

Christian Virtue Series: Honesty Gen. 27:41-45; Eph. 4:25; Prov. 12:22

6/23/19

Dishonesty seems to be rampant these days. People lie in singles bars, on job applications, and on social media (especially on dating websites!). For instance, this is how my profile might read: "6'2" charming, attractive young-ish male. Loves romantic movies and mountain climbing. Great dancer!" Maybe not! But people lie in other ways, too. They lie to the police and even when they are under oath. And they cheat their employers. In fact, the U.S. Dept. of Commerce estimates that employee dishonesty costs businesses in this country \$50 billion each year. People also lie on their tax returns. In the 1980s, the IRS changed personal tax returns, so that rather than just claiming a certain number of dependents, the tax filer had to list the Social Security numbers for each dependent. The next year, seven million "dependents" vanished! We lie to bosses and friends and spouses, and children lie to their parents and teachers. And, let's not forget the never-ending parade of telephone and internet scams! Dishonesty is an equal opportunity sin!

In spite of the fact that dishonesty seems to be all around us- and if we're honest, within us- God has some strong things to say about it. You

probably know that one of the Ten Commandments, the 9th, forbids bearing false witness against your neighbor. That makes it a pretty big deal! And listen to this verse from Proverbs 12. ²²*Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight.* (Prov. 12:22) I heard that verse more than once from my mom when I was growing up! It's clear from this passage and numerous others that God hates dishonesty. But human creativity with regard to dishonesty was boundless, even in the ancient world. For example, in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, God found it necessary to prohibit the Hebrew people from cheating their neighbors by using inaccurate weights and measures in business transactions! Dishonesty isn't a new problem.

But why does God hate it so much? I can think of a couple reasons. First, it is contrary to our created nature. Genesis 1 tells us that we were made in the very image of God. So our actions, our thoughts, our feelings, and our motives are designed to reflect God's character. And, God is a God of truth. We never have to worry about whether what God is telling us is true! Our character should mirror or reflect that aspect of God. When we don't, we are living contrary to our nature. Somehow, most of us sense this, even though we're not conscious of it. Very few people want to think of themselves as dishonest cheats. Something within us wants to believe

that we are people of integrity. Dishonesty goes against our created nature, and we know it.

There are also practical consequences to dishonesty. In the first place, little lies or acts of dishonesty often become bigger acts of dishonesty. Brain researchers have demonstrated this truth with a number of experiments; the more we lie or cheat, the easier it becomes for us to lie and cheat in bigger ways. You may have experienced or seen this yourself. I remember reading several stories about people who got caught embezzling large amounts of money from their employer or a community group. Almost inevitably they began by stealing small amounts of money, and then progressed over time to larger and larger amounts until they were caught. So one little lie usually isn't just one little lie. It prepares us for larger and more harmful lies.

Another reason God hates dishonesty is found in Eph. 4. The Apostle Paul is instructing followers of Jesus as to how they ought to live.

²⁵*So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.* (Eph. 4:25) This is one of many biblical calls to honesty, but I'm intrigued with that last phrase, "*for we are members of one another.*" Paul is pointing out the impact that lying has on community, to those who are "members of one another." The most

obvious impact is the breakdown in trust. If I cannot believe what a member of my community says, how can we work together to accomplish anything? It's nearly impossible. When the chips are down, I need to be able to trust that what someone in my workplace, family, or community says is true, so we can work together to solve the problem.

You have all probably heard the story of the boy who cried "Wolf!" The problem he faced was that his lying had broken the trust people had in his word, and when he really needed them to believe him, when he was really speaking the truth, no one would trust him! That's what dishonesty does. It breaks trust. God has always intended that we live in community. We need one another! But dishonesty damages community, in many cases rendering it incapable of fulfilling its functions. And that can lead to even more disfunction.

In Genesis 27, we read the story of how Jacob- under the direction of his mother, Rebekah- duped his father, Isaac, in order to steal his father's blessing from his twin brother, Esau. This blessing granted him land and authority and wealth. As you might imagine, this despicable act of dishonesty did not go over well with Esau. ⁴¹*Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I*

will kill my brother Jacob.”⁴² But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, “Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you.⁴³ Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran,⁴⁴ and stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury turns away—⁴⁵ until your brother’s anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?” (Gen. 27:41-45)

Being cheated by his brother caused Esau to nurture a murderous hatred of Jacob. It lasted for decades, causing Jacob to always be looking over his shoulder until a final reckoning with Esau takes place in chapter 33. Dishonesty can cause lasting damage to relationships through the hurt and anger and even rage and hate it can engender. Some of you have experienced this in your own relationships and are still feeling the effects of someone’s dishonesty over wills or contracts or romances years or even decades later! Dishonesty can cause deep fractures in our most important relationships.

So what do we do about the dishonesty which seems to be everywhere in our society, wreaking destructiveness wherever it is found? George Orwell wrote, “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a

revolutionary act.” So, how do we begin a truth movement? I think we begin by dealing with our own dishonesty. Most of the Christian virtues- courage, kindness, patience, humility, self-control, and honesty- these virtues are habits of the heart. But because of sin’s hold on our hearts, we tend to veer away from them, because they are difficult and can be personally costly, especially in the short-term. So, we need to teach them to our children, and continually re-learn them as adults!

As usual, we begin with a rigorous self-evaluation. Where do you tend to lapse into dishonesty? Like other vices, dishonesty becomes an unthinking habit, so that we hardly notice we are engaged in it anymore! As you reflect on your own life, are there particular areas of your life where choose dishonesty over truth? Be on the lookout for dishonest words and actions this week! It may even help to keep a dishonesty log for a while. (You may not want to share that with your boss!) Then ask yourself what it is about certain situations that makes you vulnerable to dishonesty. Is it the fear of looking bad? The fear of getting in trouble? Knowing that what you are doing is wrong, and then lying to cover it up? Is it greed or pride? Try to figure out what it is that makes you vulnerable to dishonesty.

Then confront that underlying issue. You may be able to talk yourself through it, or you may want to talk with someone else about how to free

yourself from it. Certainly ask God's Spirit to help you with it. But see if you can identify what's behind your dishonesty and then confront it. You may find that your dishonesty is prompted by a belief or feeling that is false in itself!

In addition, change your behavior. If you notice you are regularly lying at the office, be on special alert in that setting. Or if it is on social media sites, or at home, or when you speak publicly, or wherever. Change your behavior.

Madison Sarratt, a long-time dean of men at Vanderbilt College, and a teacher of mathematics, wrote this at the top of one of his exams: "Today I am going to give you two examinations, one in trigonometry and one in honesty. I hope you will pass them both, but if you must fail one, let it be trig, for there are many good people in this world today who cannot pass an examination in trigonometry, but there are no good people in the world who cannot pass an examination in honesty." We all face tests and challenges every day that tempt us to be less than honest. I pray we grow in our ability to pass the honesty test and become men and women of integrity.