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# “Learning to Love the Truth”

Exodus 20:16

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*You must not bear false witness against your neighbor.*  
—Exodus 20:16

You are watching Judge Judy. It is a little embarrassing, but most of us have stopped clicking long enough to watch the world's preeminent legal authority at work. You are listening to "The Case of the Borrowed Barbecue" when you hear an inconsistency in the defendant's story.

First, he said he was at the grill the whole time, but now he is saying that he had to go inside for barbecue sauce. Which is it? And how does he explain the barbecue sauce stain that his wife testified was already on his shirt? You know he is lying. You hope the judge will bring down the hammer.

Judge Judy points the long finger of justice: "The defendant is lying, so my sentence is going to sound harsh, but it is just. You will have no barbecue for the rest of your natural life. You will have no barbecued beef, pork, or chicken. You will have no sweet, smoked, spicy, wet, or dry barbecue. You will have no North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Kentucky, Virginia, Texas, Kansas City, or Memphis barbecue. You can't lie in my courtroom and get away with it."

You stand and applaud, because justice has been done. We know it is wrong to lie in a courtroom.

The ancient Hebrews knew it was wrong, too. The ninth commandment was meant to ensure the integrity of the judicial system. Whenever anyone had a grievance, the elders met at the city gate. The judge invited the disagreeing parties to make their cases and question their witnesses.

They understood that there can be no justice when people lie. This rule said no twisting the truth, no massaging the truth, no manipulating the truth, just tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. They could not build a community if the truth was overcome by lies, if bad words were allowed to destroy good ones.

The Hebrews applied this commandment to all the words we say. The Contemporary English Version translates this verse: "You shall not tell lies about others." All the world is a courtroom. We are on trial with every word we speak. The problem is that when people stand before a judge, they usually recognize the solemnity of what they say, but when they are not in the courtroom, they live with an informality that encourages thoughtless words.

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin examined 116,366 lies told by 632 participants over 91 days. Participants self-reported their lies, which makes you wonder about the results. Wouldn't liars lie about lying? Maybe that is why the statistics around lying seem unreliable. It is hard to tell what the truth is about lying.

But, supposedly, according to the bright people in Wisconsin, 51% of lies are to friends, 21% to family, 11% to colleagues, and 9% to strangers. People lie for a variety of reasons. 21% of the lies were to avoid another person, 14% were to protect one's self, 13% were to look better, 9% were for personal gain, and 5% were for no reason at all.

So how often do people lie? 75% of respondents said they do not lie much—zero to two lies per day. But the same study said lying comprised 7% of total communication. (Christian Miller and the Conversation, October 31, 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-lie-1-08-times-a-day/>)

And there are other studies that are more negative. Maybe they are more honest. A second researcher suggests that people tell 10-15 lies a day, more than one or two.

And, according to a University of Massachusetts study, 60% are incapable of having a conversation without lying once every ten minutes. And when meeting someone for the first time, a person will lie two or three times within the first ten minutes.

The Journal of Basic and Applied Psychology claims the average American lies three times in a one-minute conversation, a lot more than once or twice a day. (July 28, 2023, The Truth About Lying Statistics, <https://www.goldenstepsaba.com/resources/lying-statistics>)

The numbers are all over the place—once a day, once every three minutes, or three times a minute. Somebody's lying.

But how many of these have we said? “You look great in that.” “You’ve lost weight.” “You haven’t changed a bit.” “I only had one beer.” “The trains are running late.” “My phone died.” “I never got the message.” “I’ll get right back to you.” “I’m on the way.” “It didn’t cost that much.” “Thanks, it’s just what I’ve always wanted.” “I have no idea what happened.” “I’ll try to make it.” “I have a headache.” “I will never lie to you.”

Lies are flying around the world while the truth is putting her boots on. We are surrounded by lies, but we do not think it is a problem for us, because we are not mean liars. We are kind and gentle liars. We lie to avoid trouble, gain an advantage, and fit in.

We do not say things that are clearly untrue about another person, because we do not need to. We have

subtle ways to mishandle the truth and get what we want. What makes these ways so delicious is that we violate the principle of telling the whole truth, but do so with a mostly clear conscience.

We enjoy a good rumor. Hearsay seems harmless, even though repeating untruths is not much different from making them up. We lie when we pass gossip along.

