

Why It Is Never Right To Lie:
An Example of John Frame’s Influence on My Approach to Ethics

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[published as: “Why It Is Never Right to Lie: An Example of John Frame’s Influence on My Approach to Ethics,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame* (Festschrift for John Frame), edited by John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), pp. 778-801]

Introduction

I count it a privilege to contribute to this volume of essays in honor of my friend and former professor, John Frame. When I was a student at Westminster Seminary (1971-1973), his classes, his evident devotion to God’s Word, and the example of his life had a life-changing impact on me and significantly affected all my subsequent teaching and writing. My entire Bible-centered approach to all I have written on theology and ethics (including this essay!) owes much to his example and the convictions he instilled in me in his classes. Then nearly 30 years after I graduated from Westminster, I indirectly received another benefit from him: My son Elliot was able to take classes from John at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando and to understand first-hand why I appreciated his teaching so greatly.

I hope this essay will be understood as I intend it – as a genuine expression of deep gratitude for John Frame’s teaching, even though I argue for a position on lying that somewhat different from his own. When I selected the topic for this essay I had thought (from an imperfect memory) that John’s own position on lying was the same as my own – it is never right to lie. But when I read the section on bearing false witness in his *Doctrine of the Christian Life*,¹ I was surprised to find that his position differs from mine, because he thinks there are times when it is not wrong to lie, particularly in situations involving “the promotion of justice against the wicked, especially when they seek innocent life.”²

Did my memory simply fail me? Not exactly. I dug out my class notes from 1973 (the May 14 class) and found this section:

Problem: Nazis at door, Jews in basement

1. Tell truth
2. Lie
3. Say nothing, don’t respond

Frame inclines to #1 or #3, but problems:

¹ John Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (hereafter, DCL) (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 830-843.

² *Ibid.*, 839.

→ are there adequate linguistic conventions in war for telling truth to enemy?
In some situations, you are expected to tell truth.
lift white flag, then wouldn't be right to come out shooting
What could you say to Nazis at door that they would believe?
You don't want to rule out all deceptive maneuvers, etc.
Certainly it's legitimate to conceal the truth.³

The line that said "Frame inclines to #1 or #3" seems to indicate that he thought then (with some hesitation) that a person should either tell the truth or remain silent, but not lie. That in fact is the position I myself have adopted, and will support in this essay.

But now in *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, when John comes to the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16), he argues that it does *not* prohibit all lying. He writes,

So we have no obligation to tell the truth to people who, for example, seek innocent life. In many volumes and essays on ethics, authors refer to perhaps the most famous of all ethical dilemmas: During World War II, a Christian is sheltering Jews in his home, protecting them from the Nazis. SS officers come to the door and ask him directly whether he is hiding Jews In this case . . . I think the obligation is clearly to deceive the SS if there were any chance to mislead the SS officers, as Rahab misled the officers of her own people, I think the Christian should have availed himself of that strategy.⁴

He also lists sixteen passages from Scripture "in which someone misleads an enemy, without incurring any condemnation, and sometimes even being commended."⁵ He says,

In these passages, there is deceit, and that deceit brings harm. But the harm comes to an enemy, not to a neighbor It does appear that the Bible passages listed above, which justify deception in certain cases, all have to do with the promotion of justice against the wicked, especially when they seek innocent life we

³ Section copied from my handwritten class notes from Systematic Theology 5323 at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, May 14, 1973. In personal conversation by phone (July 13, 2009), I read John this section from the notes and he told me he thought his position on this question had moved from what it was in 1973 – but he encouraged me to publish my argument anyway, saying, "Well, maybe you will convince me!" With that encouragement, and not intending any disrespect, I offer this essay for his consideration and the consideration of other readers.

