

CHAPTER 4

TELL THE TRUTH FROM NOW ON, ESPECIALLY TO YOURSELF

“----For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice”

John 18:37(b) (RSV)

⁴⁷Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"

John 1:47 (NASB)

Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,....

Psalm 51:6(a) (ESV)

¹Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.

Psalm 73: 1 (RSV)

*The sum of thy word is truth;
and every one of thy righteous ordinances endures forever.*

Psalm 119:160 (RSV)

*²²Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,
but those who deal faithfully are His delight.*

Proverbs 12:22 (NASB)

*⁷No man who practices deceit shall dwell in my house;
no man who utters lies shall continue in my presence*

Psalm 101:7 (RSV)

*The LORD is near to all who call upon him,
to all who call upon him in truth.*

Psalm 145:18 (RSV)

*²Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

Psalm 32:2(RSV)

*Keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from speaking deceit.*

Psalm 34:13 (ESV)

⁹"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?

Jeremiah 17:9 (NASB)

*Take heed lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them,
*Deuteronomy 11:16 (RSV)**

“..... and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much”

Luke 16:10 (b) (RSV)

in hope of eternal life which God, who never lies, promised ages ago
Titus 1:2 (RSV)

¹⁶ These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; ¹⁷ do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD."

Zechariah 8:16-17 (ESV)

Then the LORD said to me, "The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds

John 14:6 (NASB)

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices
Colossians 3:9 (RSV)

For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the LORD your God.
Deuteronomy 25:16 (RSV)

So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander.
1 Peter 2:1 (RSV)

The LORD is near to all who call upon him,
to all who call upon him in truth.
Psalm 145:18 (RSV)

⁹The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, ¹²in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 (ESV)

Why does truthfulness matter?

Very few people are completely truthful, especially when it is costly. In fact, few people ever think about truthfulness as an issue at all. I cannot remember ever hearing it preached on in any church. Perhaps some preachers feel uncomfortable speaking about something that they know they do not always practice themselves? At any rate, it is a subject that is rarely ever taught about, but which ought to be. God feels very strongly about us being totally truthful at all times, even down to the smallest details. He condemns deceit and falsehood very firmly:

*⁷He who practices deceit shall not dwell within my house;
He who speaks falsehood shall not maintain his position before me.*
Psalm 101:7 (NASB)

*¹⁴ Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands afar off;
for truth has fallen in the public squares,
and uprightness cannot enter.*
*¹⁵ Truth is lacking,
and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.*

***The LORD saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.***

Isaiah 59:14-15 (RSV)

Moreover, God is continually watching and taking note of everything we say and do. He is aware of all our ways, even those we keep secret. Every lie we ever tell is immediately known about by God:

***²¹For the ways of a man
are before the eyes of the LORD,
and He watches all his paths***

Proverbs 5:21 (NASB)

God detests crookedness, but takes delight in those who are 'blameless'. That does not mean *sinless*. It means being sincere, faithful, honest and true.

***²⁰The perverse in heart are an abomination to the LORD,
but the blameless in their walk are His delight.***

Proverbs 11:20 (NASB)

Moreover, there will be blessings and rewards for those who are truthful and who live with integrity:

***For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show his might in behalf of
those whose heart is blameless toward him.....***

2 Chronicles 16:9 (a) (RSV)

³Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

***⁴He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.***

***⁵He will receive blessing from the LORD
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.***

Psalms 24:3-5 (ESV)

God wants that truthfulness to go very deep inside us. He doesn't merely want us to be superficially honest on the outside, or by appearance, but to be truthful *at our very core*, i.e. all the way through to the innermost part of us:

***Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.***

Psalms 51:6 (ESV)

Our natural inclination is to be dishonest. That is what our sinful flesh nature will instinctively choose to do.

***The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately corrupt;
who can understand it?***

Jeremiah 17:9 (RSV)

When Jesus said that He is 'the truth' what did He mean?

One day, when He was speaking to His disciples, Jesus made an unusual claim about Himself. He said He is....."the way, the truth and the life"..... For the moment, we need to concern ourselves with

the second assertion, i.e. that Jesus is *the truth*. He does not merely say that He *has* the truth, or that He *speaks* the truth. He claims to ‘*be*’ the truth:

¹ *“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. ²In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ³If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way where I am going.” ⁵Thomas *said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” ⁶Jesus *said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.*

John 14:6 (NASB)

What does Jesus mean? It would seem that He is saying that, ultimately, He Himself is the source of all truth, and the standard by which all things are to be judged as either true or false. There is nobody else, besides Jesus, who so embodies truth as to be entitled to identify Himself as being *the truth*.

It also means that where we do not know what the truth is in some area of life, or don't know what is right or wrong in a complex situation, the answer is to be found in Jesus. We can ask Him, but we can also look at Him and ask ourselves what Jesus would do in that situation.

When Jesus was on trial Pontius Pilate asked Him a very deep question to which Jesus gave no answer. Pilate asked Him *“What is truth?”*

³⁷ *Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” ³⁸ Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again, and told them, “I find no crime in him.*

John 18:37-38 (RSV)

In fact, the answer was standing right in front of Pilate. Jesus Himself is truth. Everything about Him is whole, complete, consistent, and righteous. He is full of integrity and soundness. That is true of Jesus and also of His Word, the Bible.

Given that truth is so important to God, and is the very nature of Jesus, we need to get ourselves into line with Him. Truth and truthfulness must become profoundly important to us as well, even if it makes us the odd one out, and even if it costs us. If we ever think about truth at all, most of us are satisfied with being *'generally honest most of the time'*. We tend to view that as setting the bar high enough. But it isn't.

When it comes to honesty we need to put the bar to the very highest setting. We must not settle for anything less than *100% truthfulness 100% of the time*. Anything less than that is compromise and, therefore, is not 'truth'. You can't have 99% truth. If you do, it is just a lie, the same as 50% truth is a lie. Likewise, if you only tell the truth 99% of the time, then that 1% still makes you a liar. So, those of us who feel satisfied and complacent about the issue of truth need to wake up and reassess this whole subject.

God wants us to be incorruptible and totally honest and reliable as witnesses and judges.

We saw in the previous chapter how the prophet Samuel was a completely honest Judge. Nobody in Israel could point to even one corrupt thing that he had ever done. What a testimony! That should be our standard. Most of us will never be judges, but we will probably be witnesses, at some point, whether formally or informally. When we are, we must be completely honest and incorruptible, not just 99% so:

¹⁹You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality; and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. ²⁰Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land which the LORD your God gives you.
Deuteronomy 16:19-20 (RSV)

To *take a bribe* does not only mean to do so literally, i.e. to receive money corruptly as a judge or police officer. Any of us can also face the temptation to take a metaphorical bribe by agreeing to help someone who needs us to tell a 'small lie' for them, or to fiddle something for them, in return for some past or future favour. That is just as much a bribe as if money had changed hands. It has caused us to act corruptly.

The problems caused by deception and lies

I have been a police officer, and then I was a solicitor and businessman for many years after that. If I had to say in one word what is the greatest single cause of difficulty within the workplace, I would say it is dishonesty. I mean that in its broadest sense, not just in what we *say*, but in what we *do* and what we *are*. In Great Britain it has now become normal to be dishonest. Things which would have been considered shocking even 20 years ago, let alone 100 years ago, are now commonplace.

The MPs expenses scandal in the House of Commons some time ago, and which is still ongoing, is a prime example. An alarming number of our politicians (not all) were milking the system for all they could get, regardless of right and wrong. The concept of truth probably never entered into the minds of many of those MPs.

They were acting as if there was no God and no day of judgment. They were doing things which would not have been done by the MPs of the 1980s, and certainly not by the politicians of the 1930s or the 1880s. There has been a collapse of integrity amongst the majority of our nation. Genuine honesty is now so rare that the dishonesty of the wider population is accurately reflected in the MPs who represent us.

They are like a mirror, reflecting back at us what we are like ourselves. The public felt a lot of anger when the expenses scandal broke in 2010. However, the reality is that the majority of the British people would have stolen the same, or more, than their MPs did, if they had been in their position.

The effect of this exponential increase in dishonesty in the Western nations is that there is now no basis for trust. In the past many business deals were done on the basis of a handshake. There was no serious expectation of either party failing to keep their promises. Now that would be wholly unrealistic. Any business which enters contracts anticipates that other people may well break those agreements.

Therefore provisions are made in many contracts to specify in advance what has to be paid if the contract is broken. That said, many people would have no intention of abiding by that provision even when they sign up to it. They would only pay those damages if they could be tracked down and forced to do so. They would not feel honour-bound to pay, in the absence of coercion. I can say that with some authority because I spent many years in commercial litigation and have seen at firsthand how dishonestly people behave.

Even the very word '*honour*' now seems outdated and quaint in our culture. It is rarely ever used. It is a concept which was widely understood 100 years ago, or even 50 years ago. It was taken seriously then, not only by businessmen, but by husbands and wives, neighbours, politicians, soldiers, doctors, teachers, lawyers, journalists and so on. That is not the case anymore, at least not for the vast majority of us.

I have an unusual vantage point from which to view what is going on in the world. I have not only got my own experiences to go by, but also those of my staff and of the clients that we acted for. I have observed that people at all levels now seem able to lie effortlessly and without any embarrassment, guilt or anxiety. I have had school teachers lie to me and also lawyers, policemen, medical staff and business people. I have had my own staff, even solicitors, look me straight in the eye and lie to my face. Then, when exposed or challenged, they feel no shame, only resentment at being caught out and thwarted.

When I was a policeman in the 1980s I was shown how to interview witnesses and suspects. I was taught to look at their faces closely as I questioned them and to watch their eyes in particular. When a person told a lie they would feel uncomfortable about it. They would then look away from me, even if only for a split second, at the exact point when the lie was being told. That way you could usually tell quite accurately where the lies were in the story.

That technique still works up to a point, but it is less effective today. It relies on the person having at least some residue of a functioning conscience to make them feel awkward when they lie. But as people's consciences have got weaker, or been entirely switched off, that discomfort factor has been diminishing. Therefore that technique works less effectively today.

I also remember a Solicitor colleague in a previous law firm who said to me one day, quite openly, that if ever her "*own neck was on the line*" she would definitely lie to save herself. I looked surprised and said "*Surely not!*" She replied "*Of course I would, if my neck was on the line.*" It was said as if it was obviously the only practical approach. She thought I was odd for being surprised.

