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Help Create Justice!
Exodus 20: 16

Funny, isn't it, the things one remembers from childhood?
I remember when we would be traveling on a long trip and my father would not want to stop, and there would be one coke in the cooler and my sister and I would both want it. I, as the elder child, clearly deserved that drink, but my sister didn't seem to see it that way. My father would say, "Richard, pour the coke into two glasses and share with your sister." Now, at first glance, this would seem like a command open to interpretation, easy to manipulate in my favor. I could pour my sister just a little bit of the coke and pour myself the lion's share. But my father had a foolproof way of ensuring fairness: his next statement would be, "After you've poured the drink into two glasses, let your sister choose which she would prefer." No skilled bartender ever poured that coke with greater precision, as I made absolutely sure that those drinks were perfectly equal. I took away from my father's little system a spiritual lesson that has stayed with me: if you want justice, you must be willing to do your part to create it.

The Ninth Commandment impressed this same point upon the Hebrew people: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." A society cannot live without justice or truth. But the only way justice and truth can be characteristic themes of a community is if everyone covenants together to serve as agents to work on truth's and justice's behalf. Indeed, the juridical system that the Hebrew people enacted in obedience to the Ninth Commandment impressed upon her people the value of being completely truthful. First, in a capital case, the testimony of a single witness was not sufficient to gain a conviction. Two witnesses were required, three preferred. Thus, if someone intended to give false testimony, they would need to create a conspiracy of deceit. Second, the witnesses whose testimony helped convict someone in a capital case were required to take part in the execution of the sentence. This stipulation impressed upon a witness that to lie under oath was tantamount to committing murder. Third, any witness found to be guilty of perjury in a capital case was condemned to suffer the same punishment that would have been meted out to the accused. By these stipulations the Hebrew people were reminded that if they were going to build a society of truth and justice, they would need to covenant together to create an environment of honesty.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."
Our attention focuses upon the first phrase of the statement.
But the last phrase is equally important: don't give false testimony *against your neighbor*.
At the root of the Hebrew understanding of society was the recognition that I as an individual bear the sacred emblem of God. You bear the sacred emblem of God, too. Some years ago a brilliant Hebrew scholar offered the incisive observation that the Hebrew word for trust in one's neighbor, "aman," is derived from the Hebrew verb for faith and reliance, "emuna."
That means one neighbor can say to another, "I can trust you to tell the truth as my 'aman,' my 'neighbor,' because I recognize that we are bound together by the sacred emblem of faith, "emuna."

Both of us bear the mark of the sacred emblem of God, so we share a faith covenant. I can trust you to tell the truth about me when my life hangs in the balance, and you can trust me to tell the truth about you when your life hangs in the balance. Because each of us bears the sacred emblem of God. You and I enter into that covenant relationship every time that we pray. For how do we end our prayers? We end them with “Amen,” derived from “aman,” trust in my neighbor. When we say “Amen,” we are really saying, “I trust it to be so. May God make it so.”

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”

Perhaps more than any other commandment, the Ninth Commandment frankly raises the question, “Why should we be moral creatures?” The answer comes to us plainly:

Because society cannot survive without its people making a communal commitment to morality. Justice can only be achieved if a people take upon themselves the responsibility for helping create an atmosphere where truth can flourish

A recent *National Geographic* contains a quote from a notoriously corrupt African leader who advised his people “to steal just a little bit.”

He advised them that as long as they didn’t become too greedy they could steal with impunity.

There is even a word for such a society: a kleptocracy -- a place where people live by stealing.

Needless to say the economy of that African country is in shambles because its ethic of dishonesty has created an unworkable chaos where no trust can prevail.

What happens to a country where its people cannot be trusted to tell the truth about their neighbors?

I’ll give you one famous example. In the year 1678, an Englishman, a former Jesuit priest employed by the Crown as a spy, informed the Crown that there was a “Popish plot,” to kill King Charles II and re-establish Catholicism as the state religion of England. Panic ensued. The nation seethed in upheaval.

Hundreds of people were imprisoned, many of them tortured.

Countless lives were ruined before an investigation revealed that Titus Oates had invented the entire story to vent his spleen against Roman Catholics, for whom he had developed a great hatred.

Having destroyed so many lives and put an entire nation in turmoil, Titus Oates was publicly flogged from one end of London to the other, and then imprisoned for over a decade.

“Thou shalt not bear false witness.” Why be moral?

Because a lie is an attempt to repudiate and recreate reality.

A lie is a repudiation of things as they are and an attempt to create things as we want them to be, with consequences that are invariably destructive.

One of the saddest stories I’ve encountered in recent years is that of a young man who was athletically gifted but academically challenged.

He announced that he was attending Middle Tennessee State on a football scholarship.

He received everyone’s acclaim and acclamation. His parents threw him a party. He was a celebrity.

But on the day he was to go to school, his parents planned to follow behind him with his furniture, and just before they pulled out of the driveway, the boy told his mom that he had to go back in the house and get something. He entered the house and took his life.