⁴ Frame, *DCL*, 839-840.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 836. The passages are (1) Exod. 1:15-21; (2) Josh. 2:4-6; 6:17, 25; Heb. 11:31; James 2:25; (3) Josh. 8:3-8; (4) Judges 4:18-21; 5:24-27; (5) 1 Sam. 16:1-5; (6) 1 Sam. 19:12-17; (7) 1 Sam. 20:6; (8) 1 Sam. 21:13; (9) 1 Sam. 27:10; (10) 2 Sam. 5:22-25; (11) 2 Sam. 15:34; (12) 2 Sam. 17:19-20; (13) 1 Kings 22:19-23; (14) 2 Kings 6:14-20; (15) Jer. 38:24-28; (16) 2 Thess. 2:11.

should recall that in the ninth commandment the requirement to tell the truth is conditioned on a relationship, that of “neighbor.”⁶

My intention in this essay is to argue for the position of “early Frame” (1973 notes) rather than this position of “later Frame” (2008 book). And I do so with the greatest respect and appreciation for both early and later Frame, for him as a professor and a friend.

I. Definition of lying

It is important to clarify at the outset exactly what is being discussed. The question is the narrow one of verbal affirmations of something one believes to be false. In this sense,

Lying is affirming in speech or writing something you believe to be false.

There are several related acts that are not included in this definition. On this narrow definition, “lying” does not include:

(1) *Silence* (This is saying nothing, so silence is not exactly an affirmation of anything; note Jesus’ silence in Matt. 26:63).

(2) *Nonverbal actions intended to mislead or deceive someone* (An action is something that happens; it is neither true nor false like a verbal affirmation of something. An example is leaving a light on in our house when we are away for a weekend – an observer may rightly conclude, “The Grudems left a light on,” but that may or may not prove that we are at home.)

(3) *Ironic statements, especially in humor* (These are not truly affirmations when understood rightly.)

(4) *Hyperbole* (These are not intended to be taken as literally true, but they use impossible exaggeration for rhetorical effect: “It took me forever to write this chapter”; “first take the log out of your own eye,” Matt. 7:5)

(5) *Unintentional falsehoods* (For example, you may be misinformed and then affirm something that is actually false. But this is not something you believe to be false, so it does not fit the definition of “lying” given above.)

I want to be clear that in this essay I am *not* making a moral judgment about these other acts. People may argue about acts (1) to (5), saying that some of them are *seldom or never wrong*, and others are *often or perhaps always wrong* (depending on other factors). Those are interesting questions, but they are not my main purpose in this essay. They are not the same as “lying” in the narrow sense of “affirming in speech or writing something you believe to be false,” which is my concern here.

Of course, some may argue against this narrow definition of lying, saying, for example, “Deceptive actions are the *same thing* as lying.” But that is not a careful

⁶ Ibid., 836, 839.

statement. Deceptive actions are in *some* ways similar to lying (their goal is to persuade someone else to believe something untrue) and in *some* ways different from lying. For example, actions are ambiguous and can have various meanings, while verbal affirmations ordinarily are not ambiguous. Also, the Bible treats deceptive actions and false affirmations differently, as I will indicate below. And lying involves a contradiction between what you think to be true and what you say, which does not occur in deceptive actions (a difference that was very significant to Augustine). The differences are important, and show at least that the two categories should be analyzed separately.

And Scripture itself seems to use “lie” and “lying” quite often in this narrow sense, to mean affirming in words something that one thinks to be false, in passages such as:

I am *speaking the truth* in Christ--I am *not lying*; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit-- (Romans 9:1)

For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (*I am telling the truth, I am not lying*), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (1 Timothy 2:7)

One further clarification is needed: I agree that there are a few actions that are understood to be exactly equivalent to affirming something in speech or writing. In modern American society, for example, nodding the head up and down is understood as equivalent to saying “yes,” and shaking the head back and forth is understood as equivalent to saying “no.” Another example would be an injured person who had lost his voice but who was able to point to the words “yes” and “no” on a board held in front of him. These might be called “verbal-equivalent actions.” They are unambiguous ways to affirm or deny something, and they belong in the same category as “affirming something in speech or writing.” They do not belong in my category (2) above, “nonverbal actions intended to mislead or deceive someone.”

