The Ninth Commandment

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Preacher: Stephen Murray

[0:00] If you've got a Bible, you can turn to the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, Exodus chapter 20. Two more Sundays in the Ten Commandments, this Sunday and next Sunday.

Exodus 20 and verse 1. Verse 1.
Verse 1.
Verse 1. Verse 1.
In the gospel we have untold riches.
[2:47] and so as we have just taken a collection, an offering we give thanks to you for that and we pray that you might put this money to work to serving your church to building your church and we thank you for the people you have called to the ministry of church planting in our cities and we pray that you will bless and grow this work through the offering that was taken this morning Father Lord we turn our attention to your word and we ask that you would speak truth into our hearts we need that truth, we need your help because we are weak and so we need the life that comes from your word let us see Christ clearly and let your spirit transform us through what we see we ask this in Jesus' holy name Amen So one more command what two more commandments this week and next week now it's been a while since I have talked sport in a sermon and so this is your take this as your quarterly sports related sermon illustration for the morning this one is not about my beloved arsenal this one is about college football the other strange sport that I watch and you all are a little bit bemused by the fact that I watch this

I watched a two part documentary on Netflix earlier this week about a football star named Manti Teo who played for what us South Africans call the University of Notre Dame but what Americans call Notre Dame now in his in his final year of playing for the university he became this kind of national symbol in America of triumph in the face of adversity during the course of that final season the very beginning his grandmother and his girlfriend died on the same day and yet in spite of that tragedy he kind of pushed through and he played and he played an unbelievable season the team got into the championship game at the end of the season he got nominated for the Heisman Trophy which is the trophy they give to the best college football player in the country and all the way through he would kind of dedicate all his victories to the memory of his grandmother and his girlfriend it was a huge story he got into the cover of Sports Illustrated the only problem with the triumph to triumph through tragedy story was that his girlfriend didn't actually exist and to make it even more bizarre the media couldn't tell if he knew whether or not his girlfriend actually existed now I'm not going to give you any spoilers if you don't know the story go and watch it it's fascinating it is a truly wild and incredible story of sophisticated deceit and I mention that because that's the subject of this morning's sermon deceit lying we're looking at the ninth commandment it's there in Exodus 20 verse 16 you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor and so I want to talk about truth telling this morning two things I want to do number one I want us to look at the basis for truth telling and then number two
I want us to look at the promotion of truth telling the basis of truth telling and then the promotion of truth telling so here's the first one the basis I think there are there are three ways you can think about the basis for truth telling so number one there's what we might call the pragmatic or utilitarian basis for truth telling and what I mean by that is that maintaining truthfulness in society and our interactions between other human beings is useful to us it's useful to you and me for ongoing human flourishing so Immanuel Kant famous German philosopher from the 18th century not a Christian he said trust between people is indispensable as a means of acquiring other things of value if we never trusted anyone we could never learn anything useful from anyone else after all they might not be telling us the truth nor could we cooperate with other people in joint ventures after all they may fail to honor their side of the deal now this is just this is just pure common sense right

