

SERIES: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives

SERMON: **Failing to Tell the Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:16

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Introduction: It's time for a pop quiz. We haven't had one of those in a long time. If you were going to make a list of the sins you really hate, the ones that really turn your stomach, the sinners you find nearly impossible to forgive, who would be on your list? Not names of people, but kinds of people. Just take a minute to think about it, and if you're really brave, write your list down. Be honest now.

OK, now who is on your list?

Pedophiles?

Rapists?

Terrorists?

Lying politicians?

People who betray their friends?

Those who are cruel to animals?

People who are thin? (just kidding!)

I suppose everyone's list is colored significantly by our own life experiences and maybe even by the prejudices with which we grew up.

Would you like to know what God's list looks like? You can find it in Proverbs 6:16-19, so please turn there with me.

There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

Interesting list, isn't it? We could preach a long time just on that list. God mentions several I am fairly sure didn't appear on any of our lists, and He leaves off some that probably appeared on most of ours. Most surprising may be the fact that two of the seven sins God hates are addressed in the Ninth of the Ten Commandments, which is our topic this morning. Our Scripture text is found in Exodus 20:16: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." God's list in Proverbs 6 mentions both a lying tongue and a false witness who pours out lies.

In *U. S. News & World Report*, there was an article entitled, "A Nation of Liars?" The subtitle reads: "Government officials dissemble. Scientists falsify research. Workers alter career credentials to get jobs. What's going on here? The answer, a growing number of social critics fear, is an alarming decline in basic honesty." After enumerating a frightening litany of events involving high-profile lying, the writer continues, "Is America growing dishonest? Has something in the basic social fabric changed? There are many who fear that it has. Duplicity and deception, in public and private life, are very substantially greater than they have been in the

past.”ⁱ

That, friends, was written 22 years ago while Ronald Reagan was president. And the problem of lying has grown exponentially in the years since. Perhaps you recall Dan Rather’s infamous comment regarding Bill Clinton on the Bill O’Reilly show. He called Clinton an honest person, but when challenged by O’Reilly with some of Clinton’s biggest lies, he said, “I think you can be an honest person and lie about any number of things.” The amazing thing is that most Americans seem to agree with Rather. A week or so ago my favorite cartoon demonstrated some of the ways the corporate world lies, as the pointy-haired CEO tells Dilbert,

I want you to negotiate the sale of our voice-activated hassock business. You’re not allowed to lie, but I expect plenty of omissions, misdirections, exaggerations, unjustified optimism, lost documents, unclear explanations, gray areas and tactical ignorance, oh and say that we have other offers.

There are probably a lot of reasons for this decline in basic honesty, including the breakdown of the traditional institutional supports for moral teaching—church and family life—but there is also a dangerous philosophical trend called *postmodernism* that has contributed significantly.ⁱⁱ Postmodernism questions whether there even *is* any objective truth, much less absolute truth.

Of course, if one cannot talk about the objective truth of a matter, then the interpretations given to an event, or a moral standard, or even a written document (like the Constitution or the Ten Commandments) are merely personal, or at best culturally conditioned options. No viewpoint can be dismissed, and no viewpoint can be allowed the status of objective truth. There is no absolute truth—there is only my truth and your truth. And tolerance demands that you respect my truth, though no one has bothered to explain why that is absolutely necessary.ⁱⁱⁱ

This carelessness about truth is permeating our whole society. Our universities and government and social institutions are full of people who have adopted postmodernism. They do not view themselves as liars. Why should they? If there is no absolute truth, it is really impossible to lie.^{iv} In fact, the biggest lie on campus today is that there is no absolute truth, for that is the big lie that makes it possible for academics to tell all sorts of other lies.^v As Isaiah lamented, “Truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found.” (Isaiah 59:14,15)

With that as introduction, I want to open our discussion with this proposition:

The Ninth Commandment has as its foundation the absolute truthfulness of God, and He expects *us* to be committed to truth as well.

The term “truth” is found approximately 225 times in the Scripture. Several times God is called “the God of truth.” The Holy Spirit is called the “Spirit of Truth.” Jesus said, “I am the truth.” And God’s Word is called the “word of truth.”

