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THE NINTH COMMANDMENT: TRUTH MATTERS

SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE

Perhaps no commandment has been so ignored, neglected and trampled upon as the ninth commandment:

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16 NASB)

Observing the pain and sorrow of our world, no weapon has brought about as much human havoc as a tongue given over to falsehood. As James says, “the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire...and is set on fire by hell” (Jas 3:5-6). We need not look very far back in history to see that fifty million lives burned in the hellish fires ignited by the inflammatory speech of just two men, Hitler and Stalin. By contrast, there is no greater force for good than courageously bearing witness to the truth. Truth matters! Today we will discover just how important truth telling is for God’s covenant people.

I. The Original Context of the Commandment: The Courtroom

In its original context, the command “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” was designed to safeguard the integrity of Israel’s courts. Without a dependable judicial system that upholds the truth at all costs, no community can remain healthy and free. It is inevitable that evil in all its seductive forms will infect various levels of society, but when the poor and helpless lose their last line of defense in the courts, the moral fabric of a society collapses. Thus, the integrity of Israel’s legal system was held up as important as “the sanctity of human life, the mystery of sexuality, and the maintenance of property.”¹

In Israel’s socio-structure, the legal process was carried out not by professional attorneys and judges but by family members. Under the leadership of the clan head they served as plaintiffs and witnesses, while the elders of the city presided as judge and jury. There was nothing impersonal about these kinds of legal disputes, thus the ability to remain objective and impartial must have been extremely difficult. The temptation to slant the truth in favor of a family member must have been great; therefore extreme care was to be given to the selection of leaders. As future judges, they would be called to maintain strict impartiality and remain immune to bribes from the rich and to partisanship of every kind (Exod 18:21).

Lacking our modern technology of forensic science, DNA testing, etc., in Israel, everything depended on the faithfulness and reliability of eyewitnesses. Their role was heightened even further because the death penalty was enjoined for several crimes; thus what a witness said could be a matter of life or death. In cases involving capital punishment, to protect the innocent the law demanded not one, but two or three witnesses to confirm the matter (Deut 17:6; 19:15; Num 35:30), and further, “that the witnesses had to take the lead in the execution of the convicted person (Deut 17:7).”² As a deterrent

against giving false testimony, a witness who committed perjury was himself subject to stoning:

The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. (Deut 19:18-19)

The term “neighbor” is key to the commandment. Every Israelite who entered into a court of law was to view his or her opponent as a covenant member of the family of God. At that moment the good of the community overrode personal loyalty to one’s family. Compromising community justice for the sake of family was considered criminal by God. As Brueggemann explains,

The commandment insists that courts must resist every distortion of reality, every collusion with vested interest (cf. 18:21; Pss 15:2; 24:4), which makes such truth telling prerequisite to worship. More broadly construed, the commandment enjoins members of the covenant community not to distort reality to each other. The major pertinence of the prohibition in our society is the collapse of truth into propaganda in the service of ideology. That is, public versions of truth are not committed to a portrayal of reality, but to a rendering that serves a partisan interest.³

The most pertinent application for believers in Silicon Valley would be for believers to insist on the maintenance of absolute truth in the marketplace. We should not give in to the company bias to present a positive spin about a product to acquire greater sales in the short run. Do you who market their products give the true picture to customers, with accurate timelines for development, product testing, elimination of bugs, etc., or do you promote the company bias and slant the truth to put forth your product in the best light? God wants us as his representatives to be up front with the absolute truth.

But what happens when the system fails? 1 Kings 21 presents a gruesome look at the terrible consequences resulting when compromise corrupts an entire administration. King Ahab and Jezebel were idol worshippers of the worst sort. Driven by greed, they would stop at nothing to seize Naboth’s vineyard. Naboth refused Ahab’s financial offer to sell his land not because the amount was unfair, but because he knew the land did not belong to him but to the Lord, and that it would be wrong to sell his family’s permanent inheritance in the Promised Land. Ahab was devastated and vexed following Naboth’s refusal. In response, Queen Jezebel took complete control. She forged Ahab’s name to royal documents and ordered the elders of his city to convene a kangaroo court for the sole purpose of killing Naboth. The elders were ordered to proclaim a fast in the city to give the appearance of sanctified piety, as if they were seeking God’s mind in the midst of a crisis. They were to seat Naboth at the head of the assembly to elevate his status as one capable of affecting a whole community. They then were to bribe false witnesses who would testify that they heard Naboth vehemently fixing the blame on God and the king by his curses. Cursing the king, who was considered God’s rep-

representative on earth, was considered high treason. Like blasphemy, it could be punished by death (Exod 22:28; Job 2:9).