But what she said isn't right. Telling lies is wrong and will always cause harm, especially to ourselves. Whenever we lie to try to save our own skin we anger God, which will bring Him into opposition to us. In the short term we might get ourselves out of some tight corner by lying, but if we do that, we are sure to arouse God's opposition. We may even bring His curse upon ourselves, such that we end up with far bigger problems later:

³²*For the devious are an abomination to the LORD;
but He is intimate with the upright.*

³³*The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked,
but He blesses the dwelling of the righteous.*

Proverbs 3:32-33 (NASB)

In the book of Zechariah we are actually told of a specific curse that God Himself deliberately sends out and which attaches to every person who steals or lies. This curse then causes that person to be cut off and to be punished and suffer loss:

³ *Then he said to me, "This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land; for everyone who steals shall be cut off henceforth according to it, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cut off henceforth according to it. ⁴ I will send it forth, says the Lord of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of him who swears falsely by my name; and it shall abide in his house and consume it, both timber and stones."*

Zechariah 5:3-4 (RSV)

The choice between having God's help, or provoking His opposition, is no small thing. How can it make sense to tell a lie for some short term gain or advantage but put ourselves on an inevitable collision course with God Himself? It would be much better to lose out financially, or miss out on a promotion, than to make God into your opponent. Remember also that any lie you tell today will be raised with you by Jesus at the Judgment Seat. Moreover, there is good reason to think that it will be exposed *publicly*. (See Book Four in this series, concerning The Judgment Seat of Christ)

Our hearts and consciences become hard and leathery once we start to tell lies, such that it gets easier and easier, until it becomes habitual

Once a person begins to lie, they will do it again in bigger ways, and with increasing frequency. Then lying gets easier, in the following ways:

- a) Our conscience is slowly turned down in volume, until it is eventually switched off completely. This is how one gets a hard heart, or a *seared conscience*. It no longer receives any 'signal' from God about what is right or wrong. When that point comes we are in great danger because our conscience, which is a God-given safety device, has been switched off.
- b) We get more imaginative in the lies we tell. They become more elaborate and extensive.
- c) We feel more comfortable and less convicted about our sinfulness. Our 'carbon monoxide detectors' are switched off. In the end we become so deeply comatose that we become oblivious to our dishonesty.
- d) This hard-heartedness can also affect those who purport to be Christians. It is easy to convince oneself that all is well, no matter how great our sins may be. I am reminded of a man in a church in Northern Ireland who was a dentist. He had murdered his first wife 20 years earlier and got away with it. He subsequently remarried another woman. She was a Christian and knew nothing of his crime. For 20 years he attended church, while continuing to hide his crime. He had no repentance at all and no concept of God's impending judgment for what he had done. How many of us who purport to be Christians have similarly hard and unrepentant hearts, even if our sins are less spectacular?

The more a person lies, the more they lose their sense of shame and become brass-faced about it

For an honest person, one of the most shameful and humiliating things imaginable would be to be caught out in telling a lie. Even the thought of doing that and being found out and exposed makes me squirm. But that is not how habitual liars see it. It would therefore be highly naive of you to imagine that they would feel any shame at being caught lying. They don't.

All they feel is anger at being thwarted or confronted. They feel no shame at what they have done. That has been my consistent experience with every liar I have ever come across, in any context, whether they were strangers, work colleagues, church members, or even church leaders.

Far from feeling ashamed, a liar feels aggrieved when he is exposed. He acts as if some wrong has been done to him. I was once involved on the sidelines of a dispute between two couples, watching what was happening and hearing what each side said. The first couple, who were Christians, were consistently telling the truth. But the second couple, who were non-Christians, were lying over and over again.

At one point the second couple told a clear lie in a letter they wrote. The first couple pointed out the lie to them and even referred to a specific entry by them on Facebook which proved they were lying. However, the second couple just replied brazenly: "*So you've been snooping then*". The point was that they:

- a) weren't ashamed, or even embarrassed, at being shown to be lying
- b) spoke as if they had done nothing wrong (in lying)
- c) made no apology and felt no remorse.

- d) even portrayed themselves as having been wronged. They had the nerve to speak as if it was the first couple who were behaving badly, i.e. by checking up on things on Facebook, not they themselves who were acting wrongly by lying.

I can think of another occasion some years ago when I was in a private meeting with the leader of a church that I used to be in. I was the Chairman of the Trustees of that church and was confronting the leader about his improper behaviour, in particular his dishonesty. We were meeting in the presence of two witnesses from the Trustees of the same church, i.e. mature Christians. They had agreed to hear each of us and to try to mediate. The leader lied repeatedly and brazenly throughout the meeting. I was astonished at hearing him lie, right in front of me. He did it with such a calm face, while looking the two witnesses straight in the eyes.

After the meeting was over, the witnesses went home, with no solution having been found. The leader then turned to me and said in a relaxed tone: "*Can't you just let me off the hook?*" By that he meant that he wanted me to stop holding him accountable and to stop pointing out where he was lying. I said "*Why did you lie to them?*" because I was amazed that he had felt able to do it. I was very naive then and had never previously experienced such blatant dishonesty from a church leader. It would not amaze me today. However, there was not even a flicker of shame or remorse on his face. He just replied: "*We'll I've got to defend myself*".

He spoke as if he had every right to do whatever was needed to cover his tracks. It was an education for me as to how dishonest people can be, even in churches. Above all, it showed how shameless they can be about it. You have to grasp that last point or you will be misled by people's expressions, i.e. the fact that their faces show no trace of embarrassment. You must not allow yourself to be thrown off course by that.

So, don't allow the absence of shame in a person's face or voice to deceive you into thinking that they must therefore be telling the truth. That doesn't follow at all. It is actually quite normal for an habitual liar to be unashamed when caught lying. Jeremiah spoke of this phenomenon:

***O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth?
You have struck them down,
but they felt no anguish;
you have consumed them,
but they refused to take correction.
They have made their faces harder than rock;
they have refused to repent.***

Jeremiah 5:3 (ESV)

***Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?
No, they were not at all ashamed;
they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,"
says the LORD.***

Jeremiah 6:15 (ESV)

Each of the people that I have referred to above, the non-Christian couple and the church leader, had the same feature. They were all willing to tell whatever lies they needed to tell in order to suit their own purposes and to protect themselves. Their approach was entirely amoral. Right and wrong did not even come into it, and certainly didn't matter to any of them. That is why they could be so bold and defiant.

The other key feature is that none of them had any sense of impending judgment. That might be understandable in the case of the non-Christian couple. But it was equally the case with the church

leader. He had no fear of God whatsoever. The idea of facing God in judgment one day, whether at the Judgment Seat of Christ (for believers) or at the Great White Throne (for unbelievers) did not matter to him at all.

It made me shudder to think of what judgment lay ahead for him. I actually felt the fear of God on his behalf, and still do, whereas he was immune to it. He had lied so often that it had become normal for him. His heart became progressively hardened until he eventually reached the point where he believed that he would get away with everything, insofar as he was thinking about it at all. He was like the people of Zechariah's day:

¹¹ But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. ¹² They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts.

Zechariah 7:11-12 (ESV)

What is 'the love of the truth'?

The love of the truth is a technical phrase used in the Bible. It refers to having a heart-attitude which values and pursues the truth *for its own sake*, not just because we want to avoid getting into trouble for lying. In the verse below, apostle Paul refers to the love of the truth in the context of explaining why so many people will follow the antichrist when he comes.

They will be deceived by him precisely because "*they did not receive the love of the truth*". The truth does not matter to them enough, or even at all. Thus, in the end, God will allow them to lose the very ability to tell the difference between truth and falsehood at all. Then they will become fully deluded, such that they will even follow someone as wicked and deceitful as the antichrist:

⁸Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; ⁹that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, ¹⁰and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. ¹¹For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, ¹²in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

2 Thessalonians 2:8-12 (NASB)

If we keep on rejecting and despising the truth, there will come a point at which God Himself will respond by deliberately taking away our capacity even to know what is true. The taking away of that faculty will leave us very prone to being deceived. But such deception would still be our own fault, because the very reason we lost the faculty of discernment was that we did not value the truth when we had the chance to see it. That is we had no regard for the truth in the past, while we were still capable of recognising it.

We need to ask God to help us to develop this quality of absolute truthfulness. We need to love the truth very deeply, such that truth really matters to us for its own sake. If that is our approach, we will be protected from countless problems, and from arousing the opposition of God Himself. More importantly, we will be doing what is right.

As well as loving the truth we must also hate falsehood

We don't often think in terms of a Christian hating anything. But there are actually some things that we have a duty to *hate*. One of those is falsehood. Most of us are far too laid back and casual about this. We might say that we regard falsehood and falseness as wrong. But many of us don't feel very

strongly about it. It doesn't bother us very much and we don't feel motivated to do anything about stopping it. But we should be bothered and it should concern us very strongly indeed. In fact, like the Psalmist, we should hate it

***I hate and abhor falsehood,
but I love thy law.
Psalm 119:163 (RSV)***

We are supposed to hate all falsehood, wherever we come across it. We are to hate lies, deviousness and manipulation. We are especially to hate the compromising and misrepresenting of God's Word, the Bible and also dishonest preaching. But above all, we are to hate falsehood when we see it in *ourselves*.

All of us have hearts which lie. We even lie to ourselves. In fact, probably most of the lies we tell are told to ourselves. Therefore we are to hate all kinds of falsehood, deceit, evasiveness, insincerity, manipulation and hypocrisy. We need to confront it zealously, especially within ourselves, and to expose it all and root it out without compromise. And we must not be too easily satisfied that we have completed the job.

We must be entirely without guile, as Nathanael was

One of my heroes in the Bible, whom I would most wish to be like, is Nathanael. We rarely hear of him. But he was singled out by Jesus who especially commented on Nathanael's lack of *guile*. Evidently, Jesus considered that absence of guile to be remarkable, presumably because it is so rare:

⁴³ *The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. And he found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."*
⁴⁴ *Now Philip was from Beth-sa'ida, the city of Andrew and Peter.* ⁴⁵ *Philip found Nathan'a-el, and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."* ⁴⁶ *Nathan'a-el said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ *Jesus saw Nathan'a-el coming to him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile*

John 1:43-47 (RSV)

In saying that there was no guile in Nathanael Jesus meant that he was entirely without pretence or hypocrisy. There was '*no side to him*', as the saying goes. Nathanael was the type of man who really meant what he said and said what he meant. He did not have hidden agendas or ulterior purposes. If he wanted something he would openly and honestly say what he wanted and why. He would not trick or manipulate people. Neither would he use anybody.

Above all, being without guile means that we are ruthlessly honest *with ourselves and about ourselves*. A guileless person, when he reads about certain sins or faults in the Bible, or hears them spoken of in a sermon, readily accepts that those sins are to be found in himself. And he knows that the main reason those sins are mentioned at all is to enable us to see the same sins in ourselves. He then directs his mind to himself and the way in which he exhibits those sins. He does not assume that he is without those sins and that they are only to be found in others.

