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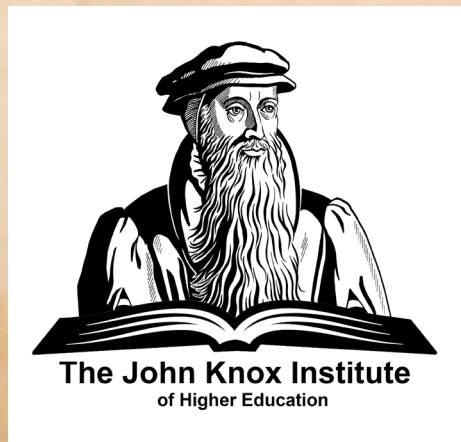
by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #41

The Ten Commandments:

Love for the Truth

Catechism Questions 76 thru 78



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

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Lecture #41

The Ten Commandments: Love for the Truth

Question 76: *Which is the ninth commandment?*

Answer: *The ninth commandment is, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.”*

Question 77: *What is required in the ninth commandment?*

Answer: *The ninth commandment requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbour’s good name, especially in witness-bearing.*

Question 78: *What is forbidden in the ninth commandment?*

Answer: *The ninth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever is prejudicial to truth, or injurious to our own, or our neighbour’s good name.*

We come now to the ninth commandment in our study on the *Shorter Catechism*. The commandments of God are perfect, and they address all the main parts of man’s life. You’ll remember that the first four commandments primarily focus on our more immediate worship and love to God. Well, the last six commandments direct our love to God in the way that we love our neighbors. And a large part of the interaction we have with our neighbors is by our speech and communication. Speech is a wonderful gift that God has given to his image-bearers. By speech, we can show our thoughts, and ask questions, and even express desires that we have within our hearts, with others. Such speech is a uniquely human gift among other earthly creatures. While it’s true that other earthly creatures, like birds, and horses, and fish, and even insects, can in some way communicate through sounds, and sights, and smells, they cannot do so verbally with words. They cannot think, they cannot speak like humans can and do.

Well, it’s right then that so noble a gift as speech and communication should be governed and directed by God’s law. This is what we find in the ninth commandment. So the first Question before us is Question #76, “Which is the ninth commandment?”—“The ninth commandment is, *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*” This is found in Exodus 20, verse 16, and Deuteronomy 5, verse 20. To “bear witness” means to answer, speak for or against someone. The

Hebrew word for this is most commonly translated with the word “answer.” The verse is, in other words, forbidding us to answer as a false witness, and to do so against our neighbor is specifically before us.

Well, a false witness is one who lies, or who fails to speak the whole truth in a matter. The idea is that if we’re called to speak about our neighbor, and to do so before others, we must not speak falsely about our neighbor. In other words, we must tell the truth.

So Question #77, “What is required in the ninth commandment?”—“The ninth commandment requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbour’s good name, especially in witness-bearing.”

To maintain truth is to speak the truth and represent the truth rightly. Notice, it is so between man and man, that is, when we are speaking with others and about others. Additionally, we must promote the truth. We must make sure we have done what is needed for the truth to be clearly understood. This should be so with others when we speak of ourselves or others. It is especially the case when we are asked to serve as a witness about ourselves or about others. We must promote the truth. That’s what we serve with our speech.

Well, Question #78, “What is forbidden in the ninth commandment?”—“The ninth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever is prejudicial to truth, or injurious to our own, or our neighbour’s good name.”

The word “prejudicial” means anything that leads men to ignore the truth, and to judge against what is true. We’ll consider this idea more fully in the main part of our lesson.

So for our lesson, we’ll look at three main points: first, *The Beauty of Truth*; second, *Sharing the Truth*; and third, *Denying the Truth*.

So first then, *The Beauty of Truth*. Everything that is right is founded upon what is true. So we’re to have no other gods before Jehovah. But why? It’s because he’s the only true God. In fact, in the Scriptures, we see that God is specifically called the “true God” in several different passages. As one example, Paul rejoiced in the Lord’s grace to the Thessalonians. He wrote in 1 Thessalonians 1, verse 9, “For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” So one thing we can say is, the reason we’re to worship only Jehovah is because he is the only true God.