Furthermore, the opposite of truth, the lie, is identified completely with Satan, the Evil One. Jesus said to the religious leaders of Israel in John 8:44, “You belong to your father, the devil,

and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” If the Devil speaks his native language when *he* lies, what language are we speaking when *we* lie? I assume the same language.

Time and again the Scriptures exhort us to be totally honest, not just in our words but also in our thoughts. In his great Psalm of confession, Psalm 51, David acknowledges, “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.” When the Apostle Paul urges us to put on the full armor of God, one of the key elements is “the belt of truth buckled around your waist.”

But the Ninth Commandment cannot be fully understood only by stressing the positive need for honesty and truth. We also need to look at the negative side and see the many ways in which we violate God’s commitment to truth, sometimes without even being aware of it. So my second proposition is this:

The Ninth Commandment is first and foremost a prohibition against perjury.

Exodus 20:16 says, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” In its most absolute sense this prohibits lying in order to convict someone of a crime he didn’t commit. One of the most noteworthy examples of this in Scripture concerned Joseph. Sold into slavery by his own brothers, he ended up in Egypt, working in the home of a government official named Potiphar. When Potiphar was away on business, his wife tried to seduce Joseph, but he resisted and fled. She was so angry and hurt at his rebuff that she falsely accused him of being the aggressor, and he ended up in prison.

Another example is when Ahab wanted Naboth’s vineyard. His wife Jezebel hired two liars to press charges against Naboth. We read in 1 Kings 21:13, “Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, ‘Naboth has cursed both God and the king.’ So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death.” It was all a lie.

In forbidding such perjury this Commandment represents an amazing advance in legal justice, for in ancient times a person was not innocent until proven guilty; but rather guilty until proven innocent. There were no DNA tests, no lie detector tests, and no forensic evidence, so almost everything depended upon witnesses. And since many crimes carried the death penalty, the words of a false witness could easily be fatal.

God was so concerned about justice that He provided a number of protections for the innocent. One witness was never enough to convict a person—there had to be 2 or 3 (Deut. 19:15). If it was a capital case the accuser had to throw the first stone (Deut. 17:7). And if the allegations proved to be false, the accuser himself received the same penalty that the accused would receive (Deut. 19:18-19).

But friends, a courtroom is not the only place where someone can give false testimony. In fact, it's a lot easier in the court of daily life. When people stand before a judge, they generally realize the solemnity of what they are saying. But in daily life, when we're not under oath, it is easy to become careless with what we say. While most of us would never condone outright lying, we easily distort the truth, shade the truth or hide the truth. So while this Commandment is first and foremost a prohibition against perjury, it also forbids many other kinds of lying.

The Ninth Commandment is also a prohibition against other kinds of lying.

The lie of malice (to hurt others) is the kind of lie Jacob told his father Isaac when he claimed to be his brother Esau, thereby stealing Esau's inheritance. This is the kind of lie any of us commit when spreading malicious gossip about someone. Just because no one is executed or thrown into prison doesn't mean no harm is done. I am embarrassed to admit how often I have welcomed a destructive word about someone I didn't particularly like. And sometimes I have even passed it on without verifying its truth. That is the lie of malice.

The lie of expediency (to help ourselves) is a lie told to get the liar himself out of a tight spot or give him an advantage he would not otherwise have. This is the kind of lie Joseph's brothers told their father when they brought his blood-stained coat of many colors back to Jacob and said that a wild animal had killed him when in fact they had sold him into slavery. It worked, for several decades, but not forever.

Do you know the name of George O'Leary? In December 2001 he was on top of the athletic world. He had just been named head football coach at the University of Notre Dame, which is a position maybe second to the Pope, but it pays a lot better. It was the dream of a lifetime. But at the end of his first day on the job a reporter happened to contact some of the guys who had played college football with O'Leary back at the University of New Hampshire. The only problem was they couldn't remember him.

It turns out when O'Leary applied for his first job 20 years earlier he didn't think his resume looked impressive enough, so he decided to improve it with a little lie about playing football at New Hampshire. Since most people didn't even know New Hampshire had a football team, he thought he could get by with it. Once it got on his resume there was no way to get it off without admitting deceit. That one little lie, once discovered, was big enough to turn O'Leary's dream into a nightmare, costing him not only his job, but also his reputation.^{vi}

According to a survey of nearly 3 million job applicants, nearly 50 percent of American resumes contain one or more falsehoods. Resumes routinely include degrees never earned, service records falsified, and accomplishments exaggerated. We are even more used to politicians telling lies of expediency when they routinely promise things during campaigns they know in their hearts they cannot deliver. I suppose most are convinced that's the only way to get elected, and since election will allow them to do the good things they *really* plan to do, the lying is somehow justified.

