

The Cost of Lies
Exodus 20:1-2, Exodus 20:16
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Randy Lovelace

I was reflecting these last couple of weeks when I was on my own personal spiritual retreat and discerning, Lord, what would be the series we should do next? And after much prayer and consideration and reflection back in December, I was like, I've never preached through the Ten Commandments. How can we do that in a helpful way? Now, that seemed like a good idea at the time. But, boy, as you get into it, it does not leave you unscathed. These are necessary and helpful, but they are hard words. But I believe the Lord has something in it for us as we continue to work through together what does renewal in the wilderness look like?

Remember God's people were being promised by Him that He would go with them and be for them, and that He would provide for them a land that was to be their own. And they were to follow Him in faithfulness and in righteousness. And He knew that they would need His rule of life, of what it meant to be in relationship to Him and in relationship to each other because in the middle of the desert, in the middle of the wilderness, they were going to face myriad temptations that would lead them and tempt them to do anything but love Him or love each other. And so He gives them this rule, these ten words, what we consider the Ten Commandments or the moral law.

This morning, we arrive at the ninth commandment. Hear now God's word as we consider His word to us. Again, beginning in Exodus 20:1-2 and then verse 16.

And God spoke all these words, saying,

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I'm grateful for the many writings and speeches of Mark Twain. There are some golden nuggets there. Consider just a couple. "In all lies, there is wheat among the chaff." "To make a lie really effective, it has an element of truth to it." Another. "Lie, an abomination before the Lord and an ever-present help in time of trouble." One more. "One of the most striking differences between a cat and a lie is that the cat only has nine lives."

But a quote that's often attributed to Twain wasn't his at all. It was actually, on almost this date a couple hundred years ago, from Charles Haddon Spurgeon in a sermon where he said these words. "A lie will go round the world while the truth is still pulling on his boots."

Lies bearing false witness is a powerful drug and runs on jet fuel. And so as we consider this commandment of not bearing false witness, I want us to consider it through the rubric of these three things. First, the source of lies. Secondly, the scope of lies. And then, finally, speech that God desires. The source of lies, the scope of lies, and speech that God desires.

First, the source of lies. There is no better place to turn because at the center of our faith is a redeemer, Jesus Christ, who said these words recorded for us in the gospel of John 8:44 while speaking to those who were bearing false witness against His ministry. And in His confronting them, Jesus responds to the Pharisees and says, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

And then John, who sat at the feet of Jesus learning from Him, would say these words in his first epistle in chapter 2 beginning in verse 21. He says,

I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life. I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you have received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. [ESV]

What he was trying to explain is that we have the word of God, which is truth. And what the truth of what Jesus says with regard to Satan is that he, the devil, is the father of lies. Because it's important for us to even understand the source of lies, it's first and foremost the one who is the best at it, and that is devil and/or Satan. As Jesus calls him properly, "the father of lies."

But why would Jesus call him this? For us to understand the ultimate source of lies itself and bearing false witness and deception, we need only turn to Genesis 3. Here, what I want you to see is that the source of lies, as we see it played out in Genesis 3, is itself breaking out three distinct things which make a lie a lie. Every one of these are contained in every lie, and that is first deception, second is distortion, and the third is destruction. Deception, distortion, destruction.

Listen to what happens when Satan comes to Adam and Eve and seeks to tempt them. This is what he says.

"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." [ESV]

Now, notice just in those two statements given to us in Genesis, we find all three of the things which I listed before. First, there is deception. Satan is seeking to lie and cover over the truth because his purpose is to gain control. He wants to arrest control from God. He wants to disrupt. He wants to destroy what God has called and made and said that it is good. There is lying going on here.

And then further, he distorts. Now, notice what he does. Watch what I think in many ways is exactly what Mark Twain was referring to, that there's enough wheat with the chaff in every lie. Notice what he says again. "You will not surely die." Okay. That's the deception. But now listen to the distortion. The distortion is taking a truth and twisting it to further the end of the one lying. Now listen to the distortion. "You will not surely die. For God knows." So he acknowledges that God is all-knowing, that He understands the very sinews of who we are in our desires and our motives. He knows this, but now watch him twist it. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So he takes the fact that he's established, and he knows they know it, that God knows. But he then twists it and says, yeah, God knows, but He's telling you that because He has an ulterior motive. So he distorts it and twists it in such a way to allow for the power of distortive suspicion to enter in.

