

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL MORAL REASONING

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Chapter 12

LYING AND TELLING THE TRUTH

Is it ever right to lie?

Is there a difference between a spoken lie and actions that deceive people?

Does the Bible teach anything about plagiarism or punctuality?

The ninth commandment reads:

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

A. THE MEANING OF THE COMMANDMENT

The specific focus of this commandment is a “false witness” that someone would give in a courtroom situation (see similar wording, for example, in passages about “false witness” such as Deut. 19:18; Ps. 27:12; Prov. 14:5; 25:18). In addition, this false witness is borne not against a stranger but against “your neighbor,” whom you should know especially well and whom you should love (Lev. 19:18).¹

But this commandment is not intended to prohibit *only* this specific kind of false speech (false testimony against your neighbor in a courtroom). I think John Calvin was correct in his insight that the negative commandments in the Ten Commandments

¹ This chapter has been adapted from Wayne Grudem, “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* (Gieschritt for John Frame), ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009; ISBN 978-1-59638-164-3), 77-801, with permission of P&R Publishing Co., P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, NJ 08865, www.prpbooks.com.

select particularly hateful and harmful examples of whole categories of wrongful actions, but God's intention in doing this is to shock us into realizing how evil *all of the actions in that general category* really are.² (See further discussion of Calvin's view on p. 318 on the meaning of "neighbor").

Therefore, it seems appropriate, under this commandment, to consider the question of lying and truthful speech in general.

I am discussing the ninth commandment here in the early part of this book (rather than treating it in sequential order, after the eighth commandment) for two reasons: (1) The topic of lying and telling the truth is closely connected to the topic of purity of speech, which was discussed in the previous chapter in our consideration of the third commandment, and so it seemed appropriate to group these two commands together. (2) In teaching ethics classes for the last 40 years, I have found that it works best to treat this topic early, because it raises issues that are relevant for many other topics that follow.

Sadly, lying has become a common part of ordinary life for many people today. A 2014 survey of more than 1,200 adults found that 76 percent said it is OK to lie sometimes. According to this survey, 21.7 percent of men admitted they had had lied on their résumés, compared with 16.3 percent of women. In addition, 37.4 percent of men and 43.6 percent of women had lied to their parents, and 21.5 percent of men and 21.6 percent of women had lied to their spouses or significant others.³

One 2014 British study found that people lie, on average, 10 times a week.⁴ A 2002 study done at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst found that 60 percent of people cannot go longer than 10 minutes without telling a lie, and told an average of two to three lies during that time.⁵ Another British survey, done in 2008, found that people lie four times a day, or 1,460 times a year, and by the age of 60 will have lied 88,000 times.⁶ Such widespread dishonesty is a destructive cancer relentlessly eating away at the fabric of society.

B. A DEFINITION OF LYING

1. The Need for a Precise Definition. Discussions of lying often suffer from a lack of precision in defining at the outset exactly what is being discussed. In a narrow sense, lying includes only verbally affirming something you believe to be false. In a broad

² See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.8.20, 2.8.47 (1:376, 411–12).

³ "Survey: Who's Telling the Truth," CreditDonkey, <http://www.creditdonkey.com/lying.html>. This study was conducted Aug. 8–12, 2014.

⁴ "Lies have become an accepted part of British life, poll reveals," *The Telegraph*, Nov. 13, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/11230110/Lies-have-become-an-accepted-part-of-British-life-poll-reveals.html>.

⁵ "UMass researcher finds most people lie in everyday conversation," University of Massachusetts-Amherst, June 10, 2002, https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2002-06/uoma-urf061002.php.

⁶ "No lie: People average 4 fibs a day," *WorldNetDaily*, Jan. 21, 2008, <http://www.wnd.com/2008/01/45642/#t4C13ZksfVEjx8kc.99>.

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⁸ *Ibid.*, 42, quoting

⁹ Tollefsen, *Lying a*

sense, some people think that “lying” refers to all kinds of deception, including not only *spoken and written statements*, but also *actions* intended to mislead or deceive others (such as leaving the lights on in a home in order to make burglars think someone is there), verbal statements that only *disclose a part* of what someone knows to be true, and *unintentional falsehoods*, statements that someone believes to be true, but which turn out to be false.

However, these broader definitions of lying include so many different categories that it makes discussion of this topic hopelessly complex and often leads to more confusion than clarity. In addition, I am not aware of any modern ethical thinker who argues that *all kinds of deception* are always wrong. Philosopher Christopher Tollefsen, who argues that lying is always wrong, says, “It seems extremely difficult to defend the view that deception as such is *always* wrong.”⁷ He quotes Augustine, who says, “Although everyone who lies wishes to hide what is true, yet not everyone who wishes to hide what is true, tells a lie.”⁸ In distinction from the broader category of “deception,” Tollefsen defines lying as “an assertion contrary to the speaker’s belief.”⁹ Such a narrow definition of lying seems to me to be a helpful focus, and it adds precision to the argument.

Another reason for focusing on verbal statements is that the Bible’s own focus in this issue is on lying in this more narrow sense, the sense of *affirming in words* something you believe to be false (see the long list of passages in the following section).

