

## Just Don't Lie

Exodus 20:16

Cradock Presbyterian Church

November 11, 2012

*Witness.* That's the key! It's all about the way you *witness*. It's a legal term! This commandment, at least originally, had a court in mind. It was all about oaths in a legal setting. You already heard this sorta foreshadowed in the 3rd Commandment, about not taking the name of the Lord for vain or empty purposes. That was about swearing in the Lord's name falsely, at least in part it was. No wonder we still have that practice, in our American courts, of having witnesses at trial place their hand on a Bible, and swear to tell the "truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, *so help me GOD.*"

You gotta get back to 1380 B.C. or so, back there to when they got these commandments, to really get a sense of the power of *this* commandment, the necessity of making sure that people didn't "bear false witness" in any way. Those people had nothing permanent. They lived in tents. They had NO protection. All they had was each other. And their covenant, their law. Their law absolutely depended on having witnesses who told the truth. You know why, if you think about it. You can convict a person today, even send 'em to Death Row, without having even one witness. We have ways of collecting evidence through forensics, through DNA, with video cameras and cell phone tower tracking and GPS and on and on, evidence more than good enough to convict beyond a reasonable doubt. But they didn't have that, wandering around back there in the wilderness. So it all came down to witnesses.

So what? you might say. They didn't have much, much property, much to own, so probably there wasn't much to worry about. Well, yeah, there always is. All societies

need laws, because people tend to put themselves first, and tend to push others aside, sometimes even to the point of death, but certainly to the point where people get mad with each other. Since we have to have laws, we have to enforce 'em, or what's the point to having laws? Enforcement has to be fair, because if it isn't, people will turn against the enforcers of the law, and even against the laws themselves. Here's where truth comes in: if truth goes missing, then fairness is missing, too. So making sure witnesses tell the truth, making sure the truth comes out, is absolutely essential to society, especially a society like ancient Israel. Because if you don't think you're getting justice, getting treated fairly, you're just going to get mad and stay mad. Then you won't work well with anybody; and if enough people are like that, what kind of society would that be?

We know that this commandment didn't stay just in the courts. We know that it expanded out to include lying in all parts of life. Somewhere along the way, somebody made the connection: breaking the law in other parts of the commandments is gonna lead to court cases, where people have to tell the truth. But if they'd been truthful, or *honest*, up front, before bad things happened, we'd have never ended up in court! Hmm... So great minds got to realizing that maybe this commandment was more basic than they realized – or maybe it should be.

Think about stealing, in a close-knit society like Israel. We had that commandment last week. As soon as an item got stolen, the owner of that property was going to know right away that it was gone. I mean, they didn't have much at all! – so when anything was missing, you noticed it right away! What do you think would happen,

in a family or close-knit group, when you discovered something was missing? The person with the missing thing would surely say, "Hey! anybody seen my stuff? It's missing!" And then somebody's got to lie. The person who stole it has to lie. Or they have to remain silent, which is really a lie; keeping silent is saying "no," when the truth is "yes." What if they had a klepto in their midst, in wilderness Israel? Everybody would have started looking suspiciously at each other, and everybody would have started guarding their stuff. Lying has a corrosive effect on any group.

Then what does God want? What did he want from Israel, and what does he want from us? Ought to be clear. God wants peace, shalom, for his people. God wants his people to work together. But if everybody's suspicious of everybody else, you get discord instead. Now, remember, God called Israel out of slavery in Egypt to be his witness nation to the world. If the whole nation is running around suspicious of each other, one hand on their wallet, untrusting of each other, how can they be telling the world how good God is? You think any outsiders want to be part of that?

One hand on their wallets – ! You know, I hate to say it, but that almost sounds like us today. We don't trust anybody, do we? And I think it's because lying has become so prevalent. Dear God, am I glad the Presidential campaign is over! Neither candidate acquitted himself very well! Those campaign ads set new records for out-and-out lying. Brother Romney hit a record low by lying about what Jeep was going to do, with shipping jobs out to China, and when he got told by Jeep themselves that it wasn't true, *he bought more air time and put the ad on even more!* The President wasn't much better; the ads that distorted Romney's positions on birth control started running in the

spring and never stopped running, even though the record was corrected. They just got run by so-called “independent political action committees.” Oh yeah, that’s the honest way to do things! You know what all that reflects? It reflects the rationalization that’s at the heart of the way most people lie nowadays. It’s an almost utilitarian view of the truth! You can lie if it helps you do what you want to do, because what you want to do, in the end, is right and good. That has so many strange names: “shading” the truth, or “bending” it; or telling “white lies.” White lies! Who came up with that crazy term?! They’re white because the color of pain hasn’t been painted on them yet. You know why people lie so much? Because they’ve forgotten that Great Commandment, that Double Commandment, as I call it, that Jesus gave us. I know, I keep coming back to it in every one of these sermons on the Commandments. I can’t help it. It applies. If we’d put other people, and God, ahead of ourselves, we’d never lie. See, the truth keeps everybody on a level playing field; it almost never hurts another person, because it’s always doing right by them, so there’s never any need to “get even.” And oh yeah, it’s always doing right by God, which is maybe the most important thing of all. Even if the truth is hard, if you truly put the other person first, you can find a way to tell the truth that makes everything right.

That’s really what this is all about, isn’t it? Telling a lie is about putting you ahead of others, and God. If you tell the truth, you’re making, or keeping, everything right. I don’t mind telling you that I’m a strong subscriber to the old saw about the truth always coming out. If you put yourself in another’s place, you never have to worry. You’ll be living in the truth to begin with. And they’ll know it.

Let's put it this way. Let's go back to the "court setting" I told you this commandment came from, but let's give it an American flavor. What are you guaranteed by American law? A trial by *a jury of your peers!* Your *peers*. People who put themselves in your place, seeking to find the truth, and pass it on: guilty or not guilty. Your life in this world is all about the same kind of thing. You're charged with passing on the verdict God has rendered to your peers in the world: Not Guilty! Your witness will only be believed if you're able to live without any falseness or lack of truth on your own part. Because if you live in falseness or if you lack truth, your witness will only be seen as false. AND God's verdict of "Not Guilty" will be thrown out.

Seem like a long way to go, with a simple commandment? It's pretty simple in practice. Just don't lie – ever. That'll keep your credibility high, so that your job as juror and witness for God is easy to do. And if you continue to tell the truth, if you keep on doing it with sensitivity to others, if you resist the temptations to "shade" or "bend" things to make the moment easier – you won't just be one step closer, you WILL be living the life God has in mind for you and for me.