

**Women's Bible Study – Fall 2010**

**10 Apps for Life**

**November 17, 2010**

***App #9: God's Truth***

**Exodus 20:16**

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I had a “blast from the past” as I was thinking about the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment this week. Anyone heard this song before from a really old TV show?

*Now, we're not ones to go 'round spreadin' rumors,  
Why, really we're just not the gossipy kind,  
No, you'll never hear one of us repeating gossip,  
So you'd better be sure and listen close the first time!*

It's a humorous song, but probably only because we all know the human tendency to speak unkindly about someone behind her back. The ninth commandment isn't exactly about gossip specifically, but I hope you'll see the range of application that this one sentence in Exodus can have.

Exodus 20:16: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” First let's talk about *the simple intention* of the command. To bear false witness means to tell a lie when on the witness stand in court. We would call this sin perjury today. Remember that the Israelites were only about 3 months out of slavery in Egypt, so the 10 commandments were in part designed to help them live as a free people. One thing they had to establish was a legal system—a way to address grievances and punish crime. So here was instruction at the most basic level on the only way a legal system can truly work. The witnesses have to be reliable and honest.

There are other provisions in the Old Testament law that helped to ensure honesty in court. For example, capital punishment was not allowed if there was only one witness. Numbers 35:30: “If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses. But no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness.” And if you were one of the witnesses in a case that required the death penalty, which was accomplished by stoning, the witness was to be the one to cast the first stone. (Deut. 13:9; 17:7). If you got caught giving false testimony, the punishment was the same for you as for the accused. Look at Deut. 19:15, where we see an expansion of the law concerning witnesses: “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who are 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 the rest shall hear and fear . . .” You can imagine that if we had these laws today, people would “hear and fear,” too. These regulations all served to show the new Israelite nation how serious the truth was, especially in a court of law. And false testimony does two things. It undermines the justice system and it hurts individuals.

Remember the story of Naboth? (I Kings 21). Naboth had the misfortune to own a vineyard that King Ahab wanted. When Naboth wouldn't give it to him, he arranged for a couple of thugs to accuse Naboth of cursing God and the king. Their false testimony against Naboth resulted in Naboth's stoning. And remember that Jesus' death came about partly because the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin sought out people to give false testimony about Jesus. But Prov. 19:5 says, "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape."

So, the simple intention of this command is forbid perjury in a court of law. However, it is not a stretch to apply it more broadly to include any kind of speech that harms another's reputation—so not just perjury, but slander, too. The book of Leviticus elaborates on and explains the Decalogue, and in it we see this broader application of the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment: "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people" (19:16). And in this sense, this commandment builds on the previous commandment not to steal. When by our words we cause others to think ill of someone we are stealing their good reputation.

Reputation is the estimate in which a person is held by others. A good reputation results from a life ruled by wisdom. It takes time to build a good one and very little time to ruin one. Prov. 22:1 says, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches." Let me give you two illustrations of this. In 1919 several players on the Chicago White Sox baseball team were bribed to throw the World Series. In other words, they agreed to lose on purpose in exchange for a share of the gambling money. They were found out, though, and eight players were banned from professional baseball for the rest of their lives. Buck Weaver was one player who was banned, but he insisted on his innocence. He batted over .300 for the series and didn't make a single error. The league commissioner would not relent, but Buck Weaver filed a formal protest to clear his name every single year until he died an old man. His good name was that important to him.

2<sup>nd</sup> illustration: My daughter's class has been studying immigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and parents were invited to come share their family's immigration stories. At the end of my talk about our family's story, I wrapped things up by telling the students how thankful I was for my godly heritage. One little hand shot up, and one very honest little boy said, "My family doesn't have a godly heritage. In fact, one of my ancestors did something so terrible that the rest of the family changed their name!" Apparently it took just one scoundrel to ruin the family reputation. A good name is truly a treasure. Now think how terrible that makes the sin of slander. It's one thing to ruin your own good name by foolishness, but how unjust is it to have your good name ruined by a lie?

Why should we want a good reputation? Because we enjoy how it makes us look? No, because if we're Christians, people will base their opinions of Jesus in part by the reputations of his followers.

Just how widespread do you think slander is? How often have you read, heard, or said damaging words about another person to a third party? Think back to your girlhood—think about your siblings, about your days on the playground at school. Think about your conversations on the phone when you were a teen. Think about what you read in the newspaper or online. Think about Facebook. Think about the conversation in the break room at work. Think about the political advertisements we've been inundated with. What about the every day words that pass between your family members? What conversations do you overhear when your kids are with friends? What conversations do your kids overhear when you're talking with your friends?

