



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Speaking the Truth

Reverend Scott Johnson | January 18, 2026 | Exodus 20:16

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 20, verse 16. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

New Testament Reading

And let's turn to John chapter eight for our Old, or rather our New Testament reading, John chapter eight, verse 31. John 8, 31 through 47.

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. They answered him, we are offspring of Abraham and have never been a slave to anyone. How is it that you say you will become free?

Jesus answered them, truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever. The son remains forever. So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham, yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my father, and you do what you have heard from your father.

They answered him, Abraham is our father. Jesus said to them, if you are Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did. But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told

you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works of your father.

They said to him, we were not born of sexual immorality. We have one father, even God. Jesus said to them, if God were your father, you would love me for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.

Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

The Untamable Beast

The Bible tells us there is a certain creature in the world that is so wild, so savage, that no man has been able to tame it or to bring it under control. It's a creature that is so dangerous, you'll never see one in the zoo. You'll see polar bears and alligators and crocodiles in the zoo, but not this beast.

What is this terrible creature? Well, it lives in your mouth. It is your tongue. It is the words that you speak. James in his letter says this about the tongue in James chapter three, for every kind of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. There is great power in the tongue.

With your tongue, by the grace of God, you can do great good, but also you can do incalculable harm. James goes on to say, with it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. With your tongue, you can bless God, you can praise God, you can also comfort the sick, you can encourage the discouraged. With your tongue, you can even tell someone the way of salvation by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Or you can do great evil with the words that you speak. With your tongue, you can emotionally damage someone for life. With your hurtful words, you can ruin a person's reputation. With malicious

rumors, you can drag their good name through the mud. You can curse someone who is made in God's image.

And because of the mighty power of the tongue, the Bible has much to say about the words that we speak and what we say and how we say it. And the Bible's teaching on the right and the wrong use of our tongue is essentially summed up in these short words or these few words that we read today from the Old Testament in the ninth commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. And so today, as we look at this commandment, we'll see what the Lord has to say about this subject, about falsehood and truth in our speech.

Truth in Matters of Public Justice

First of all, on the surface, the Ninth Commandment has to do with a rather specific set of circumstances, and that is a person is forbidden to falsely accuse another person in a court of law. This is the first concern of the Ninth Commandment. It is telling the truth in matters of public justice. And the reason why the ninth commandment presents this whole issue of lying and falsehood and truth and so on, the reason why the whole commandment frames it in terms of a court of law is because the potential to do evil with one's words was especially pronounced in the ancient justice system of Israel.

Verdicts of innocence and guilt were decided almost solely upon the weight of verbal testimony. A witness could either contribute to the acquittal or to the condemnation of the person who was charged with the crime. And it makes sense when you think about it because in those days there was no – there weren't the kind of things that we have today such as fingerprint records or DNA testing or computer records, surveillance cameras and so on. And so what we consider to be evidence today simply didn't exist in those days.

And so for the justice system to function properly, for it to render true verdicts based on what is true, witnesses had to be absolutely trustworthy. They had to speak the truth in a court of law. And since many crimes were capital offenses, often people's lives were at stake. The defendant could die as a result of a guilty verdict. Proverbs 25:18 says a man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, a sword or a sharp arrow. All it took is one false word from a witness and the innocent person could die just as surely as he would be bludgeoned by a club or slashed with a sword or pierced with an arrow. And so a word was dangerous. Testimony could lead to the death of the defendant. And so the testimony of witnesses in a court of law had

to be absolutely trustworthy and true. And so that's the first concern of the Ninth Commandment.

Slander, Gossip, and Rash Judgments

Slander & Libel

But secondly, the Ninth Commandment extends to any kind of lying or really any kind of speech that destroys unjustly the name or reputation of another person. For starters, there is slander or libel, that is, spreading falsehood against somebody with the intent to do them harm, to destroy their reputation. And of course, we see this often in our world. We especially see examples of this whenever there are elections. It is a sin, of course, to slander and to libel. Often there is political advantage to the politician who smears his opponent with half-truths or deceitful exaggerations or outright lies.

But it's not just politicians who do this. Anybody can be guilty of slandering another person for personal advantage. An ambitious company worker may spread rumors about his rival at the company in order to get a promotion. A child may make up something against his brother or sister to tell his parents to get his sibling in trouble. And these are obvious examples of slander, and we could come up with many more.

Gossip

But there is a much more common and insidious way that speech is often used to hurt others, and that is gossip. And if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that there is a part of us that loves to hear gossip. The juicier, the better. Proverbs 18:8 says, the words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels. They go down into the inner parts of the body. And so, although we acknowledge that we like to hear gossip, perhaps we are even tempted to spread gossip. But speaking or willingly hearing gossip, it is a sin according to the ninth commandment because it is damaging the reputation or name of another.

And strictly speaking, it could be the case that what is being gossiped is actually factual or true. However, since the intent of spreading that, of telling others what may be factually true, is in order to make them look bad or to destroy their reputation, gossiping is really a kind of slander. And in this way, we, by our gossiping, can break the ninth commandment. And commentators and the history of the church have always included this kind of sin as part of the ninth

commandment. Even if what we say is true about a person, if we say it in order to gossip about that person, that is breaking the ninth commandment. And the reality is usually gossip isn't 100% factually true anyway. Usually it's a mixed bag of half-truths, exaggerations, and lies. And as we know, the further gossip spreads, the less true it becomes.

Rash Judgements

Another form of lying that hurts others is making rash judgments against a person. James says in chapter one, verse 19, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak. Quick to hear, slow to speak. How much, how true it is that we do the opposite. We are quick to speak and slow to hear. And so before we patiently listen to somebody's side of a story, before we try to understand their perspective, before we try to understand their understanding of things, we jump to unwarranted conclusions. We rush to a judgment, and then we go off and share our harsh or rash judgments by talking to others.

The problem is, of course, that we could be completely wrong. We could have completely misunderstood things. But in the meantime, we have done great damage to that person's reputation by rushing to a judgment and then telling others about that. And this is something that almost always happens, not always, but almost always happens when it comes to conflict between two people. When two people are in a conflict situation, almost always the first casualty is truth itself. One person jumps to a conclusion about the other person. He interprets his words or his actions in a certain way. He makes a rash and untrue judgment. And then he compounds his sin by going and telling his friends his false version of what has happened.

And so the truth, a person's reputation, is destroyed by a false judgment and then slander. And so often it is the case, not always, but so often it is the case that in conflict, both sides to one degree or another, are guilty of doing this. In fact, in a conflict situation, as you know from experience, it's very hard not to fall into this trap. It's very hard not to rush to a judgment, to interpret someone's words or actions in a way that only reinforces what you already think about them.

This is why any time you are in a disagreement or in a conflict with another person, as a Christian, your duty is to engage that person in open and honest communication. Your goal is, with that person, to seek the truth. And part of what seeking the truth is, with that person with whom you are at odds, is your readiness to acknowledge and confess that, yes, I failed here, I sinned here, I shouldn't have said that. And of course, in the conflict, your goal is obviously

resolution, restoration, and so on, but also at the same time throughout that conflict, to protect the good name of the person that you are at odds with.

And so the Ninth Commandment forbids any speech that unfairly ruins the good name of our neighbor. It could be by slander, by gossip, by making rash judgments. But this is a very serious thing. God takes this very seriously because there is nothing more precious that belongs to us than our name. There is nothing more valuable, more worthy to be protected than the good name of somebody. Proverbs 22:1 says, a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches and favor is better than silver or gold. And the nature of a lie about someone is that it always travels faster and farther than the truth. A lie has amazing power to spread quickly. C.H. Spurgeon said, a lie will go around the world while truth is pulling its boots on.

The Positive Command: Speaking the Truth in Love

If the ninth commandment forbids all speech that unjustly harms our neighbor, then what is implied in that, and we've seen this with all the commandments, that when the commandment forbids something explicitly, then implicitly, just as present in the commandment, is a positive commandment to do something. And so what's implied in the ninth commandment is that we are to use our speech to benefit, to build up others. We are to speak the truth, to speak the truth in love in order to build up others. That's what the positive commandment is here in the ninth commandment.

And so God calls us to speak truthfully to one another, to edify one another, to speak words that bring comfort, encouragement, and love to others. He calls us to speak honestly and openly with one another, not using deceit, not hiding the truth, but speaking the truth in love. And as you do this by the grace of God, God will use your speech, use your tongue to be a wonderful means of building up others in the body of Christ, of drawing others nearer to Christ. God has given us this amazing power in the tongue by His grace to love others, to encourage them, to build them up in faith and hope. And that's really what the ninth commandment positively is telling us to do.

The Problem of Deception and Self-Protection

Thirdly, the ninth commandment condemns not just falsehood that hurts another person, but any kind of lie by which a person deceives another person. We face all kinds of situations in which we are tempted to obfuscate the truth, hide the truth, twist the truth, deny the truth. We do it not

because we have set out to lie, but because we instinctively want to protect ourselves. Or we want somebody to do something for us. Or we want to somehow advance our own interests. And so we find ourselves tempted to bend the truth sometimes. But the ninth commandment condemns that. Anything that falls short of the truth or distorts the truth is forbidden by the ninth commandment.

Now, if God forbids deceiving others in the ninth commandment, does that mean then that there are absolutely no circumstances in which it is permissible to tell a lie? In other words, is it always wrong in every conceivable situation to deceive another person? Are all forms of falsehood categorically forbidden by the ninth commandment in all circumstances? And the short answer to that question is no.

Joking or Jest

First of all, there are forms of bending the truth or playing with the truth that are rather innocent. For example, when we are joking or jesting in a good-natured way, we often play with the truth a little bit. When you hear a comedian tell a funny story about something you did, you know that he's either exaggerating that story or he's making it up. He's doing it for comedic effect. He's not trying to deceive anybody. We also use certain words and phrases in conformity with the standard practices of etiquette in our speech with one another that, strictly speaking, may not be true.

Games & Sports

For example, say you've had a terrible day. You're very upset. You're very sad. And you go to the store and the clerk says, how are you doing today? And you kind of mutter, fine, thank you. Have you broken the Ninth Commandment? Well, no, you're just answering in a way that's more of a social custom than trying to hide or to deceive the truth or trying to deceive the truth in some kind of malicious way. There's also deception that takes place in games and sports. Would the ninth commandment forbid a quarterback from ever faking a handoff to his running back? No, that's not really what is in view here. Much more seriously, would it be wrong for a military to... would it be wrong for them to deceive or to trick the enemy in order to advance their goals? Of course not.

Lies of Necessity

But a much more difficult question arises when we ask this. Is it ever okay to lie in order to protect our own safety or the safety of someone else? This is a question that theologians have wrestled with. It is called the question of the lie of necessity. And the classic example that always seems to come up in this debate is, what if you lived in the Netherlands during World War II, and like Corrie ten Boom, you were hiding Jews in your house? And when the Nazis came by to ask if any Jews were there, would you be morally bound by the ninth commandment to tell the truth to the Nazis? Yes, we are hiding Jews in our house. Or would you be justified to lie to them and say, no, there is nobody here?

Now on this question of the lie of necessity, there has not been a unanimous answer given by the church, by the theologians, by the scholars, by those who think deeply about these things. In fact, for a long time, Christian theologians completely ruled out the lie of necessity. They said there is never a time when it is right to deceive another person. But we have to ask, is that biblical? There are, in fact, examples in the Old Testament of people who not only told lies to deceive others, but were commended for that.

To take just one example of many, consider Rahab in the book of Judges, or the book of Joshua, rather. Before the Israelites destroyed the city of Jericho, they sent spies into the city, and the prostitute Rahab, she hid the Israelite spies in her house. And when the king of Jericho sent messengers to her to see if the spies were there, she lied to them. She said that they had already left the city. And then she sent the messengers out the wrong way so they would never find them.

Now, how does the Bible view Rahab and her actions? Well, first of all, she's included in the Faith Hall of Fame in Hebrews chapter 11. So that tells you something, although that doesn't necessarily mean that her lie was justified. But consider what James 2:25 says. And in the same way, was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? And so here, Rahab is specifically commended for her actions, and those actions consisted of telling a falsehood, telling a lie, deceiving the messengers, sending them out the wrong way so that they would not find the spies.

And there are many other examples that we could add, along with Rahab's example. But the point is that the scriptures do not condemn a lie if there is some extreme, dire circumstance that makes it necessary. Specifically, when someone's life hangs in the balance, when it is a matter of death or life. So Rahab didn't sin when she lied. The Hebrew midwives did not sin when they

lied to Pharaoh. The Christians in Holland did not sin when they lied to the Nazis about the Jews that they were hiding in their house.

