

Sunday, August 7, 2022 | Ten

Exodus 20:16 | "Our Neighbor's Reputation"

At the beginning of the summer, we kicked off a new 11-week series called "Ten." This study unpacks the first commandments given to the Jews in Exodus and how they can still help guide Christians today. Using parallel passages, we'll discover that the principles God tried to instill in Israel in the Old Testament find fulfillment through Jesus in the New Testament. And how, while the believer is no longer bound to the Law for salvation (i.e., justification), we can still use it to become more like Christ (i.e., sanctification).

In the first week, we studied what Christ had to say about all the commandments rather than dive headlong into the ten commandments. In Matthew 22, we learned that Jesus summed up the duty of man into two sentences: love God with everything and love others as yourself. On these two things, Jesus says, hang all the Law and the prophets. Those two commands give context to everything else in the Bible and life. So much so that **a love for God and neighbor brings certainty in a world of uncertainty.** Even without an explicit command, we can still make good decisions in uncertain situations. The Scriptures can still speak into a 22nd context because its' principles are sufficiently broad enough to encompass all human experience. It is hard to go wrong when you are consumed with love for God and others.

We finally got to the titular Decalogue in the second week by exploring the first commandment. The Ten Commandments were not created by a committee. They were, quite literally, given to us by the voice of God. Therefore, since these ideas come from outside human reasoning, the Decalogue (i.e., the "Ten Words") and all other truths within Scripture embody objective truth. Who better to teach us how we ought to live than a being whose judgment is not clouded by shifting opinions, influenced by fluctuating emotions, or pressured by changing circumstances? And the first word upon which all the other divine words stand is this: Have no other gods but God. **And if there is no god but Yahweh, then we should have no other god but God.** Why would we give anything or anyone who is not a god that sort of devotion that only God deserves? What a waste of worship that would be. And is not Jesus worthy of all of our worship?

In the third week, we unpacked the second prohibition in the Decalogue. And unlike the first command, which prohibits the *having* of other gods, the second prohibits the *making* of anything that's supposed to represent God (i.e., idols, icons, images, etc.). It's a subtle distinction, to be sure, but it's no less important. There are so-called "worship practices" in this world that are wrong. And these practices often make use of things we might call "idols."

Commandment two shows that Yahweh should not be expressed in any manmade thing because he is the one who makes, not the one who is made. However much we may try, the creature cannot create a perfect representation of its Creator. Moreover, that command also reminds us that our Creator has already created images that bear his likeness: *us* (cf. Gen. 1:26; Eph. 2:10). **Idolatry, in all forms, not only downgrades who God is but also diminishes who men and women were made to be.**

In the fourth week, we answered the question, “What did God mean when he said, “Do not take my name in vain”? This is the broadest prohibition within the Decalogue and, therefore, one of the hardest to keep. When the Lord commanded this, he expected us to not speak or bear his name in an empty or thoughtless way. Thus, the ways in which this commandment can be broken are numerous. However, just because something is hard does not mean it's not worth doing. After all, **we, as Christians, are to live as our name implies: like Christ.** Jesus lives in us and can enable us to bring glory to his name. And only through the Lord are we able to abide by the third commandment.

In the fifth week, we unpacked the fourth prohibition in the Decalogue: Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. And that while we, as Christians, no longer observe the Sabbath as the Jews did in the O.T., we still obey the fourth commandment in principle by meeting on Sundays to remember Jesus' resurrection. Thus, not only do we have Moses to thank for our Saturdays, but we also have Jesus for our Sundays, and, ultimately, we have God to thank for our entire weekend. **The Lord's Day—i.e., Sunday—is a day of Sabbath-like rest that is set apart to the Lord so that the Christian might be more like Christ.** This is for our good because we were not designed to work all the time. Since the foundation of the world, human beings have been made to rest.

In the sixth week, we dove into the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and mother." And this commandment comes right after the commandments that dealt with our relationship with God and before the commandments that dealt with everyone else. This implies that a healthy relationship with God and others is forged in the home. How we treat our parents will impact how we treat God and those people who are around us. After all, if we are to love our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Mar. 12:31), who better to start with than those “neighbors” who are closest to us? And **when the parents are honored, the child will be blessed.**

We studied the sixth commandment in the seventh week: "You shall not murder." But this seems unnecessary. Murder is so wicked and awful that most of us don't need to be told not to do something so obviously wrong. But that assumption gives humanity far too much credit. All human beings, great and small, have the capacity to destroy life. To illustrate that principle, we

saw how the Bible speaks about five forms of murder: unintentional killing, abortion, suicide, euthanasia, and anger. Somewhere in those five categories, we are all guilty. Unlike every other created thing, human life is sacred because we alone bear the image of our Creator (cf. Gen. 1:27). As a potter signs his work, every man, woman, and child has been stamped by the Giver of Life. And life is that mark, i.e., existence, consciousness, volition, etc. As such, life is a precious gift not to be thrown away or destroyed. **Whether literally or emotionally, we do not commit murder because human life is sacred—i.e., set apart, unique, special.**

