

Tell the truth. Don't covet what others have.

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a six-part series

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Exodus 20:16-17 (CEB)

¹⁶Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

¹⁷Do not desire your neighbor's house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

Acts 5:1-11 (CEB)

However, a man named Ananias, along with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. ²With his wife's knowledge, he withheld some of the proceeds from the sale. He brought the rest and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles. ³Peter asked, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has influenced you to lie to the Holy Spirit by withholding some of the proceeds from the sale of your land? ⁴Wasn't that property yours to keep? After you sold it, wasn't the money yours to do with whatever you wanted? What made you think of such a thing? You haven't lied to other people but to God!" ⁵When Ananias heard these words, he dropped dead. Everyone who heard this conversation was terrified. ⁶Some young men stood up, wrapped up his body, carried him out, and buried him.

⁷About three hours later, his wife entered, but she didn't know what had happened to her husband. ⁸Peter asked her, "Tell me, did you and your husband receive this price for the field?"

She responded, "Yes, that's the amount."

⁹He replied, "How could you scheme with each other to challenge the Lord's Spirit? Look! The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door. They will carry you out too." ¹⁰At that very moment, she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men entered and found her dead, they carried her out and buried her with her husband. ¹¹Trepidation and dread seized the whole church and all who heard what had happened.

Radical Honesty? Truly desiring God? Are these truly to be our way forward?

This week, we come to the final two commandments: do not testify falsely about your neighbor and do not covet your neighbor's possessions. Like the four preceding commandments, these teachings begin to set forth what God means when he tells us to "love our neighbor" (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31). We will complete this series by considering the "second tablet project" underway in Europe and the U.S.

Do Not Testify Falsely Against Your Neighbor

This commandment is specifically about testimony in a court, but it points us to the larger truth, as do all the commandments. God is the God of truth, for the sum of his word is truth (Psalm 119:160) and his son is the "way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). On the other hand, Satan is the "father of lies" (John 8:44). The Ten Commandments are as much about God as they are about us. God is the truth and we must be truthful even when doing so calls for courage and strength, even when we have committed a terrible wrong.

Ananias and Sapphira

I don't know a better story about the importance of truth-telling than the sad story of Ananias and Sapphira. It is both straightforward and shocking.

In the first years after Jesus' resurrection, the believers lived in community in Jerusalem, sharing their possessions (see the page two textbox). They would sell property and give the proceeds to the apostles for distribution. Two of the believers were a married couple, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. They sold some property and agreed to keep some of the money for themselves. There was no problem with this, as the apostles didn't demand that people turn over 100% of such proceeds. But when Ananias brought the money, he evidently told Peter that it was all that they had

received for the property, for Peter immediately accused Ananias of lying, not only to Peter but to God, to the Holy Spirit. Ananias was perfectly in his rights to keep some of the money – but not to lie about it. Well . . . when the weight of all this fell on Ananias, he dropped dead on the spot. It is important to see that Luke never says that God struck down Ananias, we're simply told he died right then and there.

Then, a few hours later Sapphira comes in and when asked if the money handed over had been 100% of the proceeds from the sale of the property, says "Yes," unaware, we can guess, of what happened to her husband. And when she learns all that has happened – the lying, the exposure, the humiliation, the death of her husband – she drops dead too!!

Were the first Christians communists?

I invariably get a question something like this whenever I teach today's portions of Acts. We read about their having "all things in common" with no claims of private ownership and we imagine Moscow, not Jerusalem.

There are three directly relevant passages in Acts. The two for today and the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5.

First, the NIV translation that "No one claimed that any of the possessions was their own" is better than the NRSV, "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions." As Jews, the believers knew that the world and everything in it is God's and we are merely stewards. God is the owner; we are the trustees.

Second, the process of selling possessions to raise money is on-going, not completed: "they would sell their possessions and goods" (2:45). Even 4:35 can be read "for as many as owned lands or houses sold them as *needed* and brought *all* the proceeds of what was sold."

