

## Lesson 33: Questions 81, 82, and 83

In our last lesson, we considered the eighth commandment: “Thou shalt not steal.” We saw that it requires the lawful procuring and furthering of our own and our neighbor’s wealth and outward estate, and forbids whatever unjustly hinders either. The eighth commandment therefore governs property, possessions, labor, and material well-being. The ninth commandment now turns from God’s protection of our neighbor’s material estate to His protection of truth, justice, and our neighbor’s good name.

81–83

### Question 81: Which is the ninth commandment?

Q. Which is the ninth commandment?

A. The ninth commandment is, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exodus 20:16, ESV)*

Like the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments, the ninth is remarkably brief. Yet we would misunderstand it badly if we restricted it to the most obvious outward violation. “*Thou shalt not bear false witness*” certainly forbids lying. God is the God of truth; He cannot lie, and falsehood is contrary to His character (**Titus 1:2**; **Hebrews 6:18**). But this commandment comprehends an entire moral category concerning truthfulness between people, *especially* where it affects judgment and justice.

The wording matters. It speaks of bearing witness “against thy neighbour”. Its immediate concern is false testimony that harms another person. A false witness can deprive an innocent man of property, liberty, livelihood, or even life. Thus God explicitly forbade His people from spreading a false report, joining a wicked man in false witness, or showing partiality in judgment:

*“You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.”*

*“You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. (Exodus 23:1-3, 6-8, ESV)*

Accusations are serious, evidence matters, justice requires careful inquiry, and false testimony is destructive. A lie can become an instrument of theft, oppression, violence, or murder.

This is the same positive-law pattern we have observed throughout these commandments.

- “*Thou shalt not kill*” does not merely *forbid murder*; it *preserves LIFE*.
- “*Thou shalt not commit adultery*” does not merely *forbid adultery*; it *preserves CHASTITY*.
- “*Thou shalt not steal*” does not merely *forbid theft*; it *preserves POSSESSIONS*.
- So “*thou shalt not bear false witness*” does not merely *forbid lying*; it *preserves TRUTH*.

A person may therefore violate the ninth commandment without ever entering a courtroom. He may do so through a variety of behaviors, such as slander, gossip, or exaggeration. He may tell technically accurate facts in such a distorted, selective, or cruel manner that he communicates a lie.

### Question 82: What is required in the ninth commandment?

Q. What is required in the ninth commandment?

A. The ninth commandment requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbour’s good name, especially in witness bearing.

The catechism begins with “the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man”. God commands: “*These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord.*” (**Zechariah 8:16-17**)

**FIRST**, we must speak truthfully. Christians should be known as people whose words may be trusted. We should speak plainly, avoid exaggeration, keep lawful promises, and refuse to use vague or carefully calculated language in order to mislead. We should not make claims beyond what we know, present speculation as certainty, or conceal a material fact when justice requires us to disclose it.

This matters especially in witness bearing. Proverbs teaches that a faithful witness does not lie and that a truthful witness saves lives (**Proverbs 14:5, 25**). Truthful testimony may protect an innocent person from punishment, vindicate a falsely accused neighbor, expose genuine wrongdoing, or establish justice where confusion and falsehood have clouded the matter.

*A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (Deuteronomy 19:15-21, ESV)*

A single witness was not ordinarily enough to establish a charge; the matter required confirming testimony. If someone maliciously brought a false charge, he was to receive the penalty he intended for his neighbor, up to the death penalty. The general equity of this law is clear: accusations are serious, evidence matters, justice requires careful inquiry, and false testimony is destructive.

**SECOND**, the ninth commandment requires us to preserve and promote our neighbor's good name. A good name is not a shallow concern. Scripture recognizes that a person's reputation affects his relationships, usefulness, livelihood, and ability to serve. We should therefore receive credible good reports gladly and receive evil reports reluctantly.

This does not mean we become naïve. Charitable judgment is not refusing to believe clear evidence. Nor does protecting a good name mean concealing sin, crime, abuse, or injustice. There are times when love requires a private conversation, a church discipline process, a report to proper authorities, or truthful testimony in a lawful investigation. But our goal must be truth and restoration, not entertainment, retaliation, or the pleasure of exposing another person's weakness.

We should listen carefully before forming a judgment. We should ask whether we have heard both sides. We should interpret another person's words and actions fairly where the evidence permits. We should refuse the easy pleasure of gossip. We should not become a receptacle for every tale-bearer, and neither should we spread a report simply because someone else gave it to us.

