

Valuing Truth

Exodus 20:16

Some of the lies we tell are so common, they've become prized cultural memes. Here are some of the most popular American lies.

- "I'm fine."
- "I start my diet tomorrow."
- "money back guarantee."
- "I'm on my way."
- "Give me your number, and the doctor will call you right back."
- "One size fits all"
- "Sorry, I'm sick."
- Hitting the "Like" button.
- "This hurts me more than it hurts you."
- "I need just five minutes of your time."
- "It's the perfect present. I love it."
- "Your table will be ready in a few minutes."
- "Your call is important to us."
- "It's not the money; it's the principle."
- "I'm from the federal government, and I'm here to help you."

The truth is we lie...a lot. Time magazine article called our society a, "a huckstering, show-bizzy world, jangling with hype, hullabaloo, and hoey, bull, baloney, and bamboozlement." An article the New York Post about recent research into lying declares, "Americans Will Lie About Pretty Much Anything."

Truth today is made out of Play-Doh. It depends on your feelings, your goals, and who you're talking to. The majority of Americans believe truth is relative – that it's possible for different people to hold conflicting views of truth, and still be right. We have become our own definition of truth. Philosopher Richard Rorty said, "Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with."

Have you noticed how we have individualized truth. We each get our own truth. You just need to live your own truth. She's just speaking her truth. When your view of truth is so fuzzy lying becomes real easy.

But enough about the American fondness for lying. Let's talk about the church. According to 2020 American Worldview Inventory, nearly half of all born-again Christians agreed with this statement, "Identifying moral truth is up to each individual; there are no moral absolutes that apply to every person, all the time." Half of us don't believe in truth. Folks this is scary. This

means that the church is at a tipping point, and that critical mass has been reached. Everything is up for negotiation and redefinition. This is more than just a theoretical discussion point.

Some of the most vicious lies are told within the body of Christ. Lies dripping with bitterness and jealousy are told in a selfishness and prideful. My experience is that many believers will say whatever suits their purposes, even if it means stabbing a brother or sister in the back.

I remember with great pain a particularly contentious congregational meeting. Where I watched several fellow church members, people I had known for years. I had worshipped with them. I had ministered to them. I served with them, and one by one they stepped to a microphone and said things about Teresa's dad, who was the Senior Minister. They said things I knew weren't true. Things that I knew that they knew weren't true. They were just making things up to get what they wanted.

Lies in the church aren't new. The apostle Paul had to defend his ministry to the Corinthians against false accusations. He was accused of being wishy washy and changing plans on a whim. He was accused of writing bold, intimidating letters, but his personal presence was unimpressive and he wasn't a very good speaker. He was accused of mismanaging money contributed by the Corinthian church. The truth was these liars simply wanted Paul out of the way so they could get money and power for themselves.

BODY:

God has always called us to be people of truth. This is one of the great principles that resonated from the slopes of Sinai, as God spoke His Ten Commandments in Ex. 20:16, *"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."*

I. What is Lying

First point. What is lying? What does God mean when He says "false testimony?" that phrasing me think of an episode of Law and Order. However, it would be a mistake to limit the 9th Commandment to placing your hand on the Bible and swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth . The focus is much wider than that. This refers to all kinds of deceptive speech. What is being forbidden here is any speech that has deception as its purpose.

II. Ways We Lie

That's what lying is, and we do it in many different ways. We lie through **slander**. When we assault someone else's character with untrue insults and accusations we violate the heart of this commandment. We also lie through **gossip**. There isn't a single person here over the age of five who hasn't been deeply hurt by untrue rumors spread about us, but we can be so quick to pass on the same about others.

Flattery can also be a form of lying. When we say stuff we don't mean just to get what we want out of a person, that is wrong. We often say we shouldn't talk behind a person's back, but

neither should we say things to a person's face that we wouldn't say behind their backs. To falsely shower someone with praise is not nice, it is lying.

Perhaps the most common form of lying is **exaggeration**. The 9th commandment doesn't forbid the playful storytelling we do for entertainment or teasing, because our intent is not to deceive. However, it does rule out inflating or deflating the truth to create a false impression. Isn't it interesting that we overestimate on our resumes and underestimate our 1040s?

We even deceive while telling the truth. We've become so artful at deceiving with the truth that psychologists have coined a new word – **paltering**. Your mom asks you if you finished your homework. You answer that you have written an essay on William Shakespeare. That much is true. You did write that essay. What you don't say is that you wrote that essay last year for an assignment in a different class. The truth is you haven't even started on today's homework. That's a palter, and that's a lie, because it's intended to deceive.

During some business negotiations one representative asks the other, "What do you expect sales to be next year?"

They answer by saying, "Our sales have been up consistently for the last ten years." It's a true statement, but what they don't say is that their own internal data shows that they expect sales to drop the next year. That's the using the truth to deceive, and it's a lie.

Abraham did the same thing in the O.T. His wife was a very beautiful woman. She was also his half-sister. The word used here could mean sister. It could mean niece. It could mean cousin. If you look at the genealogies in Genesis, it looks like Sarah was Abraham's cousin, but she was also his wife. So when a foreign king took interest in her, Abraham was afraid and feared for his life. So, Abraham says that Sarah was his sister. Were his words untrue? No. But were they deceptive? Yes.