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we don't tell the truth in society society falls apart everything breaks down like Dave could be running off with that money after this service you don't know like if we didn't have honesty he's not by the way we have checks and balances but we don't know without honesty stuff just falls apart so the Bible
I think is in kind of general agreement with that but then the Bible expands upon that that utilitarian approach and actually gives us a much better grounding for truthfulness and so here's the second way you can think about truthfulness you can think about the basis of truth telling in terms of that the Bible teaches us that God is inherently truthful it's a core piece of his nature so in the Old Testament Numbers 23 verse 19 God is not human that he should lie not a human being that he should change his mind does he speak and then not act does he promise and not fulfill that's the Old Testament you go to the New Testament you find the same thing if you go to Paul's letter to Titus the way he opens up his greeting at the beginning of the letter he says this Paul a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness in the hope of eternal life which God who does not lie promised before the beginning of time so Numbers 23
Old Testament Titus 1 New Testament tell us that God cannot lie and you get a similar statement in the book of Hebrews chapter 6 God does not and cannot lie so that's like he's saying more than the fact that God just keeps his word I'm not just saying God keeps his word it's saying God himself is truth he cannot lie his perfect nature is bound up with truth for him to lie is to be what he is not and so as creatures then as creatures created in his image created by him to live in his world reflecting him we ought to reflect that truthfulness and the more we actually do that the more we live into who he has created us to be to live dishonestly is to diminish the image of God in yourself and it's a denial of your creator now that's a step beyond pragmatism right in terms of a basis for why we should be truthful we engage in truth telling not just because it's useful to us but because it is fundamental to our creator and who he created us to be it's a much more powerful basis for truth telling because if you only if you only have the pragmatic side you might agree that on the whole truth telling is a good for all of us and it should be kept in place but what about moments when an individual act of truth telling is is going to maybe potentially cause you harm or endanger you or cost you what do you do then so imagine imagine you're at some big event like a fundraising dinner or a concert or a wedding and you're packed in with 300 people in this fancy auditorium and you're all packed in there squashed and at one point during the proceedings the emcee comes up to the front to the microphone and he taps the microphone and he says excuse me excuse me excuse me can is the owner is the owner of a white
[10:31] Ford Figo registration number CAA 566721 here are you here sir ma'am are you here you're blocking one of the residence driveways can you please get up and go and move it straight away now everyone starts scanning the room right everybody's looking around what do you do if you're the owner of the Ford Figo do you sit there in that moment and think do you know that one of the most famous philosophers of all time Immanuel Kant said that honesty is the foundational building block of human flourishing therefore I have no shame and embarrassment if I'm going to get up and go move my Ford Figo or do you think maybe I'll just wait for the proceedings to carry on and then I'll secretly slip out during the next song or item you see I suspect in situations like that you need a little bit more than utilitarian pragmatism to motivate you to honesty and so being an honest truthful person must be rooted in the God who created us the God who never lies and the God who commands us his people to never lie but then there's a third basis for truth telling and this is closely tied to the original context of the command that's here in Exodus 20 the third basis for truth telling is love for neighbor remember commandments five through ten are commandments that deal with love for your fellow human being so when

Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself he is summarizing those commandments and their implications the previous three commandments that we've looked at you might remember were all two words in the original Hebrew so no murder no adultery no steal now you'd expect the ninth commandment to follow in that pattern right no lie but instead if you look down you see you get a longer sentence literally we get no giving false or deceitful testimony against your neighbor in the backdrop there's the law court it's law language you would have noticed in this series that there's a lot of capital punishment in ancient Israel in the civil law of ancient Israel and that goes for the whole ancient Near East at that time in fact there's probably more in the rest of the ancient Near East a lot of crimes are punished via capital punishment you don't have back then you don't have