The Evil Nature of Lying

But having said that, at the same time, we need to have an appreciation for the reason why, historically, the church has been very reluctant to admit that there are times when it is permissible to break the ninth commandment. And the reason for that is this: that those who have had that reluctance have a good appreciation of the truth of what a lie is. And that is, a lie is inherently evil. It is wrong. To put it simply, lying is of the devil. There is nothing more quintessentially evil or satanic than to lie.

We heard from John chapter eight, Jesus says in verse 44, you are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character for he is a liar and the father of lies. And so what is the origin, the source of all falsehood? It is Satan. And so a lie then comes from the evil one. It is evil in itself.

And what's more, there is nothing that is more basic to the character of unbelief than that it is based on a lie. In Romans 1, Paul is speaking about the nature of unbelief, how the unbeliever suppresses the truth of God that is revealed in all of creation. And he says this in Romans 1:25, that the unbeliever has exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever, amen. And so what the Bible teaches then, the Bible says is this, that unless God changes our heart and he sheds his light and truth upon our hearts, in the most basic way, the most fundamental way, spiritually, we, by nature, have nothing to do with the truth.

Now, this does not mean that a typical unbeliever is always going about speaking lies. That's not what it means. But what it does mean is this: at the very center of a person who is apart from Christ, unregenerated, one who has not come to know the Lord Jesus, at the very center of that person, in his heart, he is controlled and animated, not by the truth of God, but by the lie of Satan. The person either walks in the truth and the light, or he walks in darkness and in lying and falsehood. And so the unbeliever is oriented towards what is untrue.

And we could put it this way, bringing it home to us: by nature, apart from grace, we are liars. We are liars. Apart from grace, apart from Christ, our whole way of thinking, our understanding

of ourselves, of the world, the way that we live, everything is based upon a complete lie. It's not just that we tell a fib here and there, but it's that our whole being as fallen human beings is constituted by a falsehood. And so lying is part of the very fabric of who we are apart from grace.

The Insidious Nature of Habitual Lying

And this leads to a very important observation that we need to make, and that is lying goes much, much deeper than instances of slander or gossip. We've talked about these forms of lying, how we might, in our sin, engage in these in order to hurt others. But the lying that we are most tempted to engage in is far more insidious, far more habitual. And that is we are prone to lie to promote ourselves, to protect ourselves, to manipulate others.

When you apply for a job, it's so tempting to stretch the truth a little bit about your experience or your qualifications or to hide something that you know your employer really should know. Or when you're trying to get health insurance, it's convenient, it's easy to, quote, forget to mention that little health problem that you had a couple of years ago. And sometimes without even thinking, we instinctively hide the truth. For example, let's say you're at home, you're working on your computer. You're supposed to be working on your sermon, say. And instead, you're wasting your time. You're checking out the baseball scores. You're checking out the latest headlines because who knows, there may have been some earth-shattering events in the last five minutes since the last time you checked the headlines.

And there's nothing terribly wrong with that. It's wasting time and so on. But then you hear your wife open the door. And the first thing you do is you close out the website and pretend like you've been working all along. I've heard of people doing that. It's shocking, honestly. But we are tempted to lie to save ourselves from embarrassment. You meet someone and they say, it's good to see you again. We met at so-and-so's house. And you have no idea who this person is. You can't recall ever meeting them, but you don't want them to think that you've forgotten them. And so you say, that's right. I remember, how are you doing?

And so a lie can make life easier. A lie can get us out of a sticky situation. Mark Twain defined a lie in this way: an abomination before the Lord and an ever present help in trouble. And in different ways, we seek to protect, in different ways, we seek to project an image of ourselves to others that isn't really according to what's true about ourselves. We do this on social media. Our lives that are broadcast on social media are idealized versions of ourselves. Someone might get

the idea, if all that they knew us by was Facebook or Instagram, that everything in our life was awesome.

And even in our real life interactions with others, we put up a good front. We hide the ugly realities about ourselves from others. And that's especially true in the church, because in the church, we all share certain expectations and values of what a Christian life should look like, what a Christian marriage and family should look like. And so we are very careful, we become very skilled at making a good showing to others. For example, there is the dad who verbally abuses his kids at home, but then he comes to church on Sunday and he loudly dotes on his children so everybody can see and hear what a loving and caring father he is.

