

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

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"The Ninth Commandment"  
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The ninth commandment states, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." (Exodus 20:16). Again, it is short and to the point. It involves the wonder of speech--but also all other means of communication.

The art of communication is an amazing wonder. In this man differs from all other earthly creatures. He speaks. He expresses himself. He does this first through the use of spoken language--itself a wonderful thing. But from this follows the ability to write. Without speech there would be no written forms of expression. Without speech there would be no concepts, no ideas. Self-expression is a wonderful creation of God.

However, this gift of self-expression has been grossly distorted by man's fall into sin. That which was created good, that which Adam and Eve could use in Paradise to the glory of God, is now used in the service of sin. James speaks of this horrible distortion of a good gift when he writes in chapter 3:5ff, "Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell . . . But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God."

With such an indictment one might almost hesitate ever to speak again. Our tongues too are not perfect. How easy it is to transgress God's holy command! Not just once, not just twice--but continuously we sin in this regard.

But mere silence is not the solution to the problem. The tongue is not something of itself. It is itself but a little member--which cannot operate apart from the body to which it is joined. The tongue is rather an instrument which reflects the corruption of man's heart. Out of the heart are the issues of life--and death. From the heart come forth the poisons which pour forth from the mouth. Yet among brethren, regenerated and called Christians, this ought not to be. A regenerated heart gives forth that which is pure and holy. And the tongue of such a regenerated one must speak forth that which is proper and right. So ought we to examine our tongues--to see also the fruit of righteousness in our lives as well, fruit which is according to the requirements of the ninth commandment.

In speaking of the ninth command, we must also understand that there is a principle involved--otherwise the command would be surely misunderstood. That principle must be found in God Who has given the command. Simply put the principle is that God is truth. Scripture makes this also very plain. Not only does God KNOW truth, nor DETERMINE truth, but He IS truth. He is the sum total of infinite perfections. There is nothing in God that is contrary to His own perfect Being.

Further--all that which God does is truth. His revelation is without lie, perfectly reliable and trustworthy. He has been pleased to manifest Himself in the Bible that we may understand what is truth--and what is the lie.

This truth of God, ultimately and in the highest degree, is revealed outside of God in Jesus Christ. It is He Who reveals to us the perfections of God. Through His perfect work and through His death on the cross, He manifests the infinite love of God for His people. Therefore also Jesus could say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

About this truth of God, the creature must be very concerned. He is to speak the truth of God in love. In "speaking," of course, we do not limit our expression only to words. "Speaking" involves as well all forms of communication. In writing, in our actions, by our expressions we also communicate or "speak."

Our speech is to concern itself ever with truth--and centrally the truth about God Himself. We are to speak about God and to God in harmony with what He has revealed about Himself. We may not be content with false doctrine about God. We may never be satisfied with error. Ever we want to speak as well as we can what God has Himself shown to us in Scripture.

From this fact proceeds another. We are to speak the truth with and concerning the neighbor. One must also speak of the neighbor in harmony with the reality. One is not to distort facts or spread false reports. But also, in doing all this, Scripture insists that we "speak the truth in love," that we may "grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ." (Ephesians 4:15). Love of God and love of the neighbor becomes the motive of repeating anything about the neighbor. One can, of course, repeat true things about the neighbor--to his destruction. One shows hatred in repeating anything which can hurt or destroy the neighbor. Therefore we are to tell the truth--but always as a manifestation of the love of God in Jesus Christ. We seek the neighbor's spiritual welfare always.

The warning of this command that we bear no false witness is necessary--in view of the fact that we possess very really a sinful nature. All sin, but especially that of bearing a false witness, can be traced back to the first sin of Adam and Eve and of the devil who tempted them. The serpent, used by Satan, came with the obvious but seductive lie: "Ye shall be as God." That lie was rooted in the horrible sin of pride--a pride which sought to elevate the creature above the Creator. From that terrible lie, proceeds all other lies of Satan and of men. Man desires to take God's place--and tries to believe every statement that seems to show that he can.

Out of this lie, so full of pride, and indeed false witness of the most terrible sort, proceeds all other evil lies of man. There is the denial of all of the Word of God. There is the denial of God's sovereignty, God's invincible power. There is the denial of God's divine providence whereby He directs and governs all things. There is the denial of predestination of moral rational creatures unto a determined end--even before the creation of all things. Man insists on bearing false witness about God and His Word!

Such terrible sin has its consequences in man's relationship to man. By the lie, or more refined forms of deceit, man would seek advantage over fellow man. He seeks to hurt, to cut, to murder, to steal--all through his words.