But then there's also destruction because you can't have the first two without the third. Because in the process of deceiving and saying what is not true about God and then twisting and distorting what God has actually said, he ultimately is seeking to destroy several things. He's seeking to destroy God's

character, His glory, but also the relationship that is intended to be first and foremost between us and the Lord but then also the relationship that you and I have with one another as human beings.

Listen to the destruction that happens. The ordeal in the garden, ladies and gentlemen, is the original, bonafide, straight down the middle conspiracy theory. Right? Think about that. Because what happens next is when He comes to them, what do they do? They hide. Already, that suspicion has now destroyed the intimacy that Adam and Eve had in trusting God. And now suspicion has entered in, and now they feel they have to hide themselves because they're beginning to feel something that becomes a powerful drug and a motive for why we want to lie, and that is shame and, often it's close traveling partner, guilt. We know we've done wrong. We feel it, and we don't want it to be exposed because we'll be found out.

And so what begins to happen? It's not just the intimacy lost with God. It's the intimacy completely lost and broken between Adam and Eve. Because what happens as a result? Blame shifting, denial, defensiveness, covering, and lying. In their response, in all of their responses, is itself the lie. And the source of it is Satan himself.

But we must ask the hard question that scripture presents before us, that the ordeal in the garden being the original conspiracy theory is using deception, distortion, and destruction to achieve power and control, right? But if we're listening to scripture and asking it questions, we have to deal with the hard question that I think points right back at us with this question. Were they merely victims or did they become willful accommodators and then ambassadors of the source of lies?

And that is the issue I think that we must ask, that the power is not just the one seeking to lie and cause deception, distortion, and destruction. It's to recognize that there's something about a lie that makes it just enough of a hook because perhaps it gets down to something that we all experience as human beings in various degrees—fear, anxiety, guilt, or shame. And the lie sparks that in us, and we want to believe. You see, they weren't just unwilling victims. No. They became accommodators when they were willing to listen to him. You see, that's the part of accommodation. I'm just going to hear what you have to say. I'll give you some space. And in giving the lie space, they become the accommodators.

But then they don't stay in accommodation. They become ambassadors because then when they allow that to come in them, they then begin to spurt them out back towards God who has already told them the truth. Now they become ambassadors of lying, and they become ambassadors of the evil one himself.

This is why Jesus comes to the Pharisees and says, you are doing the will of your father Satan and of the evil one, "the father of lies" because you're carrying out his ends. Whether you realize it or not doesn't let us off the hook. Now that is very challenging. And the shift becomes how have I or how do I give space to lies and liars because it sparks something in me when I reflect just a little bit? And there's the shift.

As one writer says, "Deception feels incredibly rational. Idols function like spiritual forgeries imitating God's character but distorting it." That's why theology is not merely for people who go to seminary. It's important for all God's people to know who God is so that we can spot counterfeit gods when they approach our lives because what's happening is there is idolatry. Instead of giving rightful worship and space to a holy God, they allow space and give worship and accommodate and become ambassadors for the father of lies. It's idolatry writ large. And it seems so rational, but that's because we believe that what we're led by is our rational selves. But the truth is we're not. Most of the time, we're led by our emotions, our desires, and our reason has convinced us it's leading the way, but in fact it just comes up with post hoc negotiation and reasons for why we feel the way we do.

It seems like the right thing, which is why we must ask the question, what is the truth? Lord, what are you saying? And help me to be careful. Help me, O Lord, to be humble, not only before you but before others. And help me to be aware. Is there anxiety, or fear, or desire for control, or suspicion, or cynicism

that I've allowed space for in my life unwittingly, yet I participate and accommodate and give space to lies? That's the challenge. They were not unwitting victims. They became willful in it. Lord, have mercy. Because it feels so human, doesn't it? It feels that way to me.

But beyond Genesis 3, if we consider when it says, "You shall not bear false witness," now we need to consider what are the scope of lies? Because it seems as though what is in view in regard to the commandment is bearing false witness. Now, that's courtroom language where we seek to come and testify as a witness in a case or about another or about a circumstance, and we're called to speak the truth, and when we don't speak the truth, we are bearing false witness against our neighbor. So it does have courtroom language. That is most certainly in view.

