
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: TEN COMMANDMENTS

LECTURE 16: THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

TEN COMMANDMENTS

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Lecture 16

THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

Witness bearing is a huge responsibility. It can make the difference of a life or death. It has saved nations from destruction and individuals from unjust sentences. It may prevent accidents and clear up crimes. But It may also lead people astray from the right path, and even from God. Therefore, God directs us to watch how we bear witness or share information. To limit the 9th commandment only to telling lies in court settings is therefore shallow. The 9th deals with something we do daily, namely, how we use our tongue! Words are vehicles, not only of thoughts, ideas or truths, but mostly of love.

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 16

Welcome, dear friends, in the lecture on the ninth commandment: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” And together, I want to consider this subject under the title, *Wholesome and Healing Communication*. As you will see, the ninth commandment is not only about lies and dishonesty. It’s about our words, how we communicate. Before we look at that in detail, let’s consider the ninth principle, and that reads that sin is never a single sin, but one sin always leads to and entwines itself with other transgressions of other commandments.

And the best way is to illustrate that with David’s case, David’s sin with Bathsheba. First, when he sees Bathsheba, he lusted in his heart. He coveted his neighbor’s wife, the tenth. At the same time, undoubtedly, he’s committing adultery in his heart, so it intertwines with the seventh. Next, he abuses his royal power [when] he commands her to be brought into the palace. That’s the fifth commandment issue. And upon the act of adultery, the seventh commandment, he added lies to cover up his tracks, deceit. When all that fails, he resorts to breaking the sixth commandment and added murder. And he kept on covering up his foul deeds for some time, which is again the ninth commandment.

You see, all the commandments of the second table are intertwined with one commandment. One sin that he did [initiated other sins]. Yet, when David reflects in his confession in Psalm 51 he says, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned.” For him, principally, the guilt was against the first table of the law. So, he felt indeed that that sin also intertwined with the first table of God’s commandments, particularly the third. He had taken the name of God in vain, acted in a horrible manner as a representative of the name of God. And therefore, he prays in Psalm 51, “Build thou up the walls of Jerusalem.” He broke them worse than the enemies ever could, [but] that’s not where the trail of sin stops.

David’s sin also includes Bathsheba’s sin. It includes Joab’s sin as he committed murder by following the directions of David in his treacherous plot to kill Uriah. It leads to his own children’s sins as Absalom and later on also Amnon fall into grievous sins [likely] inspired by David’s terrible example. So, the principal: one sin often intertwines or leads to other sins. It makes the apostle James make this positive direction in the last verse of his

book when he writes, “Let him know, that he which converteth a sinner from the error of his way,” *the* error of his way, “shall save his soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.” One error leads to a multitude, so let that be an incentive for us to do all we can to seek to reach our neighbors who are going into [an] error, a sin, so that it doesn’t become more sins in him or others around him.

That leads us then to the ninth commandment in this day: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” Let’s consider the ninth by thinking through the following questions. First, how does God value communication? Secondly, how are we to express our love in the way that we communicate? And third, what are His directions to safeguard our neighbor’s well-being through our communications?

How does God value communication? And before I look at that, let’s for a moment think about the ninth. It appears to speak only about lying: “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” That’s one layer. By now, we should have gotten used to understanding that there are many layers in these commandments. When God says, “Thou shalt not take my name in vain, use it in a frivolous and irreverent [way],” that is the lowest way of the abuse of the name, but that didn’t exclude the cursing or the blaspheming. And so, it is also with the ninth. Though it mentions one layer, and perhaps one of the most important layers, it doesn’t exclude the rest of the way we use our words, or rather, the way we communicate.

Now, communication is important to God. Notice what Jesus said in Matthew 12:36, “But I say unto you, That every idle word men shall speak, they shall give an account of that in the day of judgment,” every idle word. Communication matters to God. And therefore, indeed in the Scriptures, the tongue and the mouth have a major attention in the teachings of God to us. One of the verses you will hear coming back in this lecture is the one from Ephesians 4:29, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” That ties in with a verse from Proverbs, which compares our tongue, a wholesome tongue, to a tree of life, whereas a perverse tongue causes a breach in the spirit of a person (Proverbs 15:4).