But most important, the ambiguities in Luke's grammar are cleared up by the events. What is the point of noting Barnabas' generosity, if selling the field is something that he is required to do? Even more to the point, when Ananias lies to Peter about having turned over all the proceeds of a sale, Peter's replies, "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? After it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

In all these passages, Luke wants us to see that the transformed hearts of the believers has resulted in their recognizing that all they own is to be shared as needed, that this is what it means to be good trustees of God's world. There was simply to be no needy persons among them and from what we know of the early church in its first centuries, the Christians did a remarkable job of living this out.

Certainly, a dramatic story, but there is a deep truth – lying, embracing falsehood, has no place in a world created by the God of truth. We may think that some of the lies we tell are necessary, but are they? What harm do we do when we embrace falsehood? In their book on the Ten Commandments, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, had a few reflections on this that have stayed with me:

For instance, many doctors and nurses, when asked why they did not tell the truth to a seriously ill patient, justify their lack of candor on the basis of love. "I didn't think the patient really wanted to hear that he was dying." Such "love" is the source of our lies. Patients are given false hope, hope based not on the truth of Christ's death and resurrection, but hope based upon a lie. The patient is encouraged to live in a dreamworld, is denied the opportunity to put life in order in the face of death, is robbed of the joy that might come, in the last days of life, from reconciliation with family, friends, and God. Lies shaped by such undisciplined and malformed "loves" are among the most deadly. Such lies not only make us liars, but also act as if God lies, for, to tell the truth, God has created us to be the sort of people who can hear the truth about our condition (that we are all "terminal") without despair.

Preachers who do not preach truthfully often justify their pastoral deceit on the basis of "love." They are such kind and caring pastors, they don't want to make their congregations' lives more miserable by telling them the truth. Congregations complain that this makes for boring, predictably trite sermons. What they ought to be

complaining about is paternalistic pastors who have so little respect for their congregations as to assume that they are fated to be liars. Moreover, if the church cannot maintain a truthful ministry how can we expect others with public responsibility and offices to learn to say the truth?¹

What lies do we tell? How often do we fail to grasp that we are lying to ourselves? What if we truly embraced the God of truth and abandoned all falsehood and deceit? It would take a great deal of courage – but how much would we gain? How many lives are destroyed by the secrets and lies we tell even those love?

Do Not Desire What Belongs to Your Neighbor

We usually hear this final commandment as “do not covet,” though I’m not sure we really know what “covet” means. The CEB gets it right when they use the word “desire” in the tenth commandment. Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines “covet” in this way: “to wish for enviously; to desire (what belongs to another) inordinately or culpably.”

The world we live in works fashions us into factories of desires. There are just so many things that I’m told I should want . . . and other people seem to have them, even as I don’t. Indeed, I’ve often thought that this commandment is very appropriately placed in the list of ten. We can often feel like we breeze through the others – I haven’t murdered anyone today nor have I committed adultery, and so on. But when we hit this last one, we are brought to a full stop. We are all caught up in its story. It is the story of Cain when he desired Abel’s approval (Genesis 4) and King Ahab when he coveted Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16). It is our story. What or whom do we truly desire? Let’s ask that alien to follow us around for a while and tell us the truth that our behavior and our choices reveal.

There is so much more that could be said about this final commandment, but space demands that we wrap with these challenging reflections from Walter Brueggemann:

The propensity to covet in our society is enacted through an unbridled consumerism that believes that the main activity of human life is to accumulate, use, and enjoy more and more of the available resources of the earth. An undisciplined individualism has taught us that we are entitled to whatever we may want no matter who else may be hurt. Such individualism, however, is driven by a market ideology based on an elemental assumption of scarcity. If there is a scarcity of goods needed for life, then energy and passion are generated to gather and accumulate all that one can (cf. 16:19–21). M. Douglas Meeks has shown that the ideology of scarcity, which drives our economy, is, in the end, an act of theological doubt that does not believe that God’s providential generosity is finally reliable. This commandment summons the faithful to break with the practice of acquisitive individualism and to reject the ideology of scarcity upon which it is based. Thus the commandment requires a massive repentance that is theological in substance, but that is manifested economically.²

The Second Tablet Project

In closing out this series, let’s go back to a few of the basics. The ancient Israelites understood that the creator of the universe had created them in his own image, had sought a relationship with them, and had shown them how to live in right relationship with him and with each other. God’s instruction to them was the Law, the heart of which God inscribed on two tablets. The first tablet spoke to the people’s relationship with God and the second tablet spoke to their relationship with one another.