Two weeks ago, we unpacked the commandment regarding adultery. And like the prohibition regarding murder, the seventh commandment isn't so much an effort to stem the tide of sexual infidelity but a commentary on the importance of sexual fidelity. In other words, God is highlighting how much value he puts on sex and marriage. Marriage isn't a communal affair but one of exclusivity. The Lord elevates marital unions far above our base desires so that even though we may be tempted to go astray, we refuse to do so because the vow we made to our spouse in the sight of God is far more important than the feelings we might have towards some would-be adulterous partner. Thus, **whether physically or mentally, we do not commit adultery because, like marriage, sex is sacred—i.e., set apart, unique, and special.**

Last week, we turned to the eighth commandment: “you shall not steal.” Just like the sixth commandment wasn't so much a rule meant to mitigate murder and the seventh wasn't so much a rule meant to reduce adulteries (both commandments were also principles intended to highlight the importance of human life and marriage), the eighth commandment not only wants to discourage theft it also wants to elevate the importance of another's possessions and labor. And because all ownership is stewardship, stealing is not only a sin against our neighbor; it is a sin against our God. This also means we become thieves when we do not use our resources the way God wants us to use them. Thus, **we do not steal because a person's possessions and work are sacred—i.e., set apart, unique, special.**

In every court across the United States, before a witness is allowed to speak, they're expected to take an oath. Usually, the clerk asks them, "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" In many ways, it's a formality, and some do not take it seriously. However, it's an integral part of our judicial system. The somewhat repetitive formula ensures that, more than anything else, the court is after the truth. Hollywood has played off this fact many times. For instance, in a particularly intense scene in *A Few Good Men*, Tom Cruise's character grills Jack Nicholson's character while in court. At one point, Cruise says, "I want the truth!" And Nicholson replies, "You can't handle the truth!" That

famous one-liner has been etched in the conscience of anyone who's seen the movie, and, likely, even if you've never seen *A Few Good Men*, you probably have heard that before. But just as our courts, either literal or fictionalized via film, prize the truth, so, too, does our God. In fact, if there is one thing closest to God's heart, it is truth. So much so that the Lord gave the ninth commandment:

READ: Exodus 20:16 (ESV)

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Just as the sixth commandment wasn't solely about discouraging murder, the seventh wasn't strictly about dissuading adultery, and the eighth wasn't exclusively about deterring theft, the ninth isn't exclusively about keeping people from destroying their neighbor's reputation; it is also about emphasizing the importance of truth. Its inclusion in the Ten Commandments makes sense only in light of this fact. Otherwise, we might think it shouldn't be listed alongside other commandments that deal with seemingly more critical issues--i.e., murder, adultery, and theft. But since it's more of a principle elevating and promoting truth, we'd be hard pressed to find cause to take it off the list.

Lying does two things:

i. It hurts our neighbor's reputation.

The implied context that is being addressed by the ninth word in the Decalogue is the court of law. In legal terms, we don't call lying "lying" but "perjury." Today, evidence takes many different forms. For instance, fingerprinting, video footage, DNA testing, etc. But during Moses' time, forensics were limited. In fact, most of the time, the only evidence that a prosecutor could present was eyewitness testimony. What people saw played a crucial part in Israel's judicial process and still does today.

Therefore, God's admonition to "not bear false witness against your neighbor" sought to uphold the very foundation upon which a society is built: justice. Without a just system of governance, communities dissolve, and civilizations deteriorate. No one will put their confidence and allegiance into a corrupt system where lying is allowed. A person who would willingly go to court and spread false information about their neighbor chips away at his own house. It is a perversion and manipulation of the rules that govern everything they themselves hold dear. To put it simply, a false witness can be highly destructive. So much so, the writer of proverbs puts it this way:

READ: Proverbs 25:18 (ESV)

A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.

To ensure that a witness was telling the truth, the Scriptures required that at least two people serve as witnesses to one accusation (cf. Num. 35:50; Deut. 17:6; 19:15; 1 Ki, 21:10; Isa. 8:2). And in cases where capital punishment might be the result of a person's testimony, they'd also be expected to cast the first stone (cf. Deut. 13:6-11; 17:7). The idea being that someone should be less prone to lie if they'd have to help in the killing of someone. Also, should someone be found guilty of perjury, the court of law in Israel required that the liar bear the sentence of whomever they testified against. This was called *lex talion*, also known as the "eye-for-an-eye" principle (cf. Ex. 21:23-27; Deut. 19:15-21).¹ So if I said my neighbor stole my T.V. and during the investigation, the judge found out I lied, under Israelite law, I'd be required to pay damages to my neighbor. Whatever harm I caused by my lie would then be given back to me as punishment.