Now, God values communication for three reasons. And, the first is that communication and our ability to speak is part of the image of God in us. He created us with the ability to put our thoughts and our ideas into words. Look at the first book of the Bible, in Genesis 1, notice that God begins the Scriptures with ‘And God spoke.’ Words, words that created, words that communicated life and beauty and order and harmony in a chaotic and void world. Now, that use of the words that God there shows is a model for us. We’re not to use words as weapons to fight and to tear down and to destroy. We are to use our words as vehicles to minister grace to the people that hear us, that we speak to. That’s the subject that we are dealing with in the ninth commandment.

The second reason that God values communication, friends, is because God knows that words spoken hurt more than stones and sticks. Words can be daggers. Words shred people in their inner being. And even if those nasty words, untrue words are recalled and confessed as wrong, they don’t remove the scar. And therefore, God shows a tender concern in this ninth commandment that we would use the gift of communication not in the way that the devil uses it, to destroy and to hurt, but to use it as He uses it, as a tree of life to bring grace and healing, joy and satisfaction. ‘Words [fitly spoken],’ Solomon says, “are like apples of silver in pictures of gold’ (Proverbs 25:11), what a beautiful imagery. And so, we are to use the gift of communication.

The third reason why God values communication [is that] He knows how important it is in our relationships with one another. Deep joy, close intimate relationships can only be established through the gift of communication. When I place my thoughts into words [and] share those with someone else, we bind relationships into a greater intimacy and a greater beauty and a greater depth. We are distinguished from animals. They also communicate, but they bark, or they shriek, or they sing. They don’t share their ideas. They don’t share their thoughts, the hidden things, with each other. They don’t create beautiful poetry or beautiful letters in which we speak to someone else to minister into the deepest levels of their life.

And, the bonds of the relationship become only closer and closer, the more that we discover and share with each other in and through the gift of communication. The fruit of that is harmony, is the beauty of love and the beauty of trust. And again and again, we are to remember that that is the intention of every one of God’s commandments, to bring to us the happiness that flows out of being devoted in a holy, pure love to one another. So therefore again, the ninth commandment, friends, is not only about lying. It is about God’s direction, how to use our words as His gift to maintain and to deepen and enrich our relationship with each other.

And again, I may borrow the words of the Heidelberg Catechism. They add to the exposition on this ninth this comment, that we use our communication to “defend and to promote, as much as I am able, the honor and the good character of my neighbor.” That is the commanding part of the ninth commandment, and what a beautiful example we have of that in the Persons of the holy Trinity. The way They speak about Each Other, honor Each Other, also in the revelation of the Scripture, is beautiful. They never slander. They never rumor. They never say bad things about Each Other, but They exalt, communicate love, deepen, as it were, through Their communication the beauty of the relationship. Although, I realize that doesn’t deepen at all in a perfect God.

Now then, how are we to express our love in communication according to the ninth commandment? First, of course, I am not to tell an untruth about our neighbor means we are to tell the truth, bear a true witness about our neighbor in a court session. That’s very important to God. God demands the death of a false witness in a court session because He knows what damage it does when I bring a false witness. It could mean someone else’s death, or it could mean his life. It could be his freedom, or it could be his imprisonment. So, we are to speak the truth. Also, when we’re not asked, and we know the truth, we have a responsibility to bear witness of the truth. Well, isn’t that what is included in the sum of the commandments as Jesus says, “Therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. For, this is the law and the prophets.” When accusations against you are leveled, and someone knows the truth, you would appreciate if he or she would come forward and bear witness to the truth in that situation.

To bear witness or no false witness, also means I am to tell the truth in all non-court sessions. Our Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount that our *yes* be *yes* and our *no* be *no*. We are to be countercultural. Lying is so common in our culture, wherever we are or live, but how often we are not guilty of it too. We make a promise and then don’t keep it, never maybe even intended to keep it. That’s a lie. When we twist the facts to make the story prettier, that’s a lie. When we exaggerate just to impress someone else or to get our way, that’s a lie. We are to strive to speak the truth, to love the truth, but also to deal in truth with one another.