Love covers many offenses in the sense that it does not needlessly expose every fault (**Proverbs 17:9; 1 Peter 4:8**). Keeping confidences can be an act of faithfulness. Yet confidentiality may never become a shelter for abuse, criminal conduct, or continuing injustice. A confidence is not ours to preserve when preserving it means abandoning the vulnerable or obstructing lawful justice.

The catechism also requires care for our own good name. That is not vanity.

*Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true. (3 John 12, ESV)*

Notice a few things here:

1. John thinks it is important to speak well of the reputation of Demetrius.
2. John calls several witnesses to verify his assertion ("everyone", the truth, and himself).
3. John appeals to his own good reputation, which undergirds his argument for Demetrius.

Scripture commends a reputation of integrity, and a Christian may defend his character when false accusations threaten his calling or the peace of Christ's church (**Job 27:5-6**). But our name must actually be good. We may not defend a reputation through denial, image management, retaliation, or concealment of actual sin. Where we have sinned, repentance begins with truth.

## Question 83: What is forbidden in the ninth commandment?

Q. What is forbidden in the ninth commandment?

A. The ninth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever is prejudicial to the truth, or injurious to our own or our neighbour's good name.

The negative side is deliberately broad. The ninth commandment forbids “whatsoever is prejudicial to the truth, or injurious to our own or our neighbour's good name.” False witness is much broader than perjury. Scripture places these sins together with remarkable seriousness.

*There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers. (Proverbs 6:16-19, ESV)*

**FIRST**, it forbids falsehood in all its forms. Lying, false testimony, forged evidence, false accusation, dishonest promises, and deliberate misrepresentation all attack truth. A lie told in court may be **especially** serious because it corrupts public justice, but a lie told in a home, church, workplace, classroom, or conversation remains sin against God and neighbor.

The commandment also forbids **deceptive silence** where truth is owed. We must not withhold necessary testimony when an innocent person needs defense or when justice depends upon truthful disclosure. Silence can be cowardice. If we know a report is false and have a proper opportunity and responsibility to correct it, refusing to speak may make us participants in the injury.

At the same time, speaking truth unseasonably or maliciously can violate the commandment. Not every true fact needs public circulation. A person may repeat an accurate report with the purpose of humiliating another, damaging his ministry, harming his employment, or enjoying his disgrace. Truth is not a weapon placed in our hands for revenge.

The ninth commandment does not, however, require us to disclose every fact to every person in every circumstance. Prudence, confidentiality, and lawful discretion are not deception. Neither does it require us to pretend that sin is righteousness, that abuse is harmless, or that credible evidence does not exist. But it does require us to be people whose speech corresponds to reality, whose witness serves justice, and whose words seek our neighbor's true good.

***A difficult question belongs here: is every lie or deception necessarily sinful?***

***Christians have differed on this.*** We should be **very slow** to make exceptions to the ordinary obligation of truthfulness. **Usually**, our duty is clear: speak truth, keep promises, and refuse lies.

Some Christian theologians, including Wayne Grudem, maintain that **lying is never lawful**, even to protect innocent life. R.C. Sproul argued instead, “We should always tell the truth where righteousness and justice require it.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, deceiving murderous aggressors in order to protect the innocent may become not merely permissible but obligatory. I side with R.C. Sproul on this one, because I see Scripture distinguishing truthfulness from providing information intended for evil use:

- The Hebrew midwives feared God rather than Pharaoh and protected Hebrew children under a murderous decree; God dealt well with them and gave them families (**Exodus 1:15-21**).
- Rahab protected the Israelite spies from those seeking their lives, and Scripture commends her faith and reception of the spies (**Joshua 2; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25**).

In such cases, wicked aggressors had no rightful claim to information by which they intended to murder the innocent. Therefore, I believe **a lie may be justified** in the extraordinary circumstance of protecting another person from imminent, unjust violence, as when Christians deceived Nazi authorities in order to shelter Jews. This is not permission for convenience, embarrassment, profit, social pressure, or ordinary self-protection. Most of us will never face such a circumstance.

The ordinary rule remains: Christians speak the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> See R.C. Sproul, “Love Your Neighbor”, and Wayne Grudem, “Why It Is Never Right to Lie”.