Therefore, while a broader meaning of “lying” is used by some, it is not my meaning in this chapter. The main issue I will discuss in this chapter is the narrow question of *verbal affirmations* of something one believes to be false. Therefore, I will use this definition for lying:

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

2. Things Not Included in Lying. Several related acts are not included in this narrow definition:

1. *Silence.* This is saying nothing, so silence is not exactly an affirmation of anything; note Jesus’s 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. An example is leaving a light on in our house when we are away for a weekend. An observer might rightly conclude, “The Grudems left a light on,” but that may or may not mean that we are at home.
3. *Ironic statements, especially in humor.* These are not truly affirmations when understood rightly.

⁷Christopher O. Tollefsen, *Lying and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics, vol. 33 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 16.

⁸Ibid., 42, quoting Augustine, *To Consentius: Against Lying*, 23 (NPNF¹, 3:491).

⁹Tollefsen, *Lying and Christian Ethics*, 25.

4. *Hyperbole*. Hyperbolic statements are not intended to be taken as literally true; they use impossible exaggeration for rhetorical effect: I might say, "It took me *forever* to write this chapter." Similarly, Jesus said, "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 I am *not* making moral judgments about these other acts. People may argue about acts 1 to 5, saying that some of them are *seldom or never wrong*, while others are *often or perhaps always wrong* (depending on other factors). Those are interesting questions, but they are not my main purpose in this chapter. 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.

3. Deceptive Actions Are Not the Same as Verbal Lies. 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 statement. Deceptive actions are in *some* ways similar to lying (their intent is to persuade someone 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.

In a gracious and kind response to an earlier form of this chapter,¹⁰ my friend and former professor John Frame wrote:

I fail to see any morally relevant difference between intentionally misleading someone with the lips and misleading him with an action. . . . I agree that actions in themselves are neither true nor false. But they do sometimes mislead people, and often they are performed intentionally to deceive. If verbal misrepresentations are wrong, they are wrong because they deceive people we should not deceive. . . . So I fail to see how actions and words are different in this respect.¹¹

Frame agrees that actions and words are different in some respects, but he argues that there is no "morally relevant difference" between deceiving with words and deceiving with actions, for both are wrong "because they deceive people."

¹⁰ See my article, "Why It Is Never Right to Lie."

¹¹ John M. Frame, "Responses to Some Articles," in *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 973.

My reply is that wrong (1) because and (2) because lying cannot lie (Titus 1: lies deceive people, wrong—including that no modern Christians persuasively from Scripture Vern Poythress calls the "unique different from leaving

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¹⁰Vern S. Poythress, 85-86. (Pro

My reply is that there are two different and deeper reasons why lying is wrong. It is wrong (1) because God says over and over again that lying is wrong (see next section) and (2) because lying fails to imitate the character of God, who never lies because he cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). It cannot be the case that lying is wrong *simply because* lies deceive people, or we would have to argue that all kinds of deception are morally wrong—including deceptive maneuvers in warfare or in sports contests—a position that no modern Christian ethicist defends, and one that is not possible to defend persuasively from Scripture.

Vern Poythress gives an additional response to Frame when he argues for what he calls the “uniqueness of verbal action.” Poythress says that “verbal communication is different from leaving a light on or setting an ambush or feigning a retreat” because:

When no words are involved, physical actions have to be interpreted. . . . Words and utterances need interpretation too. But the interpretation is constrained by the regularities of language, the regularities in the meaning of words, and the regularities of personal communication. Statements can be true or false; by contrast, a football maneuver or a military maneuver is neither true nor false.¹²

In addition, there is the overwhelming testimony of Scripture on this topic. As numerous passages in the next section indicate, Scripture itself uses *lie* and *lying* quite often in the narrow sense of affirming in words something that one thinks to be false. This meaning is found in passages such as these:

I am *speaking the truth* in Christ—I am *not lying*; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 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 Tim. 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 has lost his voice but who is 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.”

¹²Vern S. Poythress, “Why Lying Is Always Wrong: The Uniqueness of Verbal Deceit,” *WTJ* 75 (2013): 85–86.

4. Augustine, Calvin, and Others Define Lying in a Similar Way. The restriction of lying to a narrow sense is not new with me. The respected church father Augustine (AD 354–430), the most famous defender of the view that lying is always wrong, argued against lying only in the narrow sense that I have outlined above, that is, affirming in speech or writing something that one believes at the time to be untrue.¹³ Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) held a similar view,¹⁴ as did Calvin (1509–1564).¹⁵

Westminster Seminary professor John Murray (1898–1975) 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 concluded, “The upshot of our investigation has been that no instance demonstrates the propriety of untruthfulness under any exigency.”¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

He later says, “The injunctions of Scripture which bear directly on the demand for truthfulness have reference to speech or utterance.”¹⁸

C. NUMEROUS BIBLICAL STATEMENTS CONDEMN LYING

1. Extensive Biblical Testimony. The Bible has numerous passages that prohibit or condemn lying in the sense of verbally affirming something that you believe to be false. These passages condemn false speech (seeing it as characteristic of sinners who are far

¹³ See the extensive discussion in Paul J. Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004). Griffiths represents Augustine’s view as follows: “The lie is a verbal act, something we do with words” (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” (31). “Nonverbal actions cannot be lies” (33). “Silence—the refusal of speech—is also excluded” (33). “Error is excluded from the lie. . . . Jokes are not lies” (34). “Augustine’s definition of the lie, then, excludes in principle nonverbal communication in general and silence in particular” (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*, sec. 3 (NPNF¹, 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*, sec. 42 (NPNF¹, 3:476).

