

## Why it is never right to lie

### A. Definition of lying

Intro: People mean many different things by "lying." This just confuses the discussion.

(Such as: , or telling only part of what you know in answer to a question, or staying silent when someone asks you a question, or any misleading actions, or any time you deceive someone, or unintentionally giving false information, and so forth).

Those are interesting questions.

But I will not focus on them in this presentation.

- will focus only on one specific question

-- if we clarify that one question, it will give much clarity to understanding these other topics.

→ Warning: this lesson will disagree with nearly all of modern society, and also with many Christians today

1. → **Lying is affirming in speech or writing something you believe to be false.**
2. Several related acts that are not included in this definition. On this narrow definition, "lying" does not include:
  - a. *Silence* (saying nothing, b/c silence is not exactly an affirmation of anything; note Jesus' silence in Matt. 26:63).
  - b. *Nonverbal actions intended to mislead or deceive someone* (i.e. leaving lights on in house when gone)
  - c. *Ironic statements, especially in humor* (These are not truly affirmations when understood rightly)
  - d. *Hyperbole* (Not intended to be taken as literally true, use impossible exaggeration for rhetorical effect - Matt 7:5)
 

"It took me forever to clean the garage."
  - e. *Unintentional falsehoods* (For example, you may be misinformed and then affirm something that is actually false)
3. I am not now making a moral judgment about these other acts. People may discuss them (a to e above)
  - a. (I would say that some of them are *seldom or never wrong*, others may be *often or perhaps always wrong*.)
  - b. Not the same as "lying" in the narrow sense of "affirming in speech or writing something you believe to be false"
  - c. Some may argue against this narrow definition of lying - "Deceptive actions are the *same thing* as lying."
 

-- I disagree

    - i. Actions are ambiguous & can have various meanings, while verbal affirmations ordinarily are not ambiguous.
    - ii. Lying involves a contradiction between what you think to be true and what you say.
    - iii. These differences are important, and show at least that the two categories should be analyzed separately.
    - iv. Scripture itself seems to use "lie" and "lying" quite often in this narrow sense (Rom 9:1; 1 Tim 2:7)
    - v. However, some "verbal-equivalent actions" (nodding head) – are exactly equivalent to affirming something in speech/writing
  - d. Augustine (354 – 430 AD, Hippo, North Africa [present-day Algeria]) - argued only against lying in the same narrow sense that I defined above (*On Lying*)<sup>1</sup>
  - e. John Murray (Westminster) - "the person who is to be branded as a liar is the person who affirms to be true what he knows or believes to be false or affirms to be false what he knows or believes to be true."<sup>2</sup>
  - f. *Westminster Larger Catechism* - says 9th commandment requires: "speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever."
4. → **I believe that lying in the sense defined in #1 above is always wrong.**

The reasons for this are in what follows:

### B. Biblical standards about truthfulness and lying

1. Numerous biblical condemnations of lying in general.
  - a. Ex 20:16: "You shall not *bear false witness* against your neighbor"; Job 27:4; Ps 5:6; 12:2; 58:3; 63:11; 101:7; 116:11; 119:163; 120:2; 144:11; Pro 12:19,22; 13:5; 30:8; Isa 59:4; Jer 9:3, 5; Mic 6:12; Acts 5:3-4, Eph 4:24, Col 3:9-10; 1 Tim 1:10; Rev 14:5; 21:8; 22:15
  - b. Bible's moral standards include many specific OT/NT verses that prohibit speaking lies/falsehood.
2. Does the mention of "neighbor" narrow the application of the 9th commandment?
  - a. John Frame suggests that the 9th commandment (Ex 20:16) may not prohibit all affirmations of falsehood.
    - i. "What then is a lie? I would say that a lie is a word or act that intentionally deceives a neighbor in order to hurt him. It is false witness *against* a neighbor." – John Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 835.
    - ii. "I have questioned whether a neighborly relationship exists between a believer and someone who seeks to murder . . . we have no obligation to tell the truth to people who, for example, seek innocent life." – Frame, 839

<sup>1</sup> Augustine says, "that man lies, who has one thing in his mind and utters another in words, or by signs of whatever kind" (*On Lying*, 3; NPNF First Series, vol. 3, 458)

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 146.