But of course He wasn't giving it to them because they were about to enter a courtroom the next day. No. They were families. They were a people who were about to go on a really big road trip without any McDonald's on the way. And they were about to climb all over each other's nerves. And they were going to come along to some tourist attractions that were going to tempt them off of their journey. People said, mommy and daddy, when are we going to get there? Well, I don't know. The Grand Canyon looks pretty good. I think we'll stay here. And God says, no, that's not what I want for you.

You see, they were tempted along the way. It's courtroom language, but it's all about relationship. So bearing false witness, while it has that overtone, it's really just talking about how do you and I speak to each other and about each other? And how do we speak about others out there?

Now let's consider what the confession and catechism of our own church states to answer this question, "What are the sins forbidden by the ninth commandment?" "The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are"—okay. This is just hard to read. So just stick with me. It's hard to read because I see myself in this. So preacher preach it to yourself. So just letting you into the preacher room. Come with me. "What are the sins forbidden by the ninth commandment?"

"The prejudicing the truth and the good name of our neighbors as well as our own, especially in public courtrooms; giving false evidence; supporting false witnesses; wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause; outfacing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence; calling evil 'good' and good 'evil'; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery; concealing the truth; undue silence in a just cause; holding our peace when iniquity calls for either reproof from ourselves or complaint to others; speaking the truth unseasonably or maliciously to a wrong end or perverting it to a wrong meaning or in doubtful or equivocal expressions; scoffing; whispering; tale bearing; detracting; backbiting; censuring; misconstruing intentions and words and actions; flattery; vainglorious boasting; thinking or speaking too highly of ourselves or of others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults in others; hiding and excusing and extenuating of sins when called to a free confession; unnecessarily discovering infirmities in others; raising false rumors; receiving and countenancing evil reports; stopping our ears against a just defense; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any; envying when somebody else gets the credit or grieving that we didn't get it; scornful content; fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report; and practicing or not avoiding ourselves and not hindering what we can in others such things as procure an ill name,"

meaning you had an opportunity to protect the good name of another, but you didn't.

Now, I couldn't read this and not get on my knees. I would imagine I'm not the only one in the room. This is so easy. And here's why it's so easy. The scope of lies is so big and the father of it so crafty

that it is near impossible to live in the world and not face something in this list nearly every day.

Going back within our tradition and even outside our tradition, before our tradition, going all the way back to Thomas Aquinas, there have been three ways that we talk about the scope of lies, all of which are contained in what I just read to you. But there's three ways. There's crafty lies, which are simply the desire and the enjoyment of lying to another to see if you can get away with it because you have another purpose. You're just good at it. Then there's what the philosophers have called playful lies. These are lies to cover ourselves, involving pride, shame, fear, insecurity, people pleasing.

In the early years of my marriage to Kate, man, nothing escapes her gaze. So because I was commuting back and forth to the office, I would go right by a post office. And I remember I was in the basement at the utility sink, and I could hear her walk into the kitchen which was above my head, and she asked me, "Did you drop off that mail to the post office?" And I said without a blink, "Yes, I did." Now, what was I doing in that moment? And what I felt the weight of the Holy Spirit in that moment is, is my integrity so belittled in my own understanding that I'm willing to not tell my wife the truth that I didn't drop off the piece of mail to the post office? Because that's not the issue. The issue is I didn't want her to be mad at me. So I took that path of least resistance. In that moment, I was falsely worshiping my wife and not humbling myself before God. I feared her more than I fear Him.

We've called it white lies. Come on. What we're doing is we want to cover ourselves. We're doing what Adam and Eve did. We're not hiding from you. We didn't know you were here. We were naked.

But there's another category which we need to at least talk about, and that is emergency lies. Is it a lie to lie for the protection of others? Now this has been something that philosophers and theologians have debated for eons. We have a quick three examples. And I don't have to go into the stories. Rahab lying on behalf of the spies who were in her home in Joshua 2. The midwives who were responsible for protecting the life of Moses as an infant because they were instructed to kill any male children, but they lied. That's in Exodus 1. And then finally David is another example. David lied and acted all crazy because he was trying to flee Saul. And when he was looking for a cover, he had to act crazy because they wanted to take him into custody. And so he just acted as a mad man, and they let him go.