¹⁴ See Tollefsen, *Lying and Christian Ethics*, 6–8, 44–56.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.8.47 (411–12); see also Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, trans. Henry Beveridge (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 47 (on Josh. 2:4).

¹⁶ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁸ *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. *Ibid.*, 144; cf. Joshua 8.

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from God) or approve of truthfulness in speech (seeing it as characteristic of righteous people). What follows is a sample of such passages, but many more could be added. The extent of this testimony of Scripture against lying constitutes a repeated warning from God that we should not take this matter lightly.

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

My lips will not *speak falsehood*,
and my tongue will not utter deceit. (Job 27:4; verbal speaking emphasized)

You destroy those who *speak lies*. (Ps. 5:6; verbal speaking emphasized)

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

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

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

No one who utters lies
shall continue before my eyes. (Ps. 101:7; speaking emphasized)

I said in my alarm,
“All mankind are *liars*.” (Ps. 116:11)

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

Deliver me, O LORD,
from *lying lips*,
from a deceitful tongue. (Ps. 120:2; speaking emphasized)

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

Truthful lips endure forever,
but a *lying tongue* is but for a moment.
(Prov. 12:19; speaking emphasized)

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

The righteous hates *falsehood*,
but the wicked brings shame and disgrace. (Prov. 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. (Prov. 30:8)

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; speaking
emphasized)

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. (Jer. 9:3; speaking
emphasized)

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

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

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; Ananias's sin was speaking something untrue)¹⁹

I am *speaking the truth* in Christ—I am *not lying*; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 9:1; writing truthful words, not false ones, emphasized)

¹⁹The specific words of Ananias are not recorded in Acts 5, but Peter's statement shows that Ananias had said that he was donating the entire amount received for the land. However, this statement was false.

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In what I am writing to you, before God, *I do not lie!* (Gal. 1:20; here is an example where lying would mean affirming in *writing* something that Paul believed to be false, but the focus would still be on a lie as a falsehood expressed in words)

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; falsehood is contrasted with speaking the truth)

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 law is laid down for] the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, *liars*, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine. (1 Tim. 1:10)

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 Tim. 2:7; writing truthful words, not false ones, emphasized)

In their mouth *no lie was found*, for they are blameless. (Rev. 14:5; speaking emphasized)

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)

Therefore, the Bible's moral standards regarding lying include not only the ninth commandment, but an entire collection of Old Testament and New Testament passages that prohibit speaking lies or falsehood. *And this is just a partial list!* Many similar passages condemn such things as lying, falsehood, liars, and those who "speak lies."

2. The Mention of "Neighbor" in Exodus 20:16 Does Not Narrow the Application of the Ninth Commandment or the Many Other Passages about Lying. John Frame suggests that the inclusion of the word *neighbor* in the ninth commandment—"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex. 20:16)—may mean that it does 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."²⁰ Later, addressing Bible passages that promote some deception, he writes:

²⁰ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 835, emphasis in original.

[These passages] 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.²¹

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 more likely.

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 your mother" (Ex. 20:12) should lead us to conclude, more broadly, that we should be subject to all rightful authority (such as the civil government), but God phrased the requirement in terms of one's father and mother, and "By that subjection which is easiest to tolerate, the Lord therefore gradually accustoms us to all lawful subjection."²²

By contrast, Calvin says that 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" (Ex. 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."²³

Therefore, Calvin realizes that "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex. 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*. 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.²⁴

Therefore, there is an alternative to seeing "against your neighbor" as limiting the scope of the ninth commandment. A better understanding is that "You shall not bear false witness *against your neighbor*" is chosen as *a particularly hateful example* of lying,

²¹ Ibid., 839.

²² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.35 (401).

²³ Ibid., 2.8.41 (405).

²⁴ Ibid., 2.8.47 (411–12).

because it concerns a courtroom setting in which someone intentionally speaks falsely against a neighbor (whom he or she should love!) in a way that will cost the neighbor his goods (perhaps to the witness's 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*. (Ex. 20:17)

Surely we would not want to argue that the mention of "neighbor" narrows the application of this commandment, so that it is wrong to covet your *neighbor's* house or wife but acceptable to covet your *enemy's* house or wife!

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 in terms of lying, "You shall not *speak lies* at all." And the numerous other passages of Scripture mentioned above also confirm this when they condemn lying in general but make no mention of a neighbor.

D. THE CHARACTER OF GOD AS THE BASIS FOR NOT LYING

1. God Cannot Lie. 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)

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)

[God guaranteed his promise with an oath] 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 God as One 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 God as One who lies as well, and that dishonors him.²⁵

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 someone else, or whether someone might be led to think something false), but in the fact that *our lying dishonors God*. God seeks creatures who rightly represent his image, whereas Satan consistently promotes all kinds of falsehood and lying speech.

