if the gossip contains elements of truth, emphasizing the **devastating impact words can have on others**. Ultimately, Tomasino asserts that the commandment is about **using words responsibly** to avoid causing injury to one's neighbor.

2) Briefing Document: Briefing Document: The Ninth Commandment - No False Witness

Overview

This briefing document summarizes Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino's session on the Ninth Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." The session reinterprets this commandment beyond a literal prohibition against lying, emphasizing its broader implications concerning the intentional use of words to harm others. It explores historical legal contexts, biblical expansions, and modern applications, particularly regarding gossip and slander.

Key Themes and Important Ideas

1. Reinterpreting "No False Witness" Beyond a Simple Lie

Dr. Tomasino argues that the common Sunday school translation "You shall not lie" is misleading and too narrow. He states, "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."

Instead, the actual wording, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," implies a more specific context.

2. The Primary Meaning: Perjury in a Courtroom Setting

The most direct interpretation of "bearing false witness" is related to a legal or courtroom setting, akin to committing perjury. Tomasino states, "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."

- **Ancient Near Eastern Law Codes:** This understanding is supported by ancient Near Eastern legal texts, such as the Law Code of Ur-Nammu and the Code of Hammurabi. These codes imposed severe penalties for false testimony, especially in capital cases.
- **Ur-Nammu:** "If a man appeared as a witness and was shown to be a perjurer, he must pay 15 shekels of silver." (More lenient)
- **Hammurabi:** "If anyone ensnares another, putting a ban upon him, but he cannot prove it, then he who ensnared him shall be put to death." This code often applied *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye), meaning the false accuser would suffer the same fate intended for the accused.
- **Old Testament Parallels (Torah):** The Torah expands on this principle, as seen in Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 19.
- **Leviticus 19:** Prohibits swearing falsely by God's name, injustice in court, and slander. "You shall do no injustice in court... You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people. And you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor."
- **Deuteronomy 19:** Reaffirms the *lex talionis* for false witnesses: "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."
- **Biblical Examples of Perjury:**

- **Daniel and Susanna (Apocrypha):** Two lecherous old men falsely accuse Susanna of adultery after she refuses their advances. Daniel exposes their lies by questioning them separately about the location of the supposed act.
- **Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings):** Queen Jezebel bribes two men to falsely accuse Naboth of blasphemy, leading to his stoning and King Ahab's acquisition of his vineyard.

3. Expanding the Principle: The Intent to Harm Through Words

Beyond the courtroom, the core principle of the Ninth Commandment is about using words to cause harm to another person. Tomasino emphasizes, "Primarily, we're not even really talking here about lying... It's about using words that are meant to bring harm to another person. That is the primary intention behind this particular commandment."

- **Distinction between Malicious Lies and Innocent Fibs:** The commandment is not violated by "fibs" or "white lies" told with good intentions (e.g., complimenting a child's drawing, or a wife telling her husband he's still handsome). These are not considered sinful because they lack malicious intent. "It is rather about using words that are designed to bring harm to your neighbor."
- **Instances of Deceit with Good Intention in the Bible:** The text notes that some biblical figures, and even God, are depicted using deceit for protection or to advance divine purposes, which complicates a strict "do not lie" interpretation:
 - Abraham telling fibs about Sarah being his sister.
 - Rahab hiding the Israelite spies.
 - Michal protecting David by lying about his illness.
 - God sending a "lying spirit" to false prophets in 1 Kings 22 to cause King Ahab's downfall.

4. The Moral and Interpersonal Application: Gossip and Slander

The commandment's scope extends to interpersonal communication, particularly gossip and slander.