Guileless people are sincere and genuine and have a quality of innocence about them. They are tender rather than hardened and the truth really matters to them. The following two references in the psalms refer to this kind of person:

³ *Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?
And who may stand in His holy place?*
⁴ *He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
Who has not lifted up his soul¹ to falsehood*

And has not sworn deceitfully.

*⁵ He shall receive a blessing from the LORD
And righteousness from the God of his salvation.
Psalm 24:3-5 (NASB)*

*How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit!*

Psalm 32:2 (NASB)

Another example of a guileless person is Nicodemus

Look now at this lengthy passage from John's gospel where Jesus has a detailed conversation with another man called *Nicodemus*. He too was very transparent and honest, as Nathanael was. Note the sincere, almost child-like, questions which Nicodemus asks Jesus. He does so despite the fact that he was a prominent man in Israel and a highly educated teacher of the Law of Moses.

His earnestness and unpretentiousness come across very clearly in the simplicity of his questions. He evidently had the love of the truth. He was not trying to justify himself or to impress anybody with his own knowledge or sophistication. He just wanted to understand Jesus better and had no other agenda.

It is probably because he was so sincere that Jesus did Nicodemus the honour of giving him such a lengthy and detailed answer. It contrasted starkly with the short answers, or non-answers, that He gave to many of the other Scribes and Pharisees. Indeed, the most famous passage in the whole Bible, the one which contains John 3:16, was said directly to Nicodemus in answer to his earnest and childlike question. For many years I had not realised that John 3:16 was a direct statement made by Jesus Himself. I had somehow assumed it was apostle John speaking about Jesus. But it is actually Jesus Himself who says it. He is speaking to Nicodemus about Himself.

At any rate, the point is that Jesus gave a very long and detailed answer to Nicodemus, which runs to 16 verses, *because* He could see that Nicodemus was a sincere man who *really wanted to know the truth*. Therefore Jesus took the time to give him a complete answer. Jesus was clearly impressed by the humility of Nicodemus and his love of the truth. Therefore he opened up to him. Yet Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Indeed, he was a very senior Pharisee. Some say that he was the most senior teacher of the Law of Moses in all Israel.

The fact that a Pharisee could be a good and honest man might come as a surprise to some. Many of us tend to assume that all of the Scribes and Pharisees were proud and hard hearted, always trying to catch Jesus out rather than to learn from him. That is not the case. Many of them followed Him, as did Nicodemus. Here is the account of his conversation with Jesus:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicode'mus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicode'mus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ Nicode'mus said to him, "How can this be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and

bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.

John 3:1-21 (RSV)

The way Jesus answered questions from His critics and enemies was very different from how He answered Nicodemus. Most of the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees were hostile to Him. When they asked questions it was not to find an answer or to learn the truth. Truth was not on their agenda. Their aim was to justify their own existing opinions and to discredit Jesus. They did not care about finding out *whether* He was telling the truth, or whether they were mistaken. They were determined to maintain their own opinions, *regardless of whether they were right or wrong.*

Indeed, many of the religious leaders were well aware that Jesus really was the Messiah. They knew it because they had seen and verified His miracles. That was the very reason why they were following Him around, i.e. to check up on Him and find out if His miracles were genuine. But some of them weren't willing to admit any of that to Him or to the people, or even to themselves. They hated Him even though they already knew He was the Messiah. They didn't like what he was saying, *even if it was true*, and they weren't willing to change.

To proud, hard-hearted people such as them, Jesus choose not to go into detail or to give full answers. He would often say things to the crowds standing alongside so as to rebut or condemn the things said by His critics and enemies. But at such times He was really speaking to the crowd, not to the Scribes and Pharisees themselves.

When His enemies and critics asked Him questions Jesus frequently chose not to explain Himself or to elaborate on what He was doing. He tended to give them short answers. He would often just turn to the crowds instead and tell them what was wrong with the Scribes and Pharisees who were standing next to Him. Let's look at a few examples of how Jesus gave them short, abrupt answers, or rebuked them, or even gave no answers at all. It was evidently not an uncommon occurrence:

¹One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up ²and said to him, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.” ³He answered them, “I also will ask you a question; now tell me, ⁴Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?” ⁵And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ ⁶But if we say, ‘From men,’ all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.” ⁷So they answered that they did not know whence it was. ⁸And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Luke 20:1-8 (RSV)

They said to him therefore, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also.”

John 8:19 (RSV)

³⁷ While he was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him; so he went in and sat at table. ³⁸ The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. ³⁹ And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But give for alms those things which are within; and behold, everything is clean for you.

⁴² "But woe to you Pharisees! for you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ⁴³ Woe to you Pharisees! for you love the best seat in the synagogues and salutations in the market places. ⁴⁴ Woe to you! for you are like graves which are not seen, and men walk over them without knowing it."

Luke 11:37-44 (RSV)

In the meantime, when so many thousands of the multitude had gathered together that they trod upon one another, he began to say to his disciples first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

Luke 12:1 (RSV)

¹⁰ "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon,[a] who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." ¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they scoffed at him. ¹⁵ But he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts; for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Luke 16:10-15 (RSV)

Note the stark contrast between Jesus' detailed response to Nicodemus in John chapter 3 and the way He gave short, sharp answers, or even rebukes, to some of the other Pharisees. God gives revelation, and understanding to those who have the love of the truth but not to people who don't. That is because they don't care about finding out what is true and what is false.

Compare the attitude of Nicodemus with that of some of his fellow Pharisees, as shown in this next passage. His colleagues are criticising Jesus and rejecting His message. By contrast, Nicodemus speaks up publicly in defence of Jesus, right in front of his fellow Pharisees:

³⁷ On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

⁴⁰ When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." ⁴¹ Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? ⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" ⁴³ So there was a division among the people over him. ⁴⁴ Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

⁴⁵ The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" ⁴⁶ The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" ⁴⁷ The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? ⁴⁸ Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹ But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." ⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ⁵¹ "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" ⁵² They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

John 7:37-52 (ESV)

Another good example of a guileless person who had no pretentiousness and was open to the truth was the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus meets her in John chapter four. She was not a Jew and she had a lot of sin in her life, as we all do. Yet she had something of that same quality of sincerity, openness and guilelessness that we saw above in Nathanael and Nicodemus. Look at the conversation between her and Jesus when they met at the well.

Note how open and childlike she was and how she took no offence at Jesus, even when He told her frankly of some of the sins in her life. She recognized Him as being a prophet and was wide open to receive information from Him. Therefore Jesus was equally open with her, so much so that He even told her plainly that He was the Messiah. It was a remarkably clear statement, which He made to very few other people, or at least not so directly:

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), ³ he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. ⁴ And he had to pass through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

John 4:1-26 (ESV)

Moreover, because of the Samaritan woman's openness and willingness to be told the truth, and to respond to it, many more people came to believe. She went out of her way to tell them:

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" ²⁸ So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" ³⁰ They went out of the town and were coming to him.

John 4:27-30 (ESV)

³⁹ *Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did."* ⁴⁰ *So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.* ⁴¹ *And many more believed because of his word.* ⁴² *They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."*

John 4:39-42 (ESV)

What is the difference between guile and shrewdness?

We have looked at what it is to be *without guile* or to be *guileless*. What then is the sin of *guile* and how does it differ from *shrewdness*, which is a good quality? To be shrewd does not require a person to be cunning, devious, crafty or manipulative. Far from it.

A shrewd person is one who can correctly discern the character, intentions and motives of other people. A shrewd person is therefore harder to deceive. He does not overlook, or fail to appreciate, facts or events. He sees what is really going on and what people are doing and he weighs them up quickly and accurately.

But none of that is sin. None of it requires the shrewd person to have any guile. A person who operates with guile will feel free to trick, manipulate, deceive and exploit other people. He says one thing and means another. He hides his real intentions. He takes advantage of other people's ignorance or lack of discernment. He is insincere and crafty and he uses people.

Therefore guile and shrewdness are very different things and are manifested by very different types of person. We should want very much to be shrewd, *but not to use any guile in achieving that shrewdness*. The ability to see the deceit and falseness in others does not require us to display those same sinful characteristics ourselves.

We must be totally honest with ourselves when we read the Bible

Many people read the Bible in a superficial way, not really taking it seriously and not being honest with themselves about what it says. That is why most of us can read the Bible, or hear it read or being preached on, and yet be unmoved by it. It's as if we assume that when it's being critical, or speaking about sin, it obviously must be referring to someone else, not us. Or, we just filter it out completely, so that it does not even register.

A dishonest person will make that assumption quite easily. They will not be convicted, even when their own sins or character traits are very clearly what is being spoken about. If we are like that then we are just like the people of Ezekiel's day. They had the prophet Ezekiel in their midst but found it very easy to ignore, and disobey, what God was saying to them through him.

³⁰ *"As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes forth from the LORD.'* ³¹ *And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with their lips they show much love, but their heart is set on their gain.* ³² *And, lo, you are to them like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.* ³³ *When this comes--and come it will! --then they will know that a prophet has been among them."*

Ezekiel 33:30-33 (RSV)

Some of us go to church and even read the Bible, but are not honest enough to really hear what God is saying to us through the Bible. We may like liturgy, or tradition, but not hear what God is saying, because we have a heart that is hard and closed off to Him.

Jesus Himself spoke of this when He referred to some of the Pharisees and Scribes. They tend to have a bad name, but many of us are just like they were. We too can be hypocritical, with no love of the truth, and no willingness to be corrected by God, or to respond to His instruction:

⁵And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?" ⁶And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' ⁸You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." ⁹And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!"

Mark 7:5-9 (RSV)

If we want to avoid being hypocrites, as some (not all) of the Pharisees were, then we must develop a rigorous honesty and frankness with ourselves when reading the Bible. We should positively look for God's correction concerning our attitudes and ways. We must have no wish to defend ourselves from the Bible, or to justify or vindicate ourselves. It is far better to be receptive to whatever God has to say to you, even if He wants to correct or rebuke you.

If that is what He is saying to you, it's because you *need to hear it*, as we all do. Thus, we must never be angry or irritated about what the Bible says to us, as many people were when they heard Jesus tell them the truth about themselves:

²⁵But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, ²⁶and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. ²⁹And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. ³⁰But passing through their midst, he went away.

Luke 4:25-30 (ESV)

A really honest person will want to find out the full truth of what the Bible has to say to him about his various sins and faults. He will positively seek for the Bible's constructive criticism. By contrast, a superficial person, who does not have the love of the truth, will avoid anyone or anything which confronts him with the truth about himself or his situation. Instead, he will go looking for preachers and teachers who will flatter him and massage his ego rather than those who will tell him the truth. They did this in Isaiah's day and people still do it today:

***⁹ For they are a rebellious people,
lying children,
children unwilling to hear
the instruction of the LORD;
¹⁰ who say to the seers, "Do not see,"
and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophesy illusions,***

Isaiah 30:9-10 (ESV)

If we have got our doctrine wrong, or have given a false prophecy, we should welcome correction. We must then be willing to alter our opinion or our teaching rather than cling to it stubbornly.