2. Jesus Never Found It Necessary to Lie. A strong objection to the view that it is sometimes acceptable to lie 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). He faced, at least in some form, every type of difficult ethical situations that we will ever find ourselves in. That means that if people today ever face a situation in which it seems that they have to lie, then Jesus also faced that same difficult situation. And if we are required to lie in such a situation, then Jesus was required to lie as well. This would mean 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, for he was also God, and "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18). Therefore, Jesus never lied. And therefore we never have to lie

²⁵ Some passages in Scripture show that God sends a "lying spirit" (1 Kings 22:22; cf. Ezek. 14:19) to deceive people, or sends people a delusion "so that they may believe what is false" (2 Thess. 2:11). These are portrayed in Scripture as instances of divine judgment on sin. God sometimes sends evil agents to carry out judgments (as he sent the Babylonians to carry the Israelites into exile), but he never actually does evil himself. So apparently God can send a lying spirit or some kind of deception as a form of judgment on people, but he himself still never lies.

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either. Jesus's 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.

In conclusion, based on the abundant testimony of Scripture about lying and the biblical testimony about the character of God, I believe it is never right to lie in the sense of affirming in speech or writing something that you believe to be false.

E. THE NARRATIVE EXAMPLES OF LYING IN SCRIPTURE DO NOT OVERTURN OUR CONCLUSION THAT LYING IS ALWAYS WRONG

In spite of the strong testimony of Scripture against lying, a number of ethical writers have argued that there are specific *narrative examples* in Scripture that show that God sometimes approved of human lies that were told for good purposes, particularly to save human life, therefore overturning our conclusion that lying is always wrong. 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. And it was told to the king of Jericho, "Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." 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." 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. 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." 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. 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 that mention Rahab (see below) show that God actually approved of Rahab's lie.

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). We should not assume that Scripture intends to hold up an untrained, uninformed Canaanite

prostitute as a model of ethical conduct. The text does not give us warrant to draw this conclusion.

Two 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.* (Heb. 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 do not say anything 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.

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 that speaks this way and contains 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, 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.²⁶

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 . . . not as meet to be imitated:* . . . albeit that *God hath* those things memorably honored, *this evil thing mercifully overlooked.*²⁷

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

²⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, 47, emphasis added.

²⁷ Augustine, *To Consentius: Against Lying*, sec. 34 (NPNF¹, 3:497), emphasis added.

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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, "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." But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" 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." So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. (Ex. 1:15–21)

Does this passage show that God approved of lying? At least two factors call this conclusion into question: (1) The statement of the midwives may in fact have been 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 the midwives until after they had given birth, perhaps using other midwives or perhaps assisting one another in the birth process. 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 the 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 was a lie, they told it 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.

Thus, this passage is not 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."²⁸

3. Elisha's Statement to the Syrian Soldiers. The king of Syria sent a band of soldiers to capture the prophet Elisha, but God miraculously protected 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. 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. As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O LORD, open the eyes of these men, that they may see." So the

²⁸ Ibid., sec. 32 (NPNF¹, 3:495).

LORD 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 was in the city of Samaria, asked Elisha if he should kill the Syrian soldiers whom Elisha had captured (2 Kings 6:21), but Elisha told the king to feed them and send them on their way (v. 22).

Did Elisha lie to the Syrian army? He said, “This is not the way, and this is not the city” (2 Kings 6:19), but the words were actually ambiguous, somewhat enigmatic. What way? What city? (The one where God wanted 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) was, 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 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 Reporting Various Kinds of Deception. Frame mentions 16 other sets of passages “in which someone misleads an enemy, without incurring any condemnation, and sometimes even being commended.”²⁹ 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 should recall that in the ninth commandment the requirement to tell the truth is conditioned on a relationship, that of “neighbor.”³⁰

The passages fall into several categories, but none of them contains a clear lie (in the sense of a verbal affirmation of something the speaker believed to be false) that is approved by God. Some of the passages speak about *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 they do not fall into the category of a “lie” as I have defined it in this chapter.³¹

But are such deceptive actions sufficiently different from a “lie” (as defined in this

²⁹ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 836. The 16 sets of passages are (1) Ex. 1:15–21; (2) Josh. 2:4–6; 6:17, 25; Heb. 11:31; James 2:25; (3) Josh. 8:3–8; (4) Judg. 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; and (16) 2 Thess. 2:11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 836, 839.

³¹ Warfare often depends on actions intended to deceive the enemy. Another area of morally acceptable deceptive actions is athletic contests (such as a football quarterback who fakes a pass and then runs with the ball), and another is games, such as chess.

chapter) 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 are just things that happen. (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 while I am staying in a hotel in Tucson (two hours away), the neighbor will not think me to be a liar because he saw that my light was on before he came to Tucson. But if I tell my neighbor, "I'm going to stay home this weekend" and then the neighbor bumps into me 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, especially in situations of trust, such as marriages or parent-child relationships), but that they belong in a distinct category, one that Scripture treats differently from verbal affirmations of things that one believes to be false.

Other passages that Frame mentions 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). 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 of the lie (these passages include 1 Sam. 19:12–17, where Michal lies to protect David and herself; 1 Sam. 20:6, where David counsels Jonathan to lie; and 2 Sam. 17:19–20, where a woman lies to protect David's messengers).

In still other passages there are cases of what we might 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 4:18–21, where Jael invites Sisera into her tent; 2 Samuel 15:34, where David tells Hushai to say he will be Absalom's servant (he was, but he was an unfaithful servant); and Jeremiah 38:24–28, where Jeremiah reports that he has made a request to the king (which he might actually have done).