Such a restriction of “lying” to this narrow sense of speech or writing is not new with me. The respected church father Augustine (A.D. 354 – 430), the most famous defender of the view that lying is always wrong, argued only against lying in the narrow sense that I have defined above, that is, affirming in speech or writing something that one believed at the time to be untrue.⁷

Westminster Seminary professor John Murray took the same position in *Principles of Conduct*: after a discussion of several passages of Scripture (such as the stories of Rahab in Joshua 2 and the Egyptian midwives in Exodus 1), he concludes, “the upshot of our

⁷ See the extensive discussion in Paul J. Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004). Griffiths represents Augustine’s view as follows: “The lie is a verbal act, something we do with words” (p. 25). And he says that for Augustine, “the lie is deliberately duplicitous speech, insincere speech that deliberately contradicts what its speaker takes to be true” (p. 31). “Nonverbal actions cannot be lies” (p. 33). “Silence – the refusal of speech – is also excluded” (33). “Error is excluded from the lie Jokes are not lies” (p. 34). “Augustine’s definition of the lie, then excludes in principle nonverbal communication in general and silence in particular” (p. 38). Augustine himself 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). He concludes *On Lying* by saying, “It clearly appears then . . . that those testimonies of Scripture have none other meaning than that we must never at all tell a lie; seeing that not any examples of lies, worthy of imitation, are found in the manners and actions of the Saints” (*On Lying* 42; NPNF First Series, vol. 3, 476).

investigation has been that no instance demonstrates the propriety of untruthfulness under any exigency.”⁸ Murray defines a lie as follows:

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.”⁹

He later says, “The injunctions of Scripture which bear directly on the demand for truthfulness have reference to speech or utterance.”¹⁰

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* says that the ninth commandment prohibits “speaking untruth, lying”¹¹ and requires “speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever.”¹²

II. Biblical standards about truthfulness and lying

A. Numerous biblical condemnations of lying in general

The Bible has numerous commands prohibiting “lying” in the sense of affirming something that you believe to be false. These verses condemn false speech and see it as characteristic of sinners who are far from God, or they approve or truthfulness in speech, or say it is a characteristic of righteous people. What follows is a sample of such verses, but many more could be added. (These verses provide the “normative perspective” in John Frame’s three-perspective or “triperspectival” system of ethics.)

You shall not *bear false witness* against your neighbor (Exod. 20:16).

my lips will not *speak falsehood*, and my tongue will not utter deceit. (Job 27:4)

You destroy those who *speak lies* (Ps. 5:6).

Everyone *utters lies* to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. (Psalm 12:2)

The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, *speaking lies* (Ps. 58:3).

⁸ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 146.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135. As for actions intended to deceive, Murray later argues that there was no wrongdoing on the part of Joshua or the army of Israel when it retreated from the city of Ai, drawing its inhabitants into an ambush by actions intended to deceive (p. 144; cf. Joshua 8).

¹¹ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 145.

¹² *Ibid.*, Question 144.

But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of *liars* will be stopped. (Psalm 63:11)

no one who utters lies shall continue before my eyes (Ps. 101:7).

I said in my alarm, "All mankind are *liars*." (Psalm 116:11)

I hate and abhor *falsehood*, but I love your law. (Psalm 119:163)

Rescue me and deliver me from the hand of foreigners, whose *mouths speak lies* and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood. (Psalm 144:11)

Deliver me, O LORD, from *lying lips*, from a deceitful tongue. (Psalm 120:2)

Truthful lips endure forever, but a *lying tongue* is but for a moment. (Proverbs 12:19)

The righteous hates *falsehood*, but the wicked brings shame and disgrace. (Proverbs 13:5)

Remove far from me *falsehood and lying*; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, (Proverbs 30:8)

Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight (Prov. 12:22).

No one enters suit justly; no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, *they speak lies*, they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity (Isa 59:4).

They bend their tongue like a bow; *falsehood and not truth* has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:3)

Everyone deceives his neighbor, and *no one speaks the truth*; they have taught their tongue to *speak lies*; they weary themselves committing iniquity. (Jeremiah 9:5)

Your rich men are full of violence; your inhabitants *speak lies*, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth. (Micah 6:12)

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to *lie* to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? . . . You have not *lied* to men but to God." (Acts 5:3-4)

Therefore, having *put away falsehood*, let each one of you *speak the truth* with his neighbor, for we are members one of another (Eph. 4:25).

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Col. 3:9-10).

the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, *liars*, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, (1 Timothy 1:10)

and in their mouth *no lie was found*, for they are blameless (Rev. 14:5).

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, *and all liars*, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death (Rev. 21:8).

Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices *falsehood*. (Revelation 22:15)

Therefore the Bible's moral standards regarding lying include not only the ninth commandment, but an entire collection of Old Testament and New Testament verses that prohibit speaking lies or falsehood. And there are many other similar verses to those listed here, condemning things such as "lying," "falsehood," "liars," and those who "speak lies."

B. Does the mention of “neighbor” narrow the application of the ninth commandment?

But do these verses condemn all lying? They seem to, but John Frame suggests that the ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16), may not prohibit all affirmations of falsehood. He writes, “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.”¹³ Later he writes, about Bible passages that promote some deception, that they

all have to do with the promotion of justice against the wicked, especially when they seek innocent life the requirement to tell the truth is conditioned on a relationship, that of ‘neighbor’ 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.¹⁴

However, I am not persuaded that the wording of the ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness *against your neighbor*” (Ex. 20:16), is intended to show us that there are some people to whom we are allowed to lie. Another explanation of that wording is possible.

John Calvin explained the concrete references in the Ten Commandments by saying that God formulated the *positive* commands in a way that would be easier for us to accept. For example, “Honor your father and mother” (Exod. 20:12) commands us to be subject to all rightful authority (such as the civil government) but God phrases the requirement in terms of father and mother, and “By that subjection which is easiest to tolerate, the Lord therefore gradually accustoms us to all lawful subjection.”¹⁵

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. Thus, concerning the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod. 20:14), Calvin says, “But he expressly forbids fornication, to which all lust tends, in order through the foulness of fornication . . . to lead us to abominate all lust.”¹⁶

Therefore Calvin realizes that “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16) pictures a courtroom scene in which the “false witness” will likely harm the neighbor by causing loss of life or property, but the wording of the commandment in this way is *not meant to narrow the application to neighbors only*, for,

¹³ *DCL*, 835, emphasis in original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 839.

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 405 (Book 2, Chap. 8, Sec. 41).

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.”¹⁷

Therefore there is an alternative to seeing “against your neighbor” as limiting the scope of the ninth commandment. It seem that a better understanding is that “You shall not bear false witness *against your neighbor*” is chosen as *a particularly hateful example* of lying, because it is a courtroom setting where you intentionally speak falsely against your neighbor (whom you should love!) in a way that will cost him his goods (perhaps to your benefit) or even his life. By this God means to show us how hateful all lying is, not merely this kind of lying.

The other use of “neighbor” in the Ten Commandments confirms this understanding:

You shall not covet *your neighbor's* house; you shall not covet *your neighbor's* wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is *your neighbor's* (Exod. 20:17).

But surely we would not want to argue that the mention of “neighbor” narrows the application, so that it is wrong to covet your *neighbor's* house or wife but acceptable to covet your *enemy's* house or wife!

In the same way, “Honor your father and you mother” (Exod. 20:12) does not mean that we should *only* honor our parents, but implies also an obligation to honor other rightful authorities in our lives. Rightly understood, then, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” implies “You shall not covet *anybody else's* house; you shall not covet *anybody else's* wife.”

Similarly, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” implies “You shall not bear false witness *at all*,” or, to put it terms of lying, “You shall not *speak lies* at all.” And numerous other verses of Scripture also 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

The biblical commands against lying are ultimately rooted in the character of God, who never lies.

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num 23:19).

¹⁷ Ibid., 411-412.

Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him (Prov. 30:5).

in hope of eternal life, which *God, who never lies*, promised before the ages began (Titus 1:2).

so that by two unchangeable things, in which *it is impossible for God to lie*, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us (Heb. 6:18).

This, then, is the ultimate reason why lying is wrong: it makes us unfaithful image-bearers of God. The New Testament tells us, “Therefore *be imitators of God*, as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1), and when we speak truthfully we rightly portray our Creator as a God who speaks the truth. But if we lie, we are not rightly imitating God’s own truthful speech. If we lie, we are falsely portraying our Creator as one who lies as well, and that dishonors him.

This connection between not lying and bearing God’s image is seen in Paul’s statement to the Colossians:

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge *after the image of its creator* (Col. 3:9-10).

By contrast, the character of Satan is such that he lies according to his own nature:

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because *there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies* (John 8:44).

