

“LIVING GOD’S WAY – 10) WICKED WORDS!”

Exodus 20:16; Matthew 15:1-11

We’re drawing towards the end of this series now and as we look back over the past eight commandments that we’ve considered we can see just how seriously God intends us to take his ethical standards. From time to time we’ve had a look at other parts of the Law which God gave to the Israelites through Moses and seen that the penalties for breaking some of them are pretty severe. Most of the penalties involve not the giving up of freedom – which is what we tend to think of as the only way to deal with crime (“Lock ‘em up and throw away the key!”) – which would probably have been quite difficult for a nomadic people. Rather, they insist on restitution, selling oneself into slavery or, in the most extreme cases, death.

That really explains the need for this ninth commandment (in a Black country accent, “Number nine is all about lyin”). In a society where the possibility of capital punishment was an ever-present reality, giving false testimony against one’s neighbour could easily lead to the death of an innocent party. It was therefore vital that the standard of truth was adhered to or the consequences could easily get out of hand.

But, once again, we see that the scope of this particular commandment is much wider than the limits that appear to be set out here. It’s not only a question of perjury, for, if we turn over to *Leviticus 19:11,16*, to a further re-statement of the Law, we see that lying, deceit and slander are included, abuses of speech that are condemned again and again throughout the Bible and which are dealt with very directly in the New Testament. *James 3* is perhaps the fullest treatment of this theme of wrong speech and of the difficulty we have in controlling our tongues.

This morning, though, I’d like us to concentrate on three manifestations of lying which are most obvious in our own lives – three ways in which we give “*false testimony*” not only to and about those amongst whom we live and work and worship, but also about God and Jesus Christ, whom we claim to follow. In a society where there is so much untruth, half-truth and distortion of the truth, from the government upwards, this is a message which we desperately need to live out in our lives, not only as individuals, but also corporately as God’s people. If you watched this week’s episode of *Hotel Babylon* this week (not being a student, I don’t get to see day-time television, where so many of Liz’s illustrations come from!), you’ll know that every one of the storylines – and there were at least four of them intertwined – had to do with lying and deceit. But, although the actual circumstances were a long way from the experience of many of us, I would imagine, the kinds of moral and ethical dilemmas posed by them are the kinds that we all face day by day in our homes and our workplaces.

1. WHAT WE SAY

You may think that what we say is the only way we can lie, but as I hope we shall see, there are other ways of giving false testimony. However, this may be the most damaging way in which we can break this commandment. Under this heading there are three things I’d like us to consider as besetting sins, very often particularly amongst Christians.

a) Lying deliberately

Perhaps this is almost too obvious to mention, but we are still guilty of it many, many times. We know the truth and we deliberately say something else, possibly with good intentions, but very often to get ourselves out of a sticky situation or to give a better picture of ourselves. And once you have begun to lie in a situation, it can get more and more complicated – a lesson that successive government ministers have had to learn! Abraham Lincoln once said, “*No man has a good enough memory to make a successful liar.*”

Some of the most creative and complex lies I have come across have been those used to explain the non-appearance of homework to a teacher. I remember a kid called Moody in my class at school whose

excuses could have won Nobel Prizes had they ever been collected and written down. He was helped by the fact that he travelled to school by train and bus, which provided endless scope for imagination, and he seemed to have a cat that suffered from some kind of constant feline nausea and delighted in throwing up over recently completed essays on the Romantic Poets!

But we all do it, don't we? We deny things we know to be true – something which can be heard several times a week on Radio 4's *Today* programme. Solzhenitsyn once said, *"In our country the lie has become not just a moral category, but a pillar of the state."* Sometimes we exaggerate wildly to give a good impression: John Wesley was often to be heard bemoaning the way in which his fellow ministers exaggerated the size of their congregations – and it still happens. Sometimes we find ourselves lying to get back at someone who has hurt us in some way. And even though we know that something is untrue, if we say it often enough or fervently enough, we end up actually believing it. As Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* (and which became a plank of Goebbels' Nazi propaganda policy): *"The broad mass of a nation will more easily fall victim to a big lie than a small one."*

b) Gossip

In many ways this can end up being worse than outright, deliberate lying, because it has all the appearance of truth and, especially in Christian circles, it can be done under the apparent guise of pastoral concern (*"I'm just telling you this for your prayers ..."*). But gossip can be a terrible weapon in the hands of Satan and we read again and again in the New Testament that we are to guard against it.

Things that may be said from the highest of motives, but which may well be less than the truth can destroy people's characters – indeed, their whole lives. One of the *Astérix* books is called *La Zizanie*, which is difficult to translate (it means a weed and also "discord"), but it refers in this case to a man who wreaks havoc among the Gauls by setting one group against another with malicious gossip, based on the truth, but with just enough left unsaid. It can destroy churches and ruin their witness in the eyes of the community. And it is very difficult to shake off. Jim Callaghan once said in Parliament, *"A lie can be halfway around the world before truth has got his boots on."* The Apostle Paul was very much afraid of the effect of gossip on the church at Corinth (amongst others) and includes it in the list of problems he fears in *2 Corinthians 12:20*.

c) Half-truths

Telling half the truth is often at the root of gossip and if something is not, as the oath from the law courts puts it, *"the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth,"* then it is false because we are not presenting the whole picture. Half-truths lead to bias, to distortion and to the most grotesque forms of misrepresentation. You have only to look at the press – particularly but by no means exclusively the tabloids – to see the damage it can do. Beware the half-truth! Don't go spreading stories until you know you have the full facts.

