

# EXODUS

## THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

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### SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:16

To understand more about the ninth commandment and its implications for us today.

## A Continuation

In Session 55, we talked about the eighth commandment, and we addressed several passages from the Old Testament that dealt with stealing, one of which was Leviticus 6:2-5. The passage largely deals with theft of personal property by means of a number of different actions, which included: “anything about which he has sworn falsely” (Lev. 6:5). This entails not only things taken but also anything gained through false testimony. Thus, the eighth commandment and the ninth commandment are tied together. In fact, one could make the case that the so-called “second table” (the 5th through 10th commandments) are all a continuation of each other. John Frame adds: “The fifth commandment requires respect for others, which means that we may not unjustly take life (sixth commandment), a spouse (seventh), or property (eighth through tenth).”<sup>1</sup> Regardless, in this session we will examine the contours of the ninth commandment more thoroughly.

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### Read the Text:

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exodus 20:16, ESV)*

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### Study the Text:

## False Witness

The ninth commandment is not simply about lying, although there are a myriad of passages that condemn lying in general. Proverbs 12:22 says, “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.” Psalm 101:7 says, “No one who practices deceit shall dwell in my house; no one who utters lies shall continue before my eyes.” Paul writes in Colossians 3:9-10: “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” Jesus Himself says of Satan: “He is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn. 8:44). Lying is the fruit of Satanic influence. After all, it was deception that led to the fall in the garden of Eden.

But the ninth commandment, similar to the seventh commandment, doesn’t prohibit any and all kind of deception (in the same way that the seventh does not prohibit any and all kinds of sexual sin). That doesn’t mean that sexual sin or lying in general are permissible; the Scripture prohibits those things too. It simply means that the Ten Commandments are more interested in prohibiting a specific kind of transgression. Old Testament scholar Duane Garrett adds: “It is not simply a list of ten broad and generic types of evil-doing. It is ten specific sins that will destroy the covenant community.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the ninth commandment prohibits a specific kind of lying that is destructive to the covenant community of God. It uses language that is native to a

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<sup>1</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 831.

<sup>2</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014), 482.

trial or court setting in which someone is being accused of something. The ninth commandment specifically prohibits someone from bearing a false witness (or testimony) against another person.

#### **WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM**

As has been our practice, we will turn to the wisdom of the Westminster Divines to try and understand a bit more thoroughly how this commandment impacts us. First, what duties are required by the ninth commandment? It answers: “The duties required in the ninth commandment are the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.”

Note a few details of importance. For one, the majority focus of this answer is on the idea of doing anything to not only preserve truth but to build a culture that is driven by a conviction for truth. Any and every action that upholds the “good name of our neighbor, as well as our own” ought to be taken. So while the ninth commandment specifically prohibits us from bearing false witness against our neighbor, the WLC would have us consider all of the behaviors and actions that would prevent us from breaking the ninth commandment. It’s difficult to bear false witness against your neighbor in a culture that holds the virtue of truth up so high.

Question 145 asks: “What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment,” and it answers, in part: “The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are, all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors, as well as our own, especially in public judicature; giving false evidence, suborning false witnesses, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence, calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery, concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others; *speaking the truth unseasonably*, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful and equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice; speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, talebearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, harsh, and partial censuring; misconstruing intentions, words, and actions; flattering, vainglorious boasting, thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults; hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession; unnecessary discovering of infirmities; raising false rumors, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears against just defense; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any, endeavoring or desiring to impair it, rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy; scornful contempt, fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report, and practicing, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering what we can in others, such things as procure an ill name.”

A few details stand out as peculiarly interesting. We are forbidden from “stopping our ears against just defense.” Anytime someone is accused of something wrongfully, and they defend themselves, the ninth commandment forbids us to silence them as they straighten out the facts. This means that if someone slanders another Christian, that Christian has a duty in light of the ninth commandment to defend his name

when it is required of him, and the rest of the covenant community has the duty in light of the ninth commandment to allow him or her to be heard (and critically, to not silence them while they do so). Any kind of “raising false rumors” also violates this commandment because it, in a roundabout manner, is bearing false witness about one’s neighbor.