The ground for these ethical norms against lying, therefore, is found not in any human results (such as the benefit or harm that lying might do to somebody else, or whether someone might be led to think something false), but in the fact that *our lying dishonors God’s own character*. God seeks creatures who rightly represent his image, whereas Satan consistently promotes all kinds of falsehood and lying speech.

D. Did Jesus ever lie?

Sometimes people will argue that there are difficult situations (such as trying to protect a person in hiding from a murderer) in which it is morally right to lie in order to protect life (see discussion below). But a strong objection to this view comes from the life of Christ. The New Testament tells us that Christ “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). But that means that people today are ever

tempted to tell a lie in order to preserve someone's life, then Jesus also had to have faced this same kind of temptation. And if we are required to lie in such a situation, then Jesus was required to lie as well. And this means that Jesus actually lied, actually affirmed something that he believed to be untrue. It seems necessary to conclude that, according to this position, Jesus actually affirmed a falsehood!

But this would be impossible for Jesus, who was also God, since "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18). Therefore, Jesus never lied. And therefore we never have to lie either. Jesus' own moral character, and the truthfulness of all his words, provide additional evidence that Scripture prohibits us from ever telling a lie. The character of God who never lies is manifested to us in the life of Jesus, who never told a lie.

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

In spite of this strong testimony of Scripture against lying, a number of ethical writers (including John Frame) have argued that there are specific *narrative examples* in Scripture that show that God sometimes approved of human lies that were done for a good purpose, particularly to save human life. It is necessary to examine some of these passages.

1. Rahab's lie

It is admitted by all that Rahab lied to the men who were looking for the Hebrew spies:

And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there.² And it was told to the king of Jericho, "Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land."³ Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land."⁴ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. And she said, "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from."⁵ And 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."⁶ But she had brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks of flax that she had laid in order on the roof.⁷ So the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. And the gate was shut as soon as the pursuers had gone out (Josh. 2:1-7).

The question is whether this passage or later passages (both Heb. 11:31 and James 2:25 mention Rahab) show that God actually approved of Rahab's lie.

Here a careful examination of the context is important: It shows that Rahab was a “prostitute” (v. 2) who lived in the Canaanite city of Jericho. There is nothing in the historical context to indicate that she had any prior instruction in the moral standards required by the God of Israel (other than what she could know by common grace). To think that Scripture holds up an untrained, uninformed Canaanite prostitute as a model of ethical conduct is asking too much of the text.

New Testament passages commend her faith and her receiving the spies and sending them out safely, but they conspicuously avoid mentioning her lie:

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. (Hebrews 11:31)

And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? (James 2:25).

These verses certainly do praise Rahab. But they are quite different from saying something like this:

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, *because she told a skillful lie* to save the spies. Or,

And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers *and told a lie* to keep them safe.

Nowhere in Scripture is there any verse like this, an explicit approval of a lie, even one told to protect innocent life. There are dozens of statements in Scripture about lies, and they always condemn them.

Regarding Rahab’s lie, John Calvin rightly observes:

As to the falsehood, we must admit that *though it was done for a good purpose, it was not free from fault*. For those who hold what is called a dutiful lie to be altogether excusable, do not sufficiently consider how precious truth is in the sight of God. Therefore, although our purpose be to assist our brethren . . . *it can never be lawful to lie*, because that cannot be right which is contrary to the nature of God. And God is truth.¹⁸

And Augustine takes the same position:

Therefore, touching Rahab in Jericho, because she entertained strangers, men of God, because in entertaining of them she put herself in peril, because she believed on their God, because she diligently hid them where she could, because she gave them most faithful counsel of returning by another way, let her be praised as meet to be imitated 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*.¹⁹

Therefore Scripture does not hold up Rahab’s lie as an example for believers to imitate.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 47, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Against Lying*, 34 (p. 497), emphasis added.

2. The Hebrew midwives in Egypt

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families (Exod. 1:15-21).