The ninth command condemns all forms of lying and deceit. Obviously, open lying whether swearing under oath or deceit in other forms, is condemned. It is a transgression which is very common in our own day. Men are concerned with the truth only insofar as it is to their own advantage--truth becomes useful to maintain one's own personal position. But where man can lie, he does.

More commonly, we would consider gossip in its various forms to be the violation of the ninth command. It is true also that this is a very common and even acceptable way of violating the command. Gossip, evil speaking concerning another, is perhaps the greatest tool of the devil to hurt and destroy within the church. I possibly recall seeing a well-known drawing which appears at first glance to be the arched window of a church. Closer examination reveals that in reality this "arched window" is the heads of two women (it could have been men as well) pressed together--obviously revealing secrets about others. A closer study of this drawing reveals more: one can see the features of the face of Satan in it.

How truly that drawing reveals the reality! Gossip has separated more friends than any other device in all of history. Gossip has caused more dissension within the church than perhaps any other evil deed.

There is that gossip known as backbiting. I would understand backbiting to be the speaking of the truth about another--but a truth which undercuts or hurts. How often one does not hear that a person can repeat what is true--as long as information is true, he has the right to tell another. Is one justified in repeating another's sins--as long as he is convinced that he repeats the truth? We have received, perhaps, our information from reliable sources. We would never want to tell untruths about another. But the truth--that's a different matter. Our actions, often, are not so dissimilar from that of the news media. It's the bad, the crime, the evils which receive the headlines. This is what attracts attention and is considered worthy of repeating. But is it?

In speaking the truth about another--a truth which hurts the other, we do violate the ninth commandment. In repeating the hurtful, one does not help a brother who has been sinning. How can repetition of his sins to third parties help the erring brother? Nor does it help the third party--this only encourages the third party to think evilly of the sinning brother.

And all too often there is involved the evil sin of slander: speaking the lie about another. One can make up false stories about another or can repeat what he thinks to be true--but is not. There is often the distortion of facts about another or the quotation of a remark out of context, making it appear to say something which the speaker did not at all intend. Such slander represents pure viciousness.

Each ought to consider his own actions in this regard. In our visits do we follow that common practice of talking evilly of another who is absent? Jokes are made of this sinful practice. But what do you do? How do you use your telephone? Before the days of this marvellous invention, gossip was relatively limited. Now, by telephone, gossip can be spread instantaneously around the world even! The telephone has given the little instrument, the tongue, a loud sound which can be heard far and wide.

One can gossip by writing to another. The supposed facts can be laid out before another for his consideration. In all of that, one violates God's holy command. None are completely innocent. The evils of disobedience are clearly evident. There is often as a result the separation of close friends. Division is created within the church. Hatred grows and hurts. Families are broken. And Satan laughs. His favorite tool seems to have been used successfully.

But we must not be only negative. This negative command has also a positive truth which deserves proper emphasis. The regenerated, converted child of God desires to walk in thankfulness to God for that wonderful

salvation which is his through Jesus Christ. Because God has saved us, we would also serve Him--and will do so as a fruit of that salvation. The requirements of the command for us can be quite simply stated.

First, and this is of greatest importance, every Christian will want to maintain the truth concerning God. He is and must be interested in the infallible revelation of God which reveals to us the truths concerning God Himself. This means that the Christian will diligently study the Word of God. If one is truly interested in the truth, he cannot do anything else but study that Word with care and diligence. He would know what it declares concerning God Himself. And he is interested in that in order that God's Name may be most highly honored.

And the Christian will hold to that Word, and insist on its proper proclamation in church, in order that God may receive all the praise. He will hold to the truth of that Word--though it cost him his job. He will hold to that Word--though it requires him to forsake a boyfriend or girlfriend. He will hold to that Word though so very many today depart from the truth. He holds to it though he loses family and friends. The Christian will maintain the Word of God by God's grace through all of his life.

Then he will also seek to promote the good character of his neighbor. If there is some evil of which he knows about another, he refrains to repeat that to third parties. The Christian does not, however, just ignore the sins of another--but properly goes to the sinning brother and speaks to him about it. The Christian desires a brother to repent and walk again in a godly way on this earth. That is the only way one can be of real help to another.

And The Christian seeks ever to speak well of another. If one has nothing good to say of another, he keeps silent. But as much as he is able, he speaks about the brother in a good manner. He speaks of the other's deeds, performed properly to God's glory. He rejoices in the advancement of the brother. Thus he would promote the wellbeing of the brother unto the benefit of the whole of the church of Christ. Then God is honored, His church prospers, and the child of God enjoys the blessings of God through Jesus Christ. In gratitude to God, let us then obey this command faithfully and daily.

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