If a person has the love of the truth then, when they realise that they have made a mistake or have got their doctrine or theology wrong, they are pleased to be corrected. They are not proud or stubborn and they don't resent being told that they are wrong. On the contrary, they appreciate the person who has corrected them.

They then willingly alter their view, so as to abandon the wrong opinion or doctrine and adopt the correct one. That is obviously what any sensible person would do. If you are wrong then, surely, it is a good thing to have that error pointed out, so that you can change your view? How could one possibly argue otherwise?

Although that is undoubtedly the right approach, the fact is that most of us do not see it that way. The average person, even in churches, resents being corrected or challenged, even when the correction is entirely valid. Indeed, they resent the correction all the more *because* it is valid. They prefer instead to maintain their existing beliefs, regardless of whether they are right or wrong.

In part that is due to pride. However it is also because that person simply does not have the love of the truth. They would prefer to maintain the *appearance* of having been right rather than change their view so as to *actually become* right. Anyone who acts in that way is more in love with their own ego and reputation than with the truth.

By contrast, consider two characters in the Bible who were very willing to be corrected. They were also prepared to change their view immediately and without any resentment or stubbornness. The first is the prophet Nathan. King David came to him and said he wanted to build a house (a Temple) for the Lord. Nathan instantly gave his own opinion on this point. He told David to go ahead and that God was with him in that proposed idea:

¹Now when David lived in his house, David said to Nathan the prophet, "Behold, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of the covenant of the LORD is under a tent." ²And Nathan said to David, "Do all that is in your heart, for God is with you."

1 Chronicles 17:1-2 (ESV)

However, later that night God spoke to the prophet Nathan and said that He was *not* actually in support of this and that He did not want David to build the Temple. Instead, God wanted one of David's sons to build it:

³But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, ⁴"Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: It is not you who will build me a house to dwell in.

1 Chronicles 17: 3-4 (ESV)

Instead of sulking, taking offense, or feeling embarrassed at having got it wrong, the prophet Nathan immediately went to David. He told him that in fact God did not want him to build the Temple, but wanted his son to do so instead of him:

¹¹When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹²He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever.

1 Chronicles 17:11-12 (ESV)

*In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David
1Chronicles 17:15 (ESV)*

Going back to David in this way can't have been easy for Nathan. He was a famous prophet, probably the most senior prophet in Israel, with direct access to the King. A lesser man than him may have been tempted to keep quiet about what God had said, so as to avoid losing face and appearing foolish.

At the outset he had given his own honest opinion, i.e. that David should build the Temple. He genuinely thought that would be God's will. Later when he had discovered that he was wrong, all Nathan wanted to do was to go straight to David to tell him the truth and to correct things. His own image did not matter to him, or at least it did not matter in comparison to upholding the truth.

Let's consider a second example, this time from the New Testament. This concerns a very able lawyer called Apollos. He had become a follower of Jesus, but at this point in the book of Acts he only knew the baptism of John the Baptist, not Christian baptism. He was a very eloquent, persuasive man, with all the gifts of an evangelist and was enthusiastically telling people what he knew. Then one day he met a Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila. They were mature believers. At any rate, they were more knowledgeable than him. So they corrected Apollos, told him about being baptised in the name of Jesus, and filled in some gaps in his knowledge:

²⁴Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately

Acts 18:24-26 (ESV)

Like Nathan, Apollos did not take offence, or resist the correction. He humbly accepted what he was told. Then that added knowledge enabled him to increase his effectiveness as an evangelist:

²⁷And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, ²⁸for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Acts 18: 27-28 (ESV)

So, Apollos, though probably more educated, and wealthy, than either Priscilla or Aquila, was willing to be corrected by them. He showed no pride or stubbornness. He loved the truth and positively wanted to be put right wherever he was wrong and to have any gaps in his knowledge filled. He was not aiming to impress anybody and therefore he had no fear of being made to appear wrong or to be lacking in any way.

Why should he, or any of us, fear those things? We are all wrong on many occasions and we all have gaps in our knowledge. Therefore we should never be reluctant to have our errors exposed and corrected. But if we are reluctant, then we should just force ourselves to accept correction anyway.

I am also reminded of the eminent Bible teacher, the late Derek Prince. One of the reasons God used him so hugely, in a worldwide ministry, was the very fact that he loved the truth far more than he loved himself or his own reputation. He was a major academic, having won a scholarship to Eton and then to King's College Cambridge. He was also a Fellow of King's College, being qualified to lecture in philosophy and also in Greek. Yet, when he was a young believer, only a few weeks after his conversion, he allowed an old, uneducated, working-class couple in Scarborough, England, to correct him and to tell him about the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, many years later, when he had become an internationally renowned Bible teacher, Derek Prince made a mistake by teaching that all Christians should have a *shepherd*, i.e. a pastor to whom they '*submit*'. This wrong teaching led to what became known as the '*Shepherding Movement*' which quickly became domineering and oppressive.

However, when he realised that what he had been teaching was wrong and harmful, he publicly renounced it and told all his listeners that he had been wrong to teach it. That was in the 1970s and from that point onwards his ministry multiplied and became even larger. I feel that one of the key reasons for his subsequent success is that God was pleased by Derek Prince's humility and love of the truth, which had made him so willing to humble himself and to publicly admit he had been wrong.

Accordingly, we must all decide that the truth is what really matters, not how we appear, or what people think of us. Therefore we need to be willing, and even eager, to be corrected whenever our opinions, or understanding of issues are wrong or incomplete.

The average person automatically believes whatever suits their own interests, regardless of whether it is actually true

A key feature of our fallen human nature is that we are self-centered. That has a very adverse effect on the way we behave. However, it also affects the way we handle information. It distorts the way we see and hear things and deflects us away from truth. Thus, the average person is particularly likely to be deceived about anything which has any bearing on themselves. In short, they will *believe whatever it suits them to believe* i.e. whatever promotes their own interests, regardless of whether it is actually true.

These things are not necessarily done consciously. They are usually done by long-established habit. Few people would go so far as to say any of these things out loud. Nevertheless, the average person will rearrange and reconstitute facts within their own minds, so as to be able to:

- a) believe the best of themselves
- b) see their own actions and motives in the best light
- c) see anything favourable to their own interests as obviously true
- d) see anything unfavourable to their own interests as obviously untrue
- e) see no faults in themselves, but only in others
- f) feel automatically entitled to things, without needing any evidence to justify that entitlement

In other words, most of us find it very easy to believe whatever we *want* to believe and to ignore or reject anything which we *do not want* to believe. In doing this, in either direction, there is no honest or rigorous examination of facts or evidence. It is all done instantly and automatically, without the need to analyse anything at all, and irrespective of whether those things are actually true or not.

In my experience that is pretty much the default-setting of the average person. It is rare for anyone, even in churches, to be different from the above. Therefore, if we are to grow as a disciple we have got to get to grips with this self-centered and self-biased way in which most of us have learned to think. We need to cross examine and challenge ourselves and expose our selfish assumptions whenever they arise. We need to be ruthlessly frank with ourselves and believe things *solely because they are true*, regardless of whether it suits, or does not suit, our purposes for it to be true.

Every lie will one day be exposed at the Great White Throne Judgment for non-Christians

Every non-Christian will, one day, have to face Jesus Christ at the Great White Throne Judgment. Then, every lie they have ever told will be publicly exposed. All things will be put right and made straight. Any lies that a non-Christian has ever told will be publicly exposed and corrected there. Therefore they will be humiliated, quite apart from the eternal punishment that will then follow.

So, an unbeliever may appear to get away with a lie today, but it is inevitable that it will, eventually, be fully exposed. There is no doubt about that, and no escape from it. It would be like telling a lie today, knowing that it will be exposed as a lie next week by the Headmaster at school assembly, in front of all the staff and pupils of the school. Wouldn't it be stupid to tell such a lie today, knowing it will all come out publicly next week?

Why then does it make any difference if the exposure of that lie might be many years in the future? Why should the timescale matter? It will all still be publicly and humiliatingly revealed, whenever it happens. Perhaps you did not realise that before, but you need to realise it now. Let it act as a brake on your tongue. Let the prospect of it keep you from lying as you reflect on the *absolute inevitability of being caught and exposed*.

Even Christians will have to give an account of their lives at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Therefore it is better to ask for God's correction and judgment now, in this life.

It is not just non-Christians who need to be wary of telling lies. Christians will also have to face Jesus Christ one day in judgment. For them it will be at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The lies told by a Christian might not necessarily be publicly exposed, or punished, though my personal opinion is that they will be. But, at the very least, such lies will cause the loss of some, or perhaps even all, of the rewards that we might otherwise have received. (See Book Four for more details).

Given that you know that you will be judged in the end and that the consequences of that judgment will be eternal, it is much wiser to seek for God's judgment here and now. If you are in a dispute with someone and you are unsure whether your own conduct is right or wrong, or whether it is you or they who are acting in accordance with God's will, then positively *ask God to judge between you now*.

You could do as David did when King Saul was hunting him and seeking to kill him:

May the Lord therefore be judge, and give sentence between me and you, and see to it, and plead my cause, and deliver me from your hand.

1 Samuel 24:15 (RSV)

I do not mean that you should ask for God's *punishment* upon yourself. Far from it. What you can and should do is to ask God to intervene and to do the following kinds of things now, in this life, rather than leave it all to be dealt with later at the Judgment Seat of Christ. You can ask Him:

- a) to *expose any wrongdoing* on your own part and make those things very clear for you to see
- b) to *enable others to see your error* or wrongdoing as well and to prompt them to point it out to you
- c) to prevent you from doing any wrong to any other person, i.e. ask God *to stand in your way*
- d) to *intervene and stop you, or redirect you*, if you are handling a situation or person wrongly, unfairly or misguidedly.
- e) to *expose any wrong motives* on your part, even if the things that you are doing are right in themselves
- f) to prevent you from going any further in a particular direction if it is wrong, i.e. *to close doors* so that your way is blocked by Him
- g) to expose anything that you *believe which is actually untrue*, or about which you have been *deceived*

Why not pray to God along all those lines? Positively ask Him to expose your wrong behaviour, wrong attitudes or wrong beliefs, so as to enable you to change here and now. That way, you may feel some embarrassment or awkwardness now, but in the long term, and especially in eternity, you will gain, because you will:

- a) avoid being rebuked (or even punished) for those things at the Judgment Seat of Christ
- b) become eligible, instead, to be rewarded for what you go on to do from now on.

