

## The Christian Life (14): The Ninth Commandment

As the fifth commandment addresses the sanctity of authority, the sixth commandment the sanctity of life, the seventh commandment the sanctity of purity, the eighth commandment the sanctity of property, the ninth commandment addresses the sanctity of truth. This means, the ninth commandment especially addresses the sins of the tongue. "Just as the previous commandment ties the hands, so this one ties the tongue" (Calvin).<sup>1</sup>

The former commandment provides for the security of every man's property, that he may suffer no wrong nor detriment in his goods. This commandment provides for the preservation of his good name, which is a much dearer possession. For, *A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches* (Prov.22:1). Indeed, a good name is so excellent a blessing, that there is but one thing to be preferred before it; and this is, a good conscience. When these two stand in competition, credit (honor) must give place to duty; and, in this case, it is far better to lose our standing with men, than our acceptance and reward with God.<sup>2</sup>

### I. The Ninth Commandment

Q. *What is required in the ninth commandment?* A. That I bear false witness against no man, nor falsify any man's words; that I be no backbiter, or slanderer; that I do not judge, or join in condemning any man rashly or unheard; but that I avoid all sorts of lies and deceit, as the proper works of the devil, unless I would bring down upon me the heavy wrath of God; likewise, that in judgment and other dealings I love the truth, speak it uprightly, and confess it: also, that I defend and promote as much as I am able the honor and good character of my neighbor.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this commandment is: since God (who is truth) abhors a lie, we must practice truth without deceit toward one another. To sum up, then: let us not malign anyone with slanders or false charges, nor harm his substance by falsehood, in short, injure him by unbridled evil speaking and impudence. To this prohibition the command is linked that we should faithfully help everyone as much as we can in affirming the truth, in order to protect the integrity of his name and possessions.<sup>4</sup>

1. *Sins forbidden.* Strictly speaking, the ninth commandment forbids bearing false witness against your neighbor. "The sin which is expressly forbidden is the giving of false testimony concerning a person when we are summoned as witnesses in his cause by proper authority. But, although the violation of truth in the solemn proceedings of courts is the only sin specified, yet all other sins allied to it, and contrary to the general principle inculcated, are forbidden" (Dick).<sup>5</sup> "The sin forbidden here is expressed by *false witness bearing*, which is especially before judges, because that is the most evident gross way of venting an untruth, under which (as in other commands) all the lesser are forbidden" (Durham).<sup>6</sup> "It is not a big step from the courtroom lie to other forms of the lie that can harm our neighbor's reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*,

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:504-505

<sup>3</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Q.112

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.47

<sup>5</sup> John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:481-482

<sup>6</sup> James Durham, *Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 387

True, the ninth commandment does not say, 'You shall not lie,' but neither can we separate what the ninth commandment forbids from what the Bible says in general about the outrageous character of lying" (Douma).<sup>7</sup> "There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying (9<sup>th</sup>), killing (6<sup>th</sup>) and stealing (8<sup>th</sup>) and committing adultery (7<sup>th</sup>), they break all restraint, with bloodshed upon bloodshed" (Hos.4:1-2). By "swearing and lying" means "swearing falsely against another" and "telling untruths in general." Thus, the ninth commandment not only forbids bearing false witness against someone in the court of law, but all expressions and variations of deceit. "Although there are many sorts of sins in words, whereby we wrong others, yet we think they are not all to be reduced to this command, for injurious and angry words belong to the sixth command, and filthy words to the seventh; but we take in here such words as are contrary to truth and fall especially under lying or wronging of our neighbor's name" (Durham).<sup>8</sup>

(1) False witness. "Testimony (bearing witness) is a statement concerning any man or thing, whether attested by an oath or not. One is guilty of bearing false witness, not merely when one himself invents and makes a false statement, but also when one receives and spreads such a statement from others" (Thelemann).<sup>9</sup> "You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness" (Ex.23:1). "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies will not escape" (Prov.19:5). "There are certain times and circumstances when the sin of lying (which is evil at all times) is even more heinous than at other times. If we are called as witnesses in a court of law, we are charged by duly appointed authority to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" (Williamson).<sup>10</sup>