In the context of Ephesians 4, the chapter on communication, Paul writes to the congregation of Ephesus, “Wherefore put away lying. Speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members of one another” (verse 25). Now, the apostle’s referring there about struggles and stresses and strains that are happening within this congregation, and he instructs them to put away lying in the sense of, ‘Brethren, don’t keep these things covered. Don’t ignore these sin issues. Deal with those things that are destroying your relationship, that are dividing you. Deal with them. Speak the truth in love. Don’t sweep it under the carpet. Don’t ignore it, but speak the truth in love and so build the relationships with each other.’ And therefore, the ninth is not just not to tell a lie.

The ninth also means that I have to do the opposite, to promote the advantage and the good reputation and the character of my neighbor. Oh, lying is the devil’s business. It casts a shadow over a character. It may destroy or wound my reputation and may end beautiful relationships of friends, of spouses, of a minister in the congregation, of a leader and his subjects. So again, friends, let’s go back to Ephesians 4:29. God calls us not to let corrupt communication proceed out of our mouth but that which is good to the use of edifying that it may minister grace to the hearers. Now, when we examine this, and let us do that closely, how our words are used, are they corrupting the feelings of someone else? Are they stirring up anger? Are they hurting hearts? Are they dividing friends? Are they defaming a character? Are they straining relationships? Or, am I ministering grace, unity, closeness, honor, respect, nourishment to those who hear me. All that is the intent of the communication that God calls us to use.

So then now, let us conclude with the third. What does God then teach us how to safeguard our neighbor by the way we communicate? Well, let’s turn away from Satan’s example of communication. This father of lies, as Jesus called him (John 8:44), began all the trouble on this earth with lies, but notice in Genesis 3 not outright, straightforward lies. He’s devious in the way that he twisted the truth. And so, when we are to safeguard the well-being of our neighbor and honor the ninth commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” let us then indeed consider some details of how we do [that].

We are not to twist the truth. The truth can be twisted in such a way that I am promoting deceit. Satan did that very cleverly when he approached Eve. He made God look evil. He made God look [like He was] withholding instead of giving. Just listen to how he put these words to Eve when he approached her and said, ‘Yea, did God

say you cannot eat of every tree of the garden?’ But that’s not what God said. God said, ‘You can eat of every tree of the garden, except this one.’

God’s revelation is generous. ‘You can eat as much and as often as you want from all these trees I have made. Except, there’s one I don’t want you to eat from.’ Satan just twisted that, didn’t he, twisting the truth and making it feel like God is restricting you: ‘You cannot eat of all the trees of the garden?’ Now, what did this twisting of the truth do? It took Eve off guard, and it led her astray. It broke the relationship between God and her, between her and her husband. That’s what lies do, what twisting the truth does.

Now, the second devious strategy of Satan that is contrary to the ninth is [that] he exaggerated the truth, as well of course as lying. Straight out he said, “You shall not die.” He made God a liar, but he also exaggerated the truth. Well, listen to what he says. Besides the straight lie, “you shall not die,” he also said, “You will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Indeed, Adam and Eve would know good and evil. They would know the difference, but they would not be like God, for they would turn out to be haters of the good and lovers of the evil.

So, exaggeration is when I inflate the facts about what you did or what someone else did or what might happen in order to lead someone astray. There are many reasons why people exaggerate, but all of them are evil, and all of them are to hurt our neighbor or to get our way. It may be to get someone’s favor and win their trust. I may exaggerate to make a better impression about myself or to make someone else feel bad about their success when [I] exaggerate [my] own. It’s all negative, harmful. It destroys the beauty of relationships, which is the heart of joy. Let’s remind ourselves again and again that all these directions that God has given us in the summary of His original law [are because] He cares for us, for our happiness.