We also lie through **insinuation**. We can create a false impression just by implying certain things. This is well illustrated by a story of a young ship's first mate. He had been negligent in some of his duties and was properly disciplined by the ship's captain. But a few days later the captain became very ill, and the first mate assumed command of the ship- and the keeping of the log. He sought a subtle revenge. His opening entry in the log that day was, "Captain sober today." That was very true, but the implication was that there were many days which the captain was not sober.

Sometimes the worst lies are never spoken, but we lie nonetheless when we keep the truth inside ourselves. **This is a lie of omission – lying with silence**. When we keep quiet and allow an untruth to go unchecked, we can be guilty of lying. There are times when we are perfectly happy to let an untruth be believed. Whenever our intention is to deceive we are violating the heart of God.

When it comes to lying, intention is important, because not all false words are purposefully deceptive. Sometimes, we just get our facts mixed up, or we have been given wrong information. Other times, unexpected developments or extenuating circumstances force us to change plans. We speak falsely, but in our hearts we are not trying to deceive. Years ago Teresa bought tickets to see the late Rich Mullins in concert. We told several people that we were going. I even rescheduled a shepherding ministry meeting so we could go. That night we drive to the arena, park our car and get out.

Let's just say it wasn't a Rich Mullins crowd. There was lots of long hair, and loud metal music booming from car stereos. There was lots of booze and I noticed a fair amount of weed in the air. It turns out we came on the wrong night. I had misread the date on the tickets. We showed up on the night of a Metallica concert. Although a Metallica version of "Awesome God" would sound interesting, it wasn't what we had expected. I hadn't lied. I was just mistaken. I had not broken the ninth commandment. What this commandment forbids are words that have the intent of deceiving.

III. Who We Are Lying To

Let's also talk about who we lie to. Take note of this word "neighbor." It has been used and abused to wiggle out of the truth. This word "neighbor" is used in a variety of ways in the Bible. Many times it means a friend or a companion. Other times it refers to an acquaintance or co-worker. But sometimes it also means of humanity. Your neighbor is a fellow human being.

By Jesus' day, The Pharisees had developed a thorough process of determining who was your neighbor and who was not. If someone was your neighbor, you had to tell them the truth. But if they didn't qualify as your neighbor then you could lie to your heart's content.

Jesus confronted these interpretive gymnastics with the parable of the good Samaritan. A Pharisee asks the question "who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells a story about a Jew is beaten and robbed by bandits, but it is a hated, half breed Samaritan that comes to his rescue. Under no definition would any Pharisee ever call a Samaritan a neighbor. But this Samaritan bandages the man's wounds, gives up his ride, pays for his medical and lodging costs. Then in Luke 10:36, Jesus nails the Pharisee to the wall, *"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

Jesus' point is that any human being is our neighbor. The word neighbor is not a loophole. We cannot divide humanity into two groups— those we have to be honest with and those we can lie to. We find here a call to be truthful with all people.

This also means being honest with ourselves. Sometimes the worst lies we tell are to ourselves. "I'm fine. I don't need to change. This is just who I am. I can control it. I'm not hurting anyone. I can quit whenever I want. I can't do it. I'll never be good enough. No one will ever love me. Now is not the right time." What lies do you tell yourself? Self-deception is dangerous and

destructive and it's a tool of Satan. He's the father of lies, and he will do anything to get you to lie to yourself.

Scripture urges us to guard against this. I Cor. 3:18 warns, *"Do not deceive yourselves,"* and James 1:22, *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."*

IV. Why We Lie

A. To Hurt Others

Why are we so tempted to lie? Why is it so easy? First, we lie because we want to hurt others. We've been hurt, so we lash out with our words to hurt back. We can be so cruel with our speech. We might say, *"sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."* But anyone who has been wounded by false words will tell you this is not true. False words hurt, and they can hurt badly. They steal our joy and rob our courage. They keep us awake at night and fill our eyes with tears.

King David knew the pain of false words. Listen to his description of those who gave false witness against him in Ps. 64:3,4, *"They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim their words like deadly arrows. They shoot from ambush at the innocent man; they shoot at him suddenly, without fear."* And consider the wisdom of Solomon in Prov. 25:18, *"Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor."* We all know the pain of such words.

But we're not so quick to recognize the pain we cause others with our false words. We don't realize how much our words pierce, and cut, and stab at the hearts of others. We tend to think of our lies as small, maybe even innocent. If we get caught, we say we didn't mean to hurt anyone. We need to see all the harm that lies bring.

Lying is much worse than a little quirk in human nature. It is destructive. James 3 compares the tongue to a spark that lights a forest fire and a well with poisonous water. Rom. 3:13 paints a picture of the destruction of deceptive speech. Speaking of all sinful people, *"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."* Lying is not harmless or innocent. In the ninth commandment God is trying to protect us from the great damage done by lies.