However, it’s not only that God is the true God, he is the God who always speaks and communicates the truth as well. This is a great comfort to us that God always and only tells the truth. We read of this in Hebrews 6, verses 17 and 18, “Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.”

Notice, God has promised us salvation as we trust in Jesus Christ, and we can rest with the greatest assurance in this promise, for, as we read there, “it is impossible for God to lie.” Have you ever thought about this? Have you ever thought about what God cannot do? Such a thing is not bad to consider. It’s not a weakness that God cannot lie. Rather, it’s a great strength and blessing. Lying is sin and corruption, and God cannot sin. He always and only tells us the truth. The whole of his Word, the Bible, is full of nothing but his truth.

Well, this means, of course, that all that he’s communicated to us is true. And what a blessing that is, that we can look to every sentence, every word, every paragraph, every book in the Bible; every commandment, every promise, every historical incident, all of it, every detail is true. It is this which makes the Bible so beautiful to us. It’s true, we can find books that are true, and we can

find articles that have truth, but we can never find any book that, from cover to cover, is guaranteed to have every word and sentence true. Every word in the Bible is true, and therefore, every word may and ought to be believed.

Well you see, when we understand this, that God can only speak what is true, we discover a great blessing to our souls. However, we also learn why lying is forbidden to his image-bearers. To lie, is to disfigure the beauty of his image. God only tells the truth, so his image-bearers are only to tell the truth. Well, how beautiful it is when we behave like God, and speak the truth.

Well, second, *Sharing the Truth*. If we are forbidden to bear false witness, that is, to lie or to misrepresent the truth, then we must tell the truth; we must communicate the truth; we must support the truth. This is why the *Catechism* says, “The ninth commandment requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbour’s good name, especially in witness-bearing.” In all of our speech and interaction with others, we are supposed to be people who advance the truth. Words are a special way that we communicate with others. We take our inward understanding and we share it with others. If we have an idea in our mind, we can then speak a few words, and our neighbor can then understand our own idea. Obviously, our words can be written as well. But the commandment requires that all our communication be true.

For something to be true, it must represent what we saw, heard, think, or know. As a simple example, imagine you were looking out your window, and you saw, perhaps, a bird fly by. And someone asked you, “What is it you see?” Well, to tell the truth would be a simple statement, “I saw this bird fly by.” We may not know exactly what kind of bird it was. Someone might say, “What kind of bird was it?” You would say, “I don’t know.” So you don’t make up something. You simply report what you do know. That’s telling the truth. It’s accurately communicating what you’ve seen and what you understand.

Well, this is not just true in personal interaction. This is to be true of businesses. They’re to tell the truth to their customers. Politicians are to tell the truth to their citizens. Ministers are to tell the truth in the pulpit. And this touches on every aspect of humanity. We are commanded in all of our relationships to maintain and promote the truth between one another. This is what the *Catechism* says, but the *Catechism*, you’ll remember, is simply helping us understand what the Bible is teaching.

Well, in addition, we’re to maintain and promote our own and our neighbor’s good name. That is, we’re to do what’s necessary to ensure that what is true about ourselves and our reputation, and what’s true about others and their reputation is indeed advanced by us. So we’re to tell the truth about what we think, and what we said, and what we’ve done, when asked. If we’re asked about by others about our neighbor, we’re to speak and share faithfully and truly what we’ve seen, and what we’ve heard, and what we’ve witnessed. It does not matter if the person is a friend, or a family member, or an enemy. We’re not only to tell good things about those whom we love, but if our enemy has done something that’s right, we’re to acknowledge the same as well. We’re to tell the truth regarding whatever we speak.

Well, this is especially needed when we’re asked by an authority to share something for their understanding. For instance, if something special has been broken in our home, and our parents ask us what happened, if we know what happened, we must tell them the truth of what we know. Or if a teacher asks us about something that happened on the playground, we’re to tell them the truth of what we know or understand. If the pastor or elder asks us about something that’s going on in our own lives, or something that’s happened in the church, we’re to tell them the truth. You see, when someone has authority over us, we’re to speak the truth. We must not lie. We may feel

that if we lied, it would make us appear better in their sight, or it might get us out of trouble. We have to remember that God sees these things, and he remembers our words. So we're to tell the truth to them.