The lie of fear is often the automatic response when we have been caught doing something wrong. A little boy got a couple of verses of Scripture confused when he said, “A lie is an abomination to the Lord and a very present help in time of trouble.” The fact is, lying in time of trouble almost always gets us into worse trouble or causes us to lie again to cover up the first lie.

Aaron told a famous lie out of fear immediately after the Ten Commandments were written and before they were even read. Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the two tablets of stone in his hands, only to find the people dancing around a golden calf. Moses’ anger burned, and in righteous indignation he threw the tablets to the ground, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. Then Moses demanded to know what the people had done that caused Aaron to lead them into such great sin. And Aaron told a whopper! (Exodus 32:23-24):

They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!

Now that was nothing more or less than a pathetic, bald-faced lie to save himself from Moses’ anger.

The lie of exaggeration. We all like to feel important, and one way to enhance our sense of importance is to exaggerate something we’ve done or seen or heard. One wag called exaggeration, “Remembering it big.” A few little trout caught on a fishing trip can quickly increase in number and size as the story is retold. A ground ball to the second baseman in Little League followed by three or four throwing errors can become a tremendous home run when told at school. Yesterday my son and I were driving on a path through Joe Stout’s ranch on the way to the father/son cookout when we spotted a black snake across the path. My son jumped out to try to grab it, but it slithered into the prairie grass. Later around the campfire Joe was saying there weren’t any snakes out there, so I responded that we had just seen a 7-foot snake less than 50 yards from where we were sitting. Joe turned to Andy and asked, “How long was that snake?” He responded, “About 4 feet,” which generated a big laugh since the guys all knew I’d be preaching on lying the next day. Truth be told we never did see its head, so it may have been 10 feet long (not likely)!

I believe God wants us to tell it like it is. When you stop and think about it, reality is stranger than fiction anyway. If we just tell the truth, it’s interesting enough, and then we don’t have to remember what we said the last time.

The half-truth. Sometimes we lie by telling only part of the truth. A teenage girl who tells her parents she’s going to her best friend’s house, but who uses that as a staging ground to see a boyfriend her parents disapprove, is lying to her parents, for while she may go to her friend’s house, that was only half the truth. She is purposely misleading them.

Rev. Fred Holloman was the Chaplain of the Kansas Senate for 24 years until retirement in 2002. He was a Baptist minister known for his short, pithy prayers, which he always ended “in Jesus’

name.” One of his best prayers dealt with the matter of half truths:

Omniscient Father:

Help us to know who is telling the truth. One side tells us one thing, and the other just the opposite.

And if neither side is telling the truth, we would like to know that, too.

And if each side is telling half the truth, give us the wisdom to put the right halves together.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

I like that.

The white lie is a term we use for relatively minor untruths told to help others or to extricate ourselves from minor embarrassments. For example, creating an alibi for a friend in trouble might be considered a white lie. Or you forget a friend's birthday, so you tell him you were out of town when you weren't. Or a tardy secretary tells her boss she ran into a terrible traffic jam when in fact she overslept?

The color assigned to this kind of lie, namely white, is an attempt to justify it. No one's really getting hurt, we argue. But the fact of the matter is we can't always be sure. White lies have a way of turning gray real fast. Randal Denny has called white lies, “just plain black lies some hypocrite has tried to whitewash.”^{vii}

Now personally I think the white lie should be distinguished from what we might call “polite formalities.” When someone asks how you're doing and you respond, “Fine, thank you,” even though you have a terrible headache, I don't view that as lying. Most people prefer such a response to an organ recital (I'm talking about your bodily organs, not Debbie's organ).

Or Aunt Gertrude asks how you like her dress and you tell her it's lovely when it's actually as ugly as sin. The alternative to polite formality is brutal honesty. I have known a few skilled practitioners of that option, but they aren't very pleasant to be around. I think 1 Cor. 13:7 says something about this when it says, “Love always protects.” I do not think of such polite formalities as white lies, nor do I think they violate the Ninth Commandment.