- **Leviticus 19 and "Rakil":** The Hebrew word *rakil*, translated as "gossip" or "talebearer," is significant. It "can refer to either a false account or it can refer to a true account." This highlights that even truthful information, if shared with malicious intent or when it should be kept private, can be harmful.
- **Proverbs 16:28:** "a troublemaker sows discord, and a gossip separates best friends" by revealing private matters.
- **Jesus's Expansion (Matthew 15:19):** Jesus broadens the concept of "false witness" to include "slander," indicating that internal evil thoughts manifest in harmful words. "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder... theft, false witness, and slander."
- **The Destructive Power of Gossip:Rapid Spread:** The "Sub-Z shampoo" analogy illustrates the exponential spread of rumors: "If each person tells only two people a rumor, within the course of two weeks, almost 32,000 people have heard the story." Juicy gossip spreads even faster and to more people.
- **Undermining Relationships and Ministries:** The anecdote about Dr. Tomasino's grandfather's church shows how gossip, even based on misinterpretation or malice, can destroy a ministry and community.
- **"Small Minds Talk About Other People":** Charles Allen's observation, "great minds talk about ideas, mediocre minds talk about things, and small minds talk about other people," underscores the triviality and potential harm of gossip.
- **Irreversibility of Harm:** The story of Yaakov and the feathers highlights the irreversible damage caused by spreading harmful words. Just as scattered feathers cannot be easily collected, once words are spoken, their effects cannot be undone. "Your words have spread far and wide, and the damage that they have done can never be undone."

5. The Overarching Principle: Responsibility in Speech

Ultimately, the Ninth Commandment is a call to be profoundly careful with our words. It's not just about avoiding perjury, but about a deeper moral commitment to avoid any speech that harms our neighbor.

- **Vows in the Heart:** The Ten Commandments are presented 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."
- **Accountability for Every Idle Word:** Jesus's warning, "You shall give an account for every idle word," is presented as the "major principle behind this ninth commandment." It emphasizes the moral weight of all our utterances, even seemingly insignificant ones.

Conclusion

Dr. Tomasino's session repositions the Ninth Commandment as a comprehensive moral injunction against using words to harm others. While originating in a legal context to prohibit perjury, its biblical and practical applications extend to all forms of malicious speech, including slander and gossip. The central message is one of profound responsibility for our words, recognizing their destructive potential and the lasting harm they can inflict on individuals and communities.

3) Study Guide: Study Guide: The Ninth Commandment – No False Witness

This study guide is designed to review your understanding of Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino's Session 10 on the Ninth Commandment, "No False Witness."

Quiz: Ten Short-Answer Questions

Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. How does Dr. Tomasino critique the common interpretation of the Ninth Commandment as simply "You shall not lie"?
2. What is the "forensic application" of the Ninth Commandment, and what modern legal term does Dr. Tomasino use to describe it?
3. Compare and contrast the penalties for false witness in the Law Code of Ur-Nammu and the Law Code of Hammurabi.
4. How does Deuteronomy 19 expand upon the consequences for a false witness, and how is this similar to Hammurabi's Code?

5. According to Dr. Tomasino, what is the *primary intention* behind the Ninth Commandment, extending beyond mere courtroom testimony?
6. Provide two examples from the Old Testament where individuals use deceit, and it is not condemned, according to Dr. Tomasino.
7. What is the Hebrew word for "gossip" discussed in the lecture, and what important distinction does Dr. Tomasino make about its meaning?
8. How does Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15:19 expand the scope of the Ninth Commandment beyond false witness?
9. Explain the "Shampoo Commercial" analogy used by Dr. Tomasino to illustrate the rapid spread of rumors.
10. What is the central lesson conveyed by the rabbinic legend of Yaakov and the feather pillow regarding the impact of gossip?

Essay Format Questions

1. Analyze Dr. Tomasino's argument that the Ninth Commandment's primary intention extends beyond lying and perjury. Discuss the biblical and modern examples he uses to support this interpretation, and evaluate the implications of this broader understanding for daily life.
2. Compare and contrast the legal systems of the Ancient Near East (Ur-Nammu, Hammurabi) with the Old Testament (Leviticus, Deuteronomy) regarding the handling and punishment of false witness. What similarities and differences are evident, and what do these reveal about the values of these societies?
3. Discuss the tension presented by Dr. Tomasino regarding instances in the Old Testament where deceit is not condemned and sometimes even blessed. How does he reconcile these examples with the general biblical condemnation of falsehood, particularly in the context of the Ninth Commandment?
4. Explore the "interpersonal issue" of gossip and talebearing as presented by Dr. Tomasino, drawing on both biblical and anecdotal evidence. Explain why even truthful statements can violate the spirit of the Ninth Commandment, and discuss the psychological and social reasons people engage in gossip.

