

*“Aseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”*

Part Ten: The Ninth Spiritual Principle ~ The Law of Honesty

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

First Christian Church, Murray, KY

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Exodus 20:16 (NRSV):

*“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”*



*"Father, I Can Not Tell a Lie: I Cut the Tree," engraving by John C. McRae, 1867.*

Wayne Dosick shares the following story: “When Bobby was five, he and his father went for a drive in the country. At a crossroads, Bobby’s father drove right through the red light, without bothering to stop.

Bobby said, “Daddy, in school my teacher taught us that we are supposed to stop at every red light.”

His father replied, “Oh don’t worry son. There’s no traffic on the road, and besides, there are no police cars around. No one will ever see us going through the red light.”

When Bobby was twelve, his mother took him to the movies. As they were going into the theater, she said, “Bobby, if the usher asks how old you are, say that you are eleven. I bought you a child’s ticket.”

When Bobby was sixteen, he overheard his father on the phone with the family accountant. “That’s right, Charlie,” said Bobby’s father, “forget that I ever told you about that extra income from the stock option deal. There’s no record of it anywhere, so it makes no sense to pay the extra tax.”

When Bobby was eighteen, he went off to the state university. Six months later, his parents received this letter from the dean of the college: *Dear Mr. and Mrs. Smith, I regret to inform you that your son Robert has been expelled from our university. He violated our school’s honor code when he was caught cheating on his mid-term exam.*

Bobby’s mother cried out, “Bobby? Cheating on an exam? How could it be? We brought him up in a good home. Where did he ever learn to cheat?”

And Bobby’s father sighed, and shook his head, and sadly asked, “How could Bobby do this to us?” (Wayne Dosick, *Golden Rules: 10 Ethical Values Parents Need to Teach Their Children*, pp. 34-35)

The Ninth Word is the law of honesty, the law of telling the truth: **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”** Some translate this commandment as **“you shall not lie.”** How many of you have been in a courtroom and observed the judge say to a witness: “Please raise your right hand to take the oath,” followed by “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?” With these words a person puts his or her left hand on the Bible, right hand raised, swears an oath to tell the truth, and then takes the witness stand to participate in the judicial process of determining the fate of someone accused of a crime. Serving on a jury is one of the responsibilities of citizenship, isn’t it? On the first level this Ninth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” relates to the prohibition of perjury or lying under oath in a court of law.

We have recently seen people imprisoned who have perjured themselves, haven't we? They have lied after promising to tell the truth. We have it a lot easier than our ancient Hebrew ancestors in relation to this commandment when it comes to serving as a witness in a court of law. If we perjure ourselves we might serve some prison time but we would not lose our lives. The Hebrew people took this commandment so seriously that if someone lied under oath they would receive the same punishment the accused would receive if the charges were true. So if that person was being charged with murder and you, as a witness lied, you yourself might be put to death.

There are two levels to understanding this ninth spiritual principle, with the first referring to taking oaths in a court of law. The second level calls upon us to take this spiritual principle of not bearing false witness against one's neighbors and then apply it to the larger world where it pertains to truth telling. We are called by God to tell the truth not only in the courtroom under oath but in every aspect of our daily lives. As the Apostle James admonished: ***"let your yes be a yes and your no be a no"*** whether we are in the courtroom or not (Js 5:12). "You shall not lie."

This spiritual principle of honesty was understood to be a foundational cornerstone for the health and functioning of our democracy. Honesty was seen as an important public virtue that especially needed to be a characteristic of those in leadership. Abraham Lincoln was nicknamed "Honest Abe." Do you remember the charming legend about the value system of the first president of the United States, George Washington? "In the original story, when Washington was six years old he received a hatchet as a gift and damaged his father's cherry tree. When his father discovered what he had done, he became angry and confronted him. Young George bravely said, 'I cannot tell a lie...I did cut it with my hatchet.' Washington's father embraced him and rejoiced that his son's honesty was worth more than a thousand trees."

(Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington the Great* (Augusta, GA: George P. Randolph, 1806), 8-9.<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/cherry-tree-myth/>)

This public virtue of honesty, seen through Washington's personal morality in which he would not lie even to escape punishment, is a thing of the past. Indeed, it almost seems like a quaint relic, something told to little children to prevent them from lying about things like stealing cookies. We presently live in a world of alternate facts and a list of lies that is so long that we no longer know what to believe. The truth has become so elusive.

This has led not only to a breakdown in communication but the radical erosion of trust, which is the cement which holds not only families, and communities, but an entire democratic society together. Since those at the top can lie, since news outlets spin the truth, lying or dishonesty has become so commonplace that we no longer see it for the problem it is. We tire of fact checking. Lying has now become a form of entertainment.

91% of the population are brazen enough to admit that they don't tell the truth on a regular basis. We wheel and deal with the truth. Yet we must ask ourselves what happens in a society when this 91% also includes politicians, safety professionals, journalists, lawyers, bankers, CEOs? What happens when we accuse scientists of lying and offer alternative facts in their place? How can we regain our bearings in our contemporary world when this ninth spiritual principle has been violated by the majority? How can sacred trust be reestablished? This is an important question, for, as Joan Chittister says, "‘You shall not lie’ is the spiritual mandate that is meant to save a great deal more than our reputations. It is a commandment meant to preserve an entire people from the cancer of mistrust, the individual from the pitfalls of pride, and the society from living with the corrosive effects of a culture of deceit." (Chittister, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 107)

Why is lying even a problem at all? One obvious reason is that, when we lie, that lie can take on a life of its own and we no longer can control where it goes and the people it will affect. In the aftermath of my sister-in-law Eileen's recent death with Covid-19, Russ and I have been reminiscing about her. The other day we remembered the humorous story Eileen shared with us at her dinner table on Long Island during one of our visits there. She told us about a trip she had taken with her husband Nick to visit her Aunt Alice and Uncle Ed in Arizona many years ago. Her Aunt Alice owned and operated an antique store in Tucson and she was always looking for good deals and ways to make money. While visiting they went on a trip through the petrified forest. After driving for about thirty miles, they stopped at a gift store. Eileen went in and bought a piece of petrified wood. She paid \$8.00 for it. They got back into the car and had driven about 15 miles back toward Tucson when Aunt Alice asked Eileen how much she had paid for it. Eileen knew that Aunt Alice would reprimand her for spending too much money and so, instead of saying that she had paid \$8.00 for it, she said that she had paid \$3.00 for it. Alice replied, "Oh gosh! I could sell that for \$8.00 in my store. Ed, drive back, I'm going to buy them out!" Eileen and Nick were nearly dying in the backseat, wondering what they should do with this lie that had taken on a life of its own.

Fortunately for them, Ed refused to drive the fifteen miles back to the store and, for the next fifteen miles back into Tucson, Aunt Alice and Uncle Ed fought about Ed's unwillingness to give in to her demand.

No real damage was done in this case with Eileen's lie about how much she had paid for a piece of petrified wood. But not all lies end with us chuckling around a dinner table. How about the following lies? Did they adversely affect other people's lives? There are so many examples that one could choose from including Dwight D. Eisenhower's confession that he had lied about the use of spy planes over Russia, Richard Nixon's lies about the Watergate tapes, Bill Clinton's lies about his personal life, possible lies pertaining to weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Chittister reminds us about the time when "Lyndon Johnson lied about the Gulf of Tonkin. The Vietnamese didn't fire on us first as he had said in order to justify our invasion of Vietnam; we fired on them. The lie took us into full-scale war that cost us 58,000 American lives, another 304,000 wounded, nine years of grief, and who knows now how many Vietnamese women, children, villages, rice paddies and grandparents. And it cost Johnson the presidency as well. (Chittister, *The Ten Commandments*, 105-106) And there are many more recent examples I could bring up, but I don't want to unnecessarily raise people's blood pressure.

"You shall not lie" is the commandment meant to preserve the integrity of an entire society from destruction. Truth, because it builds trust, is the glue that holds the world together. The Bible speaks out time and time again against lying. For example, Psalm 12:1-2, reads: "***Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind. They utter lies to each other; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.***" Proverbs 6:16-19 says: "***There are six things that the Lord hates ... haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.***"

We must raise the question of whether the rule against lying is absolute. Are there, perhaps, times when we can legitimately lie? I know that most of you will think that this rule is a black and white absolute but there are any number of Biblical examples where lying appears to be accepted, but only under the condition that it is done to protect life. When Abraham and Sarah were on their way to Egypt during a famine, he begins to worry that Pharaoh will kill him because he wanted to take his beautiful wife from him.

