

TEACHING CHILDREN THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.”

Love is the heart and soul of Christianity. It is, or should be, the motive behind all our actions. While the fear of punishment may be a useful incentive for obeying the Ten Commandments for some, it is the love taught and exemplified by Christ Jesus that should inspire and lead us to do the right thing. While the Old Testament of the Bible emphasized the punishment and disgrace due those who broke the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament fulfilled the law of God by urging his followers to let love be the guiding motive in how they treated others. Mercy, meekness, peacemaking, and forgiveness are the qualities that made one a Christian. This brotherly love can certainly protect us from disobeying the Ninth Commandment, *“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.”*

One of the earliest lessons parents teach their children is not to lie. This may take time and patience as the littlest ones may often tell what they wish was true, rather than the real truth, and may be unable to understand the difference right away. At first, there may be consequences for lying to parents or others, but eventually children need to learn to love the truth for truth's sake. Children taught to love and trust God will also want to please God and be obedient to His commandments and the Word as taught in the Bible, especially by Jesus. This includes love for our fellow man. Lying about others, whether at school, work, play, or on social media, for example, is being disobedient to God's law and Christian morality or values.

Sunday school can offer support for parents in laying a foundation for the love of truth in their children. This essay offers a few basic ideas for teaching this at home or in Sunday School. I'm not offering arts and craft ideas, or busy work, but ideas (and a couple of games) for learning the meaning behind the Commandment and how to live it in daily life. The suggestions can be tailored to meet the needs of different ages.

YOUNG CHILDREN

First things first! Have them memorize the Ninth Commandment, but make sure they know what the words mean. If you are using the King James Version of the Bible as I will be here, for instance, here is how those words “bear false witness” can be explained: “bear” means to move or carry something from one place to another, or to give out something; “false” is the opposite of “true” and is something that is not real or right, or is based on a lie; “witness” means to tell what you know about a person or an event. So, to “bear false witness” means to tell or spread lies about someone or something. Basically, God says “no lying!”

For little children, you might offer something along the lines of this explanation found in my book on the Ten Commandments:

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour” means we should not tell lies about anyone, nor should we believe any lies we may hear about others. Our neighbor is not just someone who lives nearby, but is any one of God's children, including yourself! Jesus taught us to “love thy neighbour as thyself,” and we would not want to get someone we love in trouble by telling, or believing, a falsehood about them. We also do not want to speak or believe lies about our self!”

A game for little children

Little children are prone to exaggerate or fantasize on how they wish things were. Start with some simple explanations of what is truth and what is not absolute truth, such as personal opinion, or

exaggeration. Perhaps play a game in Sunday School class. Let's call it "Lie Detector." The teacher or pupils can tell "whoppers" or state a true fact, and let the others call out if they think it is true or false. For example, "Our roof has a blue dragon nesting on it." (False!!) "Sally's eyes are brown." (True, perhaps). Let everyone in class offer up truths and lies for others to detect. Afterward, discuss the importance of keeping "whoppers" or fantasy role-playing for play time when it is okay to pretend, but to stick to what is real at other times.

Stories

Daniel in the Lion's Den (see Chapter 6 of the Book of Daniel). For little children, it may be best to tell them this story in your own words, or find a good children's book of Bible stories. Older kids can read the story from the Bible. How does this relate to the Ninth Commandment? Daniel, who was very devoted to God, was falsely accused, and cast into a den of lions by the king. But through his prayers and innocence, he was protected and the lions did not attack him. When the king learned that the accusation against him was false, he punished the accusers severely. You might spare the little children what the exact punishment was, but for older children you can show that the false witnesses were thrown into the lion's den along with their families! In Old Testament times, false accusers in courts received the same punishment that would have gone to the person accused if they had been found guilty, or in Daniel's case, wrongly found guilty. One lesson to take from this is that our lying or false accusations can cause harm or heartache for our loved ones along with the consequences faced by the liar, even though they don't deserve it. If we love our families, we want to always tell the truth so we do not bring shame upon them, as well as ourselves, if the lie is exposed.

The Boy Who Cried Wolf. One story that is not in the Bible but is useful for teaching the possible consequences of being known as a liar is the famous Aesop fable "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." You can find this story online, or in a book. It is about the shepherd boy who thought it was a funny joke to scream, "Wolf, wolf," so that the local villagers would come running to help protect the sheep he was responsible for. But when one day the wolf really did come along and attack the sheep, the villagers ignored the boy's cry for help because no one believed him and so did not come running. The moral of the story is "Nobody believes a liar . . . even when he is telling the truth."

OLDER CHILDREN

In addition to using the previous suggestions for younger children where they are age appropriate, add to your lessons on the Ninth Commandment the Biblical background from the Old and New Testament.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Bible scholars tell us that the Ninth Commandment was about *perjury* rather than being a prohibition against lying in general. Perjury, as defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "*the voluntary violation of an oath or vow either by swearing to what is untrue or by omission to do what has been promised under oath; false swearing.*"

Today, many courtrooms around the world require witnesses in trials to swear an oath. In American courtrooms, the oath is basically: "Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" If it is discovered that a witness has committed perjury, he or she may be punished with a fine or jail time.