One passage deals with *stating part of the truth*. In 1 Samuel 16:1–5, God told Samuel to mention part of the purpose of his journey, that is, to say he was going to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice (which was true), but Samuel remained silent regarding the other thing he was going to do: anoint David as king. There was no affirmation of anything false, but since God commanded Samuel what to say, the passage seems to approve of some cases in which 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 used against the consistent

testimony of many normative statements of Scripture that uniformly condemn lying as something that is always displeasing to God.

F. DO SOME CIRCUMSTANCES REQUIRE A PERSON TO LIE?

1. Is Lying in Order to Protect Life Acceptable? Are there some circumstances in which God requires us to tell a lie to bring about a good result, such as lying to save a person's life? Some authors argue that lying to protect innocent lives can be morally right. For example, Frame 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.³²

What shall we say about such a difficult situation? Isn't it better to lie to protect these hidden Jews than tell the truth and bring about their deaths?³³

Interestingly, in about AD 395, Augustine treated a similar situation of a bishop named Firmus who was hiding a righteous person who was fleeing from the corrupt emperor. When 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 for the man he was protecting. Augustine says, "What conduct could be more brave and constant?"³⁴ 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. It must be said that real-life situations are always more complex, and offer more options, than hypothetical situations

³² Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 839–40.

³³ Others who argue for the moral validity of lying to protect life in such situations include Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 112, and David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 299–305.

³⁴ Augustine, *On Lying*, sec. 23 (NPNF¹, 3:468). Tollefsen notes that Augustine repeatedly brings up another argument: "If lying is permitted in order to achieve some great spiritual or temporal good, then why would adultery, or some other form of unchastity, not also be acceptable for the sake of the same good?" *Lying and Christian Ethics*, 39, with reference to Augustine, *On Lying*, sec. 23 (NPNF¹, 3:468).

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 whom 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 do that anyway. Who can say that they would even believe the Christian if he said no?

Vern Poythress recounts an actual historical example in which God honored the simple faith of a young Dutch woman who refused to tell a lie. During the German occupation of the Netherlands, Nazi soldiers were searching for physically able Dutch men whom they would capture and force to work in Nazi munitions factories. One day, two nephews of Corrie ten Boom came to her family's home, seeking to escape from Nazi soldiers. The family hid them in a small cellar that was under a trapdoor in the kitchen floor. The trapdoor was covered by a rug, and on top of the rug was a kitchen table. Then the following events took place:

We dropped the door shut, yanked the rug over it, and pulled the table back in place. With trembling hands, Betsy, Cocky, and I threw a long tablecloth over it and started laying five places for tea.

There was a crash in the hall as the front door burst open and a smaller crash close by as Cocky dropped a teacup. Two uniformed Germans ran into the kitchen, rifles leveled.

"Stay where you are. Do not move."

We heard boots storming up the stairs. The soldiers glanced around disgustedly at this room filled with women and one old man. . . .

"Where are your men?" The shorter soldier asked. Cocky in clumsy, thick-accented Dutch.

"These are my aunts," she said, "and this is my grandfather. My father is at his school, and my mother is shopping, and—"

"I didn't ask about the whole tribe!" the man exploded in German. Then in Dutch: "Where are your brothers?"

Cocky stared at him a second, then dropped her eyes. My heart stood still. I knew how Nollie had trained her children—but surely, surely now of all times a lie was permissible!

"Do you have brothers?" the officer asked again.

"Yes," Cocky said softly. "We have three."

"How old are they?"

"Twenty-one, 19, and 18."

Upstairs we heard the sounds of doors opening and shutting, the scrape of furniture dragged from walls.

"Where are they now?" the soldier persisted.

Cocky leaned down and began gathering up the broken bits of cup. The man jerked her upright. "Where are your brothers?"

"The oldest one is at the Theological College. He doesn't get home most nights because—"

"What about the other two?"

Cocky did not miss a breath.

"Why, they are under the table."

Motioning us all away from it with his gun, the soldier seized a corner of the cloth. At a nod from him the taller man crouched with his rifle cocked. Then he flung back the cloth.

At last the pent-up tension exploded: Cocky burst into spasms of high hysterical laughter. The soldiers whirled around. Was this girl laughing at them?

"Don't take us for fools!" the short one snarled. Furiously he strode from the room and minutes later the entire squad trooped out—not, unfortunately, before the silent soldier had spied and pocketed our precious packet of tea.³⁵

This is a remarkable instance of God's providential protection. But blurting out the location of hidden people is certainly not the only thing that can be said. Poythress wisely suggests that such "Nazis at the door" situations can also become opportunities to share the gospel with the soldiers themselves, in words such as this:

Can you understand that I accept the legitimate authority of human government, but I cannot cooperate in evil? If I were harboring Jews, would I tell you? You ought not to be asking about the Jews, but asking instead about how to be reconciled to the God who made you.³⁶

Roman Catholic philosopher Christopher Tollefsen makes a similar suggestion:

So one should refuse to answer, by keeping silent or by evading in some way the question. Still, the Nazi is a human being . . . and one cannot assume that his soul is beyond saving. . . . It would be responsive to the obligation to love, and the good of sociality, to tell him further that he is engaged in a wicked activity and to encourage his repentance.³⁷

Some would argue that in this situation, evildoers such as murderers have "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 the Nazis that truth (we have no general obligation to tell everything we know). But that does not mean that I would have to lie to them

³⁵ Corrie ten Boom with Elizabeth and John Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 106–7. Poythress quotes this lengthy narrative (from a different edition) in "Why Lying Is Always Wrong," 90–91.

