

Words to the Wise: A Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments VII. Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire

Exodus 20:16 The Message No lies about your neighbor.
Common English Bible Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

Ephesians 4:29-32 adapted from The Message Watch your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift. Don't grieve God. Don't break God's heart. God's Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life. That Spirit molds and shapes you, making you fit for God. Don't take such a gift for granted. Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ has forgiven you.

As I was researching and working on this sermon, I came across a handy website that purported to collect many of what it called “famous American fibs.”¹ I’ll bet you recognize some of these:

- The check is in the mail.
- One size fits all.
- Your luggage isn’t lost, it’s only misplaced.
- “In order to better serve you...”
- This hurts me more than it hurts you.
- You may feel some mild discomfort.
- It’s not the money, it’s the principle.

And, of course, the number one fib that so many of us enjoy when making calls to the cable company or cell phone service or bank:

- Your call is important to us.

This list makes us smile – or maybe wince – as we recognize the truth of some of life’s minor annoyances and frustrations that aren’t acknowledged honestly but are instead covered up and “spun” with positive-sounding language.

¹<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-ninth-commandment-jeffery-anselmi-sermon-on-commandments-testimony-56601.asp>

But sometimes the fibs and outright lies that permeate our culture are much more insidious, aren't they? We have just come through another election season and while it continues to be – in the context of world history – an amazing and wonderful thing that we can peaceably elect those who will govern, it is also increasingly the case that the prevarications and posturings, the half-truths and outright lies that such campaigns are steeped in is a disheartening thing. According to one source, more than 50% of all political advertisements in this election season were “negative,” meaning they focused solely on the purported bad traits of an opponent.² And this happens because, another study in The Scientific American suggests, you and I remember negative ads more than we do positive ones.³ Now, that is indeed a disturbing and disheartening fact, although not a surprising one: we do sometimes tend to recall the worst about people, something about them that may in fact be a complete aberration, instead of the much longer list of good things that they are and have done. But the real problem in our civic life, it seems to me, is when negative advertising turns into outright lies. USA Today recently published a very long list of complete falsehoods that candidates told about their opponents.⁴ And no party has a monopoly on these; lies were told by candidates of both major political parties and, it seems, at about the same rate.

What I find ironic, though, is that it is often those, on both sides of the political aisle, who purport to champion the values inherent in the Ten Commandments and yet who so very blatantly and blithely ignore the Ninth Commandment: “No lies about your neighbor.” Now, why these reflection on the political process? Because it affects us,

²<http://www.nationaljournal.com/politics/believe-it-or-not-2014-s-political-ads-have-been-more-negative-than-ever-20140917>

³<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-negative-political-ads-work/>

⁴<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2014/10/30/fact-check-2014-campaign-whoppers/18081211/>

you and me. You and I cannot be immersed in a culture that seems to value lying and not find ourselves just a wee bit more likely to lie about our neighbors or ourselves. We cannot be a part of a political process that more and more gets its energy from demonizing people and not find ourselves a little more easily willing to demonize and dehumanize the stranger, the immigrant, those who don't share your political views, those who are "different" in some way. As one preacher puts it, *"We live in an age of spin. The wages of spin is desensitivity to the destructiveness of the lie. That affects relationships with people around us..."* And how different that is, he continues, from what the Ninth Commandment expects of us: *"In the ninth commandment, God commands us to love the truth, to speak and confess it honestly and do whatever we can to defend and promote our neighbour's honour and reputation."*⁵

"...do whatever we can to defend and promote our neighbour's honour and reputation." I want you to try to imagine, just for a second, that in the election season just past and in the election season soon to come that, say, Doug Lamborn took it as his first imperative to promote and defend the honor and reputation of Barack Obama, or that Harry Reid took as his most important principle to promote and defend the honor and reputation of Mitch McConnell. It wouldn't mean that they wouldn't contend mightily over some very real differences, but it would mean that political life and advertising would be marked by respect and truth-telling. Can't imagine it? Neither can I. But that in itself tells us something, doesn't it? It tells us that as individuals we are in danger, too, of treating the ninth commandment as optional, of letting the Bible's imperative of truth-telling and its insistence that we respect and honor those who share this world with us be something that we think of as optional. But it's not, it's not. The Apostle Paul was not writing directly about the ninth commandment when he wrote to the Ephesian church, a church that was oh-so-in-need of reconciliation among its various

⁵<http://theseed.info/sermon.php?id=579>

factions, but he could have been. Did you hear his words as so aptly translated by Eugene Petersen, a passage that my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, reminded me of? *“Watch your mouth. Say only what helps... [God’s] Spirit molds and shapes you, making you fit for God.... Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive.”*

