

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

(According to the original book by H.H. Pope Shenouda, III)

The Ninth Commandment

"You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor" (Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20)

"Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 12:22)

"You shall not steal...nor lie to one another" (Leviticus 19:11)

"Therefore, putting away lying, let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor" (Ephesians 4:25)

1. Types Of Lies

A false witness is a lie, and lying is vile. It indicates fear and a personality weakness. A truthful person, on the other hand, is courageous and clearly shoulders the responsibility of his actions.

Lying is an easy solution resorted to by the weak and non-intelligent. Most often it is caught, leading the liar towards a cover up using another lie. Thus he goes from one lie to another in an endless vicious circle.

Nobody trusts the words of a liar. Even when he tells the truth, people do not believe him. He may resort to swearing to prove the truth of what he says, but people even doubt his oaths, for his words have simply lost their authenticity.

Lying is a double sin that most often hides behind it another sin. It is a cover up for a previous sin, or a ruse of a future one.

Therefore a confessor should ask a penitent, who admits that he has lied, about the other sin that drove him to lying.

The Devil is the first liar. He lied to our first foreparents when he told them through the serpent: *"You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4)*. His motive for lying was his envy of them and his desire to destroy them. God said about the Devil: *"He is a liar, and the father of it" (John 8:44)*. Therefore a liar is actually the devil's son.

Lying may be direct or indirect. Thus, the bearer of lies is himself a liar and an accomplice who shares in and perpetuates lies. Under the same heading fall those who circulate false rumors. Some simple-minded people believe everything they hear and circulate it as a fact without examining and ascertaining it. We cannot, in truth, call this simple-mindedness in its true sense; for Christian simplicity ought to be wise. Thus Jesus Christ said: *"Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16)*, i.e. simple (harmless), and wise.

Therefore, our advice to every one of those people is: *"Do not believe everything that is said"* and *"Do not*

judge without investigation". If we were living in an ideal world, we would believe everything said. However, since lying exists in our world, it is our duty to investigate and verify before we believe. That is why the Bible, in both the Old (*Deuteronomy 17:6*) and the New Testament (*2 Corinthians 13:1* and *Matthew 18:16*), stipulates that there be witnesses to the facts. It keeps repeating and emphasizing the following important principle: *"By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established"*.

A sole witness to a piece of news, or its sole bearer, should not be taken as a proven source, for he may be ignorant of the truth of the matter, have no sure and certified knowledge of what he says, be an exaggerator, have wrongly heard the news, have doubtful sources from which he got the faulty news, have personal reasons that force him to suppress facts or to plot against and sow dissension among people, or have a personal motive making him wish to hurt someone in particular. Thus the Bible says: *"Let the lying lips be put to silence, which speak insolent things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous"* (*Psalms 31:18*). The speaker may not be an enemy, for he may be a joker who loves to say things as a joke in order to see how it will affect others.

It is not right for someone to suspect the behavior of a friend, or of an enemy at that, just because of what he has heard about them, without careful investigation into it.

Some may say that they have heard the same stories, not from one source only but from many. My answer to this is that we should not pass judgments just by listening and without investigation even if the sources were many, for many a time, the words of the many had the same mistaken source. Many a time also, a large number of people would conspire to tell a joint lie, as did Joseph's brothers who untruthfully informed their father that *"a wild beast has devoured him"* (*Genesis 37:33*).

Therefore it is not right to be content with the words of several witnesses, for they have to be righteous and sure of what they say.

The reason for what I am saying is that many witnessed falsely against saints, in the same way as the chief priests *"sought false testimony against Jesus"* (*Matthew 26:59*).

False Witnesses against Saints:

Many people witnessed falsely against Saint Stephen, the archdeacon, when the Jews wanted to kill him: *"They set up false witnesses who said: This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place"* (*Acts 6:13*).

Queen Jezebel brought forward false witnesses against Naboth the Jezreelite to say: *"Naboth has blasphemed God and King"*. Thus, by using this device *"they took him outside the city and stoned him"* (*1 Kings 21:13*).

Two elders witnessed falsely using bad words against the chaste Susanna, and Paul, the apostle, had many people witnessing falsely against him to the extent that he described his own service as done *"by evil report and good report"* (*2 Corinthians 6:8*). He meant by his that "evil report" had sometimes been rumored about him.