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sophisticated well resourced correctional facilities that place in history that time in history you also at this point in history you don't have very developed and sophisticated crime investigation there is no
CSI Sinai at this point there's no there's no fingerprint taking there's no DNA samples there's no highly trained specialist who can recreate the scene of the crime there's no computer modelling all you've got when it comes to making judgments in cases are witnesses so the Bible says well you've got to have multiple witnesses to convict in Deuteronomy but that can be pretty easily abused right and so the ninth commandment then comes along and it safeguards and strengthens the administration of justice and the preserving of innocent life against wrongful conviction see if honesty and integrity and truth telling is not codified into God's moral law it puts the very life of people in jeopardy in that ancient legal system in the time of Moses bearing false witness was just about the worst thing you could do for somebody worst form of deceit
Kevin DeYoung in his little book on the ten commandments he says this he says what we see throughout the ten commandments is that each commandment often gives us the worst example of sinning in some way for instance murder is the worst way of breaking the sixth commandment but Jesus tells us that it's not the only way you can also be angry adultery is the worst way of violating the seventh commandment but Jesus tells us that if you lust after someone you've also sinned so with the ninth commandment the worst thing you can do is bear false witness in a court of law where someone's life could be snuffed out because of your deceit that's why the command doesn't just say no lying the heart of this command is the preservation of human life human well being and you find these ideas combined all the way through the Old Testament law so in Leviticus chapter 19 verse 16 it says do not go about spreading slander among your people that's a form of lying or deceit slandering then the very next line straight underneath that says do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life so Moses connects slandering someone with endangering their life if it's the two together the command is not just placing a prohibition on telling a lie positively it is forcing us I think to think how we use our speech how we use our speech our verbal affirmations our condemnations in such a way that we don't harm people in such a way that people aren't unjustly punished or endangered or put at risk through what we say so sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me
I think the ninth commandment says that's not true if we speak words of deceit we harm people in contrast actually to sticks and stones proverbs 18 tells us the tongue is the power of life and death so we'd better make sure we'd better make sure that when we bear witness in our speech it's true it's not false now that's the basis that's the basis for truth telling there's the pragmatic utilitarian basis is the fact that our truth telling is rooted in a God who is truth himself and never lies and then it's rooted in love for neighbor now let's apply this and talk about promoting the truth comprehensively you will know having gone through this series now that it's really not enough for me to just stand up here and say ladies and gentlemen always tell the truth be honest in your interactions with everybody we have got ways we are sophisticated we are crafty and we have got ways of maintaining a veneer of honesty and integrity while still violating the ninth commandment and so we go back to our friends the Westminster divines and the catechism they got this so listen to the comprehensive duties that they put down in the larger catechism they write the duties required in the ninth commandment are the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man and the good name of our neighbor as well as our own appearing and standing for the truth and from the heart sincerely freely clearly and fully speaking the truth and only the truth in matters of judgment and justice and in all other things whatsoever a charitable esteem of our neighbors loving desiring and rejoicing in their good name sorrowing for and covering of their infirmities freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces defending their innocency a ready receiving of a good report and unwillingness to admit of an evil report concerning them discouraging tale bearers flatterers and slanderers love and care for our own good name and defending it when need requires keeping of lawful promises studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true honest lovely and of good report now I
[17:58] I think that is such a beautiful picture of human interaction right don't you want to live in that world notice how many of the duties are tied up with preserving the good name of others ensuring that others are seen in as favorable light as possible isn't that so so so so refreshing in a social media age where we tear each other down the slightest womb I mean social media has enabled us to supercharge our violations of the ninth commandment Peter Lightheart theologian in his book on the ten commandments he says we're spun by a whirlpool of rumor innuendo false

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accusations slander libel people are tried and condemned by online lynch mobs we like or share tweets and facebook posts even though we can't possibly confirm their accuracy we exaggerate the stupidity or malevolence of ideological adversaries to score points and win honor in twitter combat officially committed to the ten commandments the church does no better

Christians fire up the digital kindling to burn supposed heretics without due process humility or care this isn't merely an improper use of neutral technology YouTube gives preference to controversial videos the more outlandish the better twitter is a medium of self presentation often self preening where every user plays a game of brand management not by accident but by design social media encourages violations of the ninth commandment that shouldn't be us people who keep the ninth commandment should be radically generous and charitable in their assessments of others we should flee slander we should run as far as we can away from gossip we should be looking to build people up with our words not tear them down none of this means that we shouldn't say hard things hard firm things about bad behavior about sin about corruption that we see in other people we have to do that we must as the
Westminster divine say in the catechism and I quote appear and stand for the truth from the heart sincerely freely clearly and fully speaking the truth and only the truth in matters of judgment and justice we can't shy away from that we can't shy away from speaking hard truths in the interest of justice but we must be oh so very very very careful as we do it in a world of polarization in a world of shrill voices canceling each other left right and center the Christian ethic that is entrenched in the Ten Commandments can I think be a wonderful incredibly refreshing way of bearing witness to the goodness of our God friends people are exhausted of this cancel culture they are they're exhausted they're tired and they're terrified and the reason I know this is because this conversation comes up over and over and over again no matter where I go people keep having this conversation with me I speak to parents of children in our public schools here in the city of Cape Town where pretty radical and progressive ideology is flooding in at an unprecedented speed ideology around gender around sexuality around race and the parents are looking and they're going we really don't think some of this stuff is right we think there's some really harmful social theory getting pumped into the structures of our schools and into the minds into the hearts of our children social theory that doesn't have empirical science backing it up but we don't dare say anything we might be in the majority but we don't dare say anything because we're terrified of the repercussions being labeled bigots fundamentalists or racists at the same time because of the work I've been doing with Isipambano Center for Biblical Justice over the last few years I've had the privilege of speaking to many young black Christians in predominantly white spaces and particularly in churches and there I'm hearing instance after instance after instance of paternalistic forms of racism racism with a smile that they're experiencing you know what these young black Christians say to me they say well I'm never going to mention those instances
I'm never going to say anything about it I'm never going to bring it up I'll never publicly challenge a racist comment in that space because I'm terrified I'm terrified of being labeled woke or a critical race theorist or a Marxist or something like that friends cancel culture is not the exclusive domain of one ideological camp now into this polarization into this fear into this exhaustion I think we as the Christian community can bring refreshment and healing and peace through a consistent application of the ninth commandment where we speak truth clear truth but we deal with the utmost care and concern for the name and reputation of everybody that we speak about in some ways because I'm a pastor
[23:31] I'm and I use this word with this term with qualifications but I'm a professional theologian that is I spend my whole work week working in the field of theology I live in the world of theology and it's a contentious world it's a contentious world where the stakes are high because we're talking about belief in God getting theology wrong has pretty significant consequences because you're getting God wrong so there's a lot of rigorous and forceful debate in the theological world and to some extent there needs to be now as a younger theologian I plunged headlong into that savage critique and having access to social media that didn't help either if I was Stephen Murray's seminary professor almost two decades ago I think I might have had some significant reservations about Mr. Murray ever becoming Reverend Murray my heroes back then were pastors and theologians who had the tightest arguments and who could beat down their opponents with like brilliant rhetoric and insight now by God's grace I think

