

Ninth Commandment – Tregear 26.6.2022

The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgement (10:21); Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing (12:18); The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit (18:21) You may have heard some of these . They come from the book of Proverbs. All about the way we speak, the words we use, the impact of careless words thrown around. Who hasn't been hurt by the words of someone?

Our commandment today, the ninth commandment is a powerful reminder of the power for good and destruction of our tongues. *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.*

This commandment is a little different from the other commandments on a couple of counts. Firstly, the other commandments just say don't murder, straight up; don't commit adultery, straight up; why doesn't it just say Don't lie? What does it mean "false testimony"?

The picture here is of a law court; you have been summonsed to give true testimony. This is especially important because the accused stands before authorities that can put him in jail or impose some sort of punishment on him. But it's more than just lying isn't it? You can not lie, but make a factually misleading statement. What I mean is that you give some of the facts but not all the facts, so, yes, it's factually accurate but it's misleading

because not ALL the facts are there. It's selective – and so (the word false has the idea of “worthless”) what I say is worthless, it's a factually misleading statement. The other thing I can do is to say nothing when I know the truth but I choose to be quiet. If I lie or make a factually true but misleading statement or just clam up and say nothing, my neighbour will be devastated.

For the Jewish person the court was significant because if someone didn't give a truthful testimony then you would be punished. So this is how the commandment is framed here. But you know it's not just about the law court. It's about every sphere of life

The previous commandments are all about how we treat our neighbour but it's in this command that it's spelt out, *Don't give false testimony AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOUR*. What's going on here? Well, I guess most of us don't get into fistfights with our neighbours or slip a silver fork into our pocket during a dinner party. Most of our interactions with neighbours take place in speech. So here, God is saying How do we speak *about* our neighbours and *to* our neighbours? Those Proverbs that I read out at the beginning, and there are over 40 that are specifically about the way we use words; they speak to us about the power of our words. Most of us won't be giving evidence in a court of law, so how does this word from God speak to us today?

Lies – let's start here. Certainly the outright lies we would agree are wrong. But what about the selective use of truth; just giving some of the story so that we're telling the truth, but we're being selective so it becomes a factually misrepresenting statement. But it's not enough to give factually accurate statements so that you can say well I didn't really lie. We should never use the facts to advantage ourselves and harm our neighbour.

Tell the truth – Now that seems pretty obvious. Let's take a look at Jesus. Remember Jesus said, "I am the Way the **truth** and the life." All that he is said was truth. We see this in his teaching – he taught the truth about how to live; how to know God. When it came to people he didn't shrink from telling the truth to the Jewish leaders. He scolded them for leading the people away from God's truth; of being hypocrites; he said that their lives were like dead people walking around, they were like white washed tombs, looking good on the outside but corrupt and shrivelled up and dead inside. It was strong language! And they didn't like it – in fact they put him to death, because of it. There is a time for telling the truth – and the chances are that when we do tell the truth there will be those who don't like it. In our world of social media where people spread gossip with great glee; share stories about others – people don't want to hear the truth.

But let's be careful when and how we tell the truth. Notice how Jesus dealt with people again. The Samaritan woman that he met at the well in

the middle of the day because she was too ashamed to come with the other women in the early morning. Jesus could have quite rightly said to her, “You’ve lived a shameful life. What’s the matter with you? You should not be living like that with a man who is not your husband!” But he doesn’t. He begins by asking her for a drink, yes a Jew drinking from a Samaritan’s cup. And gradually he brings the conversation round to reveal her great desire which is to know the Messiah, to have life-giving water. Who will give this to me? At the end of the conversation Jesus tells her about her 5 husbands but it’s not to punish her, or to make himself look more righteous, it’s to show her that he knows her, and even though he knows this stuff about her he wants relationship with her, he wants to give her the life-giving water of the Spirit that will never end. Sometimes it’s right NOT to tell the truth to someone or about someone.

Sure, I can tell someone else about my neighbour or the person in church who did this or said that. But why? Am I seeking to edify them? To help them grow closer to God? Or am I just wanting to get someone on my side against another, or to show how much better I am, or we are?

Why are we saying this piece of information? To build up? To lovingly correct someone?

How does Jesus speak? At times he says nothing in the face of great injustice. He had every right to judge Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the woman who had committed adultery, Peter after he had denied Jesus

In my course this semester at College, I've been thinking and learning about how I listen and speak with others – how do we listen; how do we speak – what is my goal? Am I wanting to encourage them to listen to God and see what God is wanting to change or do in them? Or is this my opportunity to put them in their place, to correct them?

We love to judge and show someone that they are wrong. Why? For their edification? Is there another way we could do this? You could say, “Was there anything else you could have done or said?” or “What were you feeling as you said that?” “What was happening for you inside?” Am I just wanting to fix things so that everything is Ok, or am I genuinely wanting that other person to hear from God, how God might be speaking to them, AND TO ME? That's probably enough for now on this but it's a huge area of our relationships with others.