Imagine if we were to apply this principle today in an era where our courts are plagued by frivolous lawsuits, miscarriages of justice, false testimonies, and rampant conspiracies.² Rather than come to grips with an uncomfortable truth, our society will deflect by calling it "fake news" and find someone who presents them with alternative facts that help them ignore reality.

ii. It hurts our God's reputation.

Interestingly, the word "false" is the Hebrew term *sheh'-ker*, and it refers to speech that is untruthful, fraudulent, deceptive, or misleading (cf. Ps. 27:12; Pro 6:19; 19:5).³ Thus, in this way, it echoes the fourth commandment about not taking God's name in vain.⁴ Just as God doesn't want us to use his name in a meaningless manner, he also does not wish us to employ speech that is empty of truth. What we say matters to God. He wants us to respect him and our neighbor's reputation. And, especially in the context of law, to bear false witness hurts our neighbor and breaks the fourth commandment since God's name was invoked during oaths.⁵

READ: Numbers 23:19 (ESV)

¹ Sarna, Nahum M., *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary, (Philadelphia, PA; The Jewish Publications Society, 1991), p. 114.

² Wright (2021), p. 379.

³ Durham, John I., *Exodus*, The Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 3, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1987), p. 296.

⁴ Kass, Leon R., *Founding God's Nation*, (London; Yale University Press, 2021), p. 332.

⁵ Wright, Christopher J.H., *Exodus*, The Story of God Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Academic, 2021), p. 378.

God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

But while this commandment has obvious implications for the courts, technically, it is nonspecific.⁶ In other words, whether inside a judicial proceeding or outside the courthouse, we should not tell lies about our neighbor. In fact, this seems to be Jesus' point when he mentions the ninth commandment:

READ: Matthew 5:33-37 (ESV)

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

Despite what Anabaptists and Jehovah’s Witnesses might think, it's important to note that Jesus’ words are not against swearing oaths in court.⁷ While their intention to stick as closely as they can to the plain reading of the text is laudable, it is misguided and not a biblically sound interpretation. In the specific context of the court of law, oaths are actually required by Scripture (cf. Ex 22:11; Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Num. 5:19-22), and, interestingly, Jesus himself did so when confronted by Caiaphas (cf. Mat. 26:63-63).⁸ What’s more, God himself also swears oaths to verify truth (cf. Gen. 9:9-11; Lk. 1:72-75; Heb. 6:17), and first-century Christians also made statements while being under oath (cf. Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; Phil 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:5, 10).⁹

The problem Jesus was addressing was, ironically, how oaths would be used to conceal the truth. Jews during this time, to avoid invoking the name of God in vain, used phrases like “heaven,” “earth,” “Jerusalem,” or even the hairs of one’s “head” as a substitute. However, as a consequence of removing God's name, people began to think of vows as less severe and even non-binding.¹⁰ A person could get out of telling the truth under oath if they simply invoked one of the non-binding vows and said whatever they wanted to. Thus, if you were called to swear

⁶ Motyer, J. A., *The Message of Exodus*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, IL; IVP Academic, 2005), p. 230.

⁷ Hagner, Donald A., *Matthew 1-13*, The Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 33A, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2000), p. 129.

⁸ Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1992), p. 123-124.

⁹ Carson, D. A., *Matthew*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 9, Revised Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan Academic, 2010), p. 188.

¹⁰ Carson (2010), p. 187.

an oath in court, Jesus would like you to do so. Should you take that oath fully understanding the importance of truth and thereby speak only the truth and not take God's name in vain, you would be commended by the Lord, not condemned. The issue that the Lord is dealing with was similar to the commandments regarding murder (anger) and adultery (lust); Jesus was getting to the core problem that leads to perjury: contempt for truth. In swearing by everything but God's name, the Jews thought they weren't breaking God's law. However, God owns more than just his name. He owns heaven, earth, Jerusalem, and even each and every hair of our heads. "All oath taking implicates God, is in effect to swear in his name, and thus all oath taking is to be understood as possessing an absolute character."¹¹ Everything is the Lord's. All ownership is stewardship. Thus, to swear *falsely* by anything, even if it's not God's name, is still a sin.