## Truth and Lies

One important distinction is this: “Not all untrue statements are lies.” John Frame gives several helpful examples of why this is true: “A mistake is not a lie. A parable is not a lie, even though it may describe events that did not happen historically. A fictional story is not a lie unless the author pretends it is factual. A hyperbolic statement (e.g., “It took me forever to get here”) is not a lie but a regular linguistic convention. The same is true for the flatteries that are part of normal social discourse: “Sincerely yours,” “I had a good time,” and so on. They may be literally untrue, but everybody understands that, and such language serves an edifying purpose as a kind of glue that holds civilized society together. In these ways and others, statements that are literally untrue may be means of communicating truth, and nobody would claim that they are lies. In games (whether board games or athletic contests), strategy often dictates deception. Everyone understands this and participates with that understanding. That is part of the fun of it. When the quarterback hides the ball and thereby misdirects the defense, he deceives them, but nobody would call him a liar.”<sup>3</sup>

This is important because it’s easy to overemphasize the commandments against lying to the point of accusing someone of something that isn’t really an issue while missing the weightier applications of this that are often brushed under the rug. Even intentional misdirection (see Jesus on the *Road to Emmaus*, Luke 24:28) or downright dishonest answers (See the midwives in Exodus 2:17-21) are not considered the sin of lying. Why? Because they serve the purpose of edifying and in some cases, saving lives (the midwives of Exodus 2 served as an example to people during the holocaust who sheltered Jewish people and lied to the Nazi soldiers when asked). Frame’s definition of lying is a good one: “A word or act that intentionally deceives a neighbor in order to hurt him.”<sup>4</sup> Lying is bearing false witness for the purposes of injury or dishonest gain. There is an ill motive to it. Again, as is often the case (and as Jesus often points out), it’s a matter that begins in the heart.

## What About Now?

The main objective of the ninth commandment is to avoid any kind of behavior that would lead you to dishonestly bear witness towards your neighbor for the purpose of hurting them, and then strive in every way to uphold truth as a virtue worth preserving. You cannot love your neighbor as yourself and break this commandment, for it is the very opposite of love of neighbor.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:16. What does this commandment actually say?

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<sup>3</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 834-35.

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2. According to the notes, what kind of language does this commandment use?

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### Day Two

1. Read Luke 24:28. What did Jesus “act like” He was doing. Why is this not an example of lying?

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2. Read Exodus 2:17-21. What did the midwives do? Why is this not an example of lying?

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### Day Three

1. How does *speaking the truth unseasonably* break the ninth commandment?

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2. Lying is: “A word or act that intentionally deceives a neighbor in order to hurt him.” Do you agree or disagree with this definition? Why?

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### Day Four

1. When you are slandered, should you make a defense for yourself, according to the WLC?

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2. When someone else is slandered, should we allow for them to make a defense for themselves, according to the WLC?

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### Discuss the Text!

## Week 56 Discussion: Speaking the (Seasoned) Truth

One of the more interesting details about the ninth commandment in the Westminster Larger Catechism is the forbidding of “speaking the truth unseasonably.” The ninth commandment is, after all, all about preserving the truth. Why then does the WLC prohibit this? Because it’s not the right kind of preserving of truth. It’s preserving truth but with an ungodly spirit, which is in some sense, no longer the truth. Talk as a group about the importance of truth, and the equal importance of preserving it in with the fruit of the Spirit.

1. Icebreaker: When you speak the truth, are you more inclined “to just tell it like it is?” Or do you struggle to be straightforward?

2. Is “telling it like it is” always the best approach? Why or why not?
3. Read Galatians 5:22-23. Which of the fruit of the Spirit are often the first to go when speaking the truth to others?
4. Are you more inclined to speak truth harshly or not speak truth at all?
5. Would people describe you as a gentle and kind person, or the opposite?
6. Would people describe you as a person convicted by the truth, or the opposite?
7. Kid Talk (For Home): Talk to your children about the importance of speaking truth not only in love, but in the fruit of the Spirit. It might be “loving,” but is it “gentle or patient?”

## Takeaways:

1. The ninth commandment prohibits bearing false witness about your neighbor.
2. The immediate context is legal, but it extends beyond the legal realm to anything that is false and injurious towards others.
3. Lying is not merely untrue statements, but statements that are both untrue and meant to harm.