

## ***Truth Is Basic***

*Basic Scripture resources Exodus 20:16, 23:1-3;  
Proverbs 19:9; Acts 5:1-11;  
Ephesians 4:25-32; James 1:26, 3:1-12*

The ninth Commandment says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). This clear law against lying is grounded upon one of the most basic principles of all: the sanctity of truth.

In this age of relativism, people are not as concerned about truth as they once were. There was a time when someone like Pilate could ask, "What is truth?" (John 18:38), and everyone assumed that the question could be answered. Today the question is different. People are asking, "Is anything true?" and the common answer is no.

With this rejection of any absolute and ultimate truth has come an increasing indifference toward truth in general. For many, honesty is no longer the best policy. Telling the truth is not as important as it used to be.

Thus we cannot be reminded too often of the reality of truth and the necessity of truth-telling. The purpose of this chapter is to give such a reminder.

### ***I. The Necessity of Truth***

Why is lying wrong? Why is telling the truth necessary? Is there any good reason why God should require us to be truthful? Is it purely an arbitrary requirement?

The answer, of course, is that truth and truth-telling are not at all arbitrary but are quite essential to our authentic existence as human beings. Truth and truthfulness are the very core of right relationships to God and to our fellow men. Lying and falsehood are contrary to the very nature of things.

### ***God and His Image***

It is God's own eternal and unchanging nature to be true. As Paul says, even if every human being is found to be a liar, God will still be true (Romans 3:4). Jesus is called "the truth" (John 14:6), and the Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13). When God speaks, His word is truth (John 17:17).

On the other hand, it is Satan who is the father of lies and liars. Jesus said, "When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it" (John 8:44).

Since we are made in the image of God, truth and truth-telling are proper to our nature. When we lie and deceive, we pervert our own God-given nature and prostitute ourselves to Satan. If we are going to be conformed to the image of the one who created us, we must stop all lying and be truthful (Colossians 3:9,10). Just as lying and deceit are contrary to the nature of God, so are they contrary to true human nature.

### ***Truth and Society***

Truth is necessary not only as an ingredient in genuine human existence, but also as the

very foundation of a decent society. Loving and meaningful relationships with our fellow men are impossible unless we assume that truth-telling is the normal and expected behavior.

This point is taught to us in Ephesians 4:25, which says, "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another." The reason we should be truthful is that we are members one of another. We are interdependent members of one society: what affects one affects all. A lie that hurts one hurts all. The more prevalent lying becomes, the less any one of us will be trusted. Unless truth is the norm, society gives way to the law of the jungle: every man for himself.

## ***II. Lie Not One to Another!***

Because truth is so essential, the ninth Commandment and the Bible in general forbid all lying. "Lie not one to another," says Colossians 3:9.

What is a lie? It is the deliberate misrepresentation of what one judges in his mind to be the truth. An honest mistake is not a lie. On the other hand, one may say something that is true, and yet be guilty of lying if he actually thinks the opposite is true and he deliberately intends to misrepresent it. In other words, whether a statement is a lie or not depends on the intention of the speaker.

For instance, suppose one Sunday morning Joe asks his dad if he can go with his friend to the latter's church. He gets permission; but instead of going to church, he and his friend sneak off and play ball.

When the family arrives at church, the minister asks Joe's mother if he will be in Sunday school. "Oh, yes," she says. "He went to church with his friend." Of course, the statement is not true, but she thinks it is. Thus she is not lying; she is merely mistaken.

But when the Sunday-school teacher asks Joe's little sister if he will be in church, the story is different. Sister just happens to be unhappy with Joe about something, so she tries to make him look bad. "No," she says, "he skipped church today and is out playing ball!" Even though what she says is true, she has lied, because in her mind she thinks Joe is in church. She is deliberately misrepresenting what she thinks is the truth.

### ***False Witness***

The kind of lying most specifically forbidden by the ninth Commandment is exactly what Joe's sister is guilty of, namely, speaking falsely against another person.

The law of Moses expressly condemns false accusations and false testimony in a court of law. "Thou shalt not raise a false report," says Exodus 23:1. The seriousness of this sin in God's sight is seen in Deuteronomy 19:16-21, where the following rule is laid down. If a man gives false testimony against someone in court, then whatever penalty would have been given to the innocent party because of the lie shall be applied to the liar instead.

Bearing false witness is wrong whether it occurs inside or outside a courtroom. James 4:11 gives the general prohibition, "Speak not evil one of another, brethren." All slander, libel, and false gossip are forbidden.

### ***Falsehood and Deceit***

False witness against another person is only one kind of lying. There are many other ways to lie, and all of them are wrong. Any attempt to deceive another person, whether it be by word or by action, whether it be by what is said or by what is left unsaid, is lying.

Temptations to lie face us every day. We are tempted to make false excuses in order to

avoid a disagreeable chore or engagement: "I can't come to the meeting; I have a terrible headache." We are tempted to make false promises just to get rid of a pest: "Yes, Junior, I'll buy you a pony. Now let me finish my paper. We are tempted to withhold information and thus leave the wrong impression: (to a ticket-taker) "Sally's eleventh birthday was June 23; do she doesn't need a ticket." (Of course, it was June 23 two years ago, but nobody asked about that!) We are tempted to exaggerate: "This is a very economical car; it gets around twenty miles per gallon." (That is, on long slow trips it gets thirteen, but that's somewhere around twenty, isn't it?)

Certain professions offer greater temptations to deceive than others. In the business field, we must realize that false advertising and false claims about products for sale are just plain lying and thus are forbidden. Politicians must guard against false promises. Newsmen must realize that false or misleading news reporting is nothing less than lying.

Cheating in school is also lying, since the cheater deliberately misrepresents someone else's work as his own.

Hypocrisy is also a form of lying. A person may live a lie, pretending to be someone he is not, even though no words are actually spoken.

God wants us to see just how wicked all these forms of lying are. Thus He attaches the severest condemnation to them. "A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall perish" (Proverbs 19:9). "All liars" shall be cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death (Revelation 21:8).

### ***III. Speak the Truth in Love***

On the positive side, the ninth Commandment requires us, in the words of Ephesians 4:15, to speak "the truth in love."

Truth in and of itself is basic, and we must always try to be truthful. But as everyone knows, the truth at times can hurt. Thus the Word of God exhorts us to speak the truth, but to do it in love. This means that we have a Christian duty to be tactful. Tact is not truth modified by falsehood, but truth softened by kindness.

Many people are proud of themselves for always "telling it like it is," for "not pulling any punches," for "laying it all on the line and letting the chips fall where they may." But malicious bluntness is a sign of weakness, not strength. It shows a lack of love and consideration for the feelings of others. We must speak the truth, but in love.

The love requirement rules out certain forms of communication, even though what is said may be true. This is why gossip is forbidden, even if it is true gossip. (This is a kind of backbiting.) Some other forms of truth that show a lack of love are revealing the secrets of others, bragging, and flattering people in order to influence them.

Finally, speaking the truth in love requires us to bear witness to our unsaved neighbors concerning their lostness and concerning the free gift of salvation offered to them through Jesus Christ. By remaining silent we leave the impression that everything is all right with them, when we know in our hearts that it is not. The greatest truth that we can speak to them is that Jesus saves, and love requires us to speak it!