³⁶ Poythress, "Why Lying Is Always Wrong," 93.

³⁷ Tollefsen, *Lying and Christian Ethics*, 177.

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 are hidden.

Poythress points out that Jesus promises his disciples the Holy Spirit's help when they are tried before hostile government authorities, a somewhat analogous situation:

You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for *what you are to say will be given to you in that hour*. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt. 10:18–20).³⁸

3. Does the Hidden Jews Situation Present a “Tragic Moral Choice”? Some ethicists would use the example of Nazis searching for hidden Jews to argue for a “tragic moral choice,” a case in which we have to commit a lesser sin (lying) to avoid a greater sin (murder, giving aid to a murderer, or at least not preventing a murder when we could do so). But I disagree with this viewpoint, because (as I argued in chap. 7, p. 201), according to the Bible's teachings, *there are no such tragic moral choices*, times when God wants us to disobey one of his commands in order to obey another.

This point is more significant than people first realize. I am concerned that in today's evangelical Christian world, carefully constructed “hard cases” too often are used as a wedge to open the door a crack, to induce people to admit that there are some situations in which it is morally right (and acceptable to God!) to disobey one of God's commands in Scripture. As I explained in chapter 7 (see p. 200), this was the position of Joseph Fletcher, whose 1966 book *Situation Ethics*³⁹ constructed all sorts of “hard cases” in which a person supposedly had to lie, murder, commit adultery, or steal in order to follow the greater principle of “love” for others (that is, doing good for others).

But such reasoning from “hard cases” quickly leads to easy rationalizations 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.

4. The Broader Results of Lying or Not Lying Are Also Important. As with all ethical questions, we need to ask what *results* will come from a given action. If a person lies (even to protect life), several results will follow:

³⁸ Cited in Poythress, “Why Lying Is Always Wrong,” 92.

³⁹ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

1. The other person's life might or might not be preserved. But the person who lied cannot be sure that different actions (remaining silent or giving other answers) would not have also preserved life (especially if he or she trusts in God's sovereign control over situations).
2. God will be dishonored, because a human being who bears God's image, and who represents God on the earth, 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 or she failed to obey the biblical commands against lying.
5. It will become easier for the person who lied to lie in the future, because once a person thinks it is right to lie in some circumstances, lying will seem to be an easy solution in additional circumstances, and the person's lying will become more frequent.
6. Others may imitate the person's act of lying, 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. The person will have trusted God to bring about the right results, including protecting the other person's life.
2. God will be honored because the person's actions portrayed his or her Creator as One who tells only 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 or she faithfully obeyed the biblical commands against lying.
5. The person who refused to lie 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.

G. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LYING AND A PERSON'S MORAL CHARACTER

1. 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

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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 Tim. 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.)

2. Telling the Truth in Difficult Situations Requires Faith in God and Strong Moral Character. From early childhood, all human beings face circumstances in which they do something wrong and then are asked about it.

“Victoria, did you eat the cookies that I told you not to eat?”

“Billy, did you break Mommy’s favorite coffee cup?”

And then later in an employment situation:

“Ralph, Mr. Smith says he still has not received our payment. Did you put the check in the mail before it was picked up on Friday, as I asked you to do?”

Another example is when someone is involved in a traffic accident and is questioned by police:

“Mr. Thompson, how fast were you going when you approached the intersection?”

The temptation in these situations is to lie, because we expect that telling the truth will bring us negative consequences. In order to resist that temptation, we need to trust God to care for us even if telling the truth brings us painful consequences for a time. We also need to recognize that obeying God when it is difficult builds moral character in us and strengthens our moral backbone. Even children can be taught these simple truths, so that they form a habit of telling the truth with courage and faith even when it is costly.

The following Scripture passages will be an encouragement in such situations:

Those who honor me I will honor. (1 Sam. 2:30)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:19)

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. (Heb. 5:8)

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:14)

3. Lying or Truth Telling Are Indications of the Moral Character of the Speaker. 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 speak truthfully or to tell small lies (usually with little likelihood of being caught). For example, the expressions "I don't know," "I don't remember," "I thought you said XYZ," or "I forgot" can be outright lies, but who can ever prove it? Small exaggerations of events or distortions of details of fact can be spoken repeatedly in situations in which 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?
He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
and speaks truth in his heart. (Ps. 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 does not lie, and therefore becomes more closely conformed to the image of God. In addition, as noted above, telling the truth often requires inward trust in God to govern the circumstances and the outcome of the situation.

H. CONCLUSION ON LYING

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.

I. SEEKING AND LOVING THE TRUTH

1. The Positive Obligations Implied by the Ninth Commandment. When God gives us a command to not do something, it often implies that he wants us to do the opposite thing, and that is certainly the case with the ninth commandment. God wants us to speak the truth, believe the truth, and love the truth. Such love for the truth includes all the truth of the gospel and the entire Bible, and also truth about other people and about the world around us.