(2) Lying. "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight" (Prov.12:22). By definition a lie is "an untruth told to deceive." "To lie is to speak that which one knows to be an untruth" (Watson).<sup>11</sup> Thus, not every untruth is a lie. For example, if I accidentally tell you today is Monday when it's Tuesday, as long as I was sincerely mistaken and did not intend to deceive, it was merely an untruth and not a lie. "A lie, according to St. Augustine's definition of it is *a voluntary speaking of an untruth, with an intent to deceive*. And therefore, in a lie there must be these three ingredients. There must be the speaking of an untruth. It must be known to us to be an untruth and a falsehood. And, it must be with a will and intent to deceive him, to whom we speak it, and to lead him into error" (Hopkins).<sup>12</sup> John Dick suggested three kinds or types of lies: (a) Malicious lies or lies the design of which is to do mischief; (b) Jesting lies or lies told for the purpose of amusement and merriment. However common these are, and however lightly they are thought of, a strict moralist will condemn them also, because truth is too sacred to be trifled with; (c) Protective lies or lies intended to promote the benefit of others. "It has been pleaded as an apology for these, that they do no harm but good; a conscience duly informed, however, does not judge of the morality of an action by its consequences, but by the law: and to do evil that good may come, is a principle the Scripture has prohibited."<sup>13</sup>

Some have referred to these "protective lies" as "lies of necessity." They refer to lies told in order to protect life. Two classic examples are the Hebrew midwives protecting the Hebrew children (Ex.1:15-21)

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<sup>7</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 316

<sup>8</sup> James Durham, *Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 387

<sup>9</sup> Otto Thelemann, *An Aid to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 398

<sup>10</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 2:74

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 170

<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:508

<sup>13</sup> John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:484

and Rahab protecting the spies (Josh.2:4-6). John Murray has suggested with reference to the first, "we have a case of partial or selective truth-telling that was void of lies." "We have an instance of partial truth and not total untruth, and partial truth relevant to the circumstances. Since the midwives feared God and therefore disobeyed Pharaoh's command, it was not an obligation to tell Pharaoh the whole truth. Hence it is possible that the midwives' answer shows not falsehood but concealment through the means of part truth."<sup>14</sup> With respect to Rahab, Murray says while she is commended in the NT, she was never commended for lying but "for her faith and works in receiving the spies and sending them out another way (Heb.11:31)." "It is strange theology that will insist that the approval of her faith and works in receiving the spies and helping them to escape must embrace the approval of *all* the actions associated with praiseworthy conduct."<sup>15</sup> He then concluded his consideration of Rahab by saying: "We see, therefore, that neither Scripture itself nor the theological inferences derived from Scripture provide us with any warrant for the vindication of Rabah's untruth and this instance, consequently, does not support the position that under certain circumstances we may justifiably utter an untruth."<sup>16</sup> "Those who hold what is called a dutiful lie to be altogether excusable, do not sufficiently consider how precious truth is in the sight of God. Therefore, although our purpose be to assist our brethren, to consult for their safety and relieve them, it never can be lawful to lie, because that cannot be right which is contrary to the nature of God. And God is truth" (Calvin).<sup>17</sup> "As no man can lie for himself for his own safety, so can he not for another's; thus to lie even for God is a fault and accounted to be talking deceitfully and wickedly for Him" (Durham).<sup>18</sup>

There are times, it is argued, when we simply *must* lie! And for this, it is said, even Scripture support can be found. Did not Abraham lie to save his own life? (Gen.12:13, 19; 20:2, 5, 12). Did not the midwives lie to Pharaoh? (Ex.1:19-20). Therefore—it is argued—we too may lie in time or war, or danger. But this is not a sound argument. Abraham also committed adultery. But this does not justify adultery. In order to prove that lying can be right, we would have to prove that Abraham not only lied, but lied with God's approval. And this we cannot prove. We can prove that God permits us, in dire circumstances, to conceal (or withhold) part of the truth from those who are our enemies. We see this from God's command to Samuel (1Sam.16;1-5). God commanded Samuel to do *two* things. But when the king demanded to know what he had done, God instructed Samuel to tell about one of the things that he had been doing, but not the other. So he was to tell that part of the truth that would do no harm, and to conceal that part of the truth that would result in harm if it were told. *But observe*: he was not permitted to lie. In other words, while God does say in effect, that evil men may not have a right to know all truth that we could tell, He does not say that we have the right to tell them any lies.<sup>19</sup>

(3) Slander. Slander can best be defined as untruth or partial truth told for the purpose of harming someone's reputation (and is usually the result of envy or spite). "Whoever hides hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool" (Prov.10:18). "Slandering is to report things of others unjustly" (Watson).<sup>20</sup> "LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks

<sup>14</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 141

<sup>15</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 138

<sup>16</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 139

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary*, 4:47

<sup>18</sup> James Durham, *Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 389

<sup>19</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 2:73-74

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 169

uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; he who does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend" (Ps.15:1-3). "The slanderer wounds three at once: he wounds him that is slandered; he wounds him to whom he reports the slander, by causing uncharitable thoughts to arise up in his mind against the party slandered; and he wounds his own soul, by reporting of another what is false" (Watson).<sup>21</sup> The ninth commandment not only forbids slander, but also forbids listening to slander. "He that raises a slander, carries the devil in his tongue; and he who receives it, carries the devil in his ear" (Watson).<sup>22</sup>

(4) Gossip. Gossip can be distinguished from slander in that it concerns things that may in part or whole be true. But they are repeated to others, not for holy and loving purposes, but to merely discuss the faults of others. "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" (Lev.19:16). "A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter" (Prov.10:13). "A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends" (Prov.16:28). "He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends" (Prov.17:9). "Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases" (Prov.26:20). "Someone can chip away at the good name of his neighbor through backbiting and gossip. These need not be lies, because gossip can spread many things that are true. But it is still frivolous prattling behind a person's back. The neighbor's mistakes, faults, and shortcomings are discussed in minute detail. People realize this kind of chatter gets them an attentive audience. Many would rather hear something bad about our neighbor than something good" (Douma).<sup>23</sup>

A hearer is guilty of backbiting (1) if he inwardly delights that his neighbor is depicted in such a fashion and with relish listens to this; (2) if, due to curiosity, he gives another person the opportunity to gossip; (3) if, by smiling, nodding, or by saying, 'What are you saying? Is it possible,' he stimulates the backbiter to continue in order to either hear more, or because he dares not let the backbiter be the only speaker—especially if he is a person of some prominence; (4) if he does not speak but is silent instead and allows the backbiter to proceed rather than opposing him with words and gestures (Prov.25:23).<sup>24</sup>

(5) Flattery. Flattery has to do with motivation. It can be simply defined as "compliments intended for self-advancement." Thus, while what we say may or may not be true, the ultimate reason or motivation for speaking is hidden from the person. "He who hates, disguises it with his lips, and lays up deceit within himself; when he speaks kindly, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart" (Prov.26:224-25). "Flattery is speaking so wetly of others that it is out of proportion to what they really are. It is done out of craftiness and for gain. False flattery is an awful sin, for it leads to the ruin of our neighbors in body and soul. Yes-men, or people-pleasers are cunning in flattering others. They say 'amen' to everything they hear of their masters. Let us rather follow this advice of Solomon: 'He that rebukes a man afterwards shall find more favor than he that flatters with the tongue' (Prov.28:23)" (Udemans).<sup>25</sup>

(6) Unfaithfulness. This refers to dishonest promises or commitments. "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'" (Matt.5:37). "LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 169-170

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 169-170

<sup>23</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 316-317

<sup>24</sup> Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:230

<sup>25</sup> Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 460

hill? He who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the LORD; he who swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Ps.15:1-4). "This command forbids paying no due regard to promises – rashly making them, or entering into stations and relations which imply them, and want of due concern to remember and fulfill them" (Brown).<sup>26</sup>

(7) Rashness. "We can violate the ninth commandment even when we speak the truth, if we speak it unseasonably, unnecessarily, and from improper motives" (Dick).<sup>27</sup> "He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction" (Prov.13:3). "The ninth commandment forbids judging, evil-speaking, and rash censuring of our neighbors for doubtful or small matters, especially when we are guilty of the same or greater faults ourselves. 'Judge not, that ye be not judged' (Matt.7:1-3). 'Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest; for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things' (Vincent).<sup>28</sup>

2. *Duties enjoined.* "There is in this negative precept ('you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor'), an affirmative which is, *You shall bear true witness of, or for your neighbor*; that is if you will be true, love to learn and speak the truth. The head, the fountain and genus, as it were, of the virtues which are here enjoined, is *truth*, or rather *veracity* in our words, thoughts, judgments, contracts and in our doctrine" (Ursinus).<sup>29</sup> Thus, the ninth commandment not only forbids the above vices, but enjoins us to speak the truth in love, defend our neighbor's good name, edify with our words, and view others in the best possible light.

(1) That we speak the truth in love. Christ has given the church pastor-teachers to equip the saints, "that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ" (Eph.4:11-15). The truth (in every form) must always be told with and in love. "We are to speak the truth, promote the truth, and bear witness to the truth on every occasion – whether this pertains to us or to our neighbor. 'Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbor; execute the judgment of truth' (Zech.8:16); 'Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor' (Eph.4:25)" (Brakel).<sup>30</sup>

(2) That we defend our neighbor's good name. The ninth commandment not only forbids listening to slander, but also necessitates us to defend those slandered. "It's possible to transgress this precept when we do not speak at all; for, by holding our peace when something injurious is said of another, we tacitly give our assent, and, by concealing what we know to the contrary, by not bringing forward what would rebut the charge, we become guilty not in a much inferior degree to the first contriver of the slander" (Dick).<sup>31</sup> "We are to promote with all our strength the good reputation of our neighbor. We must render him honor and respect and preserve his reputation as much as the truth will allow us to do. If he has faults, they are to be covered rather than recounted. They should not be denied, for then one would lie,

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<sup>26</sup> John Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 491

<sup>27</sup> John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:482

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 206

<sup>29</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 600-601

<sup>30</sup> Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:234

<sup>31</sup> John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:483

yet, we must be silent about them, and those who recount them should be rebuked as being guilty of backbiting" (Brakel).<sup>32</sup>

The mandatory part of the commandment implied is that we stand up for others and vindicate them when they are injured by lying lips. This is the sense of the commandment, not only that we should not slander falsely or accuse others; but that we should witness for them, and stand up in their defense, when we know they are defamed. A man may wrong another as well by silence as by slander, when he knows him to be wrongfully accused, yet does not speak in his behalf. If others cast false aspersions on any, we should wipe them off. When the apostles were filled with the wine of the Spirit, and were charged with drunkenness, Peter openly maintained their innocence. 'These are not drunken, as ye suppose' (Acts 2:15). When the primitive Christians were falsely accused of incest, and killing their children, Tertullian wrote a famous apology (defense) in their vindication. This is to act the part both of a friend and of a Christian, to be an advocate for another, when he is wronged in his good name.<sup>33</sup>

(3) That we edify others with our words. "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones" (Prov16:24). "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Prov.27:17). "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph.4:31-32).

(4) That we view others in the best possible light. "Love...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1Cor.13:7). The virtue implied in the ninth commandment is contrary to a judgmental and censorious spirit. "If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words...he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, and evil suspicions" (1Tim.6:3-4).

Contrary to the candor commanded in the ninth commandment is suspiciousness. This is to understand things, spoken correctly or unclearly, in the worst light, and to suspect evil things from those that are good; or to entertain suspicions where there is no just cause for so doing; and where there are any proper reasons for suspicions, to indulge in them to too great an extent. Thus suspicion is the entertaining of an evil or unfavorable opinion of someone, on account of some probable and sufficient cause, whether true or apparent (Watson, 173-174).

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<sup>32</sup> Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:234

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 173-174