5. Dr. Tomasino concludes by stating that the Ninth Commandment's "major principle" is being careful about how we use our words to avoid injuring our neighbors. Elaborate on this principle, integrating the concepts of forensic application, moral application (lying to hurt), and interpersonal issues (gossip/slander). Use examples from the lecture to illustrate your points.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Ancient Near Eastern Law Codes:** Collections of laws from civilizations in the ancient Middle East (e.g., Mesopotamia, Egypt), often predating the Torah, which addressed various aspects of social and legal conduct. Dr. Tomasino specifically mentions Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi.
- **Apocrypha:** A group of texts written between the Old and New Testaments that are included in some versions of the biblical canon but not in others. Dr. Tomasino references a story about Daniel from the Apocrypha.
- **Bearing False Witness:** The direct wording of the Ninth Commandment, which Dr. Tomasino argues implies a specific legal or courtroom setting, akin to committing perjury.
- **Capital Crime/Offense:** A crime punishable by death. The law codes discussed (Hammurabi, Deuteronomy) often prescribed severe penalties, including death, for false accusation in such cases.
- **Deceit:** The act of misleading or cheating someone. Dr. Tomasino explores instances in the Old Testament where deceit, motivated by good intentions (e.g., protecting life or God's kingdom), is not condemned.
- **Deuteronomy 19:** A book in the Torah cited by Dr. Tomasino that specifies the "eye for an eye" principle (lex talionis) for false witnesses: they receive the punishment they intended for the accused.
- **Forensic Application:** The understanding of the Ninth Commandment primarily within a legal or courtroom context, specifically referring to the prohibition against giving false testimony under oath.
- **Gossip (Rakil):** The Hebrew word *rakil* refers to talebearing or revealing secrets. Dr. Tomasino emphasizes that *rakil* can refer to both false and true accounts, both of which can be harmful.

- **Hammurabi (Code of):** An ancient Babylonian law code from around 1750 BC, known for its strict penalties, including death for false accusers in capital cases and trial by ordeal (river).
- **Idle Word:** A term used by Jesus, quoted by Dr. Tomasino, suggesting that people will be held accountable for every careless or unprofitable word they speak.
- **Leviticus 19:** A chapter in the Torah that Dr. Tomasino cites as expanding upon the Ten Commandments, including the prohibition against swearing falsely, injustice in court, slander, and standing against a neighbor's life.
- **Mendacious Account:** A false or untruthful account. Dr. Tomasino notes that "false witness" could also simply mean a mendacious account, not necessarily restricted to a courtroom.
- **Moral Application:** The broader understanding of the Ninth Commandment beyond the courtroom, encompassing the principle of not telling lies about people that are designed to hurt them.
- **Nabal's Vineyard:** A story from the book of Kings (though the speaker mistakenly says Nabal's vineyard, it's Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21) where Queen Jezebel arranges for Naboth to be falsely accused of blasphemy by two witnesses so King Ahab can acquire his land.
- **Perjury:** The offense of willfully telling an untruth in a court of law after having taken an oath or affirmation. Dr. Tomasino identifies this as the most direct modern interpretation of "bearing false witness."
- **Pentateuch:** The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), also known as the Torah.
- **Profane the Name of the Lord:** To treat God's name with disrespect or to misuse it, as in swearing falsely by it.
- **Rakil:** The Hebrew word translated as "gossip" or "talebearer," which can refer to spreading either true or false information that is intended to cause harm.
- **Slander:** The action or crime of making a false spoken statement damaging to a person's reputation. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15:19 includes slander as an evil thought from the heart.

- **Ten Commandments (Decalogue):** A set of biblical principles relating to ethics and worship, which play a fundamental role in Judaism and Christianity.
- **Torah:** The central and most important document of Judaism, comprising the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Pentateuch).
- **Trial by River:** An ancient form of judicial ordeal, particularly mentioned in Hammurabi's Code, where an accused person was thrown into a river to determine guilt or innocence by whether they floated or sank.
- **Two Witnesses:** A biblical requirement (found in Deuteronomy) that any capital crime had to be testified to by at least two witnesses to ensure a conviction, a safeguard against false accusations.
- **Ur-Nammu (Law Code of):** An ancient Mesopotamian law code, older than Hammurabi's, known for its comparatively "liberal" penalties for false witness, often involving fines rather than death.
- **Yaakov and the Feather Pillow:** A rabbinic legend used by Dr. Tomasino to illustrate the irreversible and far-reaching damage that gossip and harmful words can inflict, much like scattered feathers that cannot be recollected.