The lie of flattery is more sinister. It's a lie designed to set someone up to be used. I once had a parishioner who went out of his way to tell me how great every sermon was—I mean I hit a home run every week. I soon concluded he was being insincere, because even I knew some were not up to par. Eventually I discovered he had an agenda, and when I didn't support his agenda, the compliments on the sermons ceased. I never heard another positive comment over the next 16 years.

The lie of silence is committed when we withhold information that might clear the guilty. Leviticus 5:1 says, “If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible.” Be careful, though. The Ninth Commandment does not mean that we always have to say everything that comes to mind. There are many situations in life where it is better to say nothing at all. But

when it is our duty to speak, we must say the honest thing, but in a loving way (Eph. 4:15).

The lie to self. There is nothing more difficult to do in life than to be totally honest with ourselves. We are so prone to rationalizing our behavior and our motives, and condemning the same thing in others. We seek to hold others to standards we ignore for ourselves. Dostoevsky, in his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, wrote these intriguing words:

The important thing is to stop lying to yourself. A man who lies to himself, and believes his own lies, becomes unable to recognize truth, either in himself or in anyone else, and he ends up losing respect for himself as well as for others. When he has no respect for anyone, he can no longer love and, in order to divert himself, having no love in him, he yields to his impulses, indulges in the lowest forms of pleasure, and behaves in the end like an animal, in satisfying his vices. And it all comes from lying—lying to others and to yourself.^{viii}

The lie to God is the worst lie of all. Actually nothing is more futile than lying to God, for He is the one who searches the hearts of men and knows us inside and out. But it is amazing how often we try. You remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They saw how much Barnabas' gift of a piece of land to the church was appreciated, and they decided they wanted the same recognition. They wanted to be known as generous and gracious benefactors. So they too sold a piece of property and brought some of the proceeds to give to the apostles. But they pretended to give it all. When confronted by Peter, they were told they had been under no obligation to either sell the land or give all the proceeds. But giving *some* while pretending to give *all* was lying; and it was not just lying to men but to God. And both fell over dead on the spot.

But Stuart Briscoe brings the lie to God even closer to home when he observes, “Maybe you go to church on a Sunday and sing a powerful hymn about serving God, but if you’re not careful, and if you don’t mean what you sing, you could find yourself very sweetly lying to God the whole time.”^{ix}

Now I have one more topic I want to broach, at some risk, I might add. I thought of skipping it entirely because the children are present and it may be difficult for them to process the issue. But then I decided, no, even the children need to wrestle with this question.

Is it *always* wrong to lie?

This is the first time I’ve asked this in our entire study of the Ten Commandments. I haven’t asked, “Is it always wrong to worship idols?” Or, “Is it always wrong to steal?” And we’re not going to ask in a couple of weeks, “Is adultery always wrong?” It is. But I am asking, “Is it always wrong to lie?” And the reason is that the Scriptures force us to ask this question.

There are several examples of lies in the Scripture which seem to gain God’s approval. For example, in Exodus 1 we have the fascinating story of how Moses was born despite the decree of the Egyptian Pharaoh that all Hebrew baby boys should be killed (Exodus 1:15-21):

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 'When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.' The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, 'Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?' The midwives answered Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.' (This was clearly not the reason the boys were spared; this was a lie. But the next sentence is . . .). So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

I have a hard time reading this account any other way than to say that God blessed a lie. Rahab is another example. In Joshua 2 we have the story of the spies that were sent by Joshua to the city of Jericho. They went to the house of a woman of ill repute named Rahab, probably because that is one place where a couple of strange men wouldn't seem out of place. But someone reported their presence to the authorities, and we read in verse 3 . . .

So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: 'Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.' But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, 'Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them.' (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.)

Now shortly thereafter the Israelites conquered Jericho and killed almost everyone in the city. However in 6:25 we read, "But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho." Again, there is no rebuke for her lie, only blessing.