2. WHAT WE DON'T SAY

From deliberate lying, through gossip and half-truths, we get to the point of non-truth, of keeping quiet when we should speak out. Our silence becomes as damaging as speaking out can be in other circumstances. When the poor Israelite stood condemned to death on the word of his false witnesses, it was up to those who knew the truth to say so. How often are we silent in the face of injustice, when our voice should be heard?

The German pastor, Martin Niemöller, a U-boat commander in the First War, could see where things were heading during the 1930s and wrote these words before he was finally executed by the Nazis:

"First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the communists and I did not speak out – because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me – and there was no-one left to speak out for me."

We see others being treated unjustly. We hear others being attacked for things we know to be untrue. We see others behaving in a way we know is wrong, but they remain blissfully ignorant. We know people who desperately need to know about Jesus, but we refuse to tell them about him. It is our duty to speak out against injustice and against immorality when we have opportunity – not with an arrogant or judgemental manner, but in manner that enables them to know that there is a better way. Paul, writing to the Christians of Ephesus, tells them that they should “*speak the truth in love*” (*Ephesians 4:16*). Elsewhere he points out that those who are in error should be admonished (*Ephesians 5:11; 1 Timothy 5:20*).

3. HOW WE LIVE

The way in which we **live** can be just as much a lie as the things we say. We often talk about people who are “*living a lie*”, don’t we? Sometimes we can be outwardly religious – conforming to all the patterns and rituals – but inwardly full of sin and wickedness, harbouring grudges and bitterness and resentment. Less often, perhaps, we are inwardly pious, but show no sign of it in the way we live. Both ways of life are hypocrisy – “*prejudice with a halo*” as someone once said – and are a form of lying. Jesus was more vehement in his attacks on hypocrisy than on anything else in his teaching, a vehemence that was, more often than not, aimed at the religious leaders of his day, the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. That’s why we read those verses from *Matthew 15* earlier. And he is even more outspoken in this passage from *Matthew 23:23-28*.

Of course, we all find it difficult to live up to our high calling as the followers of Jesus, but we must not deliberately try to give the impression that we are better than we actually are, we must not try to paper over the cracks. We really fool no-one but ourselves. Hypocrisy can have no place in our lives as Christians because that bears false testimony to God, it gives a false impression of what he has done in our lives and it misleads other people.

Our standard, of course, is Jesus, who proclaimed himself to be “*the way, the truth and the life*”, and who promised in *John 14:16,17* to send his followers “*the Spirit of truth*”. May our prayer be that the same Holy Spirit will so live in us that we are able to resist the temptation to lie, to gossip, to tell half-truths, that we are bold to speak out when necessary and able to live lives that are characterised by authenticity and integrity, faithful to God and to his work in us.

(Housegroup notes follow on next page)

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Exodus 20:16; Matthew 15:1-11; James 3:1-12

The severe penalties that were prescribed for the breaking of the commandments meant that the testimony of witnesses could have life or death consequences for the accused. It was vital, then, that the testimony was not false. When we look at the re-statement of the Law in *Leviticus 19:11-16*, we see that lying, deceit and slander are also forbidden. Again and again throughout the Bible we read of the importance of keeping the tongue in check and *James 3* describes the difficulty we all have. There are various ways in which we break this ninth commandment.

1. WHAT WE SAY

a) Lying deliberately – This is the most obvious way in which we can "*give false witness*". We say things that we know are untrue, sometimes with good intentions, but often to get ourselves out of a jam. But it can lead to a spiral of increasingly complicated lies. "*Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive.*"

b) Gossip – Often we give the appearance of truth, but end up spreading rumours that can do grave damage to people. St Paul, in particular, is very anxious that Christians should steer clear of this.

c) Half-truths – This is probably at the root of much gossip: people spreading news that they haven't fully heard properly or don't know that full story about. It can lead to misrepresentation and distortion.

2. WHAT WE DON'T SAY

There are occasions when our silence can be as damaging as our speech. Remaining silent when we know injustice is being done, not pointing out mistakes to those who are liable to suffer from them, keeping quiet about things that would help other people are all ways in which we fail in this area. Paul writes in *Ephesians 4:16* that we should "*speak the truth in love*".

3. HOW WE LIVE

Often we can live in a way which completely negates the truth of our words. We are "*living a lie*". This is really hypocrisy and Jesus was very hard on those who were guilty of it. Look at *Matthew 23:23-28*.

Jesus, who proclaimed himself "*the way, the truth and the life*" is to be our standard.

Questions for discussion

1. Are there occasions when a "white lie" is justified? If so, when? If not, why not?
2. What can we do to guard against gossip without neglecting our pastoral duty to care for and pray for each other?
3. What can we do to ensure that we don't remain silent in the face of so much injustice in the world?
4. How far should we go in "*speaking the truth in love*"?
5. In what areas do we find that our speech most lets us down? How can we overcome those difficulties?
6. Jesus talks of worshipping God "*in spirit and in truth*" (*John 4:24*). What do you think he means by that?