You have to make a clear decision to cut out all lies, without exception or compromise and then keep watch over your heart

I have come to the conclusion that the only way for a person to change the habit of a life time and stop being a liar is to come off it "cold turkey". Lying has to be stopped *100% and overnight*. Lies are something that we learn to rely on and which we get used to. Therefore, they seem natural. There is no safe level, or acceptable number, of lies that can be continued with after we become a Christian. They *all* have to go, however small they may seem to you. You have to declare to yourself "*No more lies, whatsoever, to anybody, any time*". And you need to mean it, because if you say that, you will certainly be tested on it:

*²³Watch over your heart with all diligence,
for from it flow the springs of life.*

*²⁴Put away from you a deceitful mouth
and put devious speech far from you.*

*²⁵Let your eyes look directly ahead and
let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.*

Proverbs 4:23-25 (NASB)

Why not do as Job did? Make a promise to yourself that you will not tell any lies at all to anybody. This is how Job put it:

*as long as my breath is in me,
and the spirit of God is in my nostrils;*

*⁴my lips will not speak falsehood,
and my tongue will not utter deceit.*

Job 27:3-4 (RSV)

Go further and do as King David did. He resolved to walk with integrity of heart and not to set before his eyes anything that is base. He said that second point because we can easily be tempted into sin as a result of what we see. This is very true of men, so many of whom have a problem with pornography. Therefore resolve not to look at it. Better still, set your computer to block it, as when it is set for a child:

*"... I will walk with integrity of heart
within my house;*

*I will not set before my eyes
anything that is base...."*

Psalm 101:2(b)-3(a) (RSV)

You have responsibility for the condition of your own heart. "*It is your most important stewardship*", as the Bible teacher, Chuck Missler, often says. What he means is that if you can guard and preserve your own integrity, and remain honest in all things at all times, then all other areas of your life will go well. If you don't take that stewardship of your own heart seriously enough, then the rest of your life

will end up in a mess. It has to be all or nothing. You must decide to cut out all lies, no matter what the circumstances and no matter what the cost.

You also need to ask for God's help to achieve this new lifestyle of truthfulness and to deal with the repercussions which it will inevitably produce. Ask Him to help you. Also ask Him to expose, and remove from your life, anything that would tempt you to lie. That is how seriously you need to take this:

*⁷Two things I asked of You,
Do not refuse me before I die:
⁸Keep deception and lies far from me,
Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is my portion,
⁹That I not be full and deny You and say,
"Who is the LORD?"
Or that I not be in want and steal,
And profane the name of my God.
Proverbs 30:7-9 (NASB)*

It would be far better to stay poor if becoming rich caused or required us to become a liar, either in getting the riches, or in keeping them. If that fact doesn't seem real to you and the awfulness of dishonesty still doesn't resonate with you, then ask God to change your heart attitude. Ask Him to give you His attitude to truth and to enable you to value it as He does, so that you become a modern day 'Nathanael'.

God promises to grant us anything we ask for, provided it is in accordance with His will. Therefore if there is one prayer you can be sure He will be delighted to answer, it is a heart-felt prayer to help you to become an entirely honest person and to give you the love of the truth. He will not refuse that request, if you really mean it, because it is undoubtedly His will for you to become such a person.

Having said that, neither will He do it all for you. If it is up to you to decide that you want the love of the truth and to be determined to choose truth over lies every time. God will not do that for you, but He will help you to change, if you really want Him to.

Then turn that decision to be truthful into an ingrained habit, so it becomes instinctive, without needing to think

Having made a genuine decision to eliminate all lying, no matter how small or seemingly justified it may be, you then have to take steps to turn that decision into an ingrained habit. That means sticking at it for a long enough period of time to enable you to adjust. It also means praying for God to give you the love of the truth. As soon as you make that your aim, you will find that you have to make a stand on all sorts of small issues, day after day.

Eventually, the habit of truthfulness will be solidly formed in you. It then becomes automatic and instinctive for you to come out with the truth when under sudden pressure, rather than tell a lie. Your reflexes will be changed, so that truth becomes your default-setting. All of that is possible, if you really want it. Any Christian can become totally honest *if they truly want to be*. The sad reality though, is that very few people do want to be. Few even consider this issue at all, let alone resolve to change their ways.

Succeeding in the future at the Day of Judgment matters much more than succeeding today.

Every lie will have to be accounted for, whichever judgment we go to. That is the one day of your life that matters more than any other. How a Christian is assessed at the Judgment Seat of Christ is the

ultimate priority, after salvation itself. That assessment and its consequences are eternal. What could possibly be above that? Therefore resolve never to allow the habit of dishonesty to tarnish the assessment that Jesus makes of your life. (See Book Four in this series which deals with the Judgment Seat of Christ)

Being truthful means swimming against the tide and refusing to compromise

If you seriously set out to become totally honest from now on then it will frequently mean swimming against the tide. You will stand out from the crowd and your honesty will not be liked or appreciated by everybody. That is putting it mildly. Many will actually hate and despise what you're seeking to do. It will lead you into all sorts of conflict, trouble and costly choices.

Telling the truth all the time is not easy, and it never will be easy, until after Jesus returns. Until then, you will usually be the odd one out, not only at work, or school, or among your neighbours. You will even be the odd one out among many Christians, and even among some church leaders. That is how rare real truthfulness is. It is rare even within the church, where deception, and especially self-deception, are now commonplace.

Peer pressure is real and very powerful, both outside, in the world, and also inside the church. There is a strong pressure on all of us to fit in and not to rock the boat by objecting to things that those around us have decided are good. However, if you follow your conscience, or if you stand up for what the Bible says, then you will find that you regularly end up as the odd one out. It is inevitable, because the majority of people, even within churches (in the West) are not following either the Bible, or their consciences, but the standards of the world. (See Book seven)

You will find yourself in positions where you believe a certain thing is wrong. But all of the people around you, including leaders in the church, may agree unanimously that it's right, or at least that is 'acceptable' or 'can be justified'. However, you must always follow your conscience rather than following the crowd, even if it means that you stand alone:

“Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd,

Exodus 23:2 (NIV)

Such situations are very difficult and painful to deal with and they can also be costly to you. But you still need to brace yourself and insist on listening to your conscience and on following God's Word, even if that puts you out on a limb as the only person who thinks as you do. That is very hard to handle, but the alternative is far worse. That is to fit in with current orthodoxy and to go along with whatever those around you are saying or doing.

The problem with just following the crowd and fitting in with the world's standards is that you will then end up disobeying, or even opposing, God, simply to win the approval and acceptance of those around you. That is a tragically foolish bargain. Therefore, never be willing to call evil things good or good things evil. Always insist on staying true to what the Bible says. Also always obey what your conscience says about how to apply the Bible in practice:

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

Isaiah 5: 20 (RSV)

Truthfulness will inevitably make you unpopular with some people

Refusing to tell lies can make you very unpopular. I vividly remember my first day on patrol as a police constable in November 1983. I was put with my designated 'tutor constable', whose task was to teach me the practicalities of how to do the job. He had to accompany me all the time for my first 10 weeks in the police. As we sat in the police car he said to me at the start of my first day: *"Let's get one thing straight - whatever I write in my pocket book, that's what you will write in yours."*

I knew immediately what he meant, and that I needed to take a firm stand, there and then. Basically, he was saying that no matter what I saw or heard, my evidence would have to be whatever he said it was. He was insisting that I did not contradict him or write anything different. I replied, as politely and deferentially as I could, that I would be happy to be guided by him as to how to write up my evidence, *so long as it was all true.*

When he heard that last point he became furious. He went back to the police station at lunch time and began to spread the news to the entire station, of over 100 officers, that I was a menace and that I was not safe to be with! He told people that I could get them into trouble because I would just write down whatever I saw and heard. He believed I could even get people the sack, for revealing that they were doing wrong, breaking rules, or telling lies.

A large proportion of the station then 'sent me to Coventry', or it seemed so to me. Very few people spoke to me for months and most were wary of going on patrol with me. It was a very painful time indeed. It's one thing to look back on it all now, but it was agonising at the time, especially as I was so young and inexperienced. But I'm not sure what else I could have done. I had to make a stand, or my integrity would have been compromised.

If I had buckled to the pressure I would soon have ended up writing something false in my pocket book. And it wouldn't have ended there. I would then have had to copy that false evidence from my pocket book into witness statements and reports for senior officers to look at. I would then have had to sign those to certify they were true. I just couldn't have done it, and I knew that.

Even worse, I would, eventually, have ended up in a Court, having to testify on oath, in front of Judges, Magistrates and juries, that what I had written in my statement and my pocket book was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I would then have had to stick to that false or incomplete story and look the judge and jury in the eye when cross examined about it. I knew I just wouldn't be able to go through with any of that, even if I had wanted to.

I would never have had a single night's sleep during my years in the police if I'd allowed myself to be compromised in those ways. Also, my personal witness as a Christian would have been ruined. How could I ever look another officer in the eye and tell him what the Christian gospel is if both he and I knew that I was a liar? My testimony as a Christian would have become worthless. That was how I saw it, and I think I was right to see it that way.

Though He allowed me to suffer for a while, God later honoured me for the stand that I took. He also had pity on my sad plight and solved it all for me. Four months later the Coal Miners' strike began, in March 1984. I suddenly found that I was sent out in carrier vans, every day, for very long shifts on the miners' picket lines. I had to spend 10 or 12 hours a day with 6-12 other officers cooped up in a van.

And, because we were doing a lot of overtime, I got to spend sustained periods of time with officers from other shifts too, i.e. the ones who had heard bad reports about me, but had never really met me. It put an end to my enforced isolation. They were all forced to get to know me and, as they did, their wariness of me diminished and then disappeared. In the end, I was fully accepted by all of them. However, I had to suffer for four months beforehand, due to the stand I had taken.

Another much smaller problem came up a year or so later, when a group of us were sent in a carrier van to police a football match. We got back from it at a certain time, say 6.30pm. However, the Sergeant told us all to write in our pocket books that we had got back later, at about 7.00pm, so as to claim an extra 30 minutes worth of overtime. That would have been OK if we could have openly said that we actually got back at 6.30pm, but that we were being awarded that extra time as a bonus. I'd have been happy to do that, provided it could be done legitimately and openly. But, that was not what the Sergeant meant.

So I announced, in front of the whole carrier van of police officers, that I was going to write down that I had got back at 6.30pm. That meant they all had to do the same, even the sergeant. They had no choice. They all therefore lost the extra 30 minutes overtime pay. As you might imagine, that went down badly, but nothing like as badly as the first time I took a principled stand. They must have been getting used to me by then, because nothing came of it.