So he tells Sarah: ***“Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account”*** (Genesis 12:13). This particular lie was religiously sanctioned, morally acceptable, because, through it, both their lives were saved. How about when Jonathan is put in the position of having to choose between helping his best friend David by lying to his father, King Saul, about where David was when he was trying to kill him (I Samuel 20:28)? Because of Jonathan’s lie, he saved the life of the person from whose lineage Jesus would come. How about the Hebrew midwives who, after being told to kill all Hebrew baby boys, lied to Pharaoh, saying ***“the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them”*** (Exodus 1:19). Through this lie they saved countless lives! Was it not perhaps divine providence that Moses’ mother and sister lied about his existence, which allowed him to lead God’s enslaved people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land? It would seem that in the Judeo-Christian tradition certain kinds of lies are permissible. Lying is religiously sanctioned when it is done to save a life.

I remember thinking about this when, some years ago, I was in New York City with my daughter Rachel for a medical appointment following her hip surgery. After seeing the surgeon, when we went into a Barnes and Nobles bookstore and browsed around in their three floors full of books. Rachel had been looking for a book she had heard of by the Jewish writer Yehuda Nir. She eventually located it and, just as she was putting her hand on it, a gentleman came up to her and introduced himself as Dr. Nir, author of the book *The Lost Childhood: The Complete Memoir*. Dr. Nir was a Holocaust survivor from Poland, who made his home in New York City, before his retirement working as a professor of psychiatry at Cornell University Medical Center. He told us that, during the Holocaust his parents had brought him to live with a Roman Catholic family in a Polish village. While there he lied about his identity to save his life, telling everyone he was not Jewish, but Roman Catholic. He even served as an altar boy and sang in the boys’ choir at the local Roman Catholic church. This lie falls under the category of permissible lies. Abraham lied, Jonathan lied, the midwives in Egypt lied, Dr. Nir lied. These are lies given to preserve life and they are permissible.

There is another category of lies as well that may be permissible. This category is perhaps best explained by a peanuts cartoon (August 1997) when “Charlie Brown says to Linus, ‘We’re supposed to write home to our parents and tell them what a great time we’re having here at camp.’ Linus answers, ‘Even if we’re not? Isn’t that a white lie?’ Charlie Brown explains that ‘Well ... it’s sort of a white lie,’ to which Linus questions, ‘Lies come in colors?’” (Schlessinger, *The Ten Commandments*, 285-6)

Before talking about that the colors of lies, I want to share with you that many years ago I received a letter from McKenna Phelps when she was a camper up at Camp Kum-Ba-Ya. We all know that McKenna believes in telling the truth just like it is. She did not write to me and say, “Dear Pastor Ruth, I’m having a great time at camp.” My letter from her (which I will cherish forever) said, “Dear Pastor Ruth, So far camp is pretty boring!”

But for most people lies do come in colors. There are ways that we can express things in such a way so as not to cause unnecessary anxiety or hurt in others. The best illustration of the ‘colors of lies’ comes from the ancient Jewish tradition. Two different rabbinic schools were debating the question of whether one should tell an ugly bride at her wedding that she is beautiful. One rabbinic school said that outright honesty was always mandated, advising one should “Sing about the bride as she is.” This means that if she is ugly, just go right ahead and tell her that she is ugly on her wedding day. The other rabbinic school said “describe her as a beautiful and graceful bride” (even if she is ugly). What these two schools of thought illustrate is that there are different kinds of truth. Objectively the bride might be ugly. But the most important truth is subjective, for is not every bride beautiful on her wedding day! Therefore, one should always tell every bride, regardless of whether she is objectively attractive or unattractive, that she is beautiful! (Schlessinger, *The Ten Commandments*, 286) Furthermore, since all beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, is not every single baby beautiful to his or her parents, even if is “a face only a mother could love”? Ask any parents holding their precious newborn baby and they will tell you that their baby is absolutely the most beautiful in the world. And that is, indeed, the Gospel truth!

So it would seem that there are some religiously sanctioned lies that are permissible to save lives. Then there are those white lies in which compassion and common decency allow one to move into the area of subjective truth. After all, life would be so difficult if people always honestly shared exactly what they thought about people and situations. But otherwise we are called to radical honesty. We are never to wheel and deal in the truth, lying for our own gain. For it is only through telling the truth that trust can be established. And it is only when we trust others that can we live peacefully together and attempt to build God’s Kingdom on earth, which is our Christian calling.

**Let us pray:** May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart always be truthful and be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.