

You shall not bear false witness
Men's Bible Study at Park View
December 20, 2005

Scriptures: Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20; 19:15-19

This week we focus on commandments nine and ten. The purpose of the ninth commandment is to assure justice in the legal process. It was a prohibition of perjury. In a society where there was little technical evidence (like DNA or fingerprinting), the witness of a neighbor carried a great deal of weight. The purpose of the tenth commandment was to address the root of many problems—the acquisitive desire to obtain what belonged to one's neighbor. It addresses the power of greed.

The social fabric of our society is dependent upon truthful talk about one another. In order to guard against the damage inflicted by untruthful witnesses, the Jewish law insisted that a person could not be condemned except by the evidence of two or three witnesses whose testimony agreed (Deuteronomy 19:15 -19).

Though the original intent of this commandment had to do with a legal process, other scriptures expand the concern for truthfulness to prohibit other kinds of false witness. Consider the following forms of false witness against a neighbor outside the courtroom:

- Lying to get out of trouble
- Tale-bearing (repeating a story without verification)
- Gossip
- Slander
- Flattery
- Silence (in the face of a stated falsehood about another)
- Fabricated or unduly slanted news reporting
- Inaccurate research conclusions
- Urban legends
- False advertising
- Political mudslinging
- Political promises not intended to be kept

In some societies deceit by speech is considered clever and worthy of admiration. However, the weight of the Biblical message discourages malicious deceit of any kind.

In sum: Both Old and New Testaments give warnings against untruthful speech.

An idea to ponder: What is the greatest temptation that you face in the light of this commandment?

The last of the ten commandments is different from the rest in that it addresses not only actions, but also thought and desire, the roots of action. While we may be able to stop ourselves from stealing, it is much more difficult to stop ourselves from wanting to obtain something that belongs to our neighbor.

To covet can simply mean to have a strong desire for something, but it also implies reaching out, taking steps to attain what we desire. The word “covet” is sometimes used in a positive sense, such as “We covet your prayers,” or “covet earnestly the best gifts” (I Corinthians 12:31). Coveting begins with delight for something.

The action forbidden in the coveting commandment, however, has to do with the desire to obtain that which is not lawfully obtainable. As G. Campbell Morgan asserted, it is “admiration merging into desire to possess” that breaks the commandment. The desire against which this commandment warns is “a willingness and a wish to injure one’s neighbor in order to gratify one’s own desire” (Weatherly, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 148). This kind of desire, run amok, eventually may lead to the breaking of other important commandments – dishonoring parents, committing adultery, killing, stealing, and bearing false witness. “The solution to the problem of desire lies not in the elimination of all desire, or in the satisfaction of all desire, but in the discipline of desire. Desire is not to be eliminated or overindulged, but controlled and directed” (Weatherly, p. 151).

Waldemar Janzen (*Exodus*, p. 266) suggests that the list of items in the tenth commandment is best taken “to refer to a neighboring extended family, or father’s house, with everyone and everything included in that term. In other words, the commandment is then directed against a mentality that wishes to enhance one’s own extended family at the expense of another extended family.”

There are numerous warnings in the New Testament against covetousness (see Romans 7:7-8; 13:9, James 4:2). There are many other references to greed: newer versions tend to use the word “greed” in place of the word “covet.”

Perhaps the best way to live in keeping with this commandment is to become content with what we have. Contentment with a limited set of goods is a sign of character. The ancient Stoics had a wise saying, “If you want to make a man happy, add not to his possessions, but take away from his desires.” (Barclay, *The Old Law and the New Law*, p. 46).

In sum: Both Old and New Testaments give clear warnings against the dangers of coveting.

An idea to ponder: Mahatma Gandhi once said: “Earth provided enough to satisfy every man’s need but not enough for every man’s greed.” To what extent does this ring true to the scripture lesson we have studied today?