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. It is entirely reasonable that, when Pharaoh's plan became known to the Hebrew people, they often delayed calling these midwives until after they had given birth, perhaps using other midwives or perhaps assisting one another in the birth process. And the midwives themselves may have been complicit in this plan, even teaching the Hebrew women how to help one another at the time of childbirth. (2) God's favor on midwives is primarily or entirely because of what is said in verse 17: they "let the male children live" and verse 21, they "feared God." If their statement to Pharaoh is a lie, in any case 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. (3) The passage is not at all a clear commendation of lying. Augustine writes that 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."²⁰

3. Elisha's statement to the Syrian soldiers

The king of Syria has sent a band of soldiers to capture Elisha, but God miraculously protects him in the following way:

And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Please strike this people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha. ¹⁹ And Elisha said to them, "*This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.*" And he led them to Samaria. ²⁰ As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O LORD, open the eyes of these men, that they may see." So the LORD

²⁰ Ibid., section 32 (p. 495).

opened their eyes and they saw, and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria (2 Kings 6:18-20).

Then the king of Israel, who is in the city of Samaria, asks Elisha if he should kill the Syrian soldiers whom Elisha has captured (v. 21), but Elisha tells the king to feed them and send them on their way (v. 22).

Did Elisha (a prophet of God) lie to the Syrian army? He said, “This is not the way, and this is not the city” (v. 19), but the words are actually ambiguous, somewhat enigmatic. What way? What city? (The one where God wants them to go?) The Lord had “blinded” them (v. 18) so they decided to follow Elisha. The statement “I will bring you to the man whom you seek” (v. 19) is, again, somewhat enigmatic, but rather than leaving them, Elisha did in fact bring them to a place where they encountered him face to face. This is by no means a clear example of a clear falsehood approved by God. (And in any case, it was not told to save Elisha’s life or anyone else’s life, for the Syrian soldiers were already blinded and harmless.)

4. Other passages

John Frame mentions several other passages “in which someone misleads an enemy, without incurring any condemnation, and sometimes even being commended”²¹ (see list above, footnote 6).

The passages fall into several categories, but none of them contains a clear lie (in the sense of a verbal affirmation of what the speaker believed to be false) that is approved by God. Some passages contain *deceptive actions* such as a military ambush at Ai (Josh. 8:3-8), a surprise attack (2 Sam. 5:22-25), or David pretending to be insane (1 Sam. 21:13). These deceptive actions do seem to be approved by God in these passages, but these do not fall in the category of a “lie” as defined in this article.

But are such deceptive actions sufficiently different from a “lie” (as defined in this article) so that we are justified in putting them in a different category? I think they are, for several reasons: (1) Scripture treats them differently, always condemning lies but not always condemning such 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: If on a weekend I leave a light on in my house (to deter burglars by making them think I am home) and then my neighbor bumps into me staying in a hotel in Tucson (2 hours away), the neighbor might have seen my light but will not think me to be a liar. But if I tell my neighbor, “I’m going to stay home this weekend” and then the neighbor bumps into me in staying in a hotel in Tucson, he will think that I lied to him. This is because (4) actions have ambiguous meanings, but propositions ordinarily do not. I am not saying deceptive actions are never wrong (sometimes they surely are), but that they belong in a distinct category, one I am not dealing with in this essay.

²¹ Frame, *DCL*, 836.

Other passages have to do with *God sending a deceptive spirit* or a lying spirit to wicked unbelievers (1 Kings 22:19-23; 2 Thess. 2:11), and these passages raise difficult questions about God's providential use of evil agents to carry out judgment, but they do not necessarily 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).

Other passages simply *report that someone lied* (just as Scripture narratives *report* other sins such as murder or adultery), without indicating God's approval on the lie (these passages include Michal's lie to protect David in 1 Sam. 19:14, or her lie to protect herself in v. 17; David's counsel to Jonathan to lie in 1 Sam. 20:6; and a woman's lie to protect David's messengers in 2 Sam. 17:20).

In still other passages there are 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. These passages include Judges 4:18, where Jael invites Sisera into her tent; 2 Sam. 15:34, where David tells Hushai to say he will be Absalom's servant (he was, but he was an unfaithful servant); and Jer. 38:26-27 where Jeremiah reports that he had made a request to the king (which he might actually have done).

One passage deals with *stating part of the truth*: In 1 Sam. 16:1-5, God tells Samuel to mention part of the purpose of his journey, that is, to say he is going to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice (which is true), but Samuel remains silent regarding the other thing he is going to do: anoint David as king. There is no affirmation of anything false, but since God commands Samuel what to say, the passage seems to approve of some cases where a person states part of the truth, and remains silent on other matters.

