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AGAINST LYING

Matthew 5:37

One Main Thing

We have to learn how to be honest. By nature, we tend to default to dishonesty when under pressure or when we want a pleasure we cannot otherwise have.

Introduction

The ninth commandment is a prohibition against dishonesty: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16). Under the Mosaic Law, the court system was based on testimony of witnesses. The integrity of the system was only as sure as the integrity of the participants. It was an absolute necessity that those involved be honest. Of course, the command is more far-reaching than just official court function. In general, those who fear God should not make false statements. God wants for us to be people of the highest moral integrity. To do that, we have to work at it. We have to learn to trust God and obey his commands even when

we think we see a shortcut to getting what we want. God says that honesty is not the best policy; it is the only policy.

Going Deeper

Psalm 51 is one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture. David, after his sin, cries out to God and asks for forgiveness. The emotions are raw and powerful, and the imagery is magical and poetic. Seeing this glimpse into David's heart is amazing and beautiful. However, Psalm 51:5 is also one of the most hotly debated passages in all of Scripture. Some people have said that this verse—"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me"—teaches that we are sinful from birth. David is not saying that we are born into sin. David is saying that he was born a sinner. This has nothing to do with inherited sin. This is an example of hyperbole. Hyperbole is a rhetorical device in which a person makes an exaggerated claim to make a point.

David is saying that he is a horrible person, and he is attempting to communicate that concept poetically by exaggerating. David is just saying that he feels like he is bad, very bad. He is not teaching that babies are born sinful. He is not teaching a doctrine. He is simply making a point about the amount of guilt he feels.

The same thing happens in Psalm 58:3, "The wicked are estranged from the womb; They go astray as soon

as they are born, speaking lies." Obviously, babies do not come out of the womb with the ability to spread lies. Babies can't talk. We understand that the verse is not literal. Babies have to learn to talk, and they have to learn to lie before they can spread lies. The verse communicates how wicked some people can be by presenting this odd image of a little baby fresh from the womb telling lies. It is hard to be sure if the imagery is supposed to be more comical or horrifying, but it is certainly provocative and memorable.

A funny thing happens to parents. At some point, they realize that their child has learned to lie. Every parent has that story that they can tell about when they caught their sweet, innocent toddler in a bold-faced lie. This occurs shockingly earlier than you would think. Parents will tell you how they can ask their not-yet-verbal toddler a question and the toddler can knowingly lie by shaking his/her head.

There have been numerous studies that attempt to identify just when a child learns the art of deception. It is really a self-taught skill, even if the behavior has not been modeled for us. A child knows he is not supposed to be in the cookie jar but does it anyway. Maybe he leaves the lid off the jar and a chair pushed up to the counter. Mom asks the child if he got in the cookie jar. Knowing that if he answers affirmatively it will result in punishment, he says, "No." He gets away with it this time. Guess what he does next time? It does not take long before a child realizes he can lie and sometimes

get away with it. Upon reflection, we may wonder just how much hyperbole David is using in Psalm 58. We are not born guilty, but we get there about as fast as we can.

Application

When you think about it, you really do not have to be taught to lie. You really do have to be taught not to lie. That is exactly what the ninth commandment does. God says, "Do not lie." Repeatedly. God tells us that we are not to deceive each other. We are to love truth, and we are to view lies as evil.

David is exaggerating about babies walking out of the womb lying, but we do learn to lie quickly and have to be told not to lie. Learning not to lie is much harder than learning to lie. Learning to lie is second nature to us. Learning not to lie is really difficult.

In Matthew 5:37, Jesus says, "But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." What he wants is for us to just speak the truth and only the truth. In the context, he is talking about taking oaths. Why do people take oaths? Why do we have to "swear on the Bible" when we want people to know we are telling the truth? Because we live in a society of liars, so we have to have some way to differentiate. The need to make oaths and promises proves that we lie.

In Colossians 3:8-10, the Bible says, "But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." We have to learn to be Christians. We have to learn to be Christ-like. So much of growing in Christ is learning to not do the thing that is most natural to us. For example, Jesus says that when someone insults us, we are not to strike back. That is a learned skill. We also have to learn not to lie. When we are in trouble, we may be able to get out of it by lying. It is hard to learn to take the lumps and tell the truth; that is not the natural reaction.

We have to learn that when the phone rings and someone else answers and says, "It's Bob," and we say, "Tell him I am not here," we have told a lie. We must learn that "little white lies" are still lies. We cannot do that.

We have to learn that when we say, "Yes. I will do that Monday," knowing that we will not do it on Monday, that is an empty promise. We have to learn that a promise that we do not intend to keep is a lie. We cannot do that.

We have to learn that when we tell our kids, "If you do that one more time, I am going to ground you!" that when they do that one more time, we have to ground

them. We have to learn when we make empty threats, a threat we do not intend to keep, it is a lie. We cannot do that.

We have to learn that when we could just lie to our boss about something that will never be found out, that is lying. We have to learn that bending the truth is a lie. We cannot do that.

It is hard to learn not to lie, but we have to learn.

Conclusion

There is a kids' song that I hear people playfully singing sometimes. It is an attempt at humor by being really shocking. You may know it, too. It is sung to the tune of "Frère Jacques" ("Are You Sleeping?") and says:

Revelation, Revelation
Twenty-one eight. Twenty-one eight.
If you lie you will fry.
Burn, burn, burn. Burn, burn, burn.

Revelation 21:8 says, "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." It is hard to not see exactly how God feels about liars after reading that verse. That is a heavy list of what we would call "big, black sins." That is a list of sins that many of us would never even

be tempted by, but there is one among them that we all have to learn to avoid.

As parents, we eventually figure out that our child has learned to lie, and we have to spend a lifetime teaching them not to. That is what God does.

We have to be told not to lie, and we have to work hard to learn not to lie. We have been told, and we better work and learn. Psalm 58:3 is hyperbole, but Revelation 21:8 is not.

Discussion

1. When do you believe that we learn to lie? Can you think of a situation where a very small child lied?
2. What would happen if there was no prohibition against lying? What would the world be like if no one ever lied?
3. What are some specific ways we still need to learn not to lie? (omissions, half-truths, gossip, etc.)
4. In your words, what does Revelation 21:27 teach us about lies?
5. Was it wrong for David to exaggerate in the Psalms? Would it be wrong for someone to embellish on a resume? Is there a difference between these examples?