Some have called these "lies of necessity." Others have suggested the best way around the dilemma they present is to redefine lying as telling a falsehood to anyone who has the right to know the truth. But I am inclined to think a more attractive solution is what some call the doctrine of the greater good. Telling the truth is right and good, but saving a life is even better, and if the two are ever in conflict, it is better to do the greater good. The danger here is that we are such rationalizers that we could justify a lot of lies by convincing ourselves that we were trying to achieve a greater good (like saving our own reputations). Clearly that is not in view with either of these examples.

What I don't want to do this morning is leave you with the impression that ethical conflicts of this nature are common, or that basic honesty is a gray area. These kinds of ethical dilemmas are really quite rare. Honesty is not only the best policy; it is the only policy we should consider the vast majority of the time. We must be truth-tellers in every relationship, starting with God, and then "with parents, children, spouses; coworkers, employers, employees; pastors, parishioners;

believer, unbeliever; friend and foe.”^x

Conclusion: Children, I want to close by telling you an old Persian legend about a boy named Selim. He was a camel driver, and one day his caravan was overtaken by robbers who took everyone’s money and all their valuables. When they came to Selim and searched his pockets, they found nothing.

The robber asked, “Are you hiding any money?”

Selim answered, “I have three gold pieces sewn in the corner of my jacket.”

“Why did you tell me?” asked the robber.

Selim answered, “Because my mother taught me three things—to be kind to everybody, to pray to God everyday, and *always* to tell the truth.”

This was something really new to the robber—to have someone tell the truth even when it meant the loss of his money. He thought for a moment, then said to Selim, “Here, instead of me taking your three gold pieces, I’m going to give you three more. If I had a mother like yours, I wouldn’t be a robber.”

Now children, I’m not promising you that telling the truth will always double your money. I’m not even certain that God requires honesty when a robber is holding you up. But what is clear to me is that if Christian parents would teach and, more importantly, demonstrate honesty, and if Christian children would practice it, the Church would have a greater impact on this sinful world in which we live. Helmut Thielicke said, “The avoidance of one small fib . . . may be a stronger confession of faith than a whole ‘Christian philosophy’ championed in lengthy, forceful discussion.”^{xi}

The Bible calls us to radical truthfulness. Jesus said in Matthew 12:36-37, “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” By the power of the Holy Spirit we must appropriate the life of Christ in us so that His words become our words and His truthfulness becomes our truthfulness. Jesus never lied, you know, “nor was any deceit found in his mouth” (Isaiah 53:9, 1 Peter 2:22). God wants us to be like Jesus.

One final thought as we prepare for the Lord’s Table. If there is anything God hates it is the lies that Christians tell to make themselves look more righteous than they are. We are so sinful that there is no way we could ever be saved apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are so guilty that the very Son of God had to be crucified for our sins.^{xiii} But He was willing, thank God. If you have never thanked Him for that, and put your faith and trust in Him, won’t you do so today?

2. Let me define this term by contrasting it with modernism. Modernism describes the emergence of the western world from the Dark Ages. Its roots lie in the Renaissance, and in the scientific revolution of the 16th and early 17th centuries. The world was understood to be a rational place; truth was there to be discovered. *Postmodernism*, on the other hand, is a world-view that comes after (post) modernism and rejects its basic tenets.

iii. Obviously, such a philosophy has a major impact on public attitudes toward honesty. There were those who liked to refer to President Clinton as a pathological liar, but I disagree. A pathological liar is one who can't help himself because of abnormal psychology. President Clinton, on the other hand, was acting quite consistently within the principles of postmodernism. As our nation's first postmodern president, he was not bound by objective standards of truth, but was able to continually reinvent himself, flexibly adapting his ideology, his behavior, and his very personality to the needs of the moment. This is not intended to be a political statement, just a psychological one. If truth is not absolute, it can be reshaped and revised repeatedly, without any concerns about contradictions.

iv. Michael G. Moriarty, *The Perfect Ten*, Zondervan, p. 193

v. Philip G. Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, 658-659.

vi. Ryken, 653.

vii. Randall Denny, *Tables of Stone for Modern Living*, Baker, 103.

viii. Quoted by Gary Bauer in *Washington Update*, January 23, 1998.

ix. Stuart Briscoe, *The Ten Commandments, Playing by the Rules*, 158,159.

x. Michael S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom; Relating to God and Others Through the Ten Commandments*, Moody, 1993, 228.

xi. Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, 59.

xii. Ryken, 664.