

"To Tell the Truth"
Ephesians 4:25
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When people list minor sins, ones that are not so bad, they usually included things like "stealing cookies from the cookie jar," driving too slowly in the fast lane or "telling a little lie." But, is not telling the truth really just a minor sin? It certainly is a common one. According to a recent study Americans, on average tell a conscious, intentional lie 11 times a week. That average includes folks who rarely, if ever lie, as well as about 10% of the population that lies over 20 times a day. The study found that it is not politicians, but teenagers who are more prone to lie than others. However, as Otto Friedrich said, "many people live in a world of fantasy. They are accustomed to making things up, to fibbing and exaggerating, and to believing their fibs and exaggerations." People insist it is often necessary to lie for one's own protection. Adlai Stevenson, a mid-20th century politician said, "Lying is an abomination to the Lord and a very present help in time of trouble."

Well, Adlai got it half right. Lying as an abomination to God. **Proverbs 12:22 The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful.** It is not a minor sin. Thus, it is not acceptable for Christians to lie, even though many of us sometimes do it. When Paul writes his letter to the church in Ephesus, he is talking to people who lived in a world where lying was very common. As one historian writes, "In the Roman Empire men had forgotten what honesty was. A person who refused a bribe was regarded not as an upright man, but as a personal enemy." Yet, even in that environment, Paul still believes the Christians in Ephesus need to tell the truth. Last week we explored 4:17-24. There we saw that God is calling us, as believers in Jesus, to make changes in our lives. We need to seek to live not just like everyone around us, but as followers of Jesus. Yet, what does that mean in practical terms? Well, one thing it means is that we are to be honest. We should not lie, but tell the truth. Or as our text says, Ephesians 4:4 **Therefore, putting away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.** We will just focus on that one verse today, but there is a lot there. Let's pause and pray the Lord would use His word today. To help us grow not as liars, but as truth tellers.

"Therefore, putting away falsehood." "Therefore" points back to what the apostle has been talking about in this chapter, our new life in Christ. He insists this includes that we stop telling lies. That is what a falsehood is. We must not purposely deceive or mislead others. Now there are all sorts of lies. Some are blatantly false statements. "I had a bowl of Cheerios for breakfast this morning" is a lie if you really had and know you had three donuts. Other lies are more creative. A woman working on a family genealogy discovered that one of her great-grandfathers had been executed in the electric chair in Sing-Sing prison in New York. Not wanting to embarrass her family, she wrote the following: "this man occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of America's best known institutions. He was very much attached to his position and literally died in the harness." And despite what we often think, there are very few harmless, or white lies. As someone said those who think it is permissible to tell white lies soon become color blind.

Why do people lie? For various reasons. Sometimes it is an attempt to avoid negative consequences. When a boy throws a ball that breaks a garage window, he may tell his parents, "I don't know how that window got broken." He might even justify the lie by thinking, "Well, maybe the window was broken before the ball hit it and I just didn't notice. I cannot really be sure that *I* broke the window." Unlike George Washington who quickly confessed that he chopped down the cherry tree, many of us are unwilling to take responsibility for some things we do. On other occasions people believe they will gain something by telling a lie. When you are filling out taxes and leave the line that says "other income" blank, when you had other income, it does save you some money, but it is also a lie. We might exaggerate our accomplishments to enhance our reputation, or we can distort the truth in order to harm another person's reputation. Yet, whatever the motivation, however cleverly it is articulated, a lie is still a lie. Though lying occurs frequently and is acceptable to many, it really has no place in a Christian's life. We are to be putting away falsehood.