Well, to do this, we must share what we truly understand. However, we should only share with others what we actually know is true. In other words, we should not simply share what others tell us about others, unless we know that it is actually true. To talk about others without knowing what is true about them is to engage in gossip, and gossip can have a lot of pleasure in the heart of wicked men, but it's often the cause of much harm to men's reputations. So we must be careful that when we speak, we speak what we know to be the truth.

Well, is it not the case that we should tell the truth? After all, we know the true God. We bear his image. And we are told the truth by him. We are his people, and so we ought then to speak the truth to others.

Well, third, *Denying the Truth*. To deny the truth is to misrepresent it, or to lie, to cover up what is true. Notice the *Catechism*: "The ninth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever is prejudicial to truth, or injurious to our own or our neighbour's good name." To speak something or show something that is prejudicial to the truth, is to guide people to a wrong conclusion about what is true. Now this doesn't only have to be with words. We might take a picture and not have the context of all that's going on, and that one snapshot could mislead an understanding of what's taking place. The point is, whatever we're communicating has to be given the proper context, and the true understanding of what's taking place, so that others understand the truth. To do otherwise is indeed to lie and to bear false witness.

Well, obviously, this means that lying itself is a sin. When we lie, we present something as true to others that we know is false. For instance, to tell our parents that we have finished our homework, and we still have several math problems to complete, it is to misrepresent the truth; that is, to lie. This also means that it is wrong to lie in order to make others feel better about something. Now, we don't need to be rude when we tell the truth. We don't need to be uncaring to those to whom we speak. But this commandment reminds us that whatever we say should be true, and not a lie.

Some people call certain kinds of lies, "white lies." They call these kind of lies that they would tell someone to make them feel better, in order to cover up perhaps the truth. These people see these kinds of lies as harmless. After all, they're meant to help and be kind. These kinds of lies often occur when people don't want to make others feel uncomfortable. So let me try to give you an example, though there are many that might come to your own mind.

Imagine that someone cooks us a meal. To us, perhaps it doesn't taste that good, but they ask us, "How is the food?" And at that moment—perhaps we love this person very much, or we simply don't want to be rude or unkind—so we're faced with this tension. Do we tell the truth, "I don't like it," and then perhaps make them feel bad? Or do we lie and say we do like it, and they'll feel happy? Well, since we don't want to make them feel bad, we might be tempted to say "It's great." Maybe it is right that we don't want them to feel bad. It may also be that we don't want to complain about the kindness that they showed to us in preparing a meal for us. However, we need to understand, to lie is not right. There are ways that we can honor them without lying.

For instance, there are many other ways we could say, "I'm very thankful that you cooked for me." They may persist and be more direct, and say, "Well, how does it taste? Do you like how it tastes?" And then we may be faced with this reality of having to tell the truth, but we can do so kindly, and in humility. For instance, we could say, "While I'm thankful for the food, it's not

my favorite,” and we could perhaps add, “I’m learning to try other foods, so I’m thankful for this opportunity.” There are lots of ways we could respond, but the point is, however we respond, we must not lie. Remember, God does not lie to us. He does not lie to make us feel better. He always tells the truth.

Perhaps a greater weight to our consideration is that some have taught that it’s okay to lie if someone else is in danger. There are certainly wicked men who want to do wicked things to others. And they ask us a question about someone else—where they are—because they want to harm that person. And when they do so, we may be tempted to lie in order to protect the other person. But let me give you another example.

In the early church, it was a punishable crime in some parts, to be a Christian. In fact, there are places in the world today where it is punishable to be a Christian. Well, should Christians deny knowing Christ in order to preserve their own lives? The lives and testimonies of the martyrs show us the faith and bravery of our fathers in the faith, who were willing to suffer rather than to deny the truth. This is a point that we need to remember. It is better to suffer than to sin, and lying always, every time, is sinful. This is because sinning is rebellion against God. It dishonors him; it misrepresents him. Suffering may be painful—even very painful—but it is to be preferred to sinning.

