

Lesson VIII: Lying

Introduction

This week we're talking about the sixth commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." This commandment is about telling the truth, and trusting others to tell the truth. We're going to learn about this commandment in three ways.

1. We'll hear the story two prophets, Jeremiah and Hananiah, and how Jeremiah wanted to believe the best of Hananiah.
2. We'll learn about what it means not to lie about others, and how we are also called to think the best of others first.
3. We'll learn that the commandment not to lie about others means we change the world by giving people a chance to be good, rather than dismissing them as evil.

The Story of Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28)

Back in Bible times, there were people who had a unique ability to figure out what God was saying—more or less, they could "hear" God. These people were called prophets, and more than anything, prophets were people who told the truth. Jeremiah was one of these prophets, and he lived toward the end of the existence of the Kingdom of Judah, right before the Babylonians (remember King Nebuchadnezzar?) came in and destroyed Jerusalem. Jeremiah spent his whole career warning the people that if they didn't repent, give up worshipping false gods, oppressing the poor, and ignoring God's commands, then a disaster would happen.

Jeremiah did this for years. He really got on the King's nerves because of how insistent he was, but because he was a prophet, the king didn't punish him for telling the truth. In fact, Jeremiah was sometimes even able to be in the king's court! He would stand in the Temple, too, and prophesy bad news to the priests and the people. He would still tell the truth—as hard as it was to hear. Jeremiah would end up having all of his prophecies written down in the book of Jeremiah in that's in the Bible. And one thing that's important to know about Jeremiah is that he didn't like the really hard truth that he had to tell people. He didn't like pointing out that God was going to destroy Jerusalem if the people kept sinning, but he knew he had to.

That's what was going on when he was in the Temple one day, wearing a bar across his shoulders called a yoke, to symbolize to the king and his court, the priests and the people, that the only way to avoid complete destruction was to serve the king of Babylon. This was a hard thing to tell everyone because Babylon was the Big Bad Guy of Judah's history. It would be like asking us to surrender to China or Russia or Iran! But Jeremiah insisted that resisting the king of Babylon would only result in that king coming in with a huge army to destroy everything and everyone. So for their own safety and the sake of everyone, Jeremiah tried to convince everyone that this was the best way to survive. They had to surrender to Babylon.

Then this other prophet named Hananiah stepped in. Hananiah took the yoke off of Jeremiah's shoulders and broke it in half, and then he prophesied. He said to everyone that they didn't need to surrender to Babylon! They could continue to fight, because he had heard from God that within two years, God was going to defeat the king of Babylon and overthrow his kingdom. Just two more years, and God was going to restore Judah and Jerusalem, because God wouldn't let this kind of disaster happen to God's own people. Hananiah basically straight-up contradicted what Jeremiah had just said.

What do you think Jeremiah did in response? *Allow for answers.* You would think he would argue, right? Insist that he was right, and that Hananiah was lying? But instead, Jeremiah praised Hananiah. He said, "Prophets are always doom and gloom, predicting famine and drought and awful stuff—and you are prophesying peace! I really, truly hope that you are right, and I am wrong, because it would be great if I misheard what God was saying." Jeremiah was ready to assume the best of what Hananiah was saying, and believe that he wasn't lying about hearing from God. Instead of assuming the worst, Jeremiah assumed the best about Hananiah.

What it means not to lie about others

Tonight we're talking about the eighth commandment—"you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." To "bear false witness" means to lie. Don't lie about your neighbor; don't lie about other people! That sounds pretty straightforward. But as easy as it should be, this commandment is surprisingly easy to break. One of the easiest ways to break it is by repeating gossip. Any time you repeat something you've heard about someone else, especially when you don't know if it's true or not, that's gossip, and that's against this commandment. But why is it so important not to lie about your neighbor?

Maybe most importantly, other people might not know you're lying! It can be easy for people to just believe what they're told, and even if they don't really believe it, saying something false about someone else can force other people to first overcome that untruth before they can get to know the real person. It would be like someone saying you like to steal things. Even if that's not true, and you've never stolen a thing in your life, now when people meet you who've heard you steal things they'll assume they need to keep an eye on their stuff! The same can be true about anything we say that's just not true about our neighbor, whether we know them or not. We should always start with the truth.

Martin Luther described the commandment this way: "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

It's not just a commandment about telling the truth about others. There's that second part to what Luther said, that we are to interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

We should try our best to believe other people are doing their best, too. Think of how Jeremiah reacted to Hananiah's prophecy. Even though it contradicted his own and he probably knew it wasn't true, Jeremiah gave Hananiah the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he was telling the truth, and God really did tell Hananiah something God didn't tell Jeremiah. If we assume the best about what other people are doing, then the worst that can happen is we were wrong.

On the other hand, if we assume the best of people and give them the benefit of the doubt, they might just prove to be as good as we were hoping. If you choose to give the new kid a chance, even though you heard on the gossip train that they were a stoner at their other school or they always cheated on their tests, they might prove the gossips wrong. It might turn out that they're a really good kid, or maybe just an okay one who turns out to be a good friend. Giving them the benefit of the doubt opened the door to a friendship.

Or if you only heard about a fight secondhand, following this commandment would mean not jumping to conclusions. The rumor mill might say so-and-so started the fight because the other person called them a name like a total overreaction, but what if the reasons are more complicated than that? What if the name-caller had been slipping hurtful notes into the other person's locker all semester, and they finally snapped? What if the name caller had been a victim of the other's bullying and was finally standing up to them? Following this commandment would mean letting the truth come out before rushing to judge.

Now, also understand that this doesn't mean we should ignore what we know for a fact about a person. If you know someone regularly steals things, and you know they've shown no signs of changing, God isn't expecting you to just pretend like they won't do what you know they will do. But if you don't know the person, start by giving them the benefit of the doubt.

How does it affect the real world?

There's a saying that "a lie can get halfway around the world before truth can even get its boots on." One of the really hard things about the world is that people are most likely to believe the first thing they hear to be the truth, which isn't very helpful when the first thing they hear might be a lie. Undoing a lie, correcting it, is a really hard thing to do. It's why this commandment is so important. Start with the truth. You don't have to keep track of it, and you don't have to correct it.

God wants us to live in the kind of community that tells the truth. Sometimes that truth is hard to hear, like when Jeremiah had to prophesy bad things about Judah, but telling the truth is always preferable to lying, and especially lying about other people. When we lie about other people, or even participate in a lie about other people by gossiping, we take away the ability of people to know what the truth is. If we all just committed to telling the truth, and committed to believing the best about each other, we'd be in a much better position to love our neighbors and make the world a better place, like God intends.

It also helps us break out of thinking in stereotypes. Assuming the best of our neighbor means rejecting stereotypes we've been taught, and just as importantly, recognizing the stereotypes we hold about other people. Actively trying to follow this commandment is a great way to fight against assumptions we make about people based on what they look like, how they talk, or what we think they believe. On Monday we commemorated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who preached about a time when we'd be judged by the content of our character, rather than just our appearance. We have to learn to give others a chance to show us who they are, what is the content of their character, because they are almost always more complex and more good than the assumptions we may have in our head about them. Even if we're wrong about them—Jeremiah was wrong about Hananiah, after all—at least we've given them a chance.

And if we all did that, if we all decided not to participate in gossip and assumed the best about people we didn't know, wouldn't the world be a better place? Lies don't build up friendship or good feeling between people, but truth can. And God wants us to be committed to the truth, to telling the truth about ourselves and letting other people tell the truth about themselves, because we're so much more than what others may assume we are. Each of us can give each other that same benefit, too, if we just follow the commandment not to lie.