I found after that that I had fewer problems. I suspect that, in part, that was because some officers modified their behaviour whenever they were with me. Therefore, there was nothing improper for me to see or write about. All our evidence was true. That, in itself, shows something important. The clear and resolute stand that I took saved me, in the end, from witnessing all sorts of wrong things that would otherwise have happened in front of me. It modified other officers' conduct. So, it worked to my advantage and, I believe, to the advantage of the police force and the public.

It is more important to have a good name than to be successful or rich

It is more important to preserve our good name and reputation than to be rich or successful. However, how many of us actually believe that? It cannot be very many, or we would not behave as we do. Yet the Bible says that it is true:

*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favour is better than silver or gold.*

Proverbs 22:1 (RSV)

Note that it says that a good name is to be "*chosen*" rather than great riches. That is because it frequently is a choice. We may find that the opportunity arises for us to have one, or the other, but not both, and we need to choose between them. Don't be confused by the reference to 'great riches'. It is not only talking about the very wealthy. When it comes to wealth, all figures are relative. Therefore we all face this dilemma, however much, or little, money we may have.

It may be that for a particular man, even a few pounds would be enough 'riches' to entice him to choose to surrender his good name. If he does so then he is a fool, and well on the way to becoming wicked. For one thing, wealth obtained by dishonest means will not last. It will evaporate away later and will also lead us into other problems and traps:

*A fortune made by a lying tongue
is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare.*

Proverbs 21:6 (NIV)

When the Bible speaks of having a 'good name' and of receiving 'favour', as we saw above, it does not only mean the opinions of other people. Their views do come into it, and they do matter, primarily in terms of whether or not you are a good witness or ambassador for Christianity. That's the main thing that matters when it comes to what people think of you. People could choose either to believe the gospel, or to reject it, based on what they think of you. So your reputation really does matter, if only for that reason alone.

However, what the verse is really talking about is *God's view of you*. The crucial question is whether He is pleased, or displeased, by your life and by the choices you make. What could matter more than that? How could any purely temporary financial gain (for a maximum of about 70 years) be worth losing your eternal life? Even if you didn't lose that, how could it be worth losing your eternal reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ?

How much does having a good name matter to you? If you are a Christian then it ought to matter a lot. The people around you, at work and elsewhere, are very observant and discerning. They will notice if your life doesn't match up to what you say you believe. If there's a mismatch, you will have no credibility from then on in sharing the gospel with anybody. Moreover, your reputation is the key to your promotion prospects, not only at your place of work, but in every context, including your service for God. You therefore need to guard your good name and never do anything to jeopardise it.

Whenever we are tempted to dishonesty, we need to pause and think of our reputation and what the proposed lie might do to it. The people around you will notice, and remember, any lie you ever tell and they won't allow you to forget it. That is true even where they themselves are much bigger liars than us. Their hypocrisy is irrelevant, because they are not claiming to be a Christian. If you are claiming to be one, then they will judge you by a very different standard than they apply to themselves. But that is fair enough. They have a valid point. Why should they take your faith seriously if you don't take it seriously yourself, such that you are willing to do the same things as they do?

Lies are natural to the Devil and to demons. They lie all the time

Lying comes naturally to us. It flows out of our sinful flesh nature. It also comes naturally to Satan and to his demons. They are compulsive liars and lie continuously. Even if a demon says something which contains some true facts, there will always be a false twist to it, which renders it false overall. Therefore, whenever we lie we are following the example of the Devil and his demons. We are showing that the Devil is our real father:

44''You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

John 8:44 (NASB)

Lies are a demon's main weapon

See Books Seven and Nine for more details on how demons use lies as a device to control and manipulate us. They use lies on a daily basis to get us to believe what *they* say, instead of believing the truth. Believing those lies causes a huge amount of disruption and damage in our lives. In addition to lying to us, the demons also want to get us to lie to other people. They will tempt and lure you into becoming a liar and to make it habitual.

Our flesh nature is deceitful enough already, but the added influence of a demon whispering into our ear can lead to us going further than we would ever have gone by ourselves. The tendency to lie, especially where it has become habitual or addictive, is a strong sign of demonic involvement in your life.

Why do the demons want us to lie?

There are many reasons why a demon wants to get you to lie, and why they put so much effort into getting you to do it. Firstly, if they can get you to become a liar, then it brings God's curse upon you, as we saw earlier, in Zechariah chapter five.

That then turns God Himself into your opponent. That suits the demon very well. It means they can get God to oppose you in ways that they are not capable of themselves. Therefore, merely by luring you into lying, they can bring about serious damage in your life and in your walk with God. They also want us to lie because of the havoc that it causes in our marriage, relationships, career and church and because it ruins our credibility as a witness for Jesus Christ.

Lying is habit-forming and addictive. You can't just lie occasionally.

Lying is addictive. If you continue lying then it will become a settled habit. You can't set a limit on how often you'll lie, or on what level of seriousness of lies you are willing to tell. If you are prepared to lie at all, to any degree, then you will, inevitably, end up lying more and more. Eventually you will find that you lie almost all the time. You can't just remain at a certain level.

That's another reason why you have to come off it cold turkey and resolve to tell no lies at all. Then you will find yourself getting more and more truthful, until that too becomes a habit, just as lying used to be. Eventually you will come to love the truth for its own sake, quite apart from the many benefits it brings.

What if telling the truth is costly or painful?

We have already seen that there is a price to pay when you tell the truth and sometimes a very high price. There's no denying that it brings trouble. However, the cost of *not* telling the truth is always very much higher. The price you pay for telling the truth is generally limited and short term. However, the cost of lying is unlimited and long term. Indeed, whether we are a Christian or not, it is eternal.

For an unbeliever, it leads to the Lake of Fire. For a Christian, it will lead to the loss of some, or perhaps all, of the rewards we would otherwise have received at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Either way, those are really tragic consequences. And they are both eternal.

"The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

The above phrase comes from the wording of the oath which is used in Courts and Tribunals every day. But what does it mean? It is actually a carefully constructed phrase which forbids any kind of deception when a person gives evidence. It means that the witness is swearing to tell:

- a) **"the truth"** - i.e. that *everything* they say will be true
- b) **"the whole truth"** - i.e. that they *will not leave anything out*. Omitting something could alter the effect and impact of the evidence and make it untrue overall, even if no direct lie is told. In other words, it is to prevent the witness lying by the things he chooses *not* to say.
- c) **"and nothing but the truth"** - this is to prevent someone telling all of the truth, and leaving nothing out, *but then adding something untrue on top of it*, i.e. lying by adding a lie to what would, otherwise, be the truth.

Must we *always* tell the whole truth?

The famous wording of the oath is clearly appropriate for use in *Courts*, because it is absolutely comprehensive and watertight. But it is not necessarily the right way to operate in our *day to day*

lives. We do not always have a duty to tell the *whole* truth. We are not always under a duty to say all that we know, or all that is on our minds. To do so would sometimes be very unwise. Note the approach that Nehemiah took:

¹²And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. ¹³So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. ¹⁴Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. ¹⁵So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. ¹⁶The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.

Nehemiah 2:12-16 (NASB)

Nehemiah was heading to Jerusalem on a mission to rebuild the wall of the city. He knew that his project was going to come in for a lot of opposition from the enemies of God's people. Therefore, although Nehemiah told no lies, he did not tell other people everything that God had told him to do. He kept some of it to himself. Nehemiah's approach would be inappropriate in a criminal Court, or even in a civil court, where the system is based on finding out exactly what the whole truth is.

That objective means that the Court must insist on total, unlimited frankness and for nothing at all to be held back. Justice is at stake. However, that is not always the case in our day to day lives, where we may be entitled to withhold certain facts, *provided that doing so does not amount to a lie.*

Nevertheless, in some situations, not mentioning something could amount to a lie.

However, there can be circumstances where to leave out, or fail to mention, some fact would amount to misleading someone and in a dishonest way. That can apply even where there is no Court involved and nobody is giving evidence. Our conscience has to guide us. In any given situation we have to decide whether we can, with integrity, choose *not* to say something.

It is impossible to create a hard and fast rule, because every situation turns on its own facts. You must therefore ask God to guide you in those specific circumstances. Then use your conscience to gauge what is right on that occasion. The more inherently honest and sincere a person is, the more they will tend to assume that total frankness and transparency are needed. However, that is not always wise, and it can sometimes be naive to think that way, depending on the facts.

We have to ask ourselves whether the person is *entitled* to be told the whole truth

A good question to ask oneself, when seeking to decide how much one is obliged to disclose, is whether the other person is *entitled* to be told the whole truth. They may, or they may not be. If they are a police officer, judge, tax official or officer of the Court, the likelihood is they would be entitled to 100% of what you know, without leaving anything out. However, if the other person is a work colleague, friend, relative, neighbour etc, they may not be entitled to know everything, or indeed anything at all.

It all depends on their position and yours, and also on any duties that may, or may not be, owed by you to them as a result. Imagine that a friend of yours has confided in you, but then another friend of both of you asks what you have been discussing. You have no duty to answer that question. It would be legitimate to fob them off by saying "*Oh we were just chatting about this and that*". Failing to give an answer would be no lie, because there was no duty to answer them at all.

We don't always have to answer the questions people ask us

One of the things that has caused me difficulty for many years is knowing what to do when asked a difficult question where I am not yet entitled, or willing, to reveal the truth, but where I may not tell a lie either. Often the only solution is to sidestep the question. Politicians have to learn how to do this and it does not necessarily signify that they are dishonest. Often it's for very good reasons.

The point is that we do not always have a duty to give people an answer. It depends on the circumstances, on who is asking the question, and on whether they have any right to receive an answer. Often they do not. Realising this fact has been a great benefit to me. I had previously felt obliged to give an answer all the time and that caused me many difficulties. Here is an example of Jesus brushing aside a question which had not been asked sincerely, and was only intended to trap Him:

¹⁹The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on Him that very hour, and they feared the people; for they understood that He spoke this parable against them. ²⁰So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, in order that they might catch Him in some statement, so that they could deliver Him to the rule and the authority of the governor. ²¹They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, we know that You speak and teach correctly, and You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth. ²²"Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

²³But He detected their trickery and said to them, ²⁴"Show Me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." ²⁵And He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²⁶And they were unable to catch Him in a saying in the presence of the people; and being amazed at His answer, they became silent.

Luke 20:19-26 (NASB)

It's possible to lie without saying any words at all, i.e. by not volunteering information to those who are entitled to it.

Sometimes a clear duty to speak does exist, for example because you are acting in some fiduciary capacity, i.e. a position of trust. If so, then you must speak. To fail to do so would then be dishonest, whereas it would not be so if there had not been a duty to speak. It could therefore be a lie to say nothing, where your silence could be reasonably taken to mean something, so as to convey a false impression.