To reiterate, the first tablet speaks to our love of God. We are to have no other gods or take God’s name in vain and so on. The second tablet speaks to how we are to live with

¹ Hauerwas, Stanley; Willimon, William H. (2010-08-01). *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (p. 120). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

² Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 852). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

others. We are not to steal or give false testimony. We are to honor our parents and our marriages. We are to forsake murder and so on.

Christians understand that attempting to live out a “Judeo-Christian” ethic derived from the second tablet while ignoring the first tablet, the “second tablet project,” is doomed to failure. We are made in God’s image. As the Westminster Confession puts it, we are “made to know God and enjoy him forever.” When we seek to build a good life or to do the right thing, we have to begin with God, God’s way, and the very reason why we are here in the first place.

As larger and larger segments of western culture have tried to live an ethic apart from any notion of God, they have learned that a genuine ethic is impossible to sustain without a source of the “oughts” other than from within ourselves. As Nietzsche rightly saw, without God there are only our preferences and our power. Thus, trying to embrace the ethic of the second tablet while rejecting the claims of the first tablet is a doomed project. The phrase, “second tablet project,” was coined by Jay Budziszewski, a professor of government at the University of Texas. These are the closing paragraphs in his *First Things* essay (June/July 2002). The complete essay is available in the First Things archive at www.firstthings.com. I recommend it.

What shall we say about the Second Tablet Project? Just that it cannot succeed. The Second Tablet depends on the First; whoever denies his duty to God will find, if he is logical, that he can no longer make sense of his duty to his neighbor. Conscience will certainly persist, reminding him of both, but it will seem to him an absurdity in a sea of absurdities. Though he may admit that he has a nature, he will be unable to say why he should keep it. Though he may admit that this nature is governed by certain laws, he will find that their oughtness creeps out the door and that even their prudence slips away. All this will be needless, for he does have the knowledge of God; he merely denies it. But denial only makes his crisis deeper, for lies metastasize, and the greatest lie metastasizes to the greatest degree.

Then should we say that the Two Tablets are enough if only we take them as a pair? More’s the pity, no: not even the pair of them is enough by the light of nature alone. Though natural knowledge is sufficient to illuminate our duty, duty by itself is despair. It cannot assure us of the possibility of forgiveness when we fall short; it cannot assure us of the certainty of providence in the face of evil; and it cannot explain to us the fallen dignity we bear as images of God. In want of the first assurance, we seek refuge from guilt by denying our sins. In want of the second assurance, we seek to make everything go right by doing wrong. In want of the explanation, we find it all too easy to pretend that we do not recognize our neighbors for what they are.

In these senses, moral knowledge is protected and illuminated by the knowledge of God, and the natural knowledge of God is protected and illuminated by the knowledge of His word. Faith and reason contain and depend on each other. May we be spared the illusion of an ethics that stands wholly by itself.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the text of the study, I ask these questions: We may think that some of the lies we tell are necessary, but are they? What harm do we do when we embrace falsehood? How would you answer these? Could we really embrace a radical honesty? What do you think would change most in your life if you did?
2. In the study, I refer to us all as “factories of desires.” Do you agree? If you do, how has this happened? Do you think the sin of coveting is more prevalent than it used to be? If so, why? How can we do our part to reshape our desires so that what we want most in life is God and God’s way? Do you think that success in this would make us seem weird or odd to our friends? Should we care?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday 1 Kings 21: 1-16 Ahab covets the vineyard owned by Naboth</p>	<p>Tuesday Micah 2:1-5 A warning against coveting</p>
<p>Wednesday Jeremiah 6:13-14 A warning against deceit and self -deception</p>	<p>Thursday Acts 2:42-47 & 4:32-37 A look at life in the community of the earliest believers.</p>
<p>Friday James 4:1-10 Conflict brought on by disordered desires</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