But what about helping others by our lies? Do we not lie to help others? someone asks. We read, of course, in the Bible about Rehab, who lied about the spies in the Book of Exodus. And there are other examples as well, where people in a moment of conflict lied in order to help someone else. Whereas that’s true, as far as the record is in the Scripture, when we closely read the biblical narratives surrounding these passages, we’ll never find anywhere where God commends the lie. He commends the faith, he commends the protecting, and so on, but he never commends the lie. Whereas Rahab is commended for her caring for the spies, she’s not commended for her lying. The Bible gives us the foundation of this in 1 John 2, and verse 21: “No lie is of the truth.” There’s no such thing as a good lie.

Well, what should we do then? Well, it doesn’t mean that we must tell everyone everything that we know, especially when those people want to do harm. If someone is wanting to harm another person, we’re not obligated to tell that person where the other one is. While we may not lie, we may be silent, and rightly so. Remember Christ, at his trial, was silent for a season, not answering the accusations or questions. Silence is not lying. The person who would abuse the truth does not have the right to know the truth; however, we do not have the right to lie.

So there’s a biblical example of how to handle those situations with wisdom. Notice the example of Samuel, in 1 Samuel 16, verse 5. This passage is referred to in many books that help us understand this principle, because it so clearly illustrates the point before us. The Lord called Samuel to go to Bethlehem in order to anoint David as king. Well, remember that Saul was alive at this time, and Samuel knew that to do this would risk his own life, if Saul or Saul’s supporters found out. So notice the communication between Samuel and the Lord, in 1 Samuel 16, and verse 2: “And Samuel said, How can I go? if Saul hear it, he will kill me. And the LORD said, Take an heifer with thee, and say, I am come to sacrifice to the LORD.” So what happened? When he was asked why he came by others, we’re told his response, in 1 Samuel 16, verses 4 and 5: “And Samuel did that which the LORD spake, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the town trembled at his coming, and said, Comest thou peaceably? And he said, Peaceably: I am come to sacrifice unto the LORD: sanctify yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.”

So notice, he did not share the whole story of what he was there to do, but he did tell the truth.

He did not evade a direct question, nor did he lie. The elders did not ask, “Are you come to anoint a king?” and Samuel said, “No, I’m not.” Rather, they asked him what he was doing. He shared the truth. Samuel was come to offer a sacrifice, so he spoke the truth. And the point, of course, is that when we’re asked questions—however difficult, even however dangerous—if we speak, we have only to speak the truth.

Well, as we close, let me challenge you to examine yourself. It’s rare that we’ll actually be in such situations as Samuel, where we ourselves would be in danger for answering the truth, or put others in danger if we answer the truth. We see that we shouldn’t lie, and it would be better to be silent then. In the majority of our lives though, there will still be situations where we’re tempted to lie, not because of outward danger or risk of danger to ourselves or others, but because, by sin, we would rather tell a lie than the truth. Well, are you someone who tells the truth, and only the truth? Do you do so to your parents and friends? Do you do so to your teachers, to your pastors, and fellow members of the church? Remember that to lie is to behave in a wicked way. It’s to misrepresent the truth. It’s to be unlike God. And most sobering, it’s to be like Satan. Remember what Christ said of him, Satan is the father of lies. Consider this well, and realize that when you lie, you are more like Satan than you are like God.

And, oh, what a great need we have to be convicted of this sin, and from that, to see our need for Christ! We can see something in this commandment as well, remembering that Christ fulfilled the commandments perfectly. Christ only ever spoke what is true. He never lied. In this, and in all things, he was perfectly righteous. How different he is than we are. Yet, it is this, with all of his righteousness that made him able to offer himself without spot unto God as a sacrifice. So that whereas we have lied, he only spoke the truth. And among all of the other parts of his righteousness, this is an astounding feature, that he is not only the true Savior, but the true Savior who only spoke what is true, which makes him able to offer himself without spot as a sacrifice. And oh, what a blessing it is that whereas he was committed to the truth, that he offered himself as the substitute for us, that we who have sinned by lying should have a Savior who forgives us our lying. And moreover, what a good thing it is that through Jesus Christ at work in the life of the believer, not only is the believer forgiven by Christ’s sacrifice in righteousness, but the believer is sanctified more and more, both to love and to serve the truth, promoting the truth in his words and actions. Let this be your prayer that Christ would save you, both to forgive your sins of lying and other sins, but also to sanctify you that you would be one who loves the truth, who speaks the truth, and promotes the truth to the glory of the true God who cannot lie.