

How 2 Equals 10: Jesus and the Ten Commandments

July 29, 2018

8th Word: *You shall not bear false witness. Exodus 20:16 and Acts 4:32-5:11*

So we are getting toward the end of our time focusing on the ten Words of God – the Decalogue. We have lifted up our relationship with God in the covenant of the first three Words: Having only God in front of us, Using God’s name in prayer and praise as gift of our relationship and Remembering the Sabbath – the holy day set apart from the rest of the week for worship and giving thanks as we enjoy the gifts of God’s creation in our lives. In part two, we have examined God’s Word about honoring our parents, the first relationships God give us; guarding the lives of others so that we can work through our relational differences; remaining faithful in our relationships as God remains faithful to us; sharing the gifts of God poured into our lives with open hands and hearts; and now, today, we move to the Word about words. You shall not bear false witness.

In its most basic intent, this Word of God had to do with making sure that whatever we say about another person is true. In a court of law, where testimony can determine life or death, truth is as essential as in the breakroom at work, where a careless observation about a co-worker can be fodder for gossip that even unintended harms a reputation and impedes full life for another. Proverbs 19 says it succinctly: A false witness will not go unpunished and a liar will not escape. We sing it in preschool here, and maybe you did when you were growing up as well: “Be careful little lips what you say...for the Father up above is looking down in love...be careful little lips what you say!”

But why? Why be careful? What’s the big deal about telling the truth that landed this Word into the Big Ten? And is it ALWAYS best to tell the truth? Aren’t there circumstances that just require truth to be withheld? Out of kindness and consideration? In one Peanuts cartoon Charlie Brown says to Linus, “We’re supposed to write home to our parents and tell them way a great time we’re having here at camp.” Linus answers, “Even if we’re not? Isn’t that a lie?” Charlie Brown explains that “Well...it’s sort of a white lie,” to which Linus questions, “Lies come in colors?”

So we gather around this Word of God about words today to first of all, acknowledge the power that words have in our lives. Ilene Quick told me that when she was a teacher she had a sign in her classroom that said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will break my heart.” Oh! So very true! And we know that we are looking at this command of God under the light of Jesus’ summary: love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the commands around our relationships with one another are based upon that singular admonition: love. Broken hearts are indeed often the result of stinging, hurtful words. They are the result of false witness: malicious gossip or categorically untrue witness in a courtroom, either one! Words have the power to build up – and the power to tear down and humiliate.

In 2007 a book entitled “A Year of Living Biblically” was written by AJ Jacobs. The premise behind the book was the author’s choice to spend an entire year living in exactly the way the Bible instructs: not just the big ten Words of God, but the author counted up 720 laws commanded in the old and new testaments. I remember finding the book both humorous and thought provoking. Apparently, Hollywood did as well as a TV series based on the book came out this year. While it did not live up to my expectations as a platform for moral high ground in a culture that pretty much scorns morality, there was an episode entitled, “Thou shall not bear false witness” in which the main character endeavored to only tell the truth. You can imagine how that went – both at work and at home. Only emphasizing the confusion about truth-telling in our lives.

In the Book of Acts we learn that truth-telling in faith community is so important that telling a lie, living a lie, in the community brings death! We have that amazing description of the early church in the fourth chapter of Acts – where people of means sold what they had and everybody lived together with a common treasury, so that all needs were met. It was an “all-in” arrangement. But then Ananias and Sapphira, a couple who apparently had some land, agreed together that they would sell the land but secretly hold back some of the money – maybe just

in case this Christian gig didn't pan out – and only place some of their proceeds at the apostles feet. Everybody else was “all in” but not Ananias and Sapphira. Now just on a side note here, what options did Ananias and Sippy have? If they had told the truth, would they have been thrown out of community? Was that their fear? Did they just want to look good, bellying up to the bar with some cold cash and impress others rather than extend their entire lives into the game? Peter says they weren't required to sell property – but they did – and they held back, and presumably they could have even said they were keeping some for a rainy day. But they made it look like they were “all in” when they really were not. And so they lied and died. End of story...for them, but what about us?

Jesus' most famous line about truth was spoken to Pilate...that last day of his life. “Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’ Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’” And we get the impression that Jesus just stared at Pilate...in essence, saying...ME – you are looking at truth right in front of you!

We live in a world where truth seems exceedingly difficult to find and changes color like a Florida chameleon depending upon the context and background, the Word of God instructing us to speak only truth certainly sets lovers of God and followers of Jesus into a small and rapidly diminishing minority. Why continue to insist on truth-telling as part of our brand? Wouldn't it be more appealing to the world at large if we just join everybody else and admit sometimes you simply must lie.

Ahhhh, but that is just it, my friends. We continue to be called to counter-culture lives. Our lives are shaped and fashioned by a cross – the willingness to give testimony to the truth that sets us free. God is love. God loves us. Since there is nothing we need to do to impress God or win God's approval ratings, we can just be who we were created to be: love-filled, truth-telling children of the Most High.

Telling the truth is an amazing way to extend God's love to one another. This week, as you seek to be formed by God's Word, scrutinize every word before you say it, making certain that what comes from your lips builds up the other, encourages and bears witness to the love of Christ that is in us.

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