

What is the meaning of the ninth commandment?

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



The basic premise behind the ninth commandment is truth, whether it is truth in deed, truthful speech or honest thoughts. If we take the meaning of the commandment further and interpret the words to mean that a person should not lie, then we can understand better how this commandment might impact our daily life, especially in today's modern environment where deception, and white lies appear to be condoned by our western society. The ninth commandment requires for each individual to be honest in his or her dealings with others, but analysis of the term "lying" reveals that there is more to being truthful than accurate reporting.

The Oxford Modern English Dictionary (1996) defines "truth" as being "the quality or state of being true or truthful" (p. 1114) and "truthful" as "habitually telling the truth" (p. 1114). By comparison the definition of the term "lying" in the same dictionary is listed as "part of a lie...deceitful, false" (p. 595) where "Lie" is described as "an intentionally false statement" (p. 573). From these interpretations it is easy to reach the conclusion that the definition of both truth and lying is steeped more in the intention of the individual rather than individual acts or words spoken.

Brevard Childs (1974) believed that the original idea behind the ninth commandment was a legal one, rather than an ethical one, in that he translated the original text to mean that a person should not tell lies in a court of law (Childs, 1974), however the more modern viewpoint on the meaning of the commandment appears to be related to individual accountability and a desire to live a life of truth (St. John in the Wilderness, 2001, [online]).

There are many different ways a person can lie including withholding the truth, slandering another person or action, or telling white lies and despite ethical discussions to the contrary all of these actions are considered untruthful from a biblical perspective. For example in Leviticus 19: 11, we are told, “ you shall not steal, you shall not deal falsely, and you will not lie to one another” (NRSV). Later in the same chapter we are again told, “ you shall not go around as a slanderer among your people...”(Leviticus 19: 16). These are just two of the copious number of biblical references that can be found that encourage each individual to be a truthful person, but how relevant is this truth in modern society?

Terence Fretheim (1991) interpreted the ninth commandment to convey a foundation for community and social living. He wrote, “ unless there is an arena in which there is public confidence that social reality will be reliably described and reported” (Fretheim, p. 848), the concept of community could not exist. Blatnik (2004) corroborates that idea and goes on to say, “ there is no community on the face of public lies” (p. 3). Blatnik (2004) also mentions verses in Ephesians that point towards the idea that “ we are bound to each other in a way that a lie in one place, a lie at one level, a lie by one person, is like a ripple in a pond – the whole pond is ultimately affected” (p. 3).

Walter Brueggemann (1994) wrote in his book that the ninth commandment is “ a recognition that community life is not possible unless there is an arena in which there is public confidence that social reality will be reliably described and reported” (p. 26). He believed that not only was truth an important part of a just and fair legal system, but that truth should be

evident in all forms of public interaction. For example the modern idea that skewing the truth in the advertisement of products in mass media forums is an accepted part of society, but essentially if public truth cannot reflect public reality then an important part of society is undermined and we as members of this society tend, over time, to distrust the messages we get from mass media sources.

In his book *Commandments of Compassion*, Keenan (1999) suggest that as a society we need to “create a space where truth can be told” (p. 4). He believes that truth should be evident in personal relationships, family relationships and public dealings we have with other members of our community. Unfortunately this level of truth can only be created if all members of society were totally honest with each other and as it is not possible for us as human beings, to read the thoughts of another person, it is often difficult to tell if a person we are dealing with has the same commitment towards living a truthful life as we ourselves would like to have.

John Timmerman (1997) also wrote about how to be truthful in all of our relationships, both personal and public. He emphasized the different ways we as individuals could achieve this level of truthfulness and suggested that if we were careful in the words we spoke so that we did not give another person the wrong impression, and combined this with attentive listening to another person, then these actions could increase our own individual ability to be truthful at all times. Timmerman also noted that the idea of promises were almost a sacred act, in that as we believe in the promises from God, so we should ensure that we only make promises we can keep (Timmerman, 1997).