So were those lies disobedience to God? Asked another way, if somebody comes and breaks into my home and asks me if I'm the only one, and yet I know my wife and child are present in the house, what do I say? And this is the same question that many faced in Germany during Nazi reign. Do I lie to protect the lives of Jews that I know I'm hiding in my home, or do I tell the truth? And I would suggest they are not lies when used for the protection of others, which is why I believe Rahab was honored by God and blessed. So were the midwives, and David was a man after His own heart. I'm not suggesting this removes all the entanglements, but it requires that we wrestle. How have crafty and playful lies or how have we tried to mask something as an emergency when really it was just to cover ourselves and not somebody else? Those are things which I believe we have to wrestle with.

But I must suggest that living in our day in this present moment, do any of us disagree—and that's rhetorical. I have the bully pulpit. Here we go. Could any of us really disagree with the fact that lying has completely torn apart the fabric of society? Institutions, communities, families, friendships. The destruction that lies have wreaked in the history of the world is very grieving.

But we must also be willing to acknowledge there's also been enjoyment in it, too. Because at the same moment that lies have destroyed the fabric of society, entered into suspicious and backbiting and false witnessing, there is also the other side of it that we also get enjoyment from. It's the gossip, right? It's the part that we understand that the culture of lies has also been a part of the culture of entertainment. How have we entertained the entertainment of lies against the name of another? I have. Have you? And it's really scary. And the realities are that when we allow these things to become a part of who we are and we don't think of them as what they are, which is destroying elements of the evil one to destroy trust, community, and relationship, we are in danger of not just being accommodators but becoming ambassadors.

Think about gossip itself. I remember the movie *Doubt* a number of years ago. In the film, the main character who's playing a priest gives this illustration. He says,

"A woman was gossiping with a friend about a man she hardly knew. I know none of you here has ever done this. And that night she had a dream. A great hand appeared over here and pointed down at her. She was immediately seized with an overwhelming sense of guilt. The next day, she went to confession. She got the old parish priest and she told him the whole thing. 'Is gossiping a sin?' she asked the old man. 'Was that the hand of God Almighty pointing a finger down at me? Should I be asking your absolution? Father, tell me, have I done something wrong?' 'Yes,' Father O'Rourke answered her in his strong Irish brogue. 'Yes, you ignorant badly brought up female.'"

Hang in there with me.

"'You have borne false witness against your neighbor. You have played fast and loose with his reputation. And you should be heartily ashamed.' So the woman said she was sorry and asked forgiveness. 'Not so fast,' Father O'Rourke says. 'I want you to go home and take a pillow up on your roof, cut it open with a knife, and return here to me.' So she went home, took a pillow from the bed, a knife from the drawer, took it on the fire escape to the roof, and stabbed the pillow. Then she went back to the old priest as instructed. 'Did you gut the pillow with a knife?' he says. 'Yes, Father.' 'And what was the result?' 'Feathers.' 'Feathers?' he repeated. 'Feathers everywhere, Father.' 'Now I want you to go back and gather up every feather that flew out into the wind.' 'Well,' she says, 'it can't be done. The wind took them all over.' 'And that,' said Father O'Rourke, 'is gossip.'"

We have tarred and feathered and celebrated it. I have. Lord, have mercy. And while we believe in a gospel and grace that is quite different than the priest exhibited in this illustration from this film, let me say not mine, we believe in a grace that can restore, a grace that can set right, a grace that can heal, a grace that can undue deception, distortion, and destruction. And this, I believe, is the speech that God desires.

You see, the speech that God desires first and foremost, we must know, is given to us first as speech we speak towards God. This, my friends, is the bedrock and the foundation of everything we do, nothing else out there, nothing else in here, but all right here in the word of God. The only way the FBI is trained to distinguish forgery in dollars is to make sure that they know what the real dollar looks like. Forgeries of the truth are impossible to know but the truth we have in our hands, and to know it and to give ourselves to it so that when forgeries come along and speak about God and misuse and distort and deceive, we know because we've given ourselves to the truth that we can find out and not give space to the lie.