There was no scholarship. There was no acceptance at Middle Tennessee State.

The lie represented what he wanted reality to be, and he tried to live as though it was true, until the lie came crashing down upon him and destroyed him.

Trying to recreate reality through a lie is destructive for an individual.

Trying to recreate reality through a lie on a large scale is even more ruinous.

Some years ago, a noted art critic attended a museum in the Soviet Union during the early 1950's and heard the curator say, "In the basement we have locked away the work of modern French artists. We would never show them because they are representative of capitalistic decadence. We aspire to a higher artistic plane."

A decade later the same art critic visited the same museum during a time when the Soviet Union was attempting to show its progressiveness. The same curator was speaking, and this time he said, "In this section we display the modern French artists, though western journalists charge that we are so repressive that we don't show such artists. Of course we do. It just so happened that the art critics who came earlier visited when we were remodeling and didn't have wall space."

On one level it was just a little lie. Yet the critic realized that he was experiencing an Orwellian vision of a totalitarian government writing and rewriting history according to the demands of the day.

Here was a real-life Ministry of Truth trying to say that there was no such thing as objective truth – the truth was just a vehicle to be used for the purposes of the system.

How, wondered the critic, could there be justice in a society where there was no regard for truth?

For the Hebrew people justice was sacrosanct. The truth was sacrosanct.

Perhaps the most powerful commentary on the Ninth Commandment was provided by Exodus 23:3, which says, "You shall not follow a majority in wrong doing.

When you bear witness in a lawsuit, you are not to side with the majority so as to pervert justice."

But the same verse also says: "You shall not be partial to the poor man in a lawsuit."

Justice is so important that the truth cannot be subverted either by the influence of the powerful or by sentiment for the powerless.

The truth is so important that justice is not to be perverted to oppress the powerless or undermine the powerful. The truth is above sentiment! Truth and justice even protect the unpopular!

At one level the Ninth Commandment simply commands people to tell the truth in court.

Yet its implications are far greater. The Ninth Commandment calls us to pursue justice with passion, yet it is also true that the pursuit of justice is always complex. It is seldom simple.

You can be as poor as a preacher and still know that the events that have taken place in the stock markets and banking industry this week have changed our world – have changed the tenor of the entire world.

Now we as a nation are clamoring for regulations that would restrict the banking and housing industries from practicing the sort of speculative practices that have led to our current disaster.

We are now demanding from our presidential candidates that they propose solutions to this disaster, and we expect that what they promise on the campaign trail they will deliver once they are elected.

We believe that our society cannot function unless there is some correlation between what campaign promises are made and what actually happens.

In fact, the candidates have heard us and are responding with all kinds of regulatory suggestions.

Yet, I read this week that months ago, the current Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Paulson, brought to Congress many of the same regulatory suggestions that are being clamored for now.

Lawmakers in both parties turned a deaf ear.

Of course, we can blame our elected representatives for their deafness.

But there is more blame to pass around than we might imagine.

Clearly, the Secretary of the Treasury saw what was coming.

He tried to tell the truth, and nobody was willing to listen.

But that is not only the politicians' fault.

I confess to you that I didn't write any letters to my representatives saying, "Listen to the man!"

What about you?

If we want justice and stability, we must covenant together to be proactive agents of the truth!

My friend Lee Gray is a great reader. You might not know it to look at him, but he really is. He's always giving me great books to read, and not long ago, he provided me with this *New York Times* best-seller: *We Regret to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families*.

It is a chronicle of what happened in Rwanda, when the Hutus slaughtered Tutsi people by the millions. The Western world, of which you and I are a part, paid virtually no attention to this annihilation. Only when thousands began showing up destitute in refugee camps did we begin to notice. Then we reacted with pride when the Western world began delivering aid to these refugee camps. We were so proud when the UN showed up distributing food, water, medicine and clothing. We thought we were doing a wonderful thing.

What we did not realize is that the Tutsi people had risen up in response to the genocide and had organized an armed force that expelled the Hutu masses.

What we did not realize is that our Western aid was actually comforting the people who authored the genocide!

We were actually giving the Hutus the strength to begin planning a campaign to commit more genocide!

In truth, the truth was simply too complex for us to follow.

We preferred to hold to the shallow notion that we were doing good with our charity.

Of course, you and I can say that we didn't know about all that.

That's true, but it is a half truth.

The more fundamental truth is, we didn't care to know.

So millions of people were slaughtered.

If we really want a culture of justice, we must covenant together to be agents of candor and vision.

The Ninth Commandment says simply, "Tell the truth, when you are in court."

But it is really saying that because you bear the emblem of God, you have the responsibility to tell the truth.

You have the responsibility to live with passion in the pursuit of an ethical existence.

You have a responsibility to tell the truth about yourself.

You have the responsibility to tell the truth about others.

You have the responsibility to covenant with others to create a just and fair world.

Why be moral?

Because the human race will not long survive if we do not commit to creating a society of morality, justice, and truth, empowered by the Spirit of God.

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The Tenth in a Series