

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
June 24, 2018

A Community of Honesty

Exodus 20:16

In December 1984, Glenn Ford was sentenced to death for the killing of a jeweler in Shreveport, Louisiana. The prosecuting attorney was A. M. "Marty" Stroud III. Almost 30 years later, on March 11, 2014, Ford was released from prison when the state admitted new evidence proving that he wasn't the killer. A year later, Stroud wrote a brutally honest apology for *The Shreveport Times*. He said:

In 1984, I was 33 years old. I was arrogant, judgmental, narcissistic and very full of myself. I was not as interested in justice as I was in winning. To borrow a phrase from Al Pacino in the movie "And Justice for All," "Winning became everything." . . . [As a result], Mr. Ford spent 30 years of his life in a small, dingy cell. . . . Lighting was poor, heating and cooling were almost non-existent, food bordered on the uneatable.

After the death verdict [was handed down], I went out with others and celebrated with a few rounds of drinks. That's sick. I had been entrusted with the duty to seek the death of a fellow human being, a very solemn task that certainly did not warrant any "celebration."

In my rebuttal argument during the penalty phase of the trial, I mocked Mr. Ford, stating that this man wanted to stay alive so he could be given the opportunity to prove his innocence. . . . How totally wrong I was. . . . I apologize to Glenn Ford for all the misery I have caused him and his family. I apologize to the [victim's family] for giving them the false hope of some closure. I apologize to the members of the jury for not having all of the story that should have been disclosed to them. I apologize to the court in not having been more diligent in my duty. . . .¹

One of the things that made Stroud's apology so powerful was the fact that in failing to do his duty, he had contributed to the court failing to do its duty. After all, we look to our courts to be a place where all evidence is presented fully and fairly. That way, we can get at the truth. We can figure out what actually happened. We can determine who's guilty and who's innocent. We can apply an appropriate punishment. In order to have a free, independent, and healthy judiciary system, all parties need to be committed to the same objective, namely, justice. Not just winning a case. Not just proving a point. Not just making a statement. But pursuing and obtaining justice.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." It's the ninth of the Ten Commandments. In its original historical setting, it had to do with courtroom practice. It was intended as a check against false accusations in a court of law. Remember that within the life of God's people Israel, there were all sorts of circumstances and situations that required adjudication. For a long time, the covenant community was governed by patriarchs and judges who operated within a system of local courts. These local courts were critical to the implementation of God's law and God's will among the people. In order to be a viable community that embodied and reflected the holiness and righteousness of God, the people of Israel needed a healthy and reliable judicial system. And one of the keys to having a healthy and reliable judicial system was to ensure that no one gave false testimony against another person in a trial.

Then, and now, accurate testimony is essential to the pursuit of justice. Harvard Law School's Alan Dershowitz has noted, "On the basis of my academic and professional experience, I believe that no felony is committed more frequently in this country than [crimes within] the genre of perjury and false statements."² No matter whether the setting is traffic court or the Supreme Court, an episode of Judge Judy or another day in the Mueller investigation, truth telling matters. Without full and complete honesty, our judicial system falls far short of its purpose.

"Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" What if that kind of oath were administered to you not only on the witness stand but in the courtroom of daily life? Do you promise that as this day unfolds, you will, in all your relationships, dealings, and circumstances, speak truthfully and act honestly? Do you vow to avoid falsehood? Do you pledge not to lie or deceive?

Though the ninth commandment was geared primarily toward courtroom practice, its concern for truth and truthfulness goes beyond just legal proceedings. Righteousness and the establishment of justice are at the core of who God is and what he expects of his people. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a God of truth, whose purpose is to reconcile us to himself and set things right in his lost and broken world. This means that truthfulness matters deeply to God, and should matter deeply to God's people.

And yet, we as God's people seek to know and do God's will in a cultural atmosphere where lying seems to be more prevalent than ever. We human beings have always practiced deception, but the ways that we deceive feels like it has reached new levels of skill and nuance. Take for example some of the terminology we use to minimize the reality of lying. Instead of saying, "I lied," we say, "I wasn't truthful," "I misspoke," "I exaggerated," or "I exercised poor judgment." Or we cast it in more passive terms like, "Mistakes were made." These are symptoms of a larger cultural condition where it's more important to put the appropriate "spin" on things than to communicate the facts and tell the truth.

Ralph Keyes has written a book called *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, in which he laments, "I think it's fair to say that honesty is on the ropes." He says, "Even though there have always been liars, lies have usually been told with hesitation, a dash of anxiety, a bit of guilt, a little shame, at least some sheepishness." But now, Keyes notes, ". . . clever people that we are, we have come up with rationales for tampering with truth so we can dissemble guilt-free."³

But the ninth commandment won't let us off the hook. God's character hasn't changed. He's still in the business of truth. He's still speaking the truth to us. He's still calling us to speak the truth to one another. God is determined to have us know the truth. The truth about himself, the truth about ourselves, the truth about the world and his purposes for it. God still promises to complete the work of making all things new through Christ, which includes the command in today's Scripture passage from Ephesians: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (4:25).