Let me give this word here. My role as a pastor is to give to you the word. And I want to remind you of this. And I know I'm doing okay on time. So stick with me. This is in 2 Timothy 4:1-5. This is Paul speaking to Timothy, a church planter. And I say this to you as one who's been given this charge.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-

minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.
[ESV]

This is what I'm called to do every single week and every single year now for the past 24 years, and with you for the last 10. Have I done it perfectly? By no means. Have I gotten it wrong? Yes. And yet my call and charge doesn't come from you first and foremost. It comes from my heavenly Father through the apostle Paul to which I was ordained and committed to commit myself to teaching the word in season and out of season. And sometimes it is hard, just like today.

But I pray for you that you would seek to know the truth. And as Jesus says, in knowing the truth, we are set free from the father of lies, we're set free from the ways in which we give ourselves to lies, and we are freed up to actually love one another. So I ask that you pray for me as I pray for you. And I ask you for grace as you would ask me to give you grace, knowing that we all come to the foot of the cross together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Lord, help us.

The speech God desires is first knowing the speech that has come from His lips. And then as we know about Him and His truth, then the next person that we speak the truth to is to each other and about each other, which means we need to walk in humility and empathy knowing I don't know your motivations, you don't know mine, and you don't know each other's. How easy it is for us to come to one another to speak about one another as if we know. And it's not because we set out with malicious intent. I don't believe that. But it's because we're trying to understand the world around us and whatever the "it" thing is, and we're trying to fill in the gaps of what we don't know. And instead of doing what the Lord calls us to do, to submit ourselves to Him and in humility sit before Him when we don't know, we fill in the blank with what we don't know about each other so that we can make sense of it. We think we have the truth, and we run away with it. And then we close the door. We remove the opportunity to fellowship with each other in unity because, well, I know what you're really thinking. Right? Haven't we done that?

Ladies and gentlemen, don't you know that there are people who are monetized to rip us apart? Just yesterday, I was sent an article from a friend by a minister who wrote an article out into the world thinking and saying things about my colleague and brother in Christ, Dr. Timothy Keller, of which this person knows nothing about. Writ large, he sought to take his name right through the mud. And this man who's writing it has a ministry on Capitol Hill. And yet he's taking his brother in Christ through the mud. Yes, I am angry about it because I see how easy it is, and oh so juicy it can be. We love the debate. But who are we hurting? We're hurting ourselves. We're hurting the name of Christ, and we're hurting each other. And we forget that there are people making money off of just that transaction. Lord, have mercy.

We, in giving ourselves to the truth, begin to fine tune who we listen to and who we don't, and who we give space to and who we don't. But in speaking to one another, that is the space. This moment, those who are joining us on the livestream, just between you and me and the privacy of YouTube, ladies and gentlemen, let's consider together as those who profess Jesus Christ, if you are a Christian and you can hear my voice, and you are a regular attender or even if you are a visitor, let's have this moment, this Holy Spirit moment to hear what God has to say to you and me about how we treat one another with our lips and our tongues. You ready? Let's hear this good word. And oh, is it a good word. It is such a good word that I use it with every single couple whom I've had the blessing and honor of marrying. Hear this.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is, and do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting unto one another as

unto the Lord. Therefore, having put away all falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with his neighbor. For we are neighbors of one body. Be angry, and do not sin.

It's okay to be angry but let us be careful and not sin.

Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, being honest with work in his own hands so that he may do something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as good for building up as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.

To experience the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and to extend it to one another, this is the speech that God desires. And our tongues are a restless evil set on fire by hell itself. We cannot tame out tongues, for if we could, we would be able to keep ourselves perfect.

So who is the one who tames our tongues? It is the only one who can change our hearts, the Holy Spirit of the living God. And by surrendering ourselves to the Holy Spirit, pray with me. Holy Spirit, tame our tongues, that when we speak, we would glorify your name and love one another. This is what we get to do to be a beautiful aroma to the world, to extend the grace, shut out the noise, and turn up the music of His glory. Let's pray together.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Tame our tongues. O Lord, my God, I ask that you would begin with me. Father, I stand before you and before your people humbled in light of your word, convicted by the power of your truth, and acknowledging my real need. And I now pray that on behalf of your people and all who can hear my voice, Holy Spirit, breathe new life. Rid us of deception. Overturn and shut out distortion. And heal and undo destruction. Lord, we cannot do this. Only you can because you are a gracious and forgiving God. Now, Holy Spirit, help us to walk in humility with each other, forgiving one another and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. It is in the matchless holy name of Jesus we pray. Amen.