What harm does this type of dishonesty do? Paul says one of the reasons not telling the truth is so bad is because of the negative impact it has on relationships within the church. **Ephesians 4:25b let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.** Most bible scholars agree that the word “neighbor” in this context refers to fellow Christians. Now, that doesn’t mean it is okay to lie to people who don’t share our faith, though that can be a bit more complicated. Apparently, it was not wrong, not even a minor sin, for the Hebrew midwives to lie to the Egyptian Pharaoh in Exodus 1, for Rahab to deceive the king of Jericho when she sided with the Israelites in Joshua 2 or for Jonathan to not tell the truth to his father, Saul, who was trying to murder David in 1 Samuel 19. From these examples, I conclude that if Nazi’s came to my door and asked if I was hiding Jews in my house, and I was, it would be okay for me to say, “Jews? No, there are none here.” Yet Paul is not concerned about lying to Nazi’s in this passage. His point is that we must not lie to fellow believers in Jesus. A few weeks ago we talked about how important unity is with the church. It is something we cherish and guard. However, as someone said, “A lie is like a knife stabbed into the heart of a church.” Speaking falsehood within a congregation can be very destructive. More than one pastor has had to resign his position because someone in the church was angry and began to spread malicious, false rumors about the pastor. When people are not telling the truth, it starts to create a general atmosphere of mistrust and healthy relationships don’t grow well in that environment. Now, when a liar gets caught, as he/she almost always eventually does, that person loses credibility. Even if that person expresses genuine remorse for his deception, no one is sure he can be trusted. Like the boy who “cried wolf,” someone who is not trusted, will not be believed even if they are telling the truth. Friends, the church of Jesus Christ should be made up of people who love one another and are committed to each other. Most of us want to be part of a church like that. Human beings have a natural longing to be part of a group of people who truly care for each other. A crucial ingredient for that to happen is trust. In 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul says “Love believes all things.” Yet, when someone in a congregation is known to be dishonest, when others assume someone cannot be trusted, then the relationships within a church

cannot be what God intends that is why Paul says lying and falsehood have to go. They bring destruction to both our individual and corporate lives.

Putting away falsehood, speak the truth to each other. That is what Paul says the Lord expects. At this point some of you are thinking, “Uh-oh, Pastor Dan. I think I have goofed up here. I know I told a couple of lies this week.” If that is your thought, congratulations! You get an “A” for honesty about your dishonesty. I am actually more concerned about those who insist that lying is something only other people do. The reality is that all us, at times, exaggerate, deceive, distort or hide the truth, tell seemingly harmless fibs or speak blatant lies. All of us. I think of the fellow who won the world’s biggest liar contest in England with this line, “I have never told a lie before in all my life.” If you feel guilty about your dishonesty that is a good thing. You should feel guilty. We should find no comfort in the thought that “everyone does it.” It is a sin to lie.

Folks, listen carefully, this is important. The commandments found in the New Testament, given through Paul, the other apostles and by Jesus Himself, are all part of the law of love. They are rules by which God expects us to live. They spell out what it means to love God and love other people. However just like the Old Testament laws, this law of love is something that none of us ever perfectly keeps. In fact, the New Testament actually raised the bar higher than the law given through Moses. When it comes to honesty, to getting rid of all falsehood and perfectly telling the truth, Jesus is the only one who has ever done that. The only one. So our first response, my first response, your first response, when we read about putting away falsehood and speaking truth is, “Oh my, I am failing to do that.” And whether it is what we consider a little white lie or a whole life built on deception, each of us needs to say, “Lord, I need your gracious forgiveness for my dishonesty.” If you’re not a Christian, not trusting the Lord Jesus, this means turning to Jesus Christ and receiving him a Savior and Lord. When you do that He will forgive you, forgive all sins, including your lies and dishonesty. If you are already a Christian, maybe have been a believer for 30 years, and you realize that you have sinned by not telling the truth, you too should confess your sin to the Lord and the experience the promise of **1 John 1:9 If we confess our sine, He**

is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

But once we have been forgiven for our dishonesty, then we are to strive, as God enables, to avoid falsehood and speak the truth. It is not sufficient to confess all the lies we have told before we go to bed each night. As Martin Luther said, “the law points us to Christ.” I think he meant both Old and New Testament law shows us our need to turn to Jesus for grace and forgiveness. But then Luther Added, “Once we have come to Christ, He then points us back to the law to show us how we are to live.” This is the proper relationship between faith and works. I like to say, justification, the first aspect of salvation, is all about what Jesus has done for me. My failing score, which included how I have failed to always tell the truth, has been erased and Jesus perfect score, which includes His complete honesty, that score is placed beside my name. It is now my score. His righteousness, including His honesty, is now counted as my own. However, the Lord still intends, in a second aspect of salvation called sanctification, to help us grow to be more like Jesus in how we live. That included putting away falsehood and telling the truth. We are not able to do that without God’s help, without the power of His spirit. Yet, if you have no desire to change, no desire to be honest, it reflects a deep problem in your soul. Most likely the problem is that even though you profess to be a Christian, you are not truly born again, not a genuine believer in Jesus.