B. To Help Ourselves

We not only lie to hurt others, but secondly, we lie to help ourselves. This is one of Satan's greatest tricks. He fools us into thinking that by lying we can help ourselves, improve our situation, or further our cause in some way. Whether we lie out of fear, embarrassment, for money, or to protect our pride we are serving the self. When we lie, Jesus is not the Lord of our lives. Rather, we are worshipping self. Consider Peter in Mt. 26. Jesus had been arrested. Peter had followed behind and was now warming his hands by the fire, when a little girl recognized

him as being one of Jesus' disciples. Three times Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Only moments before Peter had drawn his sword and was willing to fight for Jesus. Now he couldn't even speak a word on his behalf. What was motivating Peter to lie? He thought by lying that he could help himself.

We do the same thing, but like Peter we don't really help ourselves, we just dig ourselves in deeper. Oh, lies do work, at least at first, but their success is usually short-lived. You can never pave the road to long term success with deception. Lies build you up quickly, but they are a weak foundation that will crumble beneath your feet. Prov. 20:17 says, *"Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man, but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel."*

Anything we gain by lies ends up biting us in the end. Solomon writes of this many times in Proverbs. *"Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. (12:19)."* *"A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare (21:6)."* *"Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he did not give (25:14)."* So we can never really help ourselves by lying. It is merely a detour to destruction.

V. Loving Truth

In closing the door to untruth, we need to realize that God is opening another door to us, the door of truth. When God says no to one thing, He says yes to another. We can never hope to stop lying unless we pursue the truth. Consider Eph. 4:25. *"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor."* We can never hope to put off falsehood, unless we also put on the truth. Sometimes we never can get over a sin, because we don't replace it with something good. We struggle and battle with a sin. We do all that we can to avoid it, but we keep falling back into it. You can never overcome a sin, if you don't replace it with a righteous thing. Lying must be replaced with truth.

This means we must believe in and love and pursue the truth. You do not get your own truth. You can have your own feelings, your own opinions, but you don't get your own truth. Truth does not come from within. It comes from without. Truth is transcendent. It is not dependent on how you feel about it. $2 + 2 = 4$; $E = MC^2$, $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. These things are true whether you know it or not. They're true whether you love math or hate math.

Truth is absolute. We know this in math. We know this in medicine. We don't go to a doctor who is making up her own truth. We know this in engineering. We don't want to fly on a plane designed by an engineer who is discovering his own truth.

We know that truth is truth in every area of life except for morals and spirituality. We don't make up our own truth in math, in engineering, in software design, home wiring, in plumbing, in aeronautics, in astrophysics, in immunology. But when we get to moral and spiritual truth, then suddenly we want to pretend that we live in a fantasy world that truth can be whatever we want it to be. We can decide for ourselves what is right and wrong for us.

Spirituality is a buffet where we can sample all the bits we like and leave out the stuff we don't. I'll take a little bit of "God is love," and a big spoonful of "He has a wonderful plan for me life," oh and throw a little side of heaven on there. "Ewwwww. I don't want any of that sin stuff though. It gives me an upset stomach. I'll pass on the personal responsibility, and I just haven't developed a taste for righteousness. Only snobs like holiness and judgment. No thanks, I'll stick with what I have on my plate.

God wants us to be people of truth because he is a God of truth. Heb. 6:18 says that it is impossible for God to lie. We have been saved by the Gospel of truth. Our Savior is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the Truth with a capital T. The apostle John wrote in I Jn. 2:21, "*I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth.*" When we lie we are denying the very God who made us, who saved us, and lives within us.

How do we replace lies with the truth? It has to be something you desire in your heart. Lies, though spoken, come from the heart. Our Lord said, "*Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.*" Truthfulness starts in the heart. You must love the truth. You must treasure it. There are some practical helps, though, that I think can help us move toward truth.

First, we need to tell the truth about lying. We need to call it what it is. We don't see lying for the serious thing that it is. When the N.T. talks about lying it puts it alongside murder, adultery, and homosexuality. Many of us who would never do those things will easily lie. We need to see lying for the horrible thing it is and be honest about it. A woman came to Dwight Moody years ago and asked, "How can I stop my little boy from telling fibs?" "To begin with," he said, "call them lies." Part of our problem is we don't lie, we stretch the truth, we don't lie, we have a memory lapse. We don't lie, we protect someone. We don't lie, we're just selective about the facts. The first step in overcoming a sin, is being honest about that sin, and confessing that sin God. If you struggle with telling the truth, get down on your knees and tell God. Say, "Lord, I'm a liar. I know it's wrong. I know it hurts you and it hurts others. But I am powerless to overcome it. God, I need your grace and strength. I want to love the truth, because you love the truth.

Spend time in the Word. Nothing counters falsehood like the truth. Light forces out the darkness. The truth of God's word will expose and force out the lies in your life. Finally, you must also make yourself accountable. Have your friends and family be honest with you. If you have a problem lying, they know it. They may keep quiet to keep the peace. Be honest with them about your problems and let them know you want them to speak up whenever they see you playing loose with the truth.

The worst lie you may tell may be to do nothing, to not respond.