Time does not permit us here to cite all the false witnesses against the saints, but here are few examples. The apostolic Saint Athanasius who was falsely accused of adultery and murder, Saints Abram the Syrian, Maccarius the Great, and Marina who were accused of adultery, and Saint George who was accused of being a sorcerer when he drank poison without being hurt by it.

Therefore, it is not right for a person to lend his ear to false accusations as is the case referred to by the poet

who said:

Lies influenced him, and falsehood engulfed him.

What a parrot he is, his mind lying in his ears.

The commandment stating that "*Thou shall not bear false witness...*" applies to the listener as well as to the speaker, for he who listens to and accepts-lies encourages the liar to continue lying and the insincere evil-doers to surround him. Two people participate in such a sin: the speaker and the receiver of lies. The Bible says in this regard: "*If a ruler pays attention to lies, all his servants become wicked*" (Proverbs 29:12). Church laws have thus made it a condition that a priest should not be "a hearer".

Many are the accusations that are all lies, intrigues, and slander, for the evil ones have left nothing for the virtuous. It so happens that sometimes an evil person may plot an accusation against a saintly one in such a way that the latter cannot escape it or defend himself. This accusation is worked out in such a strange way as befit the "wisdom" of the devil in plotting evil.

How words evolve on their way to the listener:

If word conveyance is a sin and causes problems, the least harmful of those conveying words are those who do it accurately, in the same way as an honest recorder does in conveying everything without adding anything to it.

Yet there are those who take the words, add to them their own opinions, deductions, and claims as to the intention and purpose of the speaker, and present them all to someone else as the direct words spoken by whoever they listened to!

Look at the Nile water in flood when it is brown in color because of a large amount of silt it carries. This brown, silt-laden water was once clear water falling from the sky on the mountains of Abyssinia. However, throughout its trip, it eroded silt from the rocks and got mixed up with mud until it reached you in this form. Such are the news that come to you, saturated with mud, after probably being pure and clear at their source. The difference between them and the Nile water is that the mud carried by the latter is useful for the land, while the mud added by people corrupts relationships.

Many of the news that come your way are very different from the actual happenings. The following is an example of this:

One tells another: Haven't you heard? Such and such have happened to Mr. X.

The listener responds, saying: It must have made him very angry.

The first speaker says: But of course, he must have been very upset.

The news is carried to a third party who is told: Mr. X became very upset when such and such happened to him.

The third party answers: It is impossible that he should only become upset. He will certainly seek revenge.

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A fourth party receives the news that Mr. X will avenge himself. He says: As far as I know his true nature, he will certainly be preparing a scheme to avenge himself.

The news reaches a fifth party who says: He may send a letter to his department accusing him of certain things.

A sixth party responds to this, saying: it is not beyond him to say, for instance, that he is a communist.

The news reaches party number seven who goes to the person in question to say to him: Beware! So and So sent a letter to your department accusing you of being a communist.

This whole episode may take place though, meantime, the party in question actually became angry, then rid himself of his anger and put an end to the whole matter by forgiving his wrongdoer. On the other hand, he might have taken the matter simply without getting upset by it.

Thus someone may come to you to say, "I am angry with you". When you ask for the reason, you find out that some untruthful statements have reached him. Would that person, instead of getting angry, have firstly come to ask, "Is it true that such and such have taken place?" However this is better than the other who listens to some intriguing words, gets angry, keeps the matter to himself, and gets worked up without the other party being aware of it.

However, there is that other type of person who is accused, does not defend himself, is innocent, and whose silence is not an indication that he is guilty.

It maybe in someone's nature not to defend himself, as was the case of Joseph the righteous or it may only be one's modesty or shyness. It may also be that proving one's innocence may lead to the revelation of some secrets that need to be concealed, or may incriminate someone else or reveal one's mistakes, which is something that is undesired. Proving one's innocence may bring about other problems caused by the spiteful and the accusers. Sometimes evil appears to be cruel, frightening and despotic, and the speechless one may have left the matter of defense in God's hands and not in his own. One may also be unaware of what is being spun against one.

"He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 17:15).