My friends, the ninth commandment is both an imperative **for** us and a question **to** us: It tells us that our words are indeed gifts and that it is imperative that we seek to use them well and honorably, to build up and not to tear down; and it is the question **to** us to always ask ourselves what, indeed, will make us, in Paul’s phrase, “more fit for God.” In it’s original setting, the Ninth Commandment was addressed to the small and struggling band of Jewish folks who had fled Egypt and were now trying to figure out how to live in a community where all of a sudden there were no more harsh rulers and they had to figure out what sorts of laws and rules and behaviors would give the community the best chance of thriving. The Ninth Commandment specifically addresses the situation where two folks are in a court of law with an issue between them. But the setting for this court is so different from our setting: there it was simply the two folks who had a dispute plus a judge. No lawyers, no spectators, no one Tweeting and Facebooking and live-blogging every word. In other words, the Ninth Commandment is saying even when it’s just you and a judge and the person you have an issue with, don’t lie. For even if you can get away with that lie it will not build up the community; moreover, it will cheapen and coarsen **you** and it will dishonor God.

How much more true that is today when it seems there are in fact no private moments left anymore. A lie that is spoken can take to the wings of the internet and the cable channels and even if viciously false can never be un-done. And there is no way to get it back.

It’s the modern-day version of the famous Hassidic tale of a student who spreads

hateful gossip about one of his teachers. The student begins to feel guilty about this, and goes to the teacher to confess and ask for forgiveness. The teacher says to the student that if he wants to make amends, he should take some pillows, cut them open, and disperse the feathers to the winds. The student does this. But when he reports back to the teacher, he's told to now go outside and gather up all the feathers he'd scattered." But that's impossible," says the student; "they've all blown in every direction!" "Exactly" replies the teacher; "the same is true with words, and the damage they can cause when used hurtfully."⁶

That tale is oh-so-much-more true in an era in which social media can in literally seconds spread a lie in ways that we can't begin to imagine. And correcting such lies is indeed like gathering feathers. How many of you occasionally get emails about this or that politician doing something or this or that company secretly supporting satanism and no matter how well-debunked such lies have been, maybe years earlier, they live on forever and ever on the internet where there is always someone, it seems, willing to resurrect such things and spread them like far-flung feathers again and again and again.

Let's see if we can sum up and bring this sermon to a close. In the words of one preacher, "the ninth commandment is simply this: we are never to speak words that will attack and hurt those whom God has placed in our lives."⁷ Now, that is much easier said than done, isn't it, and thank goodness we serve a God of grace who forgives us our trespasses. But God's forgiveness of those times we have borne "false witness" against people, those times we passed along something without checking on whether it's true or not, those times we have believed the worst about someone in public life rather than the best is always predicated on the hope and expectation that we will try to

⁶<http://www.emersonuuc.org/worship/sermons/The%20Commandment%20Series.pdf>

⁷<http://theseed.info/sermon.php?id=579>

do better next time. And in the hopes that you and I will indeed try to do better next time than we did the last, let me close with two concrete steps that you and I can take that can help us avoid violating this oh-so-important commandment. The first is this. The famously flamboyant English playwright Oscar Wilde is reputed to have once said *“If you can’t say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me.”*⁸ But as Christians our tack ought to be just the opposite. The first step in avoiding violating this commandment and causing hurt where it didn’t need to be, in the words of one preacher, is this:

First, we can cut gossips off. When someone is going to tell you a juicy tidbit – “Did you hear what happened with so-and-so...?” – just say, “You know what? I don’t want to hear about that. I’m just not interested.”⁹

I guarantee that if you and I follow this sometimes difficult step the world will be a better place and we will feel better about ourselves because we will have done the right thing.

And the second step to avoiding violating this commandment is similar and it actually comes in three parts and I’ve mentioned it better. Whenever you find yourself in possession of something “juicy” about someone else and just can’t wait to spread it, ask yourself three questions: *Is it true, is it necessary, is it helpful?* You see, even if something is true, it may well not be necessary or certainly not helpful to the community to share it. And how much more that is the case if in fact it turns out that what you had to share was not in fact true!

My friends, the bottom line regarding the ninth commandment is this, in the eloquent words of a preacher named Wes Bredenhof is this: The ninth commandment is one of those ways that we are commanded to love our neighbor, and

Love also needs to compel us when we [are tempted to] gossip – destructive

⁸<http://www.haslettcommunitychurch.org/sermons/ser18MR12.pdf>

⁹<http://theseed.info/sermon.php?id=579>

communication about others. Again, whether it's true or not doesn't matter. If it's hurtful talk, it's gossip. [God's] Word clearly instructs us to put it off – it doesn't fit with a Christian life, it doesn't belong in the life of someone who is united to Christ.¹⁰

And what **does** belong to the life of those who are united in Christ? Just what the Apostle Paul said: God's *"Spirit molds and shapes [us]... Don't take such a gift for granted. Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another.... Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ has forgiven you."*

May it be so, may it be so. Amen.

¹⁰<http://theseed.info/sermon.php?id=579>