- b. But John Calvin (1509-1564, France, then Basel, then Geneva, Switzerland) explained God formulated the *positive* commands in a way that would be easier for us to accept.
  - i. Example: 5<sup>th</sup> commandment: "By that subjection which is easiest to tolerate, the Lord therefore gradually accustoms us to all lawful subjection."<sup>3</sup>
- c. By contrast, Calvin says the things prohibited in the *negative* commands put forth the most hateful examples of that whole category of wrongdoing, in order to shock us into appreciating how hateful they all are (i.e. 7th command).
  - i. The wording of the 9th commandment in this way is *not meant to narrow the application to neighbors only*, for, Calvin says, "as he forbade cruelty, shamelessness, and avarice in the preceding commandments, *here he bars falsehood* . . . For we must always come back to this: one particular vice is singled out from various kinds *as an example*, and the rest are brought under the same category, the one chosen being an especially foul vice."
- d. Better understanding is that "false witness *against your neighbor*" is a *particularly hateful example* of lying.
  - i. Other use of "neighbor" in the Ten Commandments confirms this understanding (Ex 20:17).
  - ii. Exod. 20:12 does not mean that we should *only* honor our parents, but implies an obligation to honor other rightful authorities in our lives.
  - iii. Numerous other verses confirm this when they condemn lying in general but make no mention of a neighbor.

### C. The character of God as the basis for not lying

- 1. Biblical commands against lying are ultimately rooted in the character of God, who never lies.
  - a. Num 23:19: "God is not man, that he should lie"; Prov 30:5 "every word of God proves true"; Titus 1:2: "in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began"; Heb 6:18: "it is impossible for God to lie"
- 2. The ultimate reason why lying is wrong: it makes us unfaithful image-bearers of God (Eph 5:1; Col 3:9-10).
- 3. By contrast, the character of Satan is such that he lies according to his own nature.
  - "When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:44)
- 4. Therefore ethical norms against lying are found not ultimately in human results, but in the fact that *lying dishonors God's own character*.

### D. Did Jesus ever lie?

- 1. Some people will argue that there are difficult situations in which it is morally right to lie in order to protect life.
- 2. Strong objection to this view comes from life of Christ.
  - a. Christ "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" - Heb 4:15
    - i. Means that if people today are ever tempted to tell a lie to preserve someone's life, then Jesus also had to have faced this same kind of temptation. If we are required to lie in such a situation, Jesus was required to lie as well. This implies that Jesus sometimes lied.
  - b. But: Would be impossible for Jesus, who was also God, since "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18).
  - c. Jesus' moral character & the truthfulness of all his words, are evidence that Scripture prohibits us from telling a lie.

### E. Do the narrative examples in Scripture overturn or modify our understanding of lying?

- 1. Rahab's lie - admitted by all that Rahab lied to the men who were looking for the Hebrew spies (Josh 2:1-7);
  - "When the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." (Josh 2:5).
  - a. Question is whether this or later passages (Heb. 11:31; Jas 2:25) show that God approved of Rahab's lie.
  - b. To think that Scripture holds up an untrained, uninformed Canaanite prostitute as a model of ethical conduct is asking too much of the text.
  - c. NT passages commend her faith, but they conspicuously avoid mentioning her lie (Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25).
  - d. Nowhere in Scripture is there an explicit approval of a lie, even one told to protect innocent life.
  - e. "We must admit that *though it was done for a good purpose, it was not free from fault*" (Calvin)
  - f. "But *in that she lied . . . yet not as meet to be imitated . . . albeit that God hath those things memorably honored, this evil thing mercifully overlooked.*" (Augustine)
- 2. Hebrew midwives in Egypt (Ex 1:15-21)
  - a. Does this passage show that God approved of lying? At least two factors call this into question:
    - (1) The statement of the midwives may in fact be largely true, or true as a generalization
      - a. It is entirely reasonable, when Pharaoh's plan became known to the Hebrew people, they delayed calling these midwives until after birth, perhaps using other midwives or assisting one another in the birth process.
      - b. The midwives may have been complicit in this plan, teaching the Hebrew women how to help one another
    - (2) God's favor on midwives is primarily or entirely because of what is said in v17: they "let the male children live" and v21, they "feared God."