But in none of these passages is it clear that someone told a lie and it was approved by God. Therefore these narrative passages should not be urged against the consistent testimony of many normative statements of Scripture that uniformly condemn lying as something that is always displeasing to God.

From the "normative perspective," then, taking into account the teaching of Scripture as a whole, it is always wrong to lie.

III. But do some circumstances require a person to lie?

In this section I consider what John Frame calls the "situational perspective" on the question of lying. Are there some circumstances (some situations) where God requires us to tell a lie to bring about a good result (such as saving a person's life)?

A. Lying in order to protect life?

There do not seem to be any Scripture passages that lead us to this conclusion that lying is sometimes necessary to protect a human life (see the discussion of Rahab's lie above). But people have brought up other situations that seem especially difficult. One example is a Christian during World War II who is hiding some Jewish persons in the basement of his house, and some Nazi soldiers come to the door and ask him if he is

hiding any Jews in the house. Isn't it better to lie to protect life than tell the truth and bring about the death of these Jews?

Interestingly, Augustine in about A.D. 395 treated a similar situation of a bishop named Firmus who was hiding a righteous person who was fleeing from the corrupt emperor, and the emperor's messengers came to capture the person. The bishop refused to lie, but neither would he disclose the hiding place. The emperor's messengers apparently tried to force him to disclose the hiding place, and as a result, he "suffered many torments of body" but "he stood firm in his purpose," and eventually, by his courage, he obtained a pardon from the emperor himself for the man he was protecting. Augustine says, "What conduct could be more brave and constant?"²² Augustine thought it would have been wrong to lie, even for the purpose of protecting a human life.

B. Real-life situations offer many more options

It must be said that real-life situations are always more complex, and offer more options, than a hypothetical situation sketched in a sentence or two in an ethics textbook. For example, telling the truth and lying are not the only options, since *silence* is always an option (though it may lead to suffering, as with the bishop that Augustine used as an example). A fourth option is saying any of a hundred different things that don't answer the question asked, such as, "I will not cooperate with any attempt to capture and kill Jewish people." Yes, that may mean the Nazi soldiers will force their way in and search around, but they probably would have done that anyway. Who can say that they would even believe the Christian if he said, "No"?

Some would argue in this situation that such evildoers, such as murderers, had "forfeited their right to the truth." I would probably agree with this (at least the truth regarding the hidden Jews), and so I would not tell them the truth (we have no general obligation to tell everything we know). But that does not mean that I would have to lie to them either. A Christian in that situation should immediately pray for God's wisdom to know what to say without lying, and without disclosing where the Jews were hidden.

²² *On Lying*, sec. 23 (p. 468).

C. Does this situation present a “tragic moral choice”?

Some ethicists would use this situation to argue for a “tragic moral choice,” a case where we have to do a lesser sin (lying) to avoid a greater sin (murder, or giving aid to a murderer, or at least not preventing a murder when we could do so). But John Frame would disagree with this viewpoint, and so would I. This is because I agree with Frame that *there are no such tragic moral choices*, where God wants us to disobey one of his commands in order to obey another. Frame gives several reasons for rejecting the idea that there are situations where we have to sin, including the following:

(1) “In Scripture, we have a moral duty to do what is right, and never to do what is wrong.” (3) This view implies that “the law of God itself is contradictory, for it requires contradictory behavior.” (6) 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. (7) 1 Corinthians 10:13 guarantees that God “will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape,” and this implies that there are no tempting situations so hard that all the options are sinful. Frame writes, “So I must conclude that there are no tragic moral choices, no conflicts of duties.”²³

I agree with this position. I think this is significant, because I am concerned that in today’s evangelical Christian world, too often such carefully constructed “hard cases” are used as a wedge to open the door a crack, to get people to admit that there are some situations where it is morally right (and acceptable to God!) to disobey one of God’s commands in Scripture. This was essentially the position of Joseph Fletcher, whose 1966 book *Situation Ethics*²⁴ constructed all sorts of “hard cases” in which a person supposedly had to lie, or murder, or commit adultery, or steal, in order to act follow the greater principle of “love” for others (that is, to do good for others).