Let's imagine that at 12:00 noon you send an email saying, truthfully, that £x would be a fair price for some shares, or for a house. Then at 3.00pm some event occurs that changes everything, such that the value has suddenly gone up or down. Must you send another email to say "Ignore my previous email"? It may be that you must, depending on your role and the position of the other person in relation to you. You would have to ask yourself: "Do I owe this person a duty of care? Would my silence now be misleading? Is the other person professionally represented or not?" It may turn on questions such as those, and many others.

What about "nothing but the truth"?

It is hard to imagine any circumstances, other than in warfare, where it would be appropriate to add facts that are not true. We can sometimes withhold true facts, but we may not add false ones. So, if we need to fob a person off or get them to stop asking questions, without indirectly betraying that some secret is being withheld, you may need to think of creative ways of changing the subject, as

Jesus often did. But you still cannot lie in doing so, unless, as stated, there is a war on and you are being questioned by the enemy.

What about exaggeration?

Exaggeration is very common, but it is still lying. and it is a trait which can easily become a habit. It can be like the thin end of a wedge. Exaggeration is often seen as a more acceptable form of lying. It isn't. It's actually dangerous, because if it isn't eliminated, it can undermine your conscience and, gradually, lead you into telling much more explicit lies.

I knew a church leader some years ago, to whom I have referred above. He was particularly prone to exaggeration. He actually became well known for it. People used to excuse it and speak of it as "*just his way*" and that he was "*evangelastic*" But it's very wrong. It can easily escalate to the point where you aren't just being a little rough and ready with figures, but increasingly wide of the mark. Therefore, make a decision never to exaggerate. It is wrong in itself, but it is also wrong because of what it leads to.

It is far better to make a firm decision that you will always just say exactly what you mean and no more. Do not allow yourself to embroider a story. Then, if you find that exaggeration is still a habit, make a further promise to yourself that whenever it happens you will always immediately correct what you've said. Do it there and then, in the presence of whoever else is there.

That correction repairs the damage, but the discomfort and embarrassment you will feel at having to correct yourself in front of others will help to put yourself off doing it again. It would be like getting an electric shock every time you exaggerate. Your flesh nature doesn't like being embarrassed. Therefore you will quickly learn not to risk doing it again, *provided you know that you really will force yourself to correct any exaggeration publicly*. It's a good way to cure yourself of this habit.

Are we allowed to be tactful and diplomatic?

What about saying things which are not true just in order to be kind or diplomatic? For example, what if someone asks you whether you like their dress? In a situation like that you are entitled to ask yourself "*What is this person really asking?*" It is likely that what they really mean is "*Please reassure me*". If so, you can honestly do so, whatever your real view, because it wasn't really a request for information, but for reassurance.

However, there could conceivably be a situation where you knew someone's dress was a problem or that it would cause them humiliation if you were to say nothing. If so, it may be your duty to speak the truth. If so, then your task would be to do so as gracefully, and kindly, as possible.

Honesty in all our relationships

Truth is also needed in our personal relationships, not just where we are dealing with money or property. People can be distressingly false with each other. It is possible to be false without telling direct lies about facts and figures, or without even using any words at all, simply by *misrepresenting your true feelings*. For example it is commonplace for people to pretend to be someone's friend to their face, but to be very disloyal behind their backs. It is a form of falseness which may involve words, but which doesn't have to. It involves being dishonest about your real *feelings, intentions or affiliation*.

That sort of falseness is distasteful to have to witness and painful to experience. Yet it's happening millions of times every day in Great Britain alone. It sickens me, and I feel sure it sickens God.

Resolve to yourself that you will never act in that way. Never allow yourself to have two faces. Commit yourself to be true and real in every relationship you have. Never pretend to be, or to feel, anything which isn't real.

Honesty in business or at work

God also hates to see trickery and falseness in our business dealings:

*A false balance is an abomination to the LORD,
but a just weight is His delight.*

Proverbs 11: 1(NASB)

God detests cheating and every kind of scheme to swindle other people, whether they are our customers, colleagues or competitors. God loves it when our weights and measures are genuine and we don't 'short-change' people. Many times I have been in a shop and the assistant has handed me back my change, but it is 50 pence or a pound too little.

When I raise the matter it is quite apparent from their reaction, and from the look on their face, that they were fully aware, and that the 'error' was intentional. They were just waiting to see whether I would notice. Sometimes they look brazen, or even resentful, about it. They don't even mind that you know what they were up to. Amazing though it sounds, God finds time to concern Himself with every such incident. He notices, and it all matters to Him very deeply.

Sometimes in a workplace a person offers to tell a lie to “assist” you. He may even offer to do it expecting to be rewarded, or to be considered loyal, because of his willingness to lie for you. But I don't want staff who are willing to lie for me. I'm not even willing to lie for myself, so I'd hardly want them to do it on my behalf. A person's willingness to lie for their boss may impress others, but not me. Besides being inherently wrong, a practical point to bear in mind is that *if a man is willing to lie for you, he will be equally willing to lie to you later, whenever the need arises*. Such a man cannot be trusted.

Many a time I have interviewed staff who have offered to pretend to be ill so that they can get time off from their current employer to come to a second interview. They somehow imagine that that will impress me. The moment they offer to do that I cancel the second interview. If he is willing to lie to his current employer, then I know full well that he won't hesitate to lie to me later. And, if he's as open as that about it, he obviously doesn't even consider it to be wrong. That means his conscience is already badly seared. Therefore he will be dishonest across the board, not just in relation to lying to employers.

Honesty with money

With money, nothing less than 100%, meticulous accuracy and honesty is needed. Resolve not to take anything that is not yours, however small. Don't compromise, even at a microscopic level. If you do, you will inevitably find that the level of your dishonesty will start going up and up, until you are eventually embezzling large sums.

Every embezzler always begins by taking little bits of money, here and there, never large sums. If you harden your heart repeatedly with the little amounts, your heart will, one day, let you down when it faces the temptation to take large sums. Therefore, win the honesty battle over the pennies, and there will never be any battles over major sums.

Honesty in our use of power or authority

Many people, at all levels, abuse their position of authority in order to use, control or manipulate other people. Some do it purely for the pleasure of asserting themselves, feeling a sense of importance and drawing attention to their position of power. They get pleasure simply out of having power over someone, even if they are only in a lowly role or responsibility. In fact, that is where it most often occurs. Those with only a small amount of authority are the ones most likely to behave proudly.

That abuse of authority is a form of dishonesty, because it is the misuse of a position for an illegitimate reason. Our employer did not put us into an intermediate managerial or supervisory role so that we could get a thrill out of lording it over someone else. He put us there to serve the legitimate purposes of the business, and for no other reason. So, misusing a position or role is not much different from misusing a car or a piece of property for a purpose of which we know our employer would not approve.

Honesty in preaching and in teaching the Bible

Some might imagine that this point would not even need to be made, because, if a man is sufficiently mature and motivated to preach or teach the Bible then he would surely never lie, exaggerate, dodge issues or be misleading. If only that was true. I have to say that that has not been the case for a large number of the men that I have heard preach.

I have heard countless men treat the Word of God in an extraordinarily careless manner and say things which are plainly not correct. In doing so, some have been fully aware of that, but they did not care. Others have been unaware of their errors, but only because they were not sufficiently motivated, and did not care enough about the truth, to take the trouble to find out. So, for a variety of reasons, they misrepresent God's Word and give people a false impression of Him.

I would never want to be in that position. Everything I say is what I sincerely believe to be the true meaning of God's Word, after much study. On many occasions, where I have felt unsure of the meaning I have either explicitly said so, or I have left it alone and spoken or written on some other topic instead. That is the right approach. We must never take a cavalier or reckless attitude towards God's Word. For a man who stands up to teach, the responsibility is very heavy, and so will be the judgment that comes upon him if he is not sincere and careful. Note what James tells us:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.

James 3:1 (RSV)

Nevertheless, I have heard a great many men make reckless statements while preaching, for which they have no biblical mandate or authority. They present their own opinions and preferences as if they were God's, and as if God's Word supported what they say when it clearly doesn't. I would classify that as dishonesty, and of the most grievous kind. Indeed, can there be any more serious subject matter about which to lie or exaggerate, or even to risk making errors, than God's Word?

Perhaps the main reason why so many men behave like that when preaching is because they feel no fear while handling God's Word. But we should. It is such a heavy and serious matter that it should actually make us tremble, for fear of misrepresenting God and misleading people about Him or His will. No less a person than Isaiah tells us that God wants us to *tremble at [His] Word*:

***All these things my hand has made,
and so all these things are mine,
says the LORD.
But this is the man to whom I will look,***

*he that is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word.*

Isaiah 66:2 (RSV)

Likewise, the Psalmist tells us that he trembles at both the prospect of God's judgment and the responsibility of dealing with His Word:

*My flesh trembles for fear of thee,
and I am afraid of thy judgments.*

Psalm 119:120 (RSV)

*Rulers persecute me without cause,
but my heart trembles at your word.*

Psalm 119:161 (NIV)

In spite of all that, the mishandling of God's Word, and even outright dishonesty while preaching and teaching, are far more common than most of us would ever imagine. I can think of a particular leader, some years ago, who gave a series of talks on the subject of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He was a 'cessationist'. That is he believed that the gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased in the first century AD and are no longer in operation.

The Bible never says any of that. Nor does it even hint at it, to the slightest extent. In short, *there is no biblical basis for saying it*. It is a teaching which is based solely on what *men* have said, i.e. *church tradition*. So, this leader made a series of assertions, for which he had absolutely no biblical mandate. He could not point to even one verse or passage which expressly supported his position. That is because there aren't any. Nevertheless, that fact did not prevent him from setting out many quite irrelevant passages and speaking of them *as if they supported what he was saying*.

I could see that those verses did not prove his point, or even support it. Many of them did not even relate to this issue at all. They had other meanings and were therefore being misused. He wanted people to think that those passages supported his theological stance, but they manifestly didn't. I can see two main possibilities. At worst, he was being intentionally misleading. At 'best' he was being sloppy and careless with God's Word and was bandying it about without a proper sense of reverence for what he was handling.

I actually questioned him twice during the talk, because the meeting was a kind of seminar, where that was possible. However, he dodged both my questions, either because he could not, or would not, answer them. Yet, he did not withdraw or modify any of his claims. I was told by another person later that someone else had also questioned him in an earlier seminar and that he had, likewise, given them no straight answers. He had sought instead just to fob off the questioner and to avoid answering them, rather than be put under pressure, or have his errors, or his ignorance, exposed.