Listen to Prov. 11:9: With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor. And Prov. 18:21 says that “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” I’ve talked before in Bible study about my 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mr. Hutcheson, who made us all memorize the book of James—largely because of chapter 3, which has this to say about the tongue: “For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body . . . No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.” I’ve never had the opportunity to testify in court, but I’m afraid I have slandered people. And I wish I could say memorizing James 3 cured me of speaking hurtful words altogether. I think you’ll agree that we women have a propensity toward sins of the tongue, don’t we? I’m not sure why this is, but while men may be more inclined toward physical violence, I think we’re more inclined toward verbal violence. And don’t picture the kind of violence done by a club; think more of the kind done by a super-sharp sword. The kind of sword that is so sharp it can cut someone’s head off quickly and effortlessly—almost before the victim knows what’s happened! Psalm 52 talks about a deceitful person this way: Your “tongue plots destruction” and is “like a sharp razor . . . You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking what is right. You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue” (52:2-4).

I said that the simple intention of this command is perjury in a court of law, and a broader interpretation includes slander. The focus of this commandment *is* on words that harm your neighbor. But we should also remember that this command implies truthfulness in *all* our words. For every prohibition in Ex. 20, there is a positive corollary. The positive corollary for this commandment is, “Tell the truth about your neighbor.” It follows that we will tell the truth about our neighbor if we are committed to truthfulness all the time.

Proverbs says, “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, *a lying tongue*, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, *a false witness who breathes out lies*, and one who sows discord among brothers” (6:16-19). Two of these seven things that God hates have to do with the 9th commandment—a lying tongue and a false witness. We like to talk about God’s love, but sometimes we shy away from talking about God’s hatred. Once I was teaching a group of children and I mentioned that we should hate the things that God hates. One little girl exclaimed in a shocked tone, “Oh! We don’t say that word!” But God hates a lying tongue and he hates a false witness. We should hate them, too, and we should hate them first in ourselves before we go looking for them in others. Truthfulness is very important to God.

Why? Because lying is antithetical to his nature. It is the domain of Satan. Listen to Jesus’ description of Satan in John’s gospel: “He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (8:44). Jesus, on the other hand, says, “I am the truth” (Jn. 14:6); he prays to the Father, saying, “Your word is truth” (17:17). Hebrews says “It is impossible for God to lie” (6:18), and Moses writes, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Num. 23:19). Do you really believe that God will never lie to you? That he is completely trustworthy? I went through a time of doubting in my teens. I distinctly remember asking my dad, “What if Christianity is all just a bunch of lies?” I’m thankful he didn’t freak out! And I’m even more thankful that the Holy Spirit taught me and put my doubts to rest. If you’re doubting right now, keep reading and studying and praying, and you

will find that the Christian faith is indeed true. That Jesus is completely trustworthy, and that God will never lie.

And since God can't lie, think of this—Jesus won't give false testimony to his Father on the last day about those who belong to him. My grandpa died last month after a long and godly life. He was very dear to me, and this truth has been very precious to me—that God is trustworthy and that I can completely rely on all his promises. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand” (Jn 8:27-29).

Lying takes many forms. We can lie about other people, which, I've said, is at the heart of this commandment. We can lie to other people, which God also hates. And we can lie to ourselves. I've been thinking a lot about this last one lately, because the things we tell ourselves inside our heads will set up either a godly response to people and circumstances, or an ungodly response. We can lie to ourselves about ourselves (“I'm worthless,” or “I deserve something better”). We can lie to ourselves about other people (“She is snubbing me intentionally!” or “My husband is doing that just to annoy me.”) We can lie to ourselves about our circumstances (“God can't expect me to be joyful in this situation!” or “This can't possibly be what's best for me.”) It's not only crucial to speak the truth with our mouths, but it's crucial to speak the truth in our thoughts. This is where soaking ourselves in Scripture is so vital. Hebrews says, “The word of God is living and active . . . discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12). Scripture will help us see if we are thinking true thoughts or lying ones.

We can lie in many ways. Sometimes we're truly malicious, and sometimes we're just clueless, but here are a few.

\*Carelessness. How many times have I passed something on as if it were true without checking the facts or at least admitting that I wasn't sure?

\*Breaking contracts/Not keeping promises. This includes real estate deals and marriage vows. It includes not making time for the bedtime story or the game when you told the kids you would. It includes forgetting all about the person you said you'd pray for.

\*Flattery. I've heard it said that flattery is something you say to someone's face that you'd never say behind her back! Flattery is a form of lying to get something for yourself.

\*Insinuation. My dictionary defines this as “an indirect or covert suggestion or hint, especially of a derogatory nature.” You don't actually say anything negative outright, but you craft your words so as to leave doubt in your listener's mind. The mission of a lie is accomplished even if a lie isn't actually told.