But such reasoning from “hard cases” quickly leads to easy rationalization for many other sins. It is easy for people to progress from (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. The end result is a terribly weak personal ethical system that lacks any backbone, that ignores the commands of Scripture, and that simply seeks to bring about good results by whatever means (without getting caught). The whole system can slide quickly to moral relativism.

D. The need to consider all the results of telling a lie

²³ John Frame, *DCL*, 233; the entire discussion on tragic moral choice is on 230-234.

²⁴ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

When considering this “situational perspective” for an ethical question, we need to ask what *results* will come from a given action. If a person lies (even to protect life), several results will follow:

(1) The other person’s life might or might not be preserved. But we cannot be sure that different actions (silence, or giving other answers) would not have also preserved life (especially if we trust in God’s sovereign control over situations).

(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 (at least sometimes) a liar, someone whose words cannot always be trusted.

(4) The moral character of the person who lied will be eroded, because in a difficult situation he failed to obey the biblical commands against lying.

(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.

But if a person 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.

E. Other situations

Our approach to other difficult situations would be similar to the approach above, in every case maintaining the principle that it is never right to tell a lie. Therefore, for example, there is no such thing as a “little white lie” (that is, a supposedly “harmless” lie told so as to get someone to a surprise birthday party, or to conceal a Christmas present, and so forth). Other means of getting the person to the surprise party should be used (many truthful things can be said which do not involve telling a lie).

What should a husband say when his wife asks if he likes a dress she bought, or her new haircut, but he in fact does not think the dress or the haircut is attractive? Here I can

give personal counsel (from 40 years of marriage): it is always better to tell the truth, and to do so following Ephesians 4:15, “speaking the truth *in love*.” This will mean speaking with kindness, humility, and thoughtfulness, and also speaking truthfully. (“Well, it wouldn’t be my favorite . . . but the color is nice,” or something like that.) The result may be momentary disappointment, but in the long term a husband and wife will trust each other always to speak truthfully, and with love and kindness, and the benefits to any marriage will be great.

What about conventional idioms or habitual greetings such as “How are you?” I think that “fine” can cover many situations (both speaker and hearer understand it to apply rather broadly), and “OK, thanks” can be a truthful answer in almost any situation. (Even in great distress, I can be “OK” because I am trusting the Lord.) Or at times a more specific answer might be appropriate. These are not really difficult situations, and creative thought will no doubt lead to opportunities for even more beneficial answers.²⁵

F. Lying accompanies most other sins

It is significant that lying often accompanies other sins. The murderer, the adulterer, and the thief all lie to conceal their wrongdoing. And those who promote false religions often use falsehood to advance their views:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of *liars* whose consciences are seared (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

But if lying is often used to cover up other sins, then a society in which lying is unacceptable, and in which truthfulness is held in high regard, might expect to see a decrease in other wrongdoing as well. (Certainly parents who have raised children, or teachers who have taught elementary students, will testify that if lying can be eliminated, then much other bad conduct will be eliminated as well.)

IV. The moral character of the speaker

John Frame’s understanding of ethics also requires us to look at a question from a third perspective, the “existential perspective”: what about the speaker himself?

Truthfulness and lying are often highly significant indicators of a person’s inward moral character. In fact, truthfulness in speech may be the most frequent test of our integrity each day. In ordinary life, people don’t often encounter opportunities to murder, commit adultery, steal, or break other civil laws without a high probability of being found out and suffering serious consequences. But people do have opportunities many times every day to tell a small lie (usually with little likelihood of being caught) or to speak truthfully. For example, the expressions “I don’t know” or “I don’t remember” or “I thought you said . . .” or “I forgot” can be outright lies but who can ever prove it? Small

²⁵ My friend C. J. Mahaney often answers, “I’m doing far better than I deserve,” which leads to many interesting conversations!

exaggerations of events or distortions of details of fact can be spoken repeatedly in situations where the hearers have no way of knowing that they are untrue. But in each case, God is dishonored and the liar's moral character is further eroded, his conscience is progressively hardened against God's law, and he becomes more open to committing other kinds of sin as well.

O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? 2 He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart (Psalm 15:1-2)

Each time a person speaks the truth or lies, he aligns himself either with God, "who never lies" (Titus 1:2) or with Satan, "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

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. In addition, telling the truth often requires inward trust in God to govern the circumstances and the outcome of the situation.

V. 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.