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

Behold, you delight in *truth* in the inward being. (Ps. 51:6)

Buy truth, and do not sell it;
 buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding. (Prov. 23:23)

These are the things that you shall do: *Speak the truth* to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace. . . . Therefore *love truth* and peace. (Zech. 8:16, 19)

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, *and the truth*, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

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)

John Calvin understood this, for in connection with the ninth commandment, he wrote:

We should faithfully help everyone as much as we can in affirming the truth, in order to protect the integrity of his [the other person’s] name and possessions.⁴⁰

The Westminster Larger Catechism likewise explains the positive duties implied by the ninth commandment as follows:

The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.47 (411).

matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; . . . [several more illustrations follow]. (WLC, Question 144)

By way of practical application, we should love truth and seek to promote and defend truth in all areas of human knowledge. If called upon to give testimony in court, we should do so with a willing heart and complete honesty, so far as we are able, that the truth may be known. And in the area of academic studies, we should faithfully and accurately report the results of our research in every field of study, never giving in to any temptation to distort or skew the truth to support the results we prefer.

2. The Necessity of Responding to Slander. The Westminster Larger Catechism, in further explanation of the ninth commandment, says that it also requires “love and care of our own good name, and *defending it* when need requireth” (Question 144). It gives two Scripture references in support:

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold. (Prov. 22:1)

Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.” (John 8:49)

The second passage illustrates a general pattern in Jesus’s ministry: he always defended himself immediately and firmly against false accusations throughout his entire ministry (see, for example, his progressive silencing of the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matt. 22:22, 33, 46). The only exception was the unique situation when he was on trial leading up to his crucifixion at the end of his life (27:12, 14). In that situation, it was important that he submit to the Father’s plan that he would die as a criminal, under false accusation, and that he fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet *he opened not his mouth*;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is *silent*,
so he opened not his mouth. (Isa. 53:7; cf. Acts 8:32)

Too often today Christian leaders mistakenly allow their own names or the ministries they lead to be slandered relentlessly in the public eye while they give no response. This can be immensely damaging in an age when Internet accusations can multiply rapidly with no accountability for the authors. These silent Christian leaders perhaps think they are imitating the example of Jesus at his crucifixion, but they fail to appreciate the uniqueness of that situation, and so they fail to imitate the example of Jesus during his entire public ministry, when he immediately defended himself and answered false ac-

cusations. I do not mean that we must answer everything we hear or read, for sometimes a false accusation has little influence and is best ignored: “Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you” (Eccles. 7:21). But when it seems that a false accusation will gain influence and do harm, it must be answered.

The apostle Paul showed a similar concern to protect the good name of his ministry, the good name of Christ, and the reputation of the gospel when he demanded that the city officials in Philippi come to the jail and publicly release him and Silas, thus showing public vindication of their innocence:

But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.” (Acts 16:37; cf. Mark 13:11)

J. OTHER SPECIFIC ISSUES RELATED TO TRUTH TELLING

1. Spying and Undercover Police Work. Based on the abundant testimony of Scripture, and on the arguments in the preceding discussion based on that testimony, I do not think it is ever right to lie in the sense of affirming in speech or writing something you believe to be false. But does that mean that a Christian could never work as a spy or as an undercover police officer?

My conclusion is that there are some actions that would be morally acceptable for a Christian working as a spy and other actions that would be morally wrong.

1. It cannot be wrong in general to work as a spy (to visit another country secretly for the purpose of gaining information about it), for God himself commanded Moses, “Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel” (Num. 13:2). Later, Joshua “sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, ‘Go, view the land, especially Jericho’” (Josh. 2:1).

2. It cannot be wrong to conceal one’s full identity, for Jesus himself lived as an ordinary human being for the first 30 years of his life, and the people in his village of Nazareth did not know that he was both God and man, but thought of him simply as “the carpenter” (Mark 6:3; see Matt. 13:53–58). Even his brothers (who had grown up with him in the same small first-century house) did not know that he was also fully God! “For not even his brothers believed in him” (John 7:5).

In another example, Joseph concealed his identity from his brothers when they first visited Egypt, and his actions are viewed with approval in the Genesis narrative:

Now Joseph was governor over all the land. . . . Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. “Where do you come from?” he said. They said, “From the land of

Canaan, to buy food.” And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. (Gen. 42:6–8)

Similarly, David pretended to be insane after he fled to Achish the king of Gath:

So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, “Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me?” (1 Sam. 21:13–14)

3. While I do not think it is morally right to lie about one’s name, I also think there are some situations in which going by another name is morally acceptable. This commonly happens when people use nicknames, such as “Chip,” “Rocky,” “Slim” or (referring to the gigantic American football player William Perry) “The Refrigerator.” Literary authors often use pseudonyms to conceal their identities, such as Mary Anne Evans writing under the name George Eliot. Well-known celebrities sometimes register under an assumed name at a hotel, to protect their privacy. And apparently Joseph was going by some other Egyptian name or title when his brothers appeared before him in Egypt (Gen. 42:6–11), for he did not reveal his true name to them until much later, when he declared to them, “*I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt*” (45:4).

In such a situation, if his brothers had asked him, “Are you [Egyptian name], governor of the land of Egypt?” it would have been truthful for him to answer yes, for that was the name he was using. But if they had asked him, “Are you Joseph our brother, the son of Jacob?” it would have been a lie for him to say no.

4. It is morally permissible at times to tell part of the reason you are doing something, without stating all of the reasons you are doing it. This is evident from the story in which the Lord told the prophet Samuel to go to Bethlehem and anoint David as king. But Saul was presently the king, and so Samuel answered the Lord, “How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.” Then the Lord told Samuel, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD’” (1 Sam. 16:2).