This crime of bearing false witness under oath was considered to be so serious to the early Israelites that anyone caught lying about another under judgment would be given the same punishment normally given to one actually guilty of that particular crime.

“. . . and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother; so shalt thou put the evil away from you.” (Deuteronomy 19:18-19)

Lying

“Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.” (Exodus 23:1)

While the interpretation of the Ninth Commandment in its original language may have indicated it referred only to false witness under oath, the above citation gives a slight indication that any kind of false reporting is wrong. It also seems clear through the rest of the Old Testament that God condemned lying – especially gossip and slander. Obviously, the fear of punishment did not stop God’s people from falsehoods, or there would not have been so many warnings against it. Here are some of the main ones:

“A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape.” (Proverbs 19:5)

“Let the lying lips be put to silence; which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous.” (Psalm 31:18)

“For he said, Surely they are my people, children that will not lie.” (Isaiah 63:8)

“A poor man is better than a liar.” (Proverbs 19:22)

So often we read in the Bible about certain vices or sins being “abominations” to God or hated by Him, as we learn from these verses:

“Lying lips are abomination to the Lord: but they that deal truly are his delight.” (Proverbs 12:22)

*“These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a **lying tongue**, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief. **A false witness that speaketh lies**, and he that soweth discord among brethren.” (Proverbs 6:16-19)*

By New Testament times, the Hebrews had so loaded down God’s laws with unmerciful punishment among themselves that practicing them became burdensome. But Jesus inaugurated a new reign of love and mercy.

“For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17)

THE NINTH COMMANDMENT AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

One difference between the Old Testament and New Testament is that fear and warnings of dreadful consequences were used in the early days to keep the children of Israel in line, while the New Testament writings show that Jesus, his disciples, and the Apostle Paul exhorted their followers to treat others through the motives of love, truth, and mercy.

A thorough reading of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) shows what Jesus thought of hypocritical behavior – in our thoughts, speech, and action. Hypocrisy is a form of lying and being a false witness – but with ourselves as a living lie.

Jesus spoke only indirectly of the Ninth Commandment's warning about what we swear to, or say. But in doing so he stressed an even broader meaning: that we should limit what we say to such absolute truth that our words would be examples of refreshing brevity:

"Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, "Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, Yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." (Matt. 5:33-37)

Jesus, of course, was the target of false accusers, many of whom knew the holy scriptures thoroughly. Yet their fear and jealousy of this Christly son of God blinded them to their duty to uphold God's commandment. It is possible they must have endured mental or physical suffering after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

In the letters of Paul to the early Christians, he urged everyone to keep to the faith by living and speaking the truth only:

"Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds." (Colossians 3:9)

"Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another." (Ephesians 4:25)

"Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." (Ephesians 4:29)

"Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10)

"Charity . . . rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth." (I Cor. 13:6)

Slander and Libel

Older pupils need to learn about the legal implications of lying in public, whether in speech (slander) or writing (libel) in such a way that might damage someone's reputation or put a stain on their character. A person who slanders or libels can be sued in court. It's good to make it a personal value and habit not to lie or bully while still young, so that this trait does not carry over into adulthood. Make this a class discussion, and include the topic of social media which we will go into further in the next section on "Gossip." Have the students read these verses from the Bible regarding slander:

"Whoso privily slandereth his neighbour, him will I cut off." (Psalm 101:5)

"He that hideth hatred with lying lips, and he that uttereth a slander, is a fool." (Proverbs 10:18)

Gossip

Gossip is useless or careless talk about the private life of others, often stories that are no one else's personal business. While not necessarily in the same category of lying, gossip about one's friends or even public figures, spreading hurtful rumors perhaps, can lead to misleading statements that can end in outright lies harmful to those involved. The Bible warns against those carrying or bearing such tales:

"Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people." (Leviticus 19:16)

"Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out; so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth." (Proverbs 26:20)

"A forward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends." (Proverbs 16:28)

Our young people today have extra challenges dealing with gossip, rumors, and misinformation on social media. Unfortunately, the internet can be a dangerous playing field for bullying, gossip, stalking, and media manipulation. Grown-ups are targets as well. Even those raised in Christian values may not readily see how their harmless, mindless chatter (as they see it) can be hurtful, if they are not careful to speak only truth and not engage in gossip that may be unkind.

The American author Mark Twain once said "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." Imagine what Twain would think if he saw today's speed of communication. Now a lie can travel all the way around the world in seconds! It's hard to take back hurtful comments or lies once they are posted online. It is wiser to learn to think before you push "Send" or "Post."

A Sunday School class discussion on how to navigate online interaction with friends (or strangers) would be useful. How might they keep their posts clear of mere gossip and falsehoods, including libelous accusations? How should they respond to gossip and lies that come their way? Can they keep the gossip from spreading? While some gossip may be true in its facts, if it is unkind, or simply not meant to be shared publicly, it is unloving and mischievous, something a Christian would not want to be a part of.

