

Commandments 9: The Whole Truth

10/9/2022

Exodus 20:16

Exodus 23:1-9

Luke 23: 1-5, 13-25

When I was in elementary school, my mom had me get dropped off at a daycare center after school until she could pick me up. However, I was something of a loner, even then. I was picked on by some of the other kids and didn't really much like going there. So, finally, in the fifth grade, my mom and I talked and we set a date that I would never have to go back there again. As luck would have it, about a week or so before school would let out for Easter break, I got a slight fever. It was at that moment that I concocted a lie to get me essentially three weeks off. I would pretend to be sick for a week, have a week and a half off for Easter break, and the following week was Fifth Grade Camp. So, for a week, when my mom took my temperature and turned her back, I would take the thermometer out and breath on it as hard as I could. Sure enough, I "had a fever" for a week, had a week and a half off for Easter, and then went away for a week with all the fifth graders to Fifth Grade Camp. When it was all done, I didn't have to go back to the daycare center. So, a 3.5-week break plus getting my wish, I won on all counts, and I don't know if I've ever told my parents the truth, but I've no doubt they probably figured it out. However, despite this being a harmless white lie that my parents may or may not have let me get away with, it is a lie nonetheless, and one that is a clear violation of this commandment.

Now, today's commandment is traditionally quoted as simply "You shall not bear false witness." In other words, you shouldn't tell lies, which is good advice, despite the fact that it's not the full commandment. Often, when this commandment is quoted, the "against your neighbor" is left off for whatever reason. Regardless of that common omission, this is a commandment that, on the surface, seems to be specific to court cases. We shouldn't lie on the stand and commit perjury, whether it be to cause a guilty person to go free or to cause an innocent person to be falsely imprisoned. Along similar lines, we shouldn't slander our neighbor or spread rumors about them, nor should we make false reports. In short, we shouldn't tell lies, especially when it would damage our and/or our neighbor's reputation and image, and this is reflected in the reading from Exodus 23.

The reading from Exodus 23 takes this initial commandment a step further. It talks about not taking bribes or denying justice to those who are poor. However, what I want to draw your attention to is how, while these serve as great examples of what the Ninth Commandment talks about, it also reads almost like a laundry list of the offenses committed in the Passion Narrative. It speaks against not taking a bribe, and yet it was Judas's taking a bribe that led up to his betraying Jesus. It speaks of not spreading false reports, and yet the Sanhedrin spread false reports to both Pontius Pilate and Herod of Jesus trying to cause an uprising against them. Despite both Pilate and Herod finding Jesus innocent of any crime, the Sanhedrin perverted justice by allowing a known murderer to go free, putting an innocent man to death, and driving the crowd to call for Jesus' death. Those in the crowd are guilty of siding with the Sanhedrin and their deplorable false allegations. This doesn't even go into Peter denying knowing Jesus three times. Regardless of this fact, there is, arguably, blame to go around, but this also is not all this commandment speaks against.

When we think of lies, we think of bold-faced dishonesty, saying something that is 100% not true. However, what about those things that are partially true? This commandment gives

origin to a phrase we all know: “Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill.” As one of our confessions puts it, “aggravating smaller offenses” to where they are treated as these high crimes violate this commandment. At the same time, there are those false witnesses that conceal the truth, that censor it. In these cases, a lie is not being told, but the truth is not fully available either. As a result of the truth being censored and concealed, there is the potential for a mistruth to take its place, therein making it a violation of this commandment as well. And yet, this commandment goes deeper still.

As has been a running theme, this commandment also “policies” (for lack of a better verb) our thoughts. For example, prejudice in all its forms not only blinds us to the truth about a person or group of people, but it also potentially causes us to spread rumors, lies, and prejudice to others whereby they too are prejudicial against a person or people. At the same rate, it’s not just our thoughts of others that might violate this commandment but how we view ourselves. Tearing ourselves down and calling ourselves “less than dirt,” an offense I’ve committed innumerable times in my younger years, is just as much an offense as self-righteousness. In both cases, the truth about who we are to others and to God, what our value is to others and to God, is concealed in a lie.

So, what does this commandment call us to do instead? Simply put, this commandment calls us to fulfill the classic oath when we’re sworn in during a trial: To tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Granted, this isn’t always easy to do. If someone has put on a little weight or is drinking more, it may not be easy to call them out on it, but to say nothing would be to tell them “Everything is fine,” which is a lie. So, we must tell the truth in all cases, even if the truth hurts. Similarly, alongside telling the truth, we must also put an end to mistruths. Along with not being prejudicial, both towards ourselves and others, we must work towards putting an end to prejudice in all its forms. Not only must we not hide the truth, but we must uncover it when others are concealing it. This commandment is as much about being honest ourselves as it is holding each other accountable to being just as honest, to telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God. Granted, the truth is not always easy to say, nor is it always easy to hear, but as the old saying goes, “The truth shall set us free,” and what do you know? Jesus, who is “the way, the truth, and the life,” has set us free, and to that, let all people say, “Amen and amen.”