And I need to be really careful here as I preach each week. There are churches that are telling people the truth; they're expounding Biblical doctrine and it's really accurate, but the intention of their speech is not to persuade or to edify, it's to punish, to say you're wrong and I'm right and so it's a vain worthless witness. Speak the truth and do the truth in love. Don't lie, don't exaggerate; don't spin; don't make claims that you're not going to make good on; don't withhold truth when you know it's needed, but don't tell “truth” in order to make me feel better or please myself.

I've given this example before but why do I get defensive when Georgina sometimes says something to me, seeking to help me to see that I've made a mistake or something isn't quite right. Here's the woman who's stuck by me for 38 years with all my idiosyncracies and strangeness and loved me all through that. And now I am questioning if she really is wanting what's best for me?! How could I do this? I've put the worst construction on her comments. Why do I do this? Pride? Maybe. Fear of looking foolish? Quite possibly. Whatever it is can I listen and be curious and ask, "What are you meaning by that comment darling?"; "Was my tie not quite right? Thanks".

Do you ever do that? Put the worst construction on what someone did or said? It's easy to do isn't it? It reveals my own insecurities, and the fears that lie beneath the surface of my life, my foolish patterns of living which the Devil loves to remind me of; but I can counter this with the truth that I am a child of God, I am totally loved by God, like the Samaritan woman, like Zacchaeus, like the woman caught in adultery, like the Prodigal Son.

Jesus says let your Yes be Yes and No be No. Don't swear by God or something else. Jesus says, Be logical; you're always in front of God; every word you say you're always standing in front of God, and therefore as far as God is concerned you are always under oath; and therefore as far as God is concerned you are always on the witness stand; and that means that if you lie your neighbour will be crushed. The point of this commandment is, human community is destroyed and individual people

are destroyed if you don't tell the truth. It's just as bad inside of court as outside of court.

Louis Smedes: "Truthfulness is an invisible fibre that holds people together in humane community. When we cannot assume that people are truthful then we cannot live with them and trust that they will respect our right to the freedom to respond to reality; and so we lose the opportunity to be human together in God's manner. Speak the truth, be the truth, for the truth sets others free."

God made the world so truth is the only way that things will work. So Jesus is saying that every time you tell a lie you're sabotaging or messing up the possibility of community.

By this stage I hope you're seeing that there is no commandment where you can say I'm fine with this one. We're not at all. We've all broken all the commandments. And so we turn again to the one who has made a way for us to be rescued.

Bob read for us the passage of Jesus on the day of his crucifixion. He was on trial for his life. And so we finish again this week with focussing on Jesus and how he lived out this command. When Jesus was on trial for his life they brought in witnesses, false witnesses, to testify against him, their great neighbour, to destroy him, first in the Jewish court and then before Pilate. It's like a little parable of the human race; this is the reason why

the world doesn't work, why civilization doesn't work – we don't tell the truth and that's why we're so miserable. And here's Jesus Christ coming down right in the middle of it receiving all the same devastation of it that we do. But, here in this account Jesus is finally brought before Pilate and Pilate asks him a question, "Are you a king?" And that's the moment; this is the ultimate test of the 9th commandment, because you see if Jesus tells the truth he's dead – if he says, "Yes, I am a king" – he can't say that not before Roman imperial governor. If he lies or gives a factually accurate misleading statement like "Well I'm just king in people's hearts" or if he just shuts up, then he lives. If Jesus tells the truth then he dies. But, remember he came to die for our sins, didn't he, he came to die for our lies. So if Jesus Christ lies and saves himself we're lost. We need him to tell the truth. If he doesn't, we're sunk, there will be no rescue. So here is the ultimate witness in the ultimate court room and if he doesn't tell the truth at infinite cost to himself then we're done for, doomed. So what does he do – in John 18:37 - *Jesus answered, "You are right in saying that I am a king* Now this sentence is translated in slightly different ways. But basically, Jesus is agreeing with Pilate, "Yes, you've said correctly that I am king." And he goes on to say, *In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*"

"What is truth?" Pilate sneers and proceeds to put him to death. So here it is. There's two ways to look at that; 2 ways to look at Jesus telling the truth and paying the ultimate cost for us. 1. To look at it as just an

example – Oh there's Jesus Christ and this is what we're supposed to do. He's telling the truth no matter what the cost. I better be like him or God won't accept me , or bless me. If you do that, though, you're filling yourself with fear. You're saying I think I can do that I think I can do that – you're thinking of yourself. You're saying I want to tell the truth so I'll feel good about myself, so I'll go to heaven, so God will accept me. And you will fail . You will have to fail. We can't do it.

The second way is to see Jesus not doing it to be an example but doing it as a Saviour. He's the one who sacrificially told the truth, was put to death so that I could be rescued. I will be tempted to lie, to say half-truths about others, to speak words of judgement and not of love and I can look to Jesus as my example but I have nothing to fear because it doesn't depend on me. If I fail I don't have to fear because he has done all that is necessary for me to be saved. And when I look at Jesus and realise more and more his amazing love for me; full of grace, full of truth, then I am encouraged to live as he lived and he gives me his spirit to do this.