In a World of Lies - Dare to Tell the Truth

Many children's books, in an effort to teach the value of spoken honesty, tell the folk tale about a boyhood misdeed of America's first president, George Washington. When confronted by his father, young George admitted, "I cannot tell a lie; I chopped down the cherry tree." For generations the story of George and the cherry tree was recounted to young minds. Perhaps its wide circulation demonstrates the value that most free peoples have traditionally placed on honesty and integrity.

Nevertheless, lying has become pervasive in our modern society and is now more sophisticated than ever. Spin-doctors and slick advertising fool millions. Today the Internet provides rapid, global distribution of cyberspace lies. Gossips never had it so good!

Of course exaggeration and distortion are not new phenomena. In 1959, American author Norman Mailer wrote, "Each day a few more lies eat into the seed with which we are born, little institutional lies from the print of newspapers, the shock waves of television, and the sentimental cheats of the movie screen" (Advertisements for Myself).

But today the level and magnitude of lying has increased dramatically. "The press has caught Mad Lie disease, marked by a loss of appetite for the truth and projectile regurgitation of anything fed to it" (Time, July 15, 1996, p.12). Too often the news media slants or covers up vital information to push a particular political or social agenda. "When it was revealed in April 1992 that Clinton had lied everywhere he went on the campaign trail by claiming he never received a draft-induction notice, each network buried the story in a sentence previewing the next day's New York primary" (Insight, "Does Media Coverage of President Clinton Reveal a Liberal Bias?" July 22, 1996, p.24).

But lying is not just a tool for the media or politicians. In our daily lives, it is all too easy to lie. The Washington Times quoted philosophy and legal studies professor Peter Wenz as saying, "Most of us are not tempted to do the worst kinds of things, like murder, but are tempted to do less serious things that we know are wrong.... We tend to rationalize the behavior to make it seem right...."

"When it comes to the truth.... Ninety-one percent of those surveyed say they fib regularly. One out of five say they can't get through a single day without a premeditated white lie. Almost half - 45 percent - say they don't think lying is necessarily wrong. The better we know someone, the likelier we are to have told them a serious lie" (Examining the (Un)ethical Behavior of Americans', March 4-10, 1996).

Yet statistics show that about half of Americans attend church services weekly. Doesn't this religiosity have a moral impact? The same article reports, "In 1993, the [Josephson Institute of Ethics in California] surveyed more than 8,000 Americans...[and concluded that] the effect of church attendance on morals appears to be limited. The institute found no discernible correlation between ethical behavior and the frequency of attending religious services. Those who attended services 10 or more times a year prior to the survey cheated, lied and generally engaged in other improper conduct as often as did those who attended less frequently or not at all."
Shocking? Yes! And there is a price to be paid. Lying is dangerous business. "One can't know what's going to befall you, once you engage in a lie," said ethicist Sissella Bok, author of the 1989 book *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Random House). "In a way, you lose control. Maybe it'll come back to haunt you, and maybe it won't" (San Diego Union Tribune, June 1, 1996).

And it's difficult to keep up with lying. Often more lies have to be told to protect the first lie, and every lie has to fit the facts available to the person lied to. Then all the lies have to be remembered in every detail or else the liar risks being exposed for what he is. In 1808, Scottish poet Sir Walter Scott penned the now-famous words, "O, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" *Marmion*, canto 6, stanza 17).

The Ninth Commandment

Enshrined in the Ten Commandments is a decree from God against lying. The ninth point states, "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" (EX 20:16; DEUT 5:20). Certainly, this means we are not to commit perjury by giving false testimony before a judicial body about someone else. But it includes much more. *LEV 19:11* magnifies the ninth command by forbidding all forms of lying. "*You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another.*"

This law protects every upright and decent person's reputation against slander - despicable lies invented and disseminated to harm others. *EX 23:1* says, "*You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.*" A thief steals only material items. But a slanderer may rob a man of his reputation and esteem in the eyes of others. God says, "*A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a club, a sword, and a sharp arrow.*" (PROV 25:18). Indeed, God views character assassination as a form of murder!

One of the things the Almighty lists in His holy Word as something He really hates is "*a false witness who speaks lies.*" (PROV 6:19). Deliberately spreading false rumors about someone or lying about him in formal testimony is a heinous violation of the law of God. False witnesses were employed at the blasphemy "trial" of Jesus Christ! "*For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree.*" (MK 14:56).

God wants us to always speak the truth. "*He who speaks truth declares righteousness, but a false witness, deceit... The truthful lip shall be established forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.... Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight.*" (PROV 12:17,19,22). This doesn't mean, however, that we must always tell everything we know to those who seek to hurt others. The next verse says, "*A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims foolishness.*" We can be careful in how we present information. But what we say must be the truth!

It is only in seeking and bearing witness to the truth that a man can be associated with God - for God is Truth! The Bible calls Him the "*God of truth*" (DEUT 32:4). Jesus Christ, who is also God, proclaimed, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*" (JN 14:6). King David of ancient Israel wrote in praise to God, "*Your law is truth... The entirety of Your word is truth.*" (PSA 119:142,151,160). Jesus Christ also prayed to the Father, "*Your word is truth.*" (JN 17:17).