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I think I've matured a little bit since then you can ask my wife she's had a front row seat to all of this all the way along she can tell you whether it's true or not but today what I find incredibly refreshing what I find life-giving like I actually get warm fuzzies in my heart around this is to be in the presence of older pastors and theologians who have very strong carefully reasoned biblical convictions pastors and theologians who are not weak on truth but who have bags and bags of grace and charity for their opponents in the way that they speak about them and the way they conduct themselves and interactions with them to see the commitment to truth held up alongside a commitment to preserving the good name of the other person is such a beautiful thing to see it's really such a beautiful thing to see and it's so countercultural so very very countercultural and I think it is such an incredibly attractive and persuasive apologetic for us in front of a watching world we must promote comprehensive truth telling in our interactions with other people but there's one other place we need to promote comprehensive truth telling and that's in our own hearts Matthew chapter 5 verse 37 when Jesus tackles the issue of truth telling he famously says let your yes be your yes and your no be your no and then he actually goes on and he says anything beyond this comes from the evil one in other words he's saying when you bear false witness when you break the ninth commandment when you lie when you gossip when you slander that's coming from somewhere it's coming from the devil it's coming from Satan now in scripture Satan is described in all sorts of different ways but the one characteristic about him that comes up over and over and over and over again is that he is a repeat offender when it comes to the ninth commandment John chapter 8 44 Jesus says Satan was a murderer from the beginning not holding to the truth for there is no truth in him when he lies he speaks his native language for he is a liar and the father of lies now notice there that

Jesus our Lord also connects the taking of life with lying like the law of Moses does Satan is a murderer because he's dishonest by nature if you if you prick him he bleeds deceit and in his deceitful ways he goes around looking to devour us 1 Peter your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking to looking for someone to devour and the way that he devours us is in accordance with his nature he speaks lies to us he whispers lies into our ears he sows doubt he accuses he works his wicked plots by getting us to lie to ourselves and the number one lie that he tells us is this God could never accept you

God could never accept you look what a mess you are look at it look at your sin look at your failures look at your inabilities look how many church services you've missed this year God could never love you he never accept you and when we believe that lie that's when we start to break the ninth commandment just think about it why do you lie why do you gossip why do you slander people why do you create an overinflated view of yourself it's because in your heart of hearts you are desperately insecure and you are trying to cover over that insecurity you don't feel accepted you don't feel loved you don't feel justified you don't feel adequate and so well you compensate somehow you save face publicly to get that sense of acceptance while at the same time decimating honesty behind you you feel a need to justify yourself so you utter you utter a half truth in a social setting to to get a momentary sense of justification of righteousness our need for righteousness is what drives our dishonesty the more insecure you feel the more likely you are to employ dishonesty in your life and a lifetime of that is going to produce one of two things either you're going to keep building up your own legend and become proud and arrogant and desensitized to the lies that you're telling or you're going to get found out as a fraud and you are going to sink under the weight of personal and public condemnation and failure there's an insecurity in the base of our hearts that drives our violations of the ninth commandment and the devil well he does everything that he possibly can to amplify that insecurity he's like this is how I take you down he whispers into your ear day in day out you you are not enough and no one will ever truly love you and accept you and friends it's at precisely that moment that we need to exercise the ninth commandment it is precisely at that moment that we need to tell the truth here's the truth here's Martin Luther the great reformer telling the truth he says when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell tell him this I admit that I deserve death and hell what of it for I know one who has suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf his name is Jesus