In the end, the elders had no trouble finding more than one worthless man in their city, people who were willing not only to compromise their own integrity but sacrifice the life of an innocent man for money. With no fear of God before their eyes they swore that Naboth had committed not one but two crimes worthy of death. By their testimony Naboth was executed by stoning. When the deed was done, Naboth's vineyard was swiftly deposited into royal hands. Ahab and Jezebel rested well, knowing they could count on corporate solidarity, ensuring that all lips were sealed. There would be no leak to the press. Reading the story we are gripped by the evil power of the slanderous tongue:

**A rascally (“worthless”) witness makes a mockery of justice,
And the mouth of the wicked spreads iniquity. (Prov 19:28)**

All that was needed was just *one* elder in that city to stand up and speak the truth and Naboth's life would have been saved. Solomon exhorts the righteous to not be silent:

**A truthful witness saves lives,
But he who utters lies is treacherous. (Prov 14:25)**

The painful pleas are voiced with even more passion as we learn that the Lord holds accountable all who have any knowledge of the facts if they keep silent:

**Deliver those who are being taken away to death,
And those who are staggering to slaughter, Oh hold them back.
If you say, “See, we did not know this,”
Does He not consider it who weighs the hearts?
And does He not know it who keeps your soul?
And will He not render to man according to his work?
(Prov 24:11-12)**

Unfortunately for Naboth, these proverbial pleas fell on deaf ears. Not one righteous man or woman had the courage to stand up and testify to the truth. But even when there is no human witness to the truth and worldly courts collapse under the weight of compromise, fear or greed, God still stands behind his commandment and punishes perjurers. As the proverbs attest:

**A false witness will not go unpunished,
And he who tells lies will not escape. (Prov 19:5)**

**A false witness will not go unpunished,
And he who tells lies will perish. (Prov 19:9)**

In Naboth's case, when the courts failed miserably, God had his prophet who never compromised the truth. Elijah was sent to Ahab with these words, “The dogs shall devour Jezebel in the field of Jezreel. All of Ahab's line who die in the town shall be devoured by dogs, and all who die in the open country shall be devoured by the birds of the sky” (1 Kgs 21:23-24 JPS). The commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” stands as inviolable.

II. The Broader Context of the Commandment: Protecting Reputations

When the Ten Commandments are repeated in Deuteronomy, the scope of the ninth commandment is expanded from giving a “false” witness to a “vain” (*shave*) witness (Deut 5:20). This would include any evasive or worthless testimony, and also slanderous remarks that might damage a person's reputation in any public sphere. This slight change may also serve to link it to the third commandment, which

uses the same term to protect the sanctity of God's name. In this way God's covenant people were to view the reputation of their neighbor, who was made in God's image, with the same sanctity with which they revered God's name. Seldom do we comprehend how precious our reputation is until it is taken away from us. As the English poet and dramatist John Gay confesses, few things rouse our anger like one who defames us:

*I hate the man who builds his name
On ruins of another's fame.*

Or, as Iago says in Shakespeare's *Othello*:

*Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.*

Bruce Waltke explains, “One of the most fragile aspects of a person's life requiring protection is his or her reputation, yet it is also the aspect most at risk by the abuse of others.”⁴ Slander is an extremely powerful tool in the hands of an enemy. We can't arm ourselves against it, and others are eager to listen to it and even quicker to believe it and pass it on. As someone has well observed, “If slander be a snake, it is a winged one—it flies as well as creeps.”⁵ The sage captures it well:

**The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels,
And they go down into the innermost parts of the body. (Prov 26:22)**

Who among us can resist the sweet delicacy of gossip? Waltke comments: “The image signifies that the slanderer's audience greedily swallow his inflammatory speech, and the addition, *they descend into one's innermost being*, indicates that, having delighted in them, they make a deep impact on their lives, whether they know it or not. The words now in their hearts will inevitably be on their lips.”⁶ Yet, however sweet the taste to those who consume and spread it, for the victim it reeks of bitterness. In the Psalms we can feel the searing sorrow of Saul's slander relentlessly pushing David to the brink of despair. Its poison-tipped arrows are more lethal than the king's sword:

**Do not deliver me over to the desire of my adversaries,
For false witnesses have risen against me,
And such as breathe out violence.
I would have despaired unless I had believed
that I would see the goodness of the LORD
In the land of the living. (Ps 27:12-13)**

A painful irony in this country is that we are quick to elevate our heroes on pedestals, with little or no character investigation, but once elevated by fame, we are quicker still to destroy them with character assassination. In “the land of the free” you can go from the cover of *Time* to the front page of the tabloids in no time. If you are famous and charged with a crime, the whole country will try your case via the news media before you ever have your day in court. Slander is imbedded in the very fabric of our society. In the name of our first amendment we glibly overrule God's ninth commandment, as Waltke testifies:

Politicians seek to destroy one another in negative campaigning; gossip columnists feed off calumny; and in Christian living

rooms reputations are tarnished or destroyed over cups of coffee served in fine china with biscuits. These de facto courtrooms are conducted without due process of Torah; accusations are made, hearsay allowed, slander, perjury, and libelous comments uttered without objection. No evidence, no defense. Personally, I refuse to participate in or tolerate any conversation in which a person is being defamed or accused without the person being there to defend himself. It is wrong to pass along hearsay in any form, as prayer requests or pastoral concerns. More than merely not participating, it is up to Christians to stop rumors and gossips in their tracks.⁷

Such advice would have been life saving for two women in our church who recently came under vicious attacks of slander. This has caused one deep emotional wounds and the loss of several family relationships from those who believed the lies of a false witness. She was condemned as guilty before she could even give voice to her innocence. Slander quickly tarnished another woman's reputation as a teacher among many parents and threatened her job. Fortunately for her, an investigation is beginning to reveal the malice and lies of the obsessive ringleader of these evil rumors.

Paul keenly knew that Christian leaders who had dedicated their lives to God's word and to shepherding his people would come under severe attack from slander, so he carefully charges Timothy with instructions identical to Israel's law: "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses" (1 Tim 5:19). Once elders have been given the honor of serving in the church they are to be protected. Many a church has lost a capable leader because of the character assassination of a few disgruntled sheep. The church is to be a safe place where reputations are considered sacred. But, on the other hand, elders are not exempt from sin. If the evidence is weighty, they are to be subject to discipline without partiality, like everyone else:

Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. (1 Tim 5:20-21)

In this manner Paul publicly rebuked the apostle Peter for his hypocrisy which was compromising the community in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14).

Having looked at the original context and broader application of the commandment, it would be helpful now to see how the Scriptures exhort us to deal with slander, first in terms of giving it, and second in terms of receiving it. For the first we will look at several Proverbs; for the second, we will examine the implications of the life and work of Jesus on the ninth commandment.

III. Silencing Slander

Perhaps because of the ease with which we are prone to slander, the book of Proverbs is replete with sayings regarding our speech. A small sampling gives several clues on how to tackle this tendency to slander, which lies just below the surface in all of us:

**A man's discretion makes him slow to anger,
And it is his glory to overlook a transgression. (19:11)**

**He who conceals a transgression seeks love,
But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends. (17:9)**

Hatred stirs up strife,

But love covers all transgressions. (10:12)

**For lack of wood the fire goes out,
And where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down.
(26:20)**

First and foremost, we are exhorted to examine and deal with the source of our hurt before it gives rise to anger (19:11). Anger left unchecked will only add fuel for contention, strife, and worst of all, retaliation. Fighting fire with fire only creates more fire. When parties retaliate in kind, old wounds are reawakened with such force that once-intimate communities become fractured and decimated. Before responding relationally to those who hurt you, you must first deal with your anger.

Secondly, wise people know that like any fire, contention will eventually die down without fuel. But if someone persists in fueling the flame with inflammatory remarks, it may be necessary to remove that person from the community to preserve the health of the group (26:20). For as Peterson remarks, "Language is the community's life-blood; if the circulatory system is diseased the community gets sick, sick from lies and gossip alike."⁸

Thirdly, the ultimate antidote to slander is not merely silence, but love. When you have been deeply hurt by someone you are in a position of strength to do great harm to their reputation by exposing their ugly deeds. Rather than confronting the wrongdoer with truth, we expose our pain to our man-made circles of comfort, those whom we know will empathize with us and lick our wounds. This is a far easier way to deal with pain than confronting the wrongdoer with truth and love, but it lacks courage. The wisdom of Proverbs offers a radically different course. "By contrast, love cherishes the wrongdoer as a friend to be won, not as an enemy with whom to get even."⁹ Governed by love for our "neighbor," we "draw a veil" (10:12) over the person's transgressions so that, rather than exposing their faults, we publicly portray them in the best light. Waltke notes that in Proverbs 19:11 "*To pass over* [lit. 'to pass along by,' a figure meaning 'to forgive'] *transgression* causes people to delight and rejoice in him and wins him more fame, honor, praise, and distinction than a warrior."¹⁰ This is humanity at its glorious best (19:11).