That's an extreme example, but as a Christian, I am tempted to hide behind an ideal version of myself so you don't know what I'm really like or what I'm really doing. And even if we don't tell outright lies, we all experience the temptation to hide that part of ourselves to others. Some part of the truth we hide from others. And at the same time, we work hard to project to others what we want them to think of us. One author put it this way, very convictingly. He said, the biggest lie we tell every day is that we are on the inside what we pretend to be on the outside. And in this way, lying is so ingrained in us, it's so habitual, so part of our fallen nature, that if we were like Pinocchio, we would all be walking around with extra long noses.

God is Truth

And insofar as we are guilty of this kind of habitual, instinctive resort to falsehood and deception, we are not reflecting the glory of God. Insofar as we engage in falsehood, we are not yet like Christ. And again, that's because God is truth. The truth is from God. There is nothing more God-like than truth. There is nothing more devil-like than falsehood and lying.

One of the most fundamental truths about God is that he is true. God cannot lie. There is no possibility that he can say anything that is false. Romans 3:4, speaking of God the Father says, by no means! Let God be true, though everyone were a liar, as it is written, that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged. The son of God, because he is God himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, he is truth, he cannot lie. John 14:6, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. The Holy Spirit is truth as well. John 16:13, when the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears, he will speak and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

And so truth is inherent. It is inseparable from each of the three persons of the Trinity: father, son and spirit. The Bible testifies of each one that they are truth, that there is no falsehood in them. And for this reason, all that God says is truth. His word is truth. All that he has revealed is true. And so to speak the truth is to be like God. To tell a lie is to contradict the very character of God. It is to be like Satan. And this is the reason why God hates lying. This is why he gives us the ninth commandment. It is a complete contradiction of all that he is as God, the God who is truth.

Freedom in Jesus Christ

God hates lying, but God loves sinners. God loves even sinners who are guilty of falsehood and deception and lying. And once again, as we have seen with the other commandments, when we really begin to dive deep into the ninth commandment and to unpack all that it says and how it applies to our lives, not just in a court of law, but how it speaks to the inclination of our hearts, how it uncovers that sinful tendency we have to use deception to avoid the truth.

When we realize that the ninth commandment is hitting close to home, that's when we come to see again that there is only one who can save us from the judgment of the law. There is only one who can bring us salvation from the condemnation that belongs to us because we have broken the law, we have broken God's commandments, and of course that is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the one who came into the world, the one who came into the world to lay down his life for sinners such as you and me, that all who come to him in faith may be saved, may have their sins forgiven, and receive eternal life.

In John chapter eight, Jesus is speaking to the Jews who want to kill him. And he says that the reason that they are seeking to kill him is because, he says, you are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desire. Because the devil is at heart a murderer, those who are of the devil, those who are sons of the devil also will murder. By the same token, because the devil is the father of lies, because all lying originates with him, the evil one, those who are of the devil will also walk in falsehood, will live according to a lie, and they cannot know the truth. They cannot bear the truth. They cannot accept the truth until God, by His grace, changes their hearts.

And so what Jesus said to the Jews in John 8 applies to every single one of us in our natural condition. By nature, in our flesh, we are not of the truth, nor can we hear the truth, or at least we cannot receive it, we cannot bear it, we cannot accept it. And this is what Jesus refers to

when he talks about being in bondage to sin, being a slave to sin. Who can deliver us from this bondage? Who can rescue us? It is Jesus who alone can do that. He says, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. He says, I am the way, the truth and the life.

All who come to Jesus Christ by faith are delivered from their bondage to sin. Verse 32, John chapter eight, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. Verse 36, so if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. And so falsehood and deception are so ingrained in us, the only solution, the only hope is that radical conversion to Jesus Christ, a new heart that only the Lord Jesus can give us. Only in this way can we hope to walk in the truth, to love the truth, to speak the truth, to pursue the truth.

And once we are freed by Jesus Christ, once we are set free by the Savior, we can abide in the truth. We've become people of the truth. And by the spirit of Christ dwelling in you, you can begin not only to speak the truth, but to use your speech to build up your neighbor, to love your neighbor, to strengthen your neighbor. And only then, only then, are you truly, by the grace of God, keeping the ninth commandment? It's not just avoiding falsehood and lying, of course it's that, but it's also using your tongue for good, by the grace of God, to love others, to build up others, to speak the truth and love to others. When God in his grace gives us that heart and that spirit to desire that, to pursue that, that is when we begin to truly keep this commandment. Let's pray.