Someone may say that the condemnation of an innocent person is unjust and a lie, but what is the sin committed by the one who "justifies the wicked", and is not his act one of love and sympathy? In order to clarify this point I hereby cite the following example:

A young man asks a girl's hand in marriage. You know that he is evil and troublesome. If your opinion is sought and you commend that young man, you will be ruining the poor girl's future, and your behavior will be subject to the Lord's words: *"He who justifies the wicked...is abomination to the Lord"*. In this case, the one who justifies the wicked is a false witness.

Another example is when you recommend a poor person to fill a vacancy at your friend's business although he is inefficient or dishonest and will definitely disrupt the work.

By justifying and recommending that person to your friend you become a false witness and you betray your friend. Your kindness to a poor person does not absolve you.

This leads us to another branch of the sin of lying:

Flattery and Favoritism:

Excessive and false commendation is outright lying that often hurts and deceives the person concerned. Many upstarts attain their goals in this easy way.

What makes this sin more abominable is the hypocrisy of the upstart who commends a person when facing him and criticizes him in his absence.

Some may flatter the family of a dead person thus paying the latter so many compliments that those attending become weary and lose faith in the eulogy.

Other Forms of Lying:

One well-known form of lying is "half-truths". In this case, the speaker conceals the other side of the truth that may reverse the situation. An example of this is the disclosure of man's weak points and the concealment of his good ones thus presenting a distorted image that is completely opposite to the actual one.

Another example is bad faith and wrong interpretation.

One example of lying is excessive exaggeration, and another is flattery.

I hope to return to these topics in my book about Silence and Speech".

Factors that Augment the Abomination of Lying:

The greater the personality of the liar and the more he is trustworthy to the point that his words are believed without examination, the more abominable is the sin of lying. Also, the higher the position of the person lied to, the more abominable is the lie. This is the same as happened when Joseph's brothers lied to their father, the same as when someone lies to one's confessor, and the same as Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit and the Lord struck them dead (*Acts 5:3,4*).

Of the examples of lying to God are false prophets, fake christs, and false prophets who attribute to God things He has not said to them. In this regard God said to such: *"Have you not seen a futile vision, and have you not spoken false divination? You say, 'The Lord says', but I have not spoken"* (*Ezekiel 13:7*), and about false prophets He said: *"the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name"* (*Jeremiah 23:25*). The Bible also refers to: *"False apostles"* (*Revelation 2:2*), to *"Lying wonders"* (*2 Thessalonians 2:9*) and to *"The diviners envision lies"* (*Zechariah 10:2*).

Lying: Reasons and Treatment:

Some think that lying saves, and so they resort to it to conceal a certain sin. Our advice to them is to resort to proper methods since the rope of lying is short and is mostly revealed.

We also say that you should not do that thing which you are afraid may be revealed. If you make up your mind to be truthful you will be spared a lot of sins.

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Man may be driven to lie by embarrassment, fear, or the questioner's insistence. Our advice here is that silence is better than lying. Therefore, keep silent, change the course of the conversation, apologize for not answering, tell the truth as far as you can, or speak up frankly and bravely defending your position or apologizing for your mistake.

Arrogance may be the cause of lying as a means to conceal one's ignorance. However, we say that there is no harm in someone saying at times, "I don't know".

The reasons for lying may be the exigencies of a certain profession as when a lawyer defends a culprit or a doctor deceives a patient. What we are looking for is an honest lawyer who does not undertake the defense of an accused person unless he is sure of his innocence. However if the accused is guilty, he explains the extenuating circumstances without resorting to lying.

The doctor is also noted to be taking care of the patient's body and his worldly life, and as such he may deceive the patient who is at the threshold of eternity and make him lose the chance to repent. However, if frankness may cause some cases to deteriorate, we advise the doctor to be judicious in his attitude, though he should not lie and should not also speak with a killing or upsetting frankness. The situation requires diplomacy, courtesy, optimistic words, and a caution that does not inspire despair. At this point we should deal with the following important question:

Does the concealment of certain facts constitute a form of lying?

No, for man has secrets that he is entitled to conceal, and he is entrusted with some other people's secrets that it is his duty to keep intact. There are certain matters that it is harmful to make public unless those in authority divulge them at the appropriate time. There are confessions that should remain concealed, facts should better remain unknown, and spiritual sacraments that should remain concealed.

Therefore, it is your privilege to conceal certain facts. You may sometimes be frank and say to the inquirer, "Allow me not to answer this question", or just elude the answer.