

Matthew 5:33-37

33 “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ 34 But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Exodus 20:16 “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

This command starts with testimony in legal proceedings and continues to issues of truth-telling as the basis of personal integrity. As with all the commandments, it must have been a very serious issue.

Remember the song *What the World Needs Now is Love, Sweet Love*. That’s the only thing there’s just too little of. Let’s today substitute truth for love, as there is a truth shortage running amok in our world. *What the World Needs Now is truth, Sweet truth*. That’s the only thing there’s just too little of.

Do you remember the old saying “My word is my bond”? And at least in our idealized memory, how many deals were sealed with a handshake? It meant something when said by someone you knew to be honest. But nowadays, we must get it in writing, as the whole social, political, business, and personal climate requires endless documentation — for sure. And even then, with all of that, we have almost totally learned to distrust even legal documents, as so many people try to weasel out of commitments and use loopholes to avoid their responsibility to tell the truth.

In all these areas, it is not okay to fudge a bit and shape what we say in ways that border on deceit. For our relationships to thrive, truth is necessary and sadly often absent.

Another saying said in jest, “I saw it on the internet; it must be true.” Now, with AI, we can say, “I saw it on the internet; it must be false.” It is hard to know what or whom to trust.

The original commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor”, originated in ancient Israel to maintain a sense of justice and as a guide for how we relate to others. It especially applied to judicial cases, like murder, where it took two witnesses to convict someone. This was done to protect people from malicious accusations based on a single person’s testimony. Of special concern were the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the resident alien; the vulnerable, who were often the victims of the breaking of this commandment. The prophets denounced those who swear falsely.

But many times, that was not enough, then or now, to keep people safe. We know Jesus was convicted and sentenced to death based on false testimony, as the authorities relied on what they knew was false testimony.

But even when people believe what they are saying, as many as 4% of those incarcerated are there based on false testimony (Adam Hamilton).

Sometimes we might think of this command as telling the truth: Don't lie. This is an essential way to relate to our neighbor. We are not to deceive them. Deceit is often accompanied by its close companion, violence. Violence in word and deed.

Three of the greatest Biblical stories that touch on the theme of honesty, besides the execution of Jesus, are the Story of Naboth and his vineyard, Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and Ananias and Saphira.

Naboth had a vineyard, and King Ahab wanted it; he even offered to exchange it for another parcel of land and maybe pay above market value. But Naboth wouldn't let go of his family's land, which, according to Jewish tradition, belonged to God anyway, and if at all possible, should remain in the family's hands. So, King Ahab sulks. Jezebel, his wife, calls him out and says, "Aren't you king? I will get your vineyard." She arranged to have a letter sent to proclaim a fast and then arranged to have many false witnesses testify that Naboth had blasphemed God. The villagers took him and stoned him to death. Elijah the prophet came and pronounced God's judgment, then, "You will be cut off, and the dogs and birds will eat the flesh of Jezebel and Ahab." Ahab repented, and God spared him, but not his dynasty, which will be wiped out. All because of the breaking of the commandment.

Then there is Joseph, who served an Egyptian official named Potiphar after being sold into slavery by his brothers. He was a victim of a false witness by the official's wife, who accused him of trying to assault her sexually. He was tossed in prison. And for a while, he languished in there through no fault of his own. A direct result of a false witness.

And one more. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira were early Christians who sold their property and then lied about the amount and gave less than the sale price to the church. Putting all assets in the hands of the apostles for the common good was a practice of the early church, as people sold their possessions and gave the proceeds to the apostles for the common good. Peter confronted the husband first, saying, "You could have kept everything; it was yours, but you lied," then "boom," suddenly he was dead. A few hours later, his wife showed up and she was struck dead as well, as a divine judgment for their hypocrisy—indeed, a cautionary tale.

All three stories show the tragic results when honesty is not part of the equation.

The trajectory of this commandment extends beyond scripture into our lives. The power of social media and its ability to spread falsehoods like wildfire have had disastrous results. Once a lie is out there, it usually can't be deleted, no matter how hard we try. This has tragic results, especially for young people. While stats vary, it is estimated that 58 % of students have experienced some form of repeated harassment.

This should raise deep concern as parents know they cannot forever keep their children safe unless they isolate them and do not allow them internet connectivity, which today is probably next to impossible.

And of course it extends, as I said, to politics, where there is an abundance of violations of this commandment by so many.

One other area that is so dangerous is gossip and backstabbing.

There is the story of a woman confessing her gossip and going to the priest for forgiveness. She is told to take a feather pillow, open it, and cast the feathers to the wind. She is a bit dumbfounded, but asks, "Am I now forgiven?" The Priest says, "First, go and gather up all the feathers and put them back." This helps us see the damage gossip can cause. (Adam Hamilton) The damage of gossip is deadly, but there is a solution that might help: speak as if the one spoken of is listening. Lev 19:11-12 basically sums it up —Leviticus 19:11-12 states: "You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord." Essentially, don't lie, tell the truth.

As Jesus says, let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Ok, but is it ever all right to lie? Well, sometimes yes, but probably less than we think, and it is always in the service of a greater good. The story of Siphrah and Puah, two midwives, shows this. Before the exodus, the Egyptian pharaoh wanted to kill all the newborn Hebrew babies, but these two midwives told the officials that the Hebrew women were studious and gave birth before the midwife could get there.

And in a similar vein.

Those people who sheltered Jews during the Holocaust and lied to officials.

But those are the kinds of exceptions that prove the rule: for the most part, lying is wrong, and deceit can destroy relationships, as many of us can attest in our own lives, those of our family or friends. The adage “Honesty is the best policy” still holds.

As Jesus says, let your yes be yes and your no be no, tell the truth and live with honesty. One of the best ways to honor this commandment is to remember one more old saying: it is always best to tell the truth, so you don't have to remember what you said.

Also helpful is the Rotary Four-Fold Test that was on my wall as a teenager.

1. Is it the truth?
2. Is it fair to all concerned?
3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Truth-telling spoken in love, as Paul said, is the direct path to living with integrity. Ephesians 4:15. When we follow Paul's admonition, the world would be a much better place. Let's apply Paul's admonition and the Rotarian test to ourselves and also use them as a yardstick to evaluate others' comments.

Thanks to Adam Hamilton for many of these ideas in his book on the 10 commandments **Words of Life** and **The Ten Commandments** by Patrick Miller.