In the life of the church, and in society as a whole, cohesion involves telling the truth. In order for people to have confidence in institutions, in social arrangements, in legal agreements, and in the rule of law, there has to be honesty. Honesty is fundamental to personal reputations, to interpersonal relationships, to group interaction, and to forming a sense of community. By contrast, deception erodes trust, undermines cooperation, and

creates disunity. That's why it's so important for a local congregation like ours to be a community of honesty, a fellowship where we deal truthfully and openly with one another.

The Department of Defense regularly publishes a book called *The Encyclopedia of Ethical Failure*. It catalogues examples of ethical failure among federal employees, and is used primarily as a training tool. In some cases, the individual has violated the standards of conduct intentionally, and in other cases unwittingly. In one instance, there were two government executives who had never taken vacation time for several years. But investigators noticed that they had taken lots of "religious compensatory time." Curiously, though, the days never fell on a religious holiday from any known religion. Instead, they happened to coincide with the employees' golf outings. When asked if golf tournaments should be considered a religious holiday, one of the employees said, "They could be for some people."⁴

No doubt this type of deception is commonplace in all sorts of agencies, organizations, and institutions, both public and private. Dishonest words and dishonest deeds at the highest levels of authority are the ones that usually make the headlines. Instances of spin, propaganda, and factual distortion have become so frequent that it can become nearly impossible to figure out what's the truth. But as researchers point out, it's not just the high-profile cases of dishonesty that are corrosive to society. It's the smaller scale, everyday falsehood and deception that weaken our bonds and undercut righteousness. Lying to your spouse. Cheating on your taxes. Padding your resume. Providing false information on an insurance claim. Playing with the numbers in the company books. Posting fake news online. Using social media to spread a lie or rumor about someone.

Researchers doing a study of Twitter looked at differences between the spread of false information and true information. Not surprisingly, they found that "fake news" spread farther, faster, and deeper than the truth, in all categories of information. As one researcher put it, "It took the truth about six times as long as falsehood to reach 1,500 people."⁵ Another individual, one of the study's authors, summarized the findings this way: "No matter how you slice it, falsity wins out."⁶

The ninth commandment, coupled with the Bible's attitude toward lying as a whole, is part of God's way of ensuring that in the long run, falsity doesn't win out. In particular, falsity isn't supposed to win out in the community of God's people in Christ, the church. "Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body." In the life of the church, falsehood can take many forms. Outright lying. Gossiping. Spreading misleading information. Covering up wrongdoing. Withholding information that the congregation needs. Making false accusations. Exaggerating or slanting the truth for personal gain or partisan interests. All these kinds of dishonesty and deception undermine the unity of God's people and weaken our witness in a day and time when truthfulness is desperately needed, at all levels of society.

Remember that God is always fact-checking our words and our deeds. So in our life together as the Lord's people, redeemed by him in Christ, let's seek righteousness and pursue godliness by handling the truth carefully. Let's worship together and work together in an atmosphere of honesty. Let's relate to one another in ways that build up trust and promote cohesion. Let's be open and available to one another so that there's no room for deception. Let's hold one another accountable so that the truth doesn't get distorted or sacrificed for selfish interests or personal glory. Instead, let's always seek God's glory by dealing with one another with transparency, with integrity, and with honesty, so that the truth is heard in our words and seen in our lives.

¹ "Lead Prosecutor Apologizes for Role in Sending Man to Death Row," *The Times* (March 6, 2015).

² Dershowitz is quoted in Joe M. Sprinkle, "A Call to Honesty." *Decision* (October 2000) 32.

³ Keyes is quoted in Albert Mohler, "The Post-Truth Era—Welcome to the Age of Dishonesty." ChristianHeadlines.com. Accessed June 21, 2018 <<https://www.christianheadlines.com/columnists/al-mohler/the-post-truth-era-welcome-to-the-age-of-dishonesty-1300818.html>>.

⁴ Adapted from Stephen J. Dunbar, "Government Employees Gone Wild: Full Transcript," Freakonomics blog (July 17, 2013).

⁵ Maggie Fox, "Fake News: Lies Spread Faster on Social Media Than Truth Does." NBC News website. March 9, 2018. Accessed June 21, 2018 <<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/fake-news-lies-spread-faster-social-media-truth-does-n854896>>.

⁶ Seth Borenstein, "Study Finds False Stories Travel Way Faster Than the Truth." NBC4 Washington website. March 8, 2018 <<https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/tech/Study-Fake-News-Faster-Truth-Social-Media-476288173.html>>.