Therefore, the third way that we are to guard [the] well-being of our neighbors is [that] we don’t gossip truth. Gossiping is usually dealing with two things. Something may be true, but something may not be kind, and certainly not necessary, to be shared with someone else. And, gossip is doing that purposely. Gossipers aren’t defending or promoting the person but breaking them down by sharing with [others their] faults or failures or magnifying them. That’s a common sin, even found among Christians, when we hide our tale-bearing behind [an] appearance of being concerned. “I would like you to pray about so-and-so because he or she did this or that.” Examine your motives. Is it the story you want to share, and you want to hide it behind some religious cloak? Gossip, friends, deeply wounds the reputation of others, and lead others to condemn others harshly or unheard.

God also forbids slandering, spreading rumors, which usually are about untruth. This goes beyond gossip. In slander, I scatter facts that I do not even know are facts. They’re unverified, maybe hearsay. And that’s not only a sin again that occurs in political life, [but] that’s a sin that occurs in Christian life. One Who was greatly slandered was our Lord Jesus Christ. The religious leaders spread stories, slandered Him. ‘He desecrates the Sabbath Day. He is a friend of sinners and publicans in the sense [that He associates] with them. He’s a drunkard.’

How destructive that sin of slander is is well illustrated by the well-known story of the minister who told one of his members, who was always slandering names and people’s lives, [to take] a goose feather pillow and to go on a tower and spread all the feathers over the village. And she did and came back to him and said, “I did it.” And then he told her, “Now, go back into the village and gather all those feathers that you scattered.” And upon her [exclamation], “That’s impossible!” then he drove home the sin in her life. “And all the stories you share of others that are not true are like those goose feathers.” Let’s avoid, *hate*, the sin of slander.

Now lastly, God also forbids flattery. Flattery can be with truth, or it can be with untruth. It can be exaggerating something, or it can be with not telling the real facts. Flattery is giving someone insincere praise only to advantage yourself. Yeah, you want to get in the good book with your boss, and you praise him up and down, even though his performance was poor. Or, you may tell someone she’s beautiful and lovely and wonderful to flatter her in order to get favors. It’s well said that gossip is saying behind the person’s back what we would never say in his face, and flattery is saying to the face what we would never say about someone behind his back. So, keep reminding yourself what communication does. It builds up. It breaks down. It ministers grace, or it ministers hurt. It corrupts, or it edifies. So, all the above are but a small beginning of the great subject of communication.

And let me alert you in closing, that there is also wordless communication that falls under the ninth commandment. We can talk negatively without saying a word. My body language can be a powerful communicator, but as not ministering grace to the person that I meet. Some use the silent treatment in connection with their spouse. Some are ignoring or sidelining someone with the cold shoulder or turned away face. That’s not

communicating grace. That's against the spirit of what communication was given for, to minister. A wink, a smirk, all are negative. Whereas, a smile or a kind word or a nod and a warm look can communicate grace to those who are receiving it. You know that research tells us that in communication only 10% is in what we speak, the words. The tone of our voice, some say, is 40%. The nonverbal language of our body is 50%. And all that also must be included when we think about the ninth commandment: wholesome and healing communication.

David wrote in haste, "All men are liars." We know there was one exception, but he was true about that: the rest of men are. Jesus Christ was no liar. His mouth always spoke the truth in love, seeking to minister grace to the hearers in His public discourses, in His private conversations, undoubtedly in His personal thoughts. And friends, therefore, when Peter, one of Jesus's closest apostles, writes in the first book, second chapter the first verse, about the sins against the ninth commandment, he says, "Wherefore laying aside all malice, all guile, all hypocrisies, all envies, and all evil speakings," notice how many of these words are tied up the ninth commandment.

In that same chapter, he draws attention to his great Master. He'd heard the slanders against his Master. He felt, to some extent, the suffering He suffered when he heard those lies about his Master. But, he writes, as he recalls his Master's example, "Who did not sin, neither was guile found in his mouth. When he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but submitted himself to him that judges righteously" (I Peter 2:22-23). Some of you may feel the pain of the slander, the lies, the injustice [of] false witnesses, the devilish destruction through fiery tongues, gossip, or hypocritical praise. Do as Jesus did. Commit yourself unto the Father Who judges righteously.

So that brings us to the end of the ninth, and that will lead us to taking up the tenth lecture in our next one. May God bless these words. Thank you.