We lie when we talk about ourselves. We tell stories in ways that show us in a better light. We find it easier not to say what we actually said, but what we wish we had said: "And then I told her a thing or two."

We lie when we say things to a person's face that we would not say behind their back: "You're the perfect one to do this."

We lie by telling half-truths, giving the slant that suits us, offering alternative facts, while giving the impression that we have told the whole truth. We have been in arguments where we are aware that there are facts that are better explained by the other person's viewpoint. We keep silent about those facts, because we love winning more than we love the truth. We lie with our silence. In the quick exchange of conversation, something untrue is said about someone and we let it pass.

There is a little George Santos, Donald Trump, and Bill Clinton in us all. We get careless with the truth in small ways and begin to wander from the truth in all kinds of ways. Lying is such a normal part of our lives that we might assume that we have good reasons to lie, but most of the time we do not.

We lie because we are lazy. We lie because it is easier than being honest. We lie to avoid being embarrassed. We

think sounding smart is more important than telling the truth.

We do not see how much is at stake when we play fast and loose with the truth. The ninth commandment is meant to protect us. Lies set everyone's pants on fire. Our words make things happen inside our hearts and souls. Lies destroy us. Lying hurts the one who speaks.

An old proverb says, "The teller of a lie should be hung by the tongue, and the hearer by the ear."

Lying hurts the one who listens. You hear a lie about a friend. You think it probably is not true, but you cannot help but look at her differently.

We do not need to believe everything we hear. We do not need to repeat everything we hear. If we do, we will lose friends and gain enemies. We cannot outrun every lie we tell. Eventually, we will end up hurting someone we care about. We are better off facing the music and accepting it when we make a mistake. Being honest may not always help us make friends, but it is more likely to help us make the friends we need.

Lies are matches that destroy forests that have been growing for decades. Lies turn harmony into hatred. Lies make us forget how good honesty is. Dishonesty looks easier, but there is more hope in integrity.

"You shall not bear false witness" is a reminder to respect the power of words and the beauty of truth.

Sam Shepard writes, "Words don't deserve malarkey. They're innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, describing that, meaning the other, so if you look after them you can build bridges across incomprehension and chaos. But when they get their corners knocked off, they're no

good any more. Words are sacred. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little.”

People who are hurting, crying out for hope, hungry for a word of affirmation and encouragement, may finish a conversation with us still crying in their pain and starving in their hunger because we have given them “small talk” when we could have given them God’s love. Talk is not cheap. Words are powerful.

In *The Matrix*, Morpheus channels Socrates and says to Neo, “This your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember, all I’m offering is the truth. Nothing more.”

Morpheus’ speech is a turning point for Neo and the movie. If he takes the blue pill, he can go back to his boring, dishonest life, but if he takes the red pill, he can find out what the world is really like. Swallowing the blue pill would make for a short movie, so he takes the red pill. Sometimes we take the blue pill, the easy way, because truth can be tough, but truth is where the adventure is.

Jesus said, “The truth will make you free,” but he did not say it would be easy.

George Orwell noted that every life, viewed from within, is a series of defeats, because none of us is as good as we pretend to be. There is more to be said about us than ever appears in the image that we try to project. One of the secrets of happiness is to stop trying to appear to be more than we are and try to present ourselves honestly.

We will find joy in saying: “This is what I really want to say.” “This may seem odd, but I made a promise, so I’m going to keep it.” “I’ve never told you this before, but this is what I’ve always felt.”

We will find joy in defending the truth. Speaking truthfully for an unpopular opinion is hard, but standing courageously for the truth becomes its own reward. When someone takes a shot at someone, we can ask: “How do you know that? Why haven’t you talked to them?”

We can speak better words, words that are true and kind. We can ask, “What honest words of love, forgiveness, and hope do I need to say?” Truth is more than avoiding lies. Truth is not only stranger than fiction, it is sacred.

Gandhi said, “There is no God higher than truth.”

Jesus said, “I am the truth.”

Truth is divine. Truth is extraordinary. Truth is so unexpected that it is delightful to tell it.

So we speak with integrity. We say what we mean. We do not use words to speak against ourselves or anyone else. We use our words for truth and love.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached: “I refuse to accept the view that humankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

What does it mean to live with unarmed truth? We open our hearts. We speak honestly. We offer compassionate words to those who need them most.