\*Exaggeration. Isn't it easy to embellish a story to serve our own purposes? Those details tend to just get in the way, don't they?!

\*Silence. Ever thought of this? Another way of creating a deception without actually telling a lie. Listen to Lev. 5:1: “If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity.” Silence can be a form a dishonesty.

I'm sure you can think of more, but I hope this list will stimulate our thinking and our consciences. At this point, you might be thinking, “Is she going to talk about whether it's ever right to lie?” This is probably the most notorious question in respect to the issue of truth and falsehood, so I'll address it, even though I'm not going to answer it directly, and it's not really at the heart of the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment. I'd like to acknowledge that I'm indebted to John Piper's insights here. There are two instances in the Scripture where people in extreme situations lied to

save lives and were not condemned for it. The Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1 lied to save newborns, and Rahab lied to save the Israelite spies. So yes, indeed, it is possible for godly people who are acting in faith, to be in such extreme circumstances that they decide to oppose evil by telling a lie. But we must be very careful not to take these two instances and conclude that truth-telling really doesn't matter. An overwhelming amount of biblical instruction is devoted to the importance of truth-telling. And Rahab and the midwives are commended for their faith and for fearing God, never specifically for their lying (Heb. 11:31). Most of us will probably never be in such an extreme situation; I pray that if I ever am, I will do what is right.

Why do we lie or slander? Well, at the root, this sin, like all others, begins in our hearts. If we have lying lips, that's because we have a deceptive heart. Ever since the Fall in Genesis, we have had a propensity to hide, to conceal the truth. Isn't that what Adam and Eve's first instinct was after sinning? Jer. 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick." Ever think about all the systems society has in place to ensure honesty? That's because we know, at heart, we're a bunch of liars. Jesus makes this profound statement in Matthew 15: "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person . . . What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, *false witness, slander*" (15:11, 18-19).

But what are some common motives for lying or speaking damaging words about another person?

- \*A desire to hurt someone who has hurt us. Think of Potiphar's wife, who wanted to get even with Joseph for spurning her advances.

- \*A desire to build intimacy in our circle of friends. In a strange way, slandering the same person or group can make us feel a sense of belonging in a clique, can't it?

  - \*Wanting to be perceived as important or "in the know."

  - \*Wanting to boost ourselves and others' opinion of us. We think we can accomplish this by making a competitor look bad. And some people do fall for this—that's why we do it. Sometimes it works! But it usually doesn't work for long, and it never works if we're talking about God's opinion of us.

  - \*To protect ourselves from getting in trouble. Dishonesty can be a defense mechanism. We're afraid, so we lie.

Again, you can probably think of more motives than these.

But now let's talk about how to change.

  - \*If you want to keep from spreading slander, start by not listening to it.

  - \*Follow the biblical pattern for church discipline and conflict resolution.

Sometimes the negatives things we hear about others or say about others is actually true. What do we do then? If someone is caught in gross sin, we shouldn't just bury the truth under the guise of keeping the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment. Matt. 18 instructs us to go first to the offending party alone, then with 2-3 others before it becomes a public matter (15-18).

  - \*Fill your mind with other things. It has been said that great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events, and small minds discuss people.

  - \*Believe the best about others until you're proven wrong. Don't assume the worst. This goes for family members, too.

  - \*Remember Mat. 12:36, 37: "On the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak."

But most important of all, harness the power of the gospel through prayer. We must pray with the psalmist, “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!” (141:3). Ben Franklin is well known for his efforts at self improvement. He wrote up a plan to instill character in himself, working on one virtue at a time. When he felt he had conquered a particular bad habit and replaced it with a good one, he moved on. I guess he hoped to arrive at perfection by the time he’d worked through his list. But noble as his aspirations were, we cannot change our hearts by human effort. John Bunyan wrote this rhyme to remind us of our inability to keep the law on our own: “Run, John, run,” the Law commands, but gives us neither feet nor hands. / Much better news the gospel brings; It bids us fly, and gives us wings. This command asks us to do something we can’t do—it’s like trying to run without feet. But the good news that says we can be reconciled to God by trusting in Christ’s righteousness—that gospel enables us to do what it commands.

I want to end with Paul’s words in Ephesians: “Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (4:22-25). Lying is part of the old self. Why must we put it away? Because we are members one of another. A lie hurts someone else, and if that someone else is a fellow believer, we are simply hurting ourselves, since we’re all one body.

When my brother Greg was about 12, I remember him coming into my room and apologizing for lying to our parents about an incident that had occurred between him and me almost a year before. His lie caused me to get in big trouble. Greg had since become a Christian, and now he wanted to make things right. He went to our parents and then to me. The power of the gospel changed his heart. I’ve never forgotten that. And if we belong to Christ, he is at work changing our hearts, too.

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