Answer Key: Quiz

1. Dr. Tomasino argues that "You shall not lie" is a misleading translation because the original Hebrew implies a "constricted setting," primarily a courtroom. This narrow interpretation fails to address the broader implications and complexities of truth-telling and harm.
2. The "forensic application" of the Ninth Commandment refers to the prohibition against giving false testimony in a legal setting. Dr. Tomasino uses the modern legal term "perjury" to describe this most direct understanding.
3. The Law Code of Ur-Nammu was "very generous," requiring a perjurer to pay 15 shekels of silver or a payment equal to the value of the litigation. In contrast, Hammurabi's Code was much stricter, stating that if a false accuser charged someone with a capital crime and could not prove it, the accuser would be put to death.

4. Deuteronomy 19 states that if a witness is false, they shall suffer the penalty they intended for the accused. This is similar to Hammurabi's Code, where an accuser facing a capital charge would be put to death if proven false, emphasizing that the consequence of false testimony mirrored the intended harm.
5. According to Dr. Tomasino, the primary intention behind the Ninth Commandment is using words that are meant to bring harm to another person. This extends beyond merely telling a fib or a simple lie, focusing instead on the malicious intent behind verbal communication.
6. Two examples from the Old Testament where deceit is not condemned include Abraham's fibs about Sarah being his sister to protect himself, and Rahab hiding the Israelite spies and lying to those who sought them. In both cases, the deceit served a protective purpose and was not presented as sinful.
7. The Hebrew word for "gossip" discussed is *rakil*. Dr. Tomasino makes the important distinction that *rakil* can refer to either a false account or a true account. This means that even spreading truthful information can be harmful and constitute gossip if it is meant to hurt or reveal private matters.
8. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15:19 expands the scope of the Ninth Commandment by including not only "false witness" but also "slander" among the evil thoughts that come from the heart. This demonstrates that the prohibition extends beyond formal testimony to general harmful speech and rumors.
9. The "Shampoo Commercial" analogy illustrates the exponential spread of rumors. If one person tells two friends, and each of those two friends tells two more, and so on, within two weeks, nearly 32,000 people will have heard the story, demonstrating the immense speed and reach of shared information, particularly gossip.
10. The rabbinic legend of Yaakov and the feather pillow conveys the central lesson that the damage done by harmful words, especially gossip, is irreversible and far-reaching. Just as Yaakov could not recollect all the

scattered feathers, the harm inflicted by words cannot be undone, emphasizing the lasting impact of what we say.

4) FAQs:

1. What is the primary intention of the Ninth Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor"?

The Ninth Commandment, often simplified to "You shall not lie," is more accurately understood as a prohibition against using words to harm another person. While it certainly includes not lying, its main focus is on malicious verbal acts. Initially, the commandment heavily implied a courtroom setting, forbidding perjury or false testimony that could lead to severe penalties, even death, for the accused.

However, its scope extends beyond legal contexts to encompass any use of words—whether lies, half-truths, or even truths—that are designed to inflict damage on a neighbor's reputation, well-being, or property.

2. How did ancient Near Eastern law codes, like those of Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi, address false testimony?

Ancient Near Eastern law codes, particularly those of Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi, were deeply concerned with the issue of false testimony. The Code of Ur-Nammu, for example, imposed a relatively lenient fine of 15 shekels of silver for a perjurer. In stark contrast, Hammurabi's Code, predating Moses by centuries, prescribed much harsher penalties. If someone brought a false accusation, especially for a capital crime, and could not prove it, they would face the same punishment that the accused would have received, often death. This principle is famously illustrated by "trial by river," where the accused's survival would lead to the accuser's death.

These codes highlight the extreme importance placed on truthful testimony and the severe consequences of its abuse in ancient legal systems.