Yes, everything that proceeds from the mouth of God is absolute Truth. "*God is not a man, that He should lie.*" (NUM 23:19). In the New Testament, we are told that "*God cannot lie*" (TIT 1:2) and "*it is impossible for God to lie.*" (HEB 6:18). This is critically important. If you couldn't rely on God's Word, there could be no real assurance of forgiveness from past sins, of divine help in time of need or of future reward and eternal life.

Therefore, it is essential to approach God in truth. David explained, "*The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.*" (PSA 145:18). And Jesus said, "*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*" (JN 4:24). If one's worship of God is not in Truth, then that person is not really worshipping Him. Anyone who lives by lies and deception will
be rejected by the Most High God. One must live by the truth! No matter what other personal weaknesses a human being may have, if he is willing to speak the truth, live openly and honestly, and acknowledge the truth when it is presented to him, he can be respected and helped to overcome his faults.

Even though honest differences of opinion permeate human society, everyone must learn to live and speak truthfully. Church services should make a difference to those who attend - if that church is truly Christian! Why? Because, as the Apostle John clearly says, genuinely Christian churchgoers are to be "walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father." (2 JN 4).

Truth or Consequences

According to the Old Testament, "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies shall perish." (PROV 19:9). Perish? We've already seen that, in some ways, God equates the bearing of false witness with murder. But would He proclaim the same sentence for it? Just how seriously does God view infractions of His ninth commandment?

Under the civil law code God gave ancient Israel, murder was punishable by death. Could such a penalty also have been imposed for lying? "If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, then both men in the controversy shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. And the judges shall make diligent inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil person from among you. And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." (DEUT 19:16-21). So, in ancient Israel, if it was discovered that you falsely accused someone of a capital crime, you would be EXECUTED!

The final punishment for all sin is death (ROM 6:23) - and lying is no exception. Truth will ultimately prevail. In the wonderful World Ahead, "Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth." (ZECH 8:3). Lying will not be tolerated there. "But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life." (REV 21:27). Who won't make it into the New Jerusalem? "But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie." (REV 22:15). Where will they go? "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and ALL LIARS shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (REV 21:8). It should be plain to see that lying is serious business with God.

Again, those who seek God must always speak the truth. Yet our society is simply filled with lies! Nationally, we could well say to God, "For our transgression s are multiplied before You, and our sins testify against us... In transgressing and lying against the LORD... conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood. Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off; for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. So truth fails." (ISA 59:12-15). Too often today the world's judicial systems render precious little justice for the average person. These institutions of justice might be better termed "injustice systems."

Because of this, the God of Truth wants nothing to do with our nations right now. "Oh, that I had in the wilderness a lodging place for wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them! For they are all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men. And like their bow they have bent their tongues for lies. They are not valiant for the truth on the earth. For they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know Me... Everyone take heed to his neighbor, and do not trust any brother; for every brother will utterly supplant, and every neighbor will walk with slanderers. Everyone will deceive his neighbor, and will not speak the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies.... Your habitation is in the midst of deceit; through deceit they refuse to know Me." (JER 9:2-6).
The Value of Truth

What is the result of lying? Blindness! The world is blind to the real nature of God and the plan He is working out here below. And where do these lies originate? With the father of lies - Satan the Devil! Jesus told those religious authorities who could not tolerate His Truth, "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it." (JN 8:44).

Satan is the world's most prolific liar. According to REV 12:9, he is presently deceiving the whole world. The very first lie he used on mankind is recorded in GEN 3:4. He told Eve that she and Adam would not die from eating the forbidden fruit - after God had said that they would. What a reversal - the devil calling God a liar! Yet for the most part, the world has gullibly believed Satan. As the "prince of the power of the air" (EPH 2:2), he broadcasts his subtle, lying attitudes to a weak, selfish humanity. This combination of evil attitudes and weak human character has proven so incredibly corrupting that the Prophet Jeremiah observed, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (JER 17:9).

But no one has to remain this way. You can turn to Jesus Christ and change your life to become a new person. The old, deceitful character that all of us once lived with can be destroyed. The New Testament exhorts us, "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds." (COL 3:9). According to the Apostle James, it is a Christian's duty to root out personal inner corruptness. "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth." (JAM 3:14). Instead of lying, the Apostle Paul says that God's Spirit will help us to speak "the truth in love" (EPH 4:15). He taught faithful believers, "Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another." (v.25).

But it is not enough to merely speak the truth. We must also live the truth! In David's psalm of repentance to God, he wrote, "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts." (PSA 51:6). In the hidden corners of our lives that others can't see, we are to deal truthfully. Remember that God can always see. We must live in accordance with all of God's commands to truthfully say we have a relationship with Him. "He who says 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." (1.JN 2:4).

Imagine a world in which everyone told the truth! Every decent person's reputation would be protected. Millions of wasted hours would be saved from the burden of investigating false reports. Unworthy men would never be placed in high positions of responsibility. Every company would tell the truth about its own products and honestly seek to serve consumer needs. Personal relationships among family members and neighbors would flourish where there is mutual trust. If applied to every phase of society, we would have a utopian civilization!

This is not a farfetched or unrealistic idea. It is simply the blessing that would result if our entire society truly obeyed the ninth commandment of the Creator God! Moreover, it is going to happen in the near future!

Jesus Christ is soon going to intervene in human affairs and set up His glorious Kingdom over all nations. In His kingdom - as we've seen - lying will not be tolerated. The entire earth will know God's Truth - and will live by it. We can rely on this promise from the God of Truth. "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (JN 8:32).

by Roderick C. Meredith