**SECOND**, the commandment forbids injuring our neighbor's good name. Leviticus says plainly, "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people" (**Leviticus 19:16**). **Psalm 15** describes the godly man as one who does not slander with his tongue or do evil to his neighbor (**Psalm 15:2-3**).

Eliab's treatment of David provides a useful example. When David arrived at the battlefield, Eliab assumed the worst, falsely charged him with pride and wicked motives, and spoke harshly against him (**1 Samuel 17:28**). Eliab did not know David's heart. He interpreted David's actions in the least charitable way possible.

We commit the same sin when we assume motives without evidence:

- Someone makes a mistake, and we call him dishonest.
- Someone disagrees with us, and we call him divisive.
- Someone asks a difficult question, and we call her rebellious.
- Someone makes a prudent decision different from ours, and we assign selfish motives.

Mature Christians learn to distinguish what they know from what they infer.

The ninth commandment therefore forbids gossip, tale-bearing, backbiting, slander, and the careless repetition of rumors. "I am just telling you so that you can pray" does not transform a harmful report into a godly one. Necessary warnings must sometimes be given, but they should go to the proper people, contain only what is needed, distinguish evidence from suspicion, and aim at protection and justice rather than circulation.

It also forbids exaggeration, selective reporting, and presenting technically true details so as to create a false impression. Modern communication makes this especially easy. A clipped quotation, anonymous post, forwarded screenshot, or reckless online accusation can injure a person's reputation, relationships, and livelihood in a few moments.

Before we repeat an allegation, we should ask:

- Is it true?
- Is it necessary?
- Is this the proper venue?
- Have I heard the other side?
- Am I seeking justice, or merely passing along a story?

**THIRD**, the commandment forbids falsehood about ourselves. Flattery, hypocrisy, vainglorious boasting, and misrepresenting our intentions all damage truth. We may tell lies about ourselves in order to appear more spiritual, more successful, more knowledgeable, or more injured than we actually are. We may also speak too harshly about ourselves in a way that invites praise and manipulates sympathy.

A damaged reputation caused by our own sin is not the same thing as unjust injury to our reputation. If a man has acted dishonestly, telling the truth about his dishonesty is not slander. If someone commits abuse or crime, responsible reporting does not violate the ninth commandment. **The commandment does not protect a false public image.** It protects truth and rightful honor.

Nor may Christians use the ninth commandment to silence lawful concerns. Churches must not confuse gossip with a responsible report, confidentiality with concealment, or charity with refusal to investigate credible allegations. The same commandment that forbids false accusation also requires faithful witness and the defense of the innocent.

Yet we must never use another person's actual fault as an excuse for cruelty. Love does not delight in wrongdoing. It grieves over sin, seeks repentance, protects those harmed, and speaks truth in the proper place with humility and restraint.

# Conclusion

Questions 81 through 83 teach us that God governs our testimony, judgments, and reputations.

81. **The commandment itself is simple:** *“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.”*

82. **What it requires is broader:** the maintaining and promoting of truth between people and the preservation of our own and our neighbor's good name, especially in witness bearing.

83. **What it forbids is equally broad:** whatever harms truth or unjustly injures a person's good name.

Take this lesson with you in three ways.

- **FIRST, live** as a trustworthy person.

Speak truthfully.

Keep lawful promises.

Refuse exaggeration, manipulation, gossip, and careless reports.

Let your words be dependable because you belong to the God of truth.

- **SECOND, guard** your neighbor's name.

Do not receive every accusation eagerly.

Listen carefully.

Interpret charitably where the facts allow it.

Defend the innocent.

Keep appropriate confidences.

And when wrongdoing must be reported or addressed, do so truthfully, responsibly, and through proper channels.

- **THIRD, receive** correction humbly.

A good name is worth preserving, but it must truthfully be good.

We must not defend sin, conceal injustice, or turn reputation into an idol.

Where we have lied, slandered, exaggerated, concealed, or damaged another person's name, we should repent, confess, correct the record, and seek reconciliation where possible.

Christ was the faithful and true witness. Yet He was slandered, falsely accused, and condemned through perjured testimony. He did not answer sin with deceit.

*He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:22-24, ESV)*

He bore the shame of guilty liars, and by His grace He forgives them and transforms them into people who love the truth.

Let us therefore steward our words faithfully: speak truth, correct falsehood where we have spread it, seek reconciliation where we have injured another, and love our neighbor in gratitude to the God of truth.