3. How does the Old Testament expand on the idea of "false witness" beyond just courtroom perjury?

The Old Testament, particularly in Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 19, expands the understanding of "false witness" beyond mere courtroom perjury. Leviticus 19:16 explicitly states, "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people." This indicates that the commandment is not just about formal testimony but also about slander and gossip, even if the gossip contains elements of truth. Deuteronomy 19:18-19 reinforces the principle of reciprocal justice for false witnesses: "then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother." This means if a false witness intended to cause their neighbor to lose property, they would lose their own; if they intended to cause their neighbor's death, they would be put to death. This broader interpretation emphasizes the moral application of the commandment, focusing on the intent to harm through words, regardless of the setting.

4. Are all lies considered violations of the Ninth Commandment?

Not all lies are considered violations of the Ninth Commandment, particularly if they are not intended to bring harm to a neighbor. The text distinguishes between malicious falsehoods and "fibs" or deceptions made with good intentions. Examples provided include telling a child their drawing is beautiful even if it's not objectively so, or a wife telling her husband he's more handsome than in college. The Bible itself contains instances where figures like Abraham, Rahab, and Michal used deceit to protect themselves or others, or to advance God's purposes, without condemnation. The core principle is the intent: if the lie is not designed to inflict injury or malice, it typically falls outside the primary condemnation of the Ninth Commandment, which targets harmful verbal actions.

5. What is the connection between "false witness" and gossip or talebearing?

The connection between "false witness" and gossip or talebearing is central to a broader understanding of the Ninth Commandment. The Hebrew word "rakil," translated as "gossip" or "talebearer" in passages like Proverbs, can refer to both false and true accounts. This highlights that even sharing truths can be harmful if the intent is malicious or if the information is private and its revelation causes damage. Gossip is condemned because it reveals secrets, sows discord, and can separate close friends, demonstrating how words, even true ones, can be used destructively. Jesus further broadens the commandment in Matthew 15:19 to include "slander" and "rumors" in addition to "false witness," emphasizing that any verbal communication intended to harm or undermine another person is a violation.

6. Why is gossip considered so damaging, even if it's based on truth?

Gossip is considered deeply damaging because, regardless of its factual basis, its primary effect is often to inflict harm, undermine reputations, and destroy trust. As illustrated by the story of the minister's wife and "Sister Gert," gossip can quickly spiral out of control, evolve into absurd and damaging fabrications, and devastate personal and professional relationships. The story of Yaakov and the feathers powerfully conveys that words, once spoken, are impossible to fully retract or control, and the damage they cause can be irreparable. People engage in gossip for various reasons, including a desire to feel "in the know" or special, but the consequences can be catastrophic, demonstrating how verbal harm extends far beyond direct lies.

7. What is the "forensic application" and "moral application" of the Ninth Commandment?

The Ninth Commandment has both a "forensic application" and a "moral application."

- **Forensic Application:** This refers to the most direct interpretation, which is about not committing perjury or bearing false testimony in a court of law. This was a critical aspect in ancient legal systems, where false accusations could lead to the accused's imprisonment, financial ruin, or even death. The Bible, like ancient law codes, emphasizes severe penalties for those proven to be false witnesses in a judicial setting, often mandating that they receive the same punishment they sought for the accused.
- **Moral Application:** This extends the commandment beyond the courtroom to encompass any verbal act intended to harm a neighbor. This includes slander, malicious rumors, and gossip, even if the information being spread is technically true but used to cause injury. The underlying principle here is about responsible and benevolent use of language, recognizing that words have the power to build up or tear down, and that God holds individuals accountable for every "idle word" that causes harm.

8. What is the overarching principle of the Ninth Commandment?

The overarching principle of the Ninth Commandment is not merely to avoid perjury in a courtroom, nor is it a blanket prohibition against all forms of lying. Instead, it is a

profound command to be extraordinarily careful about how one uses words, particularly regarding their potential to inflict injury upon one's neighbor. It encompasses the responsibility to avoid any verbal act—be it a false accusation, slander, malicious gossip, or the revealing of private truths—that is designed to cause harm, undermine reputation, or destroy relationships. The essence of the commandment is a call to ethical speech, emphasizing that our words have far-reaching consequences and that we are accountable for their impact on others.