[30:50] Christ son of God and where he is there I shall be also that's the truth that is the truth that is the truth of the gospel the truth is here's the truth friends for every single person in case you're confused and you came in you're confused about your life I want to tell you the truth this morning this is the truth you are not adequate to find acceptance before a holy God you're just not the truth is that your sin does separate you from divine love the truth is that God should pour his

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condemnation out on you but the truth is also that that condemnation was poured out on Jesus Christ on the cross the truth is also that through Christ's sacrifice you are now a recipient of divine love and the truth is also that in the gospel you are fully fully fully justified and accepted by your holy father as a dearly beloved son or daughter that's the truth that's the truth we must promote not just out there but in here friends if you don't have that truth if you don't have that gospel truth as your anchor as your right standing before God it's not the rock upon which your justification stands then you will always turn to things like dishonesty to try and justify yourself always do it when you when your sense of of being right before the creator God of the universe is based on what Jesus has already done then you don't need a lie anymore you don't need a lie you don't need dishonesty you don't need to make yourself look better in front of anybody else you'll be a different person a person whose yes is yes and whose no is no is no you'll be a person who isn't afraid of the opinions of other people because you feel so securely accepted and justified in Christ and so you'll have the courage to speak truth in difficult moments even against social pressure but because you know that you have received this love not because you deserved it but because of Christ's compassionate generosity and favor to you well then you'll also bend over backwards to speak truth in a way that is generous and gracious and compassionate and charitable to those with whom you differ think of a little boy who has a kind loving and protective father and this father regularly and deliberately speaks truthful words of affirmation to his son week after week after week he reminds his child that he loves him that he unconditionally accepts him that he cares for him that nothing in this world will break his commitment to him

I tell you what that little boy is going to grow up with far less insecurities than many other people he will grow up with a confidence that allows him to pursue that which is noble to pursue that which is true unhindered by what other people are going to think and I know this because I'm the little boy who grew up without a father whispering that affirmation in my life and I went through primary school and high school painting over over-inflated pictures of myself in a desperate effort to compensate even as a young Christian I went into ministry and I was attracted to these harsh polemical theologians because it gave me a chance to show off my intellect to puff myself up in the eyes of others I was not listening to the affirming voice of my heavenly father friends you have a heavenly father who by the spirit of truth regularly whispers in your ear you are my child
I love you I accept you you belong to me completely and I will always be with you and you say Stephen when does God whisper that into my ear and I say he whispers it every single time he reminds you about the cross every single time he reminds you about Christ giving his life to grant you an acceptance that you do not deserve listen to that spirit of truth let him expel your insecurities and then go out and live a life of honesty and truth telling in service of God and in service of neighbor let's pray our father and our king we just way too often give in to the king of lies to Satan we too often believe the things that he would whisper into our ears we too often fail to listen to the spirit of truth that reminds us of the gospel father let us hear the gospel clearly this morning let us hear the truth of the gospel clearly this morning that in Jesus Christ we are justified accepted we are your children you love us dearly let that be the basis for who we are as human beings because when we have that then we will live as truthful human beings in all our other interactions with courage with kindness father I pray for any person who comes in here this morning who maybe does not know that Christ loves them does not know that there is forgiveness available in the gospel
I pray that you would bring them to salvation this morning for the rest of us Lord I pray that we would be a comprehensively truthful congregation Lord that we would be a place of healing and refreshment in a world and in a culture that is so polarized and so hateful help us father we pray and we ask this in Jesus holy name amen

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