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, two volumes; edited by John T. McNeill; translated by Ford Lewis Battles; The Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 401 (Book 2, Chap. 8, Sec. 35).

- a. If their statement to Pharaoh is a lie, it is told only to protect themselves from punishment, not to protect the Hebrew children, so it is hardly a good example of lying to protect another life.
- b. The passage is not at all a clear commendation of lying.
  - i. God's favor on them "was not because they lied, but because they were merciful to God's people. That therefore which was rewarded in them was, not their deceit, but their benevolence." (Augustine)
- 3. Elisha's statement to the Syrian soldiers (2 Kgs 6:18-20)
  - a. Did Elisha (a prophet of God) lie to the Syrian army? He said, "This is not the way, and this is not the city."
    - i. The words are actually ambiguous, somewhat enigmatic. What way? What city?
    - ii. Rather than leaving them, Elisha did in fact bring them to a place where they encountered him face to face.
    - iii. This is by no means a clear example of a falsehood approved by God.
      - a. Was not told to save Elisha's life or anyone else's life, the Syrian soldiers were already blind/harmless
- 4. Other passages
  - a. Frame mentions several other passages "in which someone misleads an enemy, without incurring any condemnation, and sometimes even being commended."
  - b. Passages fall into several categories, but none of them contains a clear lie that is approved by God.
  - c. *Deceptive actions* (Josh 8:3-8; 2 Sam 5:22-25; 1 Sam 21:13)
    - i. These actions do seem to be approved by God, but do not fall in the category of a "lie" defined above.
    - ii. Sufficiently different from a "lie" so that we are justified in putting them in a different category:
      - (1) Scripture treats them differently, always condemning lies but not always condemning deceptive actions.
      - (2) Actions are not true or false (as verbal affirmations are), but they are just something that happens.
      - (3) People instinctively treat them differently. (i.e. leaving light on versus verbal affirmation)
      - (4) Actions have ambiguous meanings, but propositions ordinarily do not.
  - d. *God sending a deceptive spirit* or a lying spirit to wicked unbelievers (1 Kings 22:19-23; 2 Thess. 2:11).
    - i. Raise difficult questions about God's use of evil agents to carry out judgment, but they do not show God's approval of the lies any more than God's ordaining that evil people would crucify Christ (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28) shows that God approved of their evil deeds (he did not: Acts 2:23).
  - e. Other passages simply *report that someone lied* without indicating God's approval on the lie.
    - i. 1 Sam 19:14,17; 20:6; 2 Sam 17:20
  - f. Cases of what we may call *deceptive speech* but it is not clear that anyone actually told a lie in the sense of affirming something he thought to be false - Judges 4:18; 2 Sam 15:34; Jer 38:26-27
  - g. One passage deals with *stating part of the truth*, but there is no affirmation of anything false (1 Sam 16:1-5).
  - h. In none of these passages is it clear that someone told a lie and it was approved by God.

## F. Do some circumstances require a person to lie?

- 1. Lying in order to protect life?
  - a. Does not seem to be any Scripture passages that lead us to this conclusion.
  - b. Situations that seem especially difficult (WWII - Christians hiding Jews from Nazi's soldiers)
    - i. Augustine (ca AD 395) - Bishop Fermus hiding righteous person from corrupt emperor.
    - ii. Bishop refused to lie, but neither would he disclose the hiding place ("suffered many torments").
    - iii. Augustine says, "What conduct could be more brave and constant?"
    - iv. Augustine thought it would have been wrong to lie, even for the purpose of protecting a human life.
- 2. Real-life situations offer many more options
  - a. Telling the truth and lying are not the only options, since *silence* is always an option.
  - b. A fourth option is saying any of a hundred different things that don't answer the question asked.
  - c. Some would argue in this situation that such evildoers, such as murderers, had "forfeited their right to the truth."
    - i. I would probably agree to not tell them the truth, but that does not mean that I have to lie to them either.
- 3. Does this situation present a "tragic moral choice?"
  - a. "Tragic moral choice" - a case where we have to do a lesser sin (lying) to avoid a greater sin (murder).
  - b. *There are no such tragic moral choices*, where God wants us to disobey one of his commands to obey another.
  - c. Frame gives several reasons for rejecting the idea that there are situations where we have to sin:
    - i. "In Scripture, we have a moral duty to do what is right, and never to do what is wrong."
    - ii. This view implies that "the law of God itself is contradictory, for it requires contradictory behavior."
    - iii. Since Jesus "in every respect has been tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15), this view requires that Jesus himself had to sin in some situations, but Scripture repeatedly affirms that Jesus never sinned.
    - iv. 1 Corinthians 10:13 guarantees God "will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape," and implies there are no situations so hard that all the options are sinful.
  - d. "Hard cases" - (someone had to lie) quickly leads to easy rationalization for many other sins.