A graphic example of such love is given by Noah's two sons, Shem and Japheth. After the flood, Noah planted a vineyard, and one night got drunk and lay vulnerably exposed in his tent while he slept. With an unspeakable act, Ham used the opportunity to expose his father's weakness. Exactly what Ham did we are not told; we are not meant to know. Some things are best left unseen and unstated. When Ham urged Shem and Japheth to enter into such folly, they responded quite differently:

But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it upon both their shoulders and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were turned away, so that they did not see their father's nakedness. (Gen 9:23)

Out of holy respect for their father they covered his nakedness, and discreetly and honorably walked backwards lest they see something they were not intended to witness. Their sacred silence and discreet behavior was their answer to Ham's wicked exploitation. It serves as a model for the kind of action we should employ to care for each other's reputations.

One of the most glorious things about David's life is that no slanderous word was ever found on his tongue toward his lifelong enemy Saul. After years of forced exile in the desert, David's enemies

were finally silenced in Saul's death. At the funeral, David could have taken the opportunity to vilify his chief opponent, but instead chose to extract the one quality of Saul's life that made him great and used that to honor him:

**“Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life,
And in their death they were not parted;
They were swifter than eagles,
They were stronger than lions.”** (2 Sam 1:23)

If we ask why we should take such extreme care to preserve each other's reputations in the covenant community, the answer is, because God cares. As Durham affirms, “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* witness to the world.”¹¹ How we witness about one another affects our ultimate witness to the world. Thus like Noah's sons we should be chaste in all our speech about each other and be eager to present one another only in the best light before a watching world. We should never leave home without packing a protective “blanket” so that we will be adequately armed when we enter into our weekly conversations at work and school to cover up anything that not does not build up another's reputation (Eph 4:29-32).

IV. Jesus and the Great Accuser

Before leaving our topic it would be helpful to know what developments Jesus has secured for us in regard to the ninth commandment. Perhaps the best news comes from a vision in the book of Revelation which we looked at this summer:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night.” (Rev 12:10).

As Bernard Bell has taught us,

Satan's name means “accuser.” In the Old Testament he had access to God's court, where he brought accusation against God and his people. These accusations had merit, and God permitted them to be made...But the time for such accusations is over. The accuser has been thrown out of heaven. Why? Because at God's right hand he has now installed an advocate for us, even the Lord Jesus Christ...As Paul told the Romans, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Rom 8:1, 33-34).¹²

Since Satan no longer can accuse us in heaven we ought to rejoice, knowing that no slander, or legitimate accusation for that matter, that is used against us on earth will be heard in heaven. The first saint who put this truth to the test was Stephen. After he testified to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Synagogue of the Freedmen, no one was able to cope with his wisdom and the power of the Spirit within him. In response, several false witnesses were put forward, uttering charges similar to the ones leveled against Naboth in Ahab's day: “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God” (Acts 6:11). In a kangaroo court he was tried as

a blasphemer against Moses, the temple, and God's law. Responding, Stephen gave a brilliant defense before the council, convicting the authorities for their sin before the heavenly court. The enraged authorities gnashed their teeth in furious frustration. At that very moment, Stephen caught a vision of the heavenly throne room:

But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:55-56)

While Satan's accusers exercised their power on earth, Stephen saw his advocate in heaven. At this point the crowd was so infuriated they dragged him out of the city and the witnesses took the lead in stoning him to death. We are left to wonder how did God uphold the ninth commandment? Didn't sinister slander reign supreme, snuffing out the life of a beloved saint? How was Stephen vindicated?

The answer is found in Stephen's last words, which are reminiscent of Jesus' words on the cross: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” God in heaven heard the request of his servant and took his words seriously. God did forgive their sin, and we know that one of the chief sinners there was Saul, later to become the apostle Paul. Not only did Paul multiply Stephen's ministry beyond belief by planting numerous churches and penning most of the New Testament epistles, it was he who enlisted Dr. Luke in the service of the kingdom. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, documented Stephen's account, vindicating his integrity of character and innocence. The slanderous charges of blasphemy have forever been overruled not only in heaven, but also on earth.

Because of the work of Christ who took away the fear of death by his work on the cross, we have nothing to fear on earth. The ninth commandment remains holy and inviolable. The only question remaining is: Will our speech on earth serve the purposes of heaven, or will it be used in the service of hell?

“These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates.” (Zech 8:16)

1. Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:848.
2. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 2000), 3:65.
3. Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 851-852.
4. Bruce K. Waltke, “Gift of the Old Covenant,” *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).
5. Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857), London journalist and playwright.
6. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* (2 vols.; NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 2:361.
7. Waltke, “Gift of the Old Covenant.”
8. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 258.
9. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:461.
10. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:105.
11. John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 297.
12. Bernard Bell, “The War of the Worlds” (sermon preached at PBCC, July 24, 2005). Online: <http://www.pbcc.org/sermons/bell/1520.html>.

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