

We are making our way through the Ten Commandments, and if you recall, the Ten Commandments are God's rules for moral conduct given to His people to serve as the foundation for their laws as a new nation under God.

The Ten Commandments were given to the Israelites at a certain time and in a certain place, and they were given by God, not by Moses, and in the process of giving these Commandments – and this is important, they revealed something about the giver – the rule-maker. They are a reflection of God's divine nature and character declaring from His point of view – in simple terms, what is right and what is wrong.

The Ten Commandments are God's moral standards, His moral law, and it's important to point out that what occurred on Mount Sinai in giving the Ten Commandments was not the invention of God's moral standards – for people were given a conscience by God. People already instinctively knew what was right and wrong. In their hearts, they already knew what they ought to do and what they ought not to do, but at Mount Sinai, God makes it formal with His declaration of the Ten Commandments.

Now, we have made it through eight out of the Ten Commandments, and that brings us to the ninth Commandment found in **Exodus 20:16**, where God tells His people, **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”**

There was a guy who saw a sign in front of a house which said, “Talking Dog for Sale.” He rang the doorbell and the owner told him he could see the dog in the back yard. The guy went around the house and asked the dog: “Can you really talk?” “Yep,” the dog replied. The man responded, “So, what's your story?”

The dog looked up and said, “Well, I discovered my gift of talking pretty young so I told the CIA and in no time they had me sitting in rooms with world leaders, because no one figured a dog would be eavesdropping. The travel really tired me out, so I signed up for a job at the airport to do some undercover security work and now I'm just retired.”

The guy was really impressed so he asked the owner how much he wanted for the dog. The owner said, “Ten dollars.” The guy asked, “Are you serious? That dog is amazing. Why on earth are you selling him so cheaply?” To which the owner replied, “Well, he's a big liar. He didn't do any of that stuff. You can't believe a word he says.”

Truth matters to God, honesty matters to God, and to explore this subject a little further, I want to begin by looking at the first recorded sinful act in the church – a lie.

This occurred after Pentecost, at a time, when God was doing some amazing things, the Christian movement was exploding by the thousands of people being saved, but it was also a time of persecution as the Jewish authorities sought to stop the movement and silence the gospel message.

The church in Jerusalem, the first church, greatly multiplied and there were many in need – many who were ostracized by Jewish family members, cut off by Jewish friends, fired by Jewish employers, and kicked out of the Jewish synagogues for following Christ, and so the church banded together and rallied around itself and started to take care of each other. They shared what they had with one another, and we are told that there were some believers who voluntarily sold their property and their possessions and brought the money to the apostles to distribute to anyone who had need in the church. One of those who was recognized for doing this was Barnabas, and if you recall, he would later become Paul's companion.

For all involved, it must have been an exciting time of ministry, a grateful time of sharing God's blessings, and a loving time of unity and fellowship – but it was also a time where people did some bad things in order to look good, and that brings us to **Acts 5**.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Acts 5** and we will begin with **verse 1**. It is Luke who tells us,

¹But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ²and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.

I need to explain this. As I said, the early church was sharing with each other, meeting the needs of one another, and there were some like Barnabas who sold their property and gave the money to the apostles to distribute. Surely, this generous act by Barnabas did not go unnoticed and he was likely recognized and honored for his sacrificial giving.

Well, Ananias and Sapphira, who were believers in the Jerusalem church, also wanted to stand out like Barnabas, they wanted to be recognized and honored as generous givers, so to impress others, they sold some property and pledged to give

all the money from the sale to the church. They weren't commanded to do this by God or the apostles – the property was theirs to sell, and the money were theirs to keep. They could have kept it all for themselves or they could have told the apostles they were only giving a portion of the money to the church, and that would have been okay – but to impress others, to look good, they did something bad.

So, on a Sunday morning, Ananias goes to church to bring his offering to the apostles. He lays it at their feet claiming his offering represented the full amount from the sale of their property. He pretended to give it all to the Lord, when in fact, he did not. It was a lie – but hey, no one would ever know, and he's likely expecting to hear his name praised for his great generosity.

Well, Ananias does hear his name – just not in the way he expected. Let's continue with **verse 3**.

³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

Peter says, "Look, you didn't have to give anything. The money was yours to give or to keep. It was under your control and you could have done whatever you wanted to do with it, but instead you tried to deceive the church and you lied to God. **Why did you do it Ananias?**" No answer was given.

Ironically, the name Ananias means "God is gracious," but he learned the hard way that God is also holy and he suddenly died in the church. But the story is not over. Let's continue with **verse 7**.

⁷ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹ Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." ¹⁰ And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in

and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

Okay, so it didn't go well for Ananias and Sapphira. They lied to impress others, they wanted honor – but instead they suddenly met their Maker in a church service. Their sin was not in the selling of property, and their sin was not in the keeping of the money. That's their choice. Their sin was in lying – hypocrisy, in creating an image of themselves that was not true in an attempt to fool the church and to deceive God.

We are told at the end of this passage that great fear came over the whole church and over all who heard about what had happened. No doubt some people were shocked when they learned that two people actually died in a church service for lying, and that does prompt questions: *Why did God take their lives? Why then and not now?* I can only suggest that God took this action because at that time, it was the birth of the church, it was a new movement of God, and He could not allow deception and hypocrisy to creep in and take root. Maybe it was God's way of saying I am serious about this new work of Mine.

Now let's switch gears and go back to Mount Sinai where God told His people, **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”** I need to explain this.

In a general sense, this Commandment speaks about honesty or more appropriately dishonesty; however, in context, the wording of this ninth Commandment is a little more specific and it points to dishonesty in a legal proceeding – a trial.

In order for the new nation of Israel to have their own judicial system, which they did not have, there needed to be truthfulness and honesty with those who are involved in it. This Commandment concerns the testimonies of those who appear before the courts as witnesses, and to address the potential that people could use the judicial system to bring harm to others with lies and false accusations. This Commandment for witnesses to give truthful and honest testimony was essential for maintaining integrity and confidence in the judicial system and to render just decisions, and that idea holds true for us as well today.

Even today in our legal proceedings, before a witness testifies, they take an oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and if they do not, if a witness lies under oath, they can be found guilty of perjury.

Now in the Old Testament, it was a whole different matter and let me show you what I mean. Turn to **Deuteronomy 19**, and we will begin with **verse 15**.

¹⁵ “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. ¹⁶ If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, ¹⁷ then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. ¹⁸ The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. ²¹ Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

The Jewish laws did everything to ensure a witness told the truth and nothing but the truth, and if it was determined that a witness gave false testimony in court – the false witness would be punished by the court with whatever punishment would have been inflicted on the person falsely accused – life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot. For example, if you falsely accused someone of murder and the penalty was death, you got that penalty for lying about them under oath. **Can you imagine if that occurred in our nation?**

So, in context, lying under oath is what this Commandment is about, but in a general sense, it’s about dishonesty and the Bible has a lot to say about that. For example, we are told in **Proverbs 6:16-19**,

¹⁶ There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: ¹⁷ Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, ¹⁹ a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers.

That’s God list of the things He absolutely hates, and two out of the seven on His list pertain to lying. Lying is an abomination to God, it grieves Him, and as we know it takes on many different forms such as slander and hypocrisy, half-truths, and little white lies, and the sad thing is people today don’t really seem to care about it unless they are harmed by it.

A pastor was having trouble with lying in the church. Every time one of the female members saw the pastor’s car parked anywhere strange, she began immediately to

spread rumors and lies that their pastor was having an affair. There was no truth to her rumors, but she kept it up until the pastor, in an effort to stop her lying, left his car parked in front of her house, day and night for a week. That cured the problem really quick.

In his book, “You Can Experience an Authentic Life,” James White suggests that we have come to accept lying as the way of life. It doesn’t bother us. We don’t get upset anymore when someone exaggerates, or falsifies, or fabricates, or misrepresents the truth. We live in a day when we’ve been bombarded with erased tapes, tampered evidence, illicit cover-ups, padded resumes, and exaggerated ads, to the point that we’ve pretty much given up on truth being a viable pursuit, and I would add that deception and dishonesty is so prevalent that it’s difficult recognize the truth. **How sad is that?**

What God calls an abomination, we minimize, we excuse, and we even justify as a necessary means to an end. We shrug it off, claiming “*It’s just the way it is*” – but it can’t be that way for us. Truthfulness and honesty have to matter because it matters to God. As followers of Christ, we are called to be people that love the truth and speak the truth because we serve a God of truth. Lying should not be an option for us. The Apostle Paul tells us in **Ephesians 4:25**,

Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.

In this chapter of Ephesians, Paul had been telling his readers that as followers of Christ, we have a new nature. We can no longer live like we *used* to live, instead we are to live like we are *supposed* to live. We are to be different from the rest of the world. We are to think differently, talk differently, and act differently meaning there are some things we should not be doing and there are some things we should be doing. Because of who we are in Christ, we need to act like who we are. If you are a follower of Christ, then being a follower should be evident in your life, and in our passage, Paul says to stop lying, throw your deception aside like filthy clothes, and start speaking the truth in love. It’s our choice to stop bending and shading and twisting and exaggerating and skirting the truth – and just start telling the truth – the whole truth.

Once there was an emperor in the Far East who was growing old and knew it was coming time to choose his successor. Instead of choosing one of his assistants or one of his own children, he decided to do something different. He called all the young people in the kingdom together one day. He said, “It has come time for me

to step down and to choose the next emperor. I have decided to choose one of you.” The kids were shocked! But the emperor continued. “I am going to give each one of you a seed today. One seed. It is a very special seed. I want you to go home, plant the seed, water it and come back here one year from today with what you have grown from this one seed. I will then judge the plants that you bring to me, and the one I choose will be the next emperor of the kingdom!”

There was one boy named Ling who was there that day and he, like the others, received a seed. He went home and excitedly told his mother the whole story. She helped him get a pot and some planting soil, and he planted the seed and watered it carefully. Every day he would water it and watch to see if it had grown.

After about three weeks, some of the other youths began to talk about their seeds and the plants that were beginning to grow. Ling kept going home and checking his seed, but nothing ever grew. Three weeks, four weeks, five weeks went by. Still nothing. By now others were talking about their plants but Ling didn't have a plant, and he felt like a failure.

Six months went by, still nothing in Ling's pot. He just knew he had killed his seed. Everyone else had trees and tall plants, but he had nothing. Ling didn't say anything to his friends, however. He just kept waiting for his seed to grow.

A year finally went by and all the youths of the kingdom brought their plants to the emperor for inspection. Ling told his mother that he wasn't going to take an empty pot. But she encouraged him to go, and to take his pot, and to be honest about what happened. Ling felt sick to his stomach, but he trusted his mother was right. He took his empty pot to the palace.

When Ling arrived, he was amazed at the variety of plants grown by all the other youths. They were beautiful, in all shapes and sizes. Ling put his empty pot on the floor and many of the other kids laughed at him. A few felt sorry for him and just said, “Hey, nice try.”

When the emperor arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted the young people. Ling just tried to hide in the back. “My, what great plants, trees and flowers you have grown,” said the emperor. “Today, one of you will be appointed the next emperor!”

All of a sudden, the emperor spotted Ling at the back of the room with his empty pot. He ordered his guards to bring him to the front. Ling was terrified. “The emperor knows I’m a failure! Maybe he will have me killed!”

When Ling got to the front, the emperor asked his name. “My name is Ling,” he replied. All the kids were laughing and making fun of him.

*The emperor asked everyone to quiet down. He looked at Ling, and then announced to the crowd, “Behold your new emperor! His name is Ling!” Ling couldn’t believe it. Ling couldn’t even grow his seed. **How could he be the new emperor?***

Then the emperor said, “One year ago today, I gave everyone here a seed. I told you to take the seed, plant it, water it, and bring it back to me today. But I gave you all boiled seeds which would not grow. All of you, except Ling, have brought me trees and plants and flowers. When you found that the seed would not grow, you substituted another seed for the one I gave you. Ling was the only one with the courage and honesty to do the hard thing and bring me a pot with my seed in it. Therefore, he is the one who will be the new emperor!”

I love that fairytale, and it makes a good point – lying is easy and telling the truth can be hard, especially when telling the truth about yourself, and that’s what Ananias and Sapphira should have done – enduring some momentary embarrassment, instead of pretending to be people they were not and lying about doing something they had not done.

They were members of a loving church, a unified church, a church that cared for one another. It was a church that God was building – but it could not be a church built on a lie – any lie. It had to be built on truth because lying violates love, it causes distrust, and it destroys relationships.

And I say all of that to say this: We come to church on Sunday with the idea of drawing closer to God, worshipping Him from our heart, and fellowshiping with one another – but ironically and in reality, it might be the day we lie the most.

We come here pretending that life is great, everything is wonderful, and if asked **“How are you doing? How are things at home?”** we respond *“Oh, I’m just fine”* when in reality we are struggling, our lives seem to be falling apart, and our hearts are breaking. Just like Ananias and Sapphira, we want to look good, but we not helping ourselves by being dishonest. Maybe we’re scared that no one cares, that

no one has the time, or that someone would reject us if they really knew what was going on inside our hearts and in our lives, but the truth of the matter is this – we are all on this roller coaster called life. All of us experience ups and downs, twists and turns as we walk through this world. None of us is perfect.

And let me remind you that the Bible doesn't speak of church as a place where perfect people come to congratulate one another on how perfect they are. Rather, the Bible talks about church as a place where hurting people come to admit their hurt and find comfort and compassion and healing for their hurt. Of all the places we could go, the church should be the place where we are the freest to be ourselves and admit our hurts, our weakness and our struggles. **Isn't that when we are the most truthful and honest with one another and with God?** Truthfulness and honesty matters.

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