- (1) It is *sometimes* right to lie to preserve a human life to
  - (2) It is right to lie when it does more good than harm to
  - (3) It is right to lie when you think it will bring a good result to
  - (4) It is sometimes right to break *other* commands of the Bible when it will do more good than harm.
  - (5) The end result is a terribly weak personal ethical system
4. The need to consider all the results of telling a lie.
- (1) The other person's life might or might not be preserved.
  - (2) God will be dishonored, because a human being who is in God's image, and who represents God on the earth, has told a lie and thus represented his Creator as a liar.
  - (3) People will begin to think of the person who lied as (sometimes) a liar, whose words cannot always be trusted.
  - (4) The moral character of the person who lied will be eroded.
  - (5) It will become easier to lie in the future, because once a person thinks it is right to lie in some circumstances, this will seem to be an easy solution in additional circumstances, and the person's lying will become more frequent.
  - (6) The act of lying may be imitated by others, multiplying these results in other situations.
5. But if a person does not lie but remains silent or tells the truth (refusing to lie), then several good results will follow:
- (1) God will be trusted to bring about the right results, including protecting the other person's life.
  - (2) God will be honored because the speaker's actions portray his Creator as one who only tells the truth.
  - (3) People will begin to think of the person who told the truth as someone whose words can always be trusted.
  - (4) The moral character of the person who did not lie will be strengthened, because in a difficult situation he faithfully obeyed the biblical commands against lying.
  - (5) The speaker will be more likely to always tell the truth in the future, remembering that it was not necessary to lie in this difficult situation in the past.
  - (6) The speaker's truthfulness may be imitated by others, multiplying these results in other situations. In this way the work of the kingdom of God will be advanced.
6. Other situations
- a. My approach to other difficult situations would be similar to the approach above (we should tell no "little white lies")
  - b. It is always better to tell the truth, and to do so following Ephesians 4:15, "speaking the truth *in love*."
  - c. What about conventional idioms or habitual greetings such as "How are you?"
    - i. "Fine" can cover many situations or at times a more specific answer might be appropriate.
7. Lying accompanies most other sins.
- a. The murderer, the adulterer, and the thief all lie to conceal their wrongdoing.
  - b. Those who promote false religions often use falsehood to advance their views (1 Tim 4:1-2).
  - c. People who promote evil policies in a society often spread their influence through falsehoods.
  - d. If we increasingly become a society in which lying is unacceptable, and in which truthfulness is held in high regard, then we should expect to see a decrease in crime and other wrongdoing as well.

#### G. The moral character of the speaker

1. Truthfulness and lying are often highly significant indicators of a person's inward moral character.
2. Truthfulness in speech may be the most frequent test of our integrity each day.
3. People have opportunities many times every day to tell a small lie.
  - i. In each case, God is dishonored and the liar's moral character is further eroded (Ps 15:1-2).
4. Each time a person speaks the truth or lies, he aligns himself either with God (Titus 1:2) or with Satan (John 8:44).
5. A person who tells the truth (or remains silent), even in a difficult situation, faithfully represents his Creator as one who tells the truth, and therefore becomes more closely conformed to the image of God.
6. Telling the truth often requires inward trust in God to govern the circumstances and the outcome of the situation.

#### H. Conclusion

If lying is understood to mean "affirming in speech or writing something you believe to be false," then the overall testimony of Scripture is that lying is always wrong in every situation and every circumstance of life, and this will be true for all eternity.

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<http://www.christianessentialsbc.com>.

See also [www.waynegrudem.com](http://www.waynegrudem.com)