It was true that Samuel was going to sacrifice to the Lord at Bethlehem, and he did that. Although that was not his primary purpose in going, it was still a truthful statement. From that we can conclude that there are times when stating part of the truth is morally acceptable, even when done to conceal a more important purpose for an action. In this case, the Lord himself commanded it, so we cannot say that it was morally wrong.

This example gives justification, for example, for Christians to say that their purpose in traveling to other countries is to teach English, even though a more important purpose may be to do evangelism among the people that they teach. And it gives justification for a spy to travel to another country as, for example, a computer consultant or a management consultant (if he or she actually does some of that work), even though going as a spy may be the primary motivation.

5. These considerations do not fully answer the question of whether a Christian can

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work as a spy or as an undercover police officer, but they may be helpful in clarifying some of the issues involved.

2. Plagiarism. Plagiarism means publishing part of another author's work but claiming it as one's own. Plagiarism occurs in educational settings when a student turns in an essay or term paper containing a block of wording taken from someone else's writing without footnoting it or indicating that it is a quotation from someone else. Plagiarism occurs in journalism when a reporter or an opinion writer copies someone else's wordings or thoughts without attributing them to the other person. And plagiarism occurs in sermons when a pastor preaches blocks of material he has found in someone else's sermon as if they were his own original material.

All of these are examples of claiming (or intentionally giving the impression) that an author has himself or herself written the material, and that therefore the wording and ideas originated with him or her. But that is another form of lying because the author, by identifying himself or herself as the source of the work, is understood by readers and hearers as claiming, "These words and ideas originated with me." That is a false claim.

3. Punctuality. Some people are habitually late. Your friend says, "I'll meet you at Starbucks for coffee at 11 a.m. on Thursday." You arrive at 11 and wait, and then he walks in at 11:15 or 11:20 with a quick excuse about "heavy traffic" or something else. In fact, in one of my classes in a recent term, I had a student like that—he habitually came in five or 10 minutes after the class had started. I spoke privately to him about it, with little result. I expect that habit had been built up over decades.

I recognize that a habit of lateness does not fall into the category of a "major sin," such as murder, adultery, or perjury,⁴¹ but it still has some significance. If your friend agreed to meet you at Starbucks at 11 a.m. and did not make a reasonable effort to keep his word, this is a failure in his obligation to be truthful in speech. After a while, people will begin to doubt whether this person is "trustworthy" (see Ex. 18:21; 1 Cor. 7:25) in other things that he says. Certainly God himself is trustworthy in all that he says (Ps. 93:5; 111:7; 1 Tim. 1:15; Rev. 22:6), and we should imitate his speech.

In addition, your friend has "stolen" some time from you, because if you knew he was going to arrive at 11:20, you would have chosen to do something other than sit at Starbucks and wait for those 20 minutes. In disrespecting your time, your friend did not seem to be following Jesus's teaching "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39).

From 40 years of teaching experience, I know how disruptive it is when two or three students walk in late to my class, after I have already started my lecture. I generally try to ignore it and just go on with the class, but it disturbs other students and disrupts my train of thought, at least to some degree. I am sure that pastors and worship leaders feel the same about people who walk into a church service five, 10, or even 15 minutes late, and do so habitually. They probably think, "Nobody will care," but that is not exactly true.

⁴¹ See the discussion of greater and lesser sins in chap. 5, p. 139.

Yes, I'm sure the pastor would rather have them come late than not come at all, but such tardiness is still disrespectful of the pastor and worship leader, and disruptive to those who are already there. A helpful question for a person who is habitually late to ask himself or herself is "What would happen to the church if everybody acted the same way I did?"⁴²

I recognize that there are occasional circumstances that are entirely unpredictable and over which we have no control (such as a flat tire, a traffic accident, or a medical emergency), and I am not saying it is irresponsible to be late for an appointment in such circumstances. But such rare occasions are different from a habit of continual lateness. Reasonable punctuality may be a minor virtue, but I believe it is still a virtue.

4. Other Common Situations. My approach to other situations that occur in everyday life 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 to persuade someone to go to a surprise birthday party, or told in order to conceal a Christmas present, and so forth. Other means of persuading the person to go to the surprise party should be used (many truthful things can be said that do not involve telling a lie).

What should a husband say when his wife asks if he likes a dress she has bought or her new haircut, but he does not think the dress or the haircut is attractive? Here I can give personal counsel (from 48 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. Perhaps Matt. 10:19 could just barely apply here: "What you are to say will be given to you in that hour.") 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 their marriage will be great.

What about responses to 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 "I'm 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.) 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.⁴³

⁴²Fair disclosure: I am writing this section as someone who struggled with punctuality for many years, and who still struggles somewhat. A major turning point came a few years ago with the simple decision to leave earlier for appointments. For example, our church was a 15-minute drive from our home. Therefore, for many years, we would leave home at 9:15 for a 9:30 service, and always walk in a few minutes late. Finally we decided to start leaving at 9 a.m. for the 9:30 service, and suddenly the drive became more relaxed, we felt free to greet people as we walked into the church, and we would be seated five to 10 minutes before the service started, allowing time to talk to others who were there. It was a simple solution, but it changed our Sunday mornings significantly.

⁴³My friend C. J. Mahaney often answers, "I'm doing far better than I deserve," which leads to many interesting conversations!

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