So for those of us who are Christians, who desire to get rid of falsehoods and tell the truth, what are some practical things we need to do? Here are three implications from our text today:

First, we need to tell the truth to those we have deceived. Yes, we need to confess our sins of dishonesty to the Lord, but if we have deceived another person, the right thing to do often included going to that individual and telling him/her the truth. That is part of genuine repentance for our sin. That is not easy to do. And there are rare situations when it may be best to not let someone know we have been deceptive. However, in general, once we confess our sin to the Lord, the next step is to go to the person we have deceived, apologize for our dishonesty, and tell him/her the truth.

Now, some of the toughest situations involve the past. If you lied to someone 20 years ago, maybe a spouse, a parent and he/she doesn’t know about the lie, I am not sure it is always necessary or wise to bring that up and reopen old wounds. However, whenever the impact of that lie is still being felt, then you need to own it. You need to tell that person the truth. You must also make sure you are not currently being deceptive in order to cover up a past lie. And remember, it is often better that someone learns from you about your dishonesty, rather than from someone else. Again, these may not be easy situations, but telling the truth to those we have deceived is important.

Second, we need to be careful not to deceive others by telling a partial truth. A witness in a courtroom is asked, “Do you swear or pledge to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” why, because telling only a part of the truth often ends up being a deception, a lie. If you say, “but officer, when I looked at my speedometer is said I was going 65,” you are not being truthful if the last time you looked at the speedometer was five miles back that speedometer did indeed read 65 MPH when you looked at it, but you are being deceptive by implying that is what it read when the officer stopped you. Half-truths are often pretty much full lies. Now, this doesn’t mean we are obligated to tell everyone everything we know in every conversation. There are plenty of times when it is okay to answer only the question that is asked of us. In fact it can be a sin... gossip... to tell another person something that is true, but is really none of his/her business. Telling people things that are true and *helpful* should be our goal.

Yet, we need to be careful that our selection of what we choose to say in any particular situation is not intended to deceive. I sometimes think the news media folks are experts at this. Seldom do I hear a report that is blatantly false. Yet, these people tend to be masters at spin and being selective about what facts they report and what facts they don’t report. That is a big part of how they often distort the truth. The truth that we tell, and the truth we choose not to tell, can be part of an effort to deceive others. And unless we are being asked by Nazi’s if we are hiding Jews or something like that, this type of deception is not what the Lord wants us to be doing.

Third, we need to be honest with other Christians. Speaking the truth involves communication. Oh,

one way to avoid lying is keeping our mouths shut and not saying anything. But that won't do. We are members of one body. Through Jesus Christ, we are a family, a spiritual family. And as a family we need to communicate with each other. When there is an opportunity to share prayer requests we need to speak the truth. Rather than pretend that everything in our lives is wonderful, we need to be honest and speak the truth about things that are troubling us. Truth telling involves a degree of transparency where people have a chance to know us as we really are and not just see an image we project. Oh transparency can be a little scary, but because we are family it is a risk that we sometimes need to take. Of course, we need to use discretion in what we share with other people. We need to be especially careful that we don't break confidences or say things that might harm the reputation of another person. Sometimes a particular story is simply not our story to tell. We also don't want to fall into the trap of gossiping and we need to learn to keep our mouths shut when we are around people who tend to be gossips. Yet, if we want to encourage each other, if we are going to pray effectively for each other, then we do need to know at least some of the problems, struggles and doubts that our brothers and sisters are dealing with. I think it is pretty sad when someone says, "You know, Pastor Dan, I have gone to the same church as that person has for year. I have been in bible studies and served on committees with her, *but I don't really know her.* I really have no idea about what concerns or needs she has." A situation like that exists because we have failed to obey God's command to speak the truth, to communicate the truth about who we are to our Christian family.

Friends, at this time of year we focus on what God has done for us by sending Jesus to this earth. This enables us to receive His grace, and experience peace with God and one another. That is the apostle Paul's theme as well in the first 3 ½ chapters of Ephesians. And then he focuses on this questions: How then shall we live? What are the practical implication of the gospel? How do we live as followers of Jesus Christ, whether in the 1st century roman Empire, or the 21st century United States? The first answer Paul has to that question, is you tell the truth. You stop being dishonest and be a man or woman of integrity. Will you do that perfectly? No. As a sinner, deceiving others is a pretty natural thing to do. But, as people who have been redeemed, saved by

the God of truth, we should want to be truth tellers. May the Lord enable us to tell the truth for our good, the good of others, and for His glory.