According to John Ritenbaugh (1997) lying is rife in our communities. His article mentions surveys that show that students lie to their parents about 50% of the time, that people in personal relationships lie about 30 percent of the time to their partner, while 12% of four million Americans in the job market had lost their jobs because they had misleading information on their resumes (Ritenbaugh, 1997). He suggested that the reason lying was so prevalent in our society was because we tend to use other terms for lying, such as “exaggerating” or “inaccuracy” to describe the untruths.

We seem as a society to accept that politicians are up to no good, that a salesman is probably “putting us on” and that big corporations must be doing something illegal because they make so much money. The fact that these beliefs have permeated our social fabric to such a degree that these thoughts are commonplace shows just how little truth we expect from others in our daily lives. This fact alone would suggest that because we do not expect others to tell us the truth, we might be less likely to be truthful ourselves. It would seem that much of society is based on the idea that ‘everyone else is doing it’ so therefore we can absolve ourselves of being accountable and honest in our own dealings with others.

The Bible gives us countless examples of what it means to be truthful. Deuteronomy 32: 4 says “He is the rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He” (NSRV). The teachings from Jesus also contain ideas on how to be truthful, especially in terms of the role model he became for other people. Jesus was an example of a person who lived by his words on a daily basis, and it is

through his example that we can see what changes we might need to put in place in our own lives, to be a better and more truthful person.

A Christian student goes to a Christian college with the expectation that the people who share the campus with them are going to live by the same standards as themselves. One of these expectations is that the other students, the tutors and even the administration staff of the college will all want to abide by the ten commandments and sometimes it can be a bit of a shock to us to find that not only are there countless people in general society that fail to live by the commandments on a daily basis, but that some of the people in the college are also failing to live by the high standards set by Jesus Christ.

However, it is my personal opinion that when it comes to attendance at a Christian educational institution that rather than condemn or alienate those students who might lie to us, or fail the commandments in some way or another, that we need to be forgiving and use the positive Christian influence of the college to help understand why some people find it difficult to be truthful in voice and deed and encourage these people back onto a Christian path in life. We need to heed the words by Keenan (1999) mentioned earlier that we need to create the space where a person can feel comfortable enough to tell the truth.

One of the main reasons people lie to others is based on their own fear of being judged by another person. Most of us feel the need to make a good impression on others, so we feel we are not doing any harm by just omitting a few pertinent facts, or telling a few white lies to make ourselves appear better in a public light. Although the intention behind these actions may not

be malicious, any form of untruth is a lie, and the only way we can be truthful people, and keep the ninth commandment is to be totally honest in all our dealings, both personal and professional.

As students we are all well aware of how easy it is to be tempted to appear “better” in the way we behave, especially among our peers (Christian and non-Christian), but as Christians we are also aware of how important it is for us to live by higher standards than other non-Christian people might be prepared to live. We need to remember that we are all sinners in some way or another, which is why I think that it is so important, when we do become aware that one of our Christian classmates is having problems being honest in their dealings, that we help rather than condemn him. For example one of our classmates might be telling “white lies” to his parents because his grades are not as high as they should be.

Even though we all learn the importance of being truthful in all of our thoughts, words and actions, it is not our place to ignore or shun that failing student – it is not our place to judge him. Rather we should help him in spiritual ways by studying scriptures that are appropriate for the situation, and in practical ways by offering to help him study harder so that he is able to get a grade he can be proud of. Blatnik (2004) told us that just one lie by one individual in a community can affect the whole community, but if we as Christian individuals hold fast to our own truths then through the power of prayer and understanding we can help our fellow students stay true to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

The ninth commandment tells us we should not bear false witness against our neighbour – what it is asking us to do is to make truth the foundation for

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our lives here on earth. Only when we are completely truthful in all of our dealings with other people around us can we have an honest relationship with God, and that fact applies to all of us, not only as Christians, not only as college students, but also as members of the human race.

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