A Gossip Game for Sunday School

This is a classic one called "The Telephone Game." It has also been called "Gossip." It is meant to show how something whispered to another can become totally distorted after being passed along to others. One person begins by whispering a phrase or sentence into the ear of the person next to them, being careful to cup their mouth so others cannot hear. An interesting list of suggested starter phrases can be found online, such as this [Telephone Game site](#). For instance, "dogs dig holes for big bones," or "two tiny toads ate fat flying flies." After each child hears the message they turn to the next person and whisper what they think they heard. When the last player hears the message, he or she announces to the group what they think they heard. Then the first person (possibly the class teacher) reveals what the original message was. Most likely, especially with younger kids, the two messages are completely different and if the final message seems really bizarre or silly, everyone can have a good laugh.

The lesson here is that this is what can happen when one gossips about their friends. Their story can get twisted around, and if it should come to the attention of the friend gossiped about (and you can be sure it will!), the story might be so bad you could end up losing a friend or suddenly become the target of revenge. Gossip can bring a lot of hurt feelings, and it makes the instigator look bad. Teach students that if they become the recipient of hurtful gossip not to pass it on as it may not be the truth, or at least not the whole story. To quote a line from the television cartoon character Homer Simpson: "It takes two to lie, one to lie and one to listen"!

If our pupils and children are taught the habit of thinking kindly towards others, just as Jesus preached and lived, we can be alert to what constitutes "false witnessing" through gossip, lies, slander, etc. in dealing with friends and classmates (and even teachers and principals!) It is wrong to condemn or falsely accuse others when it is unwarranted or unfair. Of course, when there is a genuine concern about the actions of others that may pose a certain danger or risk to themselves or others, we need to deal

wisely with the situation. It is permissible to report harmful or illegal activities to the proper people, but we don't want our children to turn into "tattletales," taking glee in telling on their siblings or friends when not necessary.

Another topic for discussion in Sunday School classes for older kids can be about those times where "honesty is NOT ALWAYS the best policy," Consider the following:

Diplomacy. Blurting out a hurtful "truth" at the wrong time and place is being "tactless" or "undiplomatic." Discuss how to respond kindly when the unvarnished truth will be difficult for another to hear. Shrugging one's shoulders and saying "I'm just trying to be honest" is not really a good excuse for unkindness. This goes for expressing merely personal opinions, too.

Personal opinion. Discuss how one's personal opinion, if it is not based on absolute fact, is just that, an opinion not a universal truth. This goes along with the above hint to remain kind or objective in conversations with others. Just because you may believe something is true (e.g. "her new dress is ugly!") does not make it so. There are many points of view to various situations and each may be valid. There needs to be open mindedness to the thoughts and opinions of others and being respectful towards them.

Protecting someone from harm. Pose a question: if they saw a scared person running from, for example, an angry-looking fellow with a gun and the one being chased ran and hid in one direction, and then the gunman asks which way that person went, would they feel they had to be "honest" in that situation and point out where the potential victim went? Is it okay to lie where the truth would cause unnecessary harm? What are some situations where "bearing false witness" is superseded by the law of love or wisdom?

Protecting parents. Teenagers often do things they know their parents would be upset about. But if asked directly about some situation, should they lie to keep parents from getting angry or hurt in some way? Discuss. It may be better to suffer the consequences than to carry the burden of the lie, especially if exposed later (see "The Boy Who Cried Wolf"). After all, as Mark Twain also said, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." Parents are usually angrier about being lied to than they are about the original offence. Honesty with parents is almost always the best way to go, although, sadly, in some relationships or households it might indeed be wise to be cautious about what is confessed. It is something for a young person to consider deeply and be honest with themselves about the reason or motive for lying, or telling a half-truth. Prayer for guidance may be a big help in this situation, if the young person feels their heart is in the right place.

SUMMARY

Learning to love as Jesus did, we will have less problems with accidentally or intentionally becoming false witnesses against our neighbor, or fellow human beings. The disciple John wrote in his epistles:

"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (I John 4:20)

"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." (III John 1:4)

These words of encouragement to love our brothers and sisters and to walk in truth can inspire us to obey the Ninth Commandment.

TEACHING THE NINTH COMMANDMENT TO CHRISTIAN SCIENCE SUNDAY SCHOOL PUPILS

For those parents or Sunday School teachers interested in lessons on the Ninth Commandment based upon the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science, you can check out the Questions and Answers below from my book *First Lessons in Christian Science, Volume One: The Ten Commandments*. These lessons can be read aloud or the teacher can use the ideas and citations offered to customize a lesson geared toward a particular age or interest.

[The Ninth Commandment – For Young Children](#)

[What does “bear false witness” mean?](#)

[Who is “thy neighbour”?](#)

[What happens to those who “bear false witness”?](#)

[What is “gossip,” and why is it wrong?](#)

[What should you do if your group of friends will not stop gossiping?](#)

[What is “slander”?](#)

[What makes people falsely accuse others or themselves?](#)

[Is it wrong to judge another’s actions, even if we do not make any public accusations against them?](#)

[Does the Ninth Commandment help us to heal?](#)

[How do we reverse the false testimony of the material senses?](#)

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