Those who slander their neighbor have a low view of truth. They think it's something to be manipulated, hidden, or reframed if it suits them. Truth, they wrongfully assume, is what they make it. And this is a problem that humanity has struggled with since the beginning. In the Garden, it wasn't that Adam and Eve didn't know right from wrong. They did. They were told explicitly that the so-called "Tree of Knowledge" was off-limits. Thus, what Adam and Eve were doing in taking the fruit wasn't to gain more knowledge; instead, they thought they were gaining the ability to define or determine what is "good" and "evil."¹²

The Christian has no need for oath because what he says he means, and he means what he says. This has been thought of as virtuous by many throughout the centuries. Pythagoras, an ancient philosopher and mathematician who lived in the sixth century B.C., is recorded to have said, "Let one's word carry such conviction that one need not call deities to witness."¹³ And the Spanish playwright, Miguel de Cervantes, must've channeled a similar thought when he wrote *Don Quixote* because he made his titular character say these famous lines: "An honest man's word is as good as his bond."

Jesus' half-brother, James, echoed this same sentiment.

READ: James 5:12 (ESV)

¹¹ Hagner (2000), p. 128.

¹² Dickson, John, *A Doubter's Guide to the Ten Commandments*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2016), p. 153.

¹³ Keener, Craig S., *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), p. 193.

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

Thus, the ninth commandment applies to more than just perjury. In fact, the Bible condemns other forms of speech that is untruthful. For instance, slander (cf. Lev. 19:16), gossip (cf. Lev. 23:1), and even withholding information (cf. Lev. 5:1), which is just lying minus the speech, are also forbidden in Scripture.¹⁴ "The startling thing in the teaching of Jesus was the insistence that, for his followers, there should be no such principle as *heightened* [author's emphasis] truth telling. A simple "yes" or "no" ought to have the same veracity as the most extreme form of sworn testimony."¹⁵ We are never not under oath. And in the end, God will even weigh every idle word spoken (cf. Mat. 12:36). What we say matters to the Lord because speech either relays truth, in which case we are praised for doing so, or it relays untruth, in which case we are condemned.

At our core, a follower of God endeavors to uphold truth in all circumstances. Failing to do so harms not only our relationship with our neighbor but also disrupts our relationship with God. How can we think we are close to God when we lie when the Lord has explicitly said that even if he wanted to, he could not lie (cf. Num. 23:19; Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18). As Durham explains,

"The false witness was inimical to the relationship with Yahweh, upon which everything, including the very being of the Israelites, was dependent. The reputation of the neighbor was important, just as the Israelites' own reputation was important, of course. But however, important these reputations were within the community, they were important to Yahweh most of all, for these people, as his people, were to be *his* [author's emphasis] witness to the world."¹⁶

When the Lord commanded that we should "not bear false witness," he emphasized the importance of truth. And this, more than anything, is on-brand for God. After all, his Son is the literal embodiment of truth (cf. Jn. 1:1) which means that all truth in every form is God's truth (cf. Jn. 14:6). So, when we present lies as truths, we are not only hurting our neighbor, we are also defiling the very essence of who Yahweh is.

So, what's the takeaway?

We do not bear false witness because the **truth** is sacred—i.e., set apart, unique, and special.

¹⁴ Mackey, John L., *Exodus*, A Mentor Commentary, (Great Britain; Christian Focus Publication, 2001), p. 366.

¹⁵ Dickson (2016), p. 148.

¹⁶ Durham (1987), p. 297.

READ: Proverbs 22:1 (ESV)

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.

Perjury, gossip, slander, and so on can destroy a person's life. Stuff can be replaced. But a good name that's been wrongfully tarnished has little hope of recovering. We are the guardians of our neighbor's reputation. We have insight into their lives more than anyone else. This garners friendship and trust in a way that helps build healthy communities. But when we intentionally lie, the neighborhood implodes. Thus, to lie is a form of hating one's neighbor in the same way that speaking truthfully is a form of loving one's neighbor. Wouldn't we want someone to come to our aide if they heard something that was clearly not true? That becomes difficult if we've made it our habit to gossip. No one will come to defend us if we have hurt their reputation.

Video Description

Ten | Week 10 | “Our Neighbor’s Reputation”

TEXT: Exodus 20:16

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This means that just as the sixth commandment wasn't solely about discouraging murder, the seventh wasn't strictly about dissuading adultery, and the eighth wasn't exclusively about deterring theft, the ninth isn't exclusively about keeping people from destroying their neighbor's reputation; it is also about emphasizing the importance of truth. After all, Jesus is the literal embodiment of truth (cf. Jn. 1:1) which means that all truth in every form is God's truth (cf. Jn. 14:6). So, when we present lies as truths, we are not only hurting our neighbor, we are also defiling the very essence of who Yahweh is. Therefore, **we do not bear false witness because the truth is sacred—i.e., set apart, unique, and special.**

Pastor’s manuscript can be found here: