

## **The Ninth Commandment**

*Information in this document comes from the Commentary on the Westminster Larger Confession by Geerhardus Vos*

Q. 143. *Which is the ninth commandment?*

A. The ninth commandment is, *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.*

Q. 144. *What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?*

A. The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

Commentary

1. How can we explain the prevalence of untruth in the world?

We cannot understand the prevalence of untruth in the world without believing in a **personal devil** as set forth in the Bible. Just as God is the source of truth, so Satan is the source of untruth, the father of lies (John 8:44). Christian people who deal in untruth are handling the weapons of Satan's kingdom.

2. What modern system of philosophy violates the sacredness of truth?

The philosophy called "**pragmatism**," which teaches that the important question is not whether something is true, but whether it works. According to pragmatism, success is the test of truth. Something is to be accepted if it "works"; we are not to measure things by an absolute standard of truth such as the Bible. Nothing can be really practical unless it is founded on absolute, unchanging truth.

3. What change must take place in our lives before we can really know and love the truth of God?

We need to be **regenerated** or "**born again**" by the almighty power of God the Holy Spirit. This experience of the new birth opens the eyes of the heart and enables a person really to see and appreciate the truth of God.

Q. 145. *What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment?*

A. The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are, all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors, as well as our own, especially in public judicature; giving false evidence, suborning false witnesses, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence, calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery, concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others; speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful

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or equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of the truth or justice; speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, talebearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, and partial censuring; misconstruing intentions, words, and actions; flattering, vainglorious boasting, thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults; hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession; unnecessary discovering of infirmities; raising false rumors, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears against just defense; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any; endeavoring or desiring to impair it, rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy; scornful contempt, fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report, and practicing, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering what we can in others, such things as procure an ill name.

### Commentary

1. What is the general scope of the sins forbidden by the ninth commandment?  
The general scope of the sins forbidden by the ninth commandment is whatever is contrary to the truth and to the good name of any person.
2. What special form of falsehood is especially wicked?  
Opposing the truth, by word, deed, or silence, in matters of "**public judicature**," that is, in the administration of justice in the courts of the state or of the church.
3. Why is "giving false evidence" sin?
  - a. because it is contrary to the **nature of God**, who is Truth;
  - b. because it is contrary to **love for our neighbor**, in taking away his rights;
  - c. because it reduces the divinely ordained administration of **justice** to a mockery;
  - d. because it proceeds from the **moral corruption** of human hearts depraved by the fall of the race into sin.
4. What is meant by "out-facing and over-bearing the truth"?  
These expressions mean a stubborn, persistent, perverse effort to **oppose** and defeat what a person knows, in his heart and conscience, is really the truth.
5. Why is concealing the truth a sin?  
Concealing the truth is really the same thing as **telling a lie**. It is done with the intention of deceiving some person, and is therefore the acting of a lie.
6. Is concealing the truth always a sin?  
No. Concealing the truth is a sin when we conceal a matter from those who have a **right to know it**.
7. What is meant by "undue silence in a just cause"?  
This means **remaining silent**, for private or selfish reasons, fear of reproach, etc., when it is our duty to speak in the interests of truth and justice.
8. Why is it wrong to be unduly silent in a just cause?  
Because we have a moral responsibility to God and a duty to our neighbor and to human society, to see that truth and justice **prevail**, so far as it is in our power to do so.
9. What is meant by "speaking the truth unseasonably," and why is it wrong to do so?  
"Speaking the truth unseasonably" means speaking the truth at the **wrong times** or

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in the **wrong ways**, when wisdom or common sense would lead us to wait until a more suitable time.

10. What is meant by "speaking the truth maliciously, to a wrong end"?

This means speaking the truth with a **wrong motive**. Even though what we say may be strictly true, it may be wrong to say it.

11. What are "slandering" and "backbiting"?

"Slandering" is injuring someone by **maliciously** uttering a false report about that person. "Backbiting" is an **aggravated** form of slandering which consists in secretly uttering a false report about some person, behind that person's back.

12. What does the catechism mean by "detracting"? The common word used for this today is **disparaging**. It means speaking evil of a person in order to detract from that person's influence or good reputation: to depreciate a person.

13. What is meant by "talebearing" and "whispering"?

"Talebearing," as used in the catechism means much the same as the word **gossip** today: a sinful spreading about of reports of the sins and failings of other people, because we derive some personal satisfaction by dwelling on the faults of others.

"Whispering" means circulating stories or rumors about some person secretly, so that it is difficult or impossible to trace the rumors to their source and correct them.

14. What does the catechism mean by "rash, harsh, and partial censuring"?

- a. "Censuring" is meant finding fault with, or passing judgment upon, some other person because of that person's speech or conduct.
- b. "Rash" censuring means passing judgment when it is not our duty to do so;
- c. "harsh" censuring means going beyond what the evidence warrants, or "jumping to conclusions" in passing judgment on another;
- d. "partial" censuring means passing judgment unfairly or showing partiality, by being prejudiced in favor of, or against, some person.

15. Why are "flattering" and "vainglorious boasting" wrong?

"Flattering" means praising some other person too highly, in order to **please** that person and gain some favor from him. "Vainglorious boasting" means **praising our own selves** too highly, beyond what truth and justice warrant.

16. What is meant by "denying the gifts and graces of God"?

This expression means being stubbornly unwilling to recognize as true and real God's **gifts** and **graces**, whether given to ourselves or to others.

17. Why do people frequently try to hide or excuse their sins, when they ought to confess them freely?

The sinful corruption of our hearts results in our being filled with **pride** or "**vanity**," and the result of this is that we are stubbornly unwilling to confess our sins or admit our faults.

18. How do people sin by "receiving and countenancing evil reports"?

Persons who have no official **responsibility** in the matters, welcome and eagerly listen to evil reports about other people. This is a form of the sin of **rejoicing in iniquity** which the apostle Paul declares to be contrary to Christian love (I Cor. 13:6).

19. How do Christian people commit the sin of rejoicing in iniquity?

Some **gossip** about sins committed by others, claiming to be highly scandalized by the wrong that has been done, yet obviously taking a great satisfaction in telling about

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it. Others who are ashamed to do this openly will take a satisfaction in their hearts, rejoicing in the sins and shame of others.

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### Scripture References

- Exod. 20:16. The ninth commandment.
- Zech. 8:16. The duty of maintaining truth between man and man.
- 3 John 12. Preserving the good name of our neighbor.
- Prov. 31:8-9; Ps. 15:2; 2 Chron. 19:9; 1 Sam. 19:4-5; Josh. 7:19; 2 Sam. 14:18-20; Lev. 19:15; Prov. 14:5, 25; 2 Cor. 1:17-18. The duty of speaking the truth in all matters, and especially in matters of public justice.
- Heb. 6:9; 1 Cor. 13:7; Rom. 1:8; 2 John 4; 3 John 3-4. The duty of a charitableness toward others, and concern for their good name.
- 2 Cor. 2:4; 12:21; Prov. 17:9; 1 Peter 4:8. It is our duty to be sorry about, and seek to cover, the infirmities of others.
- 1 Cor. 1:4-7; 2 Tim. 1:4-5; 1 Sam. 22:14; 1 Cor. 13:6-7; Ps. 15:3; Prov. 25:23. The duty of maintaining a right attitude toward the good qualities of others, defending them against injustice, and being unwilling to believe an evil report about them.
- Prov. 26:24-25; Ps. 101:5. Both flatterers and slanderers are to be discouraged as dealers in untruth.
- Prov. 22:1; John 8:49. It is a duty to defend our own good name in case of need.
- Ps. 15:4. Lawful promises must be kept.
- Phil. 4:8. It is our duty to study and practice whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.
- 1 Sam. 17:28; 2 Sam. 1:9-10, 15-16; 16:3. The sin of prejudicing the truth and the good name of ourselves or others.
- Lev. 19:15; Hab. 1:4. The great sin of prejudicing the truth in matters of public justice.
- Prov. 6:16, 19; 19:5; Acts 6:13. The sin of giving false evidence, or arranging for it to be given by others.
- Jer. 9:3, 5; Acts 24:2, 5; Pss. 12:3-4; 52:1-4. The great wickedness of knowingly opposing the truth.
- Prov. 17:15; 1 Kings 21:9-14. The sin of passing unjust sentence, of delivering an unjust verdict, in the administration of justice.
- Isa. 5:20-23; Prov. 17:15; Amos 5:7. All breaking down of the absolute distinction between right and wrong is morally perverse.
- Job 13:4; Ps. 119:69; Luke 16:5-7; 19:8. The sin of forgery.
- Lev. 5:1; Deut. 13:8; Acts 5:3-9; 2 Tim. 4:16. Concealing the truth, and undue silence in a just cause.
- 1 Kings 1:6; Lev. 19:17. Remaining silent when it is our duty to speak.
- Isa. 59:4. Remaining silent when it is our duty to complain to the constituted authorities of church or state.
- Prov. 29:11. Speaking the truth unseasonably.
- 1 Sam. 22:9-10, compared with Ps. 52:1-5. Speaking the truth maliciously to a wrong end.
- Ps. 56:5; John 2:19 compared with Matt. 26:60-61. Perverting the truth to a wrong meaning.
- Gen. 3:5; 26:7, 9. Using doubtful or equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice.
- Isa. 59:13; Lev. 19:11; Col. 3:9. The sin of speaking untruth.

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- Pss. 15:3; 50:20. The sins of slander and backbiting.
- James 4:11; Jer. 38:4. The sin of "detracting," or unjustly speaking evil of another.
- Lev. 19:16; Rom. 1:29-30. Talebearing and whispering condemned as sinful by God's Word.
- Gen. 21:9; Gal. 4:29; 1 Cor. 6:10. The sins of scoffing and reviling.
- Matt. 7:1; Acts 28:4; Gen. 38:24; Rom. 2:1. The sins of rash, harsh, and partial censuring of others.
- Neh. 6:6-8; Rom. 3:8; Ps. 69:10; 1 Sam. 1:13-15; 2 Sam. 10:3. It is sinful to misrepresent the intentions, words, and actions of others.
- Ps. 12:2-3. The sin of flattery.
- 2 Tim. 3:2. The sin of vainglorious boasting.
- Luke 18:9-11; Rom. 12:16; 1 Cor. 4:6; Acts 12:22; Exod. 4:10-14. It is wrong to think or speak too highly, or not highly enough, of ourselves or others.
- Job 4:6; 27:5-6. The sin of denying the gifts and graces of God.
- Matt. 7:3-5. It is wrong to aggravate smaller faults of others.
- Prov. 28:13; 30:20; Gen. 3:12-13; 4:9; Jer. 2:35; 2 Kings 5:25. The sin of hiding or trying to excuse our sins, when we should confess them.
- Gen. 9:22; Prov. 25:9-10. It is wrong unnecessarily to tell the faults or failings of others.
- Exod. 23:1. The sin of raising false rumors,
- Prov. 29:12. The sin of listening to and countenancing evil reports.
- Acts 7:56-57; Job 31:13-14. The sin of refusing to pay attention to the just defense of any person.
- 1 Cor. 13:5; 1 Tim. 6:4. The sin of harboring evil suspicions concerning others.
- Num. 11:29; Matt. 21:15. The sin of envying the deserved credit of others.
- Ezra 4:12-13. Seeking to damage the good reputation of others.
- Jer. 48:27; 1 Cor. 13:6. The sin of being glad of the sins or disgrace of others.
- Ps. 35:15-16, 21; Matt. 27:28-29. The sin of scornful contempt.
- Jude 18; Acts 12:22. The sins of fond admiration and flattery.
- Rom. 1:31; 2 Tim. 3:3. The sin of breaking lawful promises or vows.
- 1 Sam. 2:24; 2 Sam. 13:12-13; Prov. 5:8-9; 6:33. The sins of neglecting such things as are of good report, and involvement in such things as procure a bad reputation.