What then should that leader have done? Firstly, he ought not to have claimed that God's Word supported his stance when it doesn't. That is he should not have twisted the meaning of verses that he was quoting from, to make them appear to be saying that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were only for a minority of people and, at any rate, only for the first century.

Secondly, on being questioned, he should have given honest, clear, straight-forward answers, even if that caused an upset or made himself look foolish or under-prepared. For example, he should have said: "*I don't really have any answers to that question, because. I don't fully understand the subject.*"

Or he could have said: *I haven't really studied the Bible for myself on this point. I have merely read what some other men have said and am stating their conclusions, without really knowing how, or why, they arrived at them. Indeed, I actually just downloaded most of this sermon from the internet.*"

He could even have said: “*What I am saying is the traditional stance of my denomination. I don’t really know why, or how, to justify any of it from the Bible. It’s just what I have always heard other men say and therefore I’m passing it on.*”

Needless to say, he didn’t make any of those candid statements. Neither have I ever heard any other preacher say anything similarly honest. But they should, if it describes their actual position, which it frequently does. Men don’t want to look foolish or to be diminished in the eyes of others. But isn’t it far better to be thought to lack competence but to be honest, than to be thought competent but to lack honesty? I would say so. More to the point, it doesn’t matter even if the audience does think you lack knowledge. What matters, above all, is that you are *honest in your handling of God’s Word*.

Your fear of God needs to outweigh, and therefore displace, any fear that you may feel about your audience or concern for your reputation. Moreover, if any leader is willing to be completely open and honest, and to handle God’s Word with the utmost care and reverence, then God would respond by increasing their knowledge anyway. It is precisely to such people, who “*tremble at [His] Word*”, that God looks, and to whom He will give revelation and insights.

When lies are used as weapons or to gain a competitive advantage

Although God is calling us to live lives of absolute truthfulness, the reality is that most of the people around us, and maybe even we ourselves, use lies as weapons. They are used routinely:

- a) to damage and undermine others who may be rivals, competitors or personal enemies.
- b) to gain assets, positions or any kind of competitive advantage for oneself.
- c) to avoid detection or criticism
- d) to cause strife, division and mistrust between other people. People often create discord deliberately, so that a particular person can be kept isolated and prevented from working together with others. Such cooperation might be a threat to the wrongdoer. In other words, they tell lies about the people they work with in order to “*divide and rule*”.

See Book Six on dealing with wicked people for further detail on these issues and the tactics which devious people use. Deception is an important part of the ‘armoury’ of the average unbeliever, whether he is only a fool or a fully-fledged wicked person. The people around us use lies as weapons and as tactics and devices and they do so routinely, on a daily basis.

A very large percentage of what we are told by those around us, i.e. our colleagues, bosses, staff, acquaintances and even friends, is lies. That is not merely a possibility, but a virtual certainty. The real question is not *whether* one is being lied to, but *by whom*, and *on what issues*. Frequently it comes in the most unexpected ways and from the people one least suspects.

Accordingly, our first duty is to root out deception from our own lives and to ‘unilaterally disarm’. That means that we cease to use lies as a weapon ourselves. However, we must also recognise that most of the people we know and work with will be continuing to tell lies to us, whether small or large, and whether rarely or frequently. The lies will inevitably come and we need to become equipped to discern those lies and to protect ourselves from their effect.

Winning without lying

God wants us to be overcomers. He wants us to succeed in life, to win our battles, and to overcome the problems that we come up against. So it's true that God wants His people to be winners. However, for success to be real it has to be achieved without resorting to deception, deviousness or manipulation, and without using other people.

In other words, for a Christian, success is only real if we achieve it in a righteous manner, by operating in line with God's standards and principles. If we don't, then any supposed 'success' that we might achieve would count for nothing. God would not view it as success, but as failure. It would therefore be 'burned up' and counted as 'dross' at the Judgment Seat of Christ. No reward would be given to us for it. On the contrary, we would be rebuked, at the very least, and probably punished as well. (See Book Four)

In other words, your achievements would only be viewed as a success in your own eyes, and possibly in the eyes of the people around you, but not to God. However, succeeding in God's eyes, and by His criteria, is the only form of success worth having, and the only type that will last. The things we achieve for God, in accordance with His principles, and in response to His promptings, will last forever.

We will be rewarded for them and those rewards, whatever form they take, will last for eternity. We will be allowed to keep them. However, anything achieved by deception, or by cheating, will not last. They will probably disappear or be taken from us, even in this life, but even more so in eternity:

*Bread obtained by falsehood is sweet to a man,
but afterward his mouth will be filled with gravel.
Proverbs 20:17 (NASB)*

The need to be truthful is one of God's main ways of guiding you - it makes it easier to decide what to do, because it automatically rules out every dishonest option, thus narrowing the choice.

We all struggle at times to know God's will and to get clear guidance from Him as to what steps we should take in complicated or difficult situations. However, one of the clearest forms of guidance God has given us this general principle of truthfulness, in whatever situation we face. The fact that we know that we are always meant to be truthful is a kind of permanent guidance. This applies in all types of problems or circumstances.

So when you face a thorny problem, and have to choose between two or more courses of action, you may well find that some of the options before you are ruled out automatically. That is because they would involve an element of dishonesty, compromise, or something squalid or underhand. Your conscience therefore tells you that one or more of the options would be wrong, or at least questionable.

If so, then there is your ready-made guidance. You already know which way to go, or at least which way *not* to go, even without any specific guidance from God. It is a kind of "*standing order*" as the Police say. The Chief Constable issues certain orders which always apply. He expects every officer to be aware of them, without needing to be told on each and every occasion. As Christians, one of our main 'standing orders' is that we should always act with integrity:

*The integrity of the upright will guide them,
But the crookedness of the treacherous will destroy them.
Proverbs 11:3 (NASB)*

Whenever you need guidance let integrity, and the need to maintain your honour and your reputation for honesty, be your guide. So, if a man is selling some goods so cheaply that you suspect they may be stolen, you don't even need to ask God for specific guidance as to whether to buy them from him on this occasion. You already know the answer will be no. The principle of integrity provides you with ready-made guidance:

***Righteousness guards the one whose way is blameless,
but wickedness subverts the sinner.
Proverbs 13:6 (NASB)***

Likewise, if we have integrity we will be secure. We may not necessarily end up as the biggest, or the best, or the richest, but we cannot be accused of any wrongdoing. That is what counts most to God. Thus our reputation, especially before God, will be secure, whereas other men's reputations may crumble, as they will be found out:

***He who walks in integrity walks securely,
but he who perverts his ways will be found out.
Proverbs 10:9 (NASB)***

As we have seen, a 'blameless' man is not sinless. It just means that he is sincere, earnest and godly and has a genuine desire to do God's will. His righteous life will, in itself, be a protection and will keep him from scandals and disasters:

***O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?
Who shall dwell on your holy hill?
² He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
and speaks truth in his heart;
who does not slander with his tongue
and does no evil to his neighbour,
nor takes up a reproach against his friend;
⁴ in whose eyes a vile person is despised,
but who honours those who fear the LORD;
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;
⁵ who does not put out his money at interest
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.
He who does these things shall never be moved.
Psalm 15:1-5 (ESV)***

***Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false,
and does not swear deceitfully.
⁵ He will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of his salvation.
Psalm 24:3-5 (RSV)***

Many of the people who are ruined in financial collapses fail because they made dishonest decisions, or took excessive risks, or over-extended themselves. They did so in ways which their consciences could easily have told them were wrong at the time. But they pressed on regardless, in pursuit of success, and put aside any feelings of uneasiness that they may have had. That is a sure way to end up in ruin.

The hardest form of truth - being honest with yourself

It is very rare to find people who are willing to be brutally honest with themselves. Most people cannot even see the issue here. The point is that the person to whom we lie the most is ourselves. Our own hearts lie to us and we justify ourselves automatically:

*"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?
Jeremiah 17:9 (NASB)*

*All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight,
But the LORD weighs the motives.
Proverbs 16:2 (NIV)*

We are highly skilled at telling lies to ourselves and believing them, when even the most naive person, if he was standing nearby, would recognise it as a lie. We operate a hypocritical double standard. We judge ourselves, and our own motives, and actions extremely generously, without any inner debate or questioning of ourselves. Therefore, we give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, and are quick to justify our actions and excuse our failures. We frequently block out, and therefore do not hear, any thought which contradicts, or even questions, our own actions or attitudes.

It is exceptionally rare for a person who has been in a conflict or argument to sit down and say privately to themselves *"Now let's examine my own actions and attitudes here. Am I out of order myself? How must my actions and words appear to others?"* Those are obvious questions and we ought to ask them of ourselves daily. But we very rarely do so, if ever. If we did ask such questions we would then come to see ourselves as others see us. That would be a major revelation. It would also transform the way we live.

These points are completely obvious. We can see them clearly in the lives of the people around us, just not in ourselves. Even if we can see it in principle, and recognise the concept in abstract terms, we do not carry it over and continue to see this when we are actually in the heat of a conflict situation. Even those who can see that this point applies to them struggle to actually put it into practice while in an argument or crisis.

At such times, even if we know these things are true, we will tend to 'revert to type' and behave in a self-deluding way. This is an area where enormous personal growth is available to us if we can learn to cross examine ourselves. That is especially true if we can learn to do this even in the middle of a tense situation, where we are in an argument with another person, or even being mistreated by them.

This blindness about our own faults also arises within family life, and between husband and wife. It happens in the workplace too. In each of these contexts, we are required to live at close quarters with other people. Their ways and attitudes may, therefore, get on our nerves. But we are usually blind to our own faults and selfish ways, because what we do seems so normal and so obviously right. That is why we need to begin to ask ourselves searching questions about how we must seem to other people and whether there is anything unfair, selfish or annoying in what we say or do.

But to learn to ask ourselves obvious questions like that is like learning to speak in a foreign language. It is alien to us because it runs entirely against the grain of our sinful nature. To begin to operate that way will require us to do what is contrary to our nature and the opposite of the habits we have learned. Likewise, at work, if your boss criticises or challenges you, instead of assuming that such a criticism is obviously unfounded, unfair, ridiculous etc, stop and ask yourself: *"How do my actions appear to other people? What can be done to improve my style, manner, technique, method etc?"*

Also, it's essential to ask God to help you to see what others can see in you and in your behavior. If not you are bound to fail because being honest and objective about yourself is extremely hard to do, even with God's help, let alone without it. In such situations pray something like this:

"Lord, please help me not to react hastily or selfishly, or to do what my flesh nature wants. Help me to calm down and humble myself. Help me to see this situation, and my part in it, as you see it and as others see it. Help me to be objective, fair, honest, unbiased and rational, even when evaluating my own actions. Please also open my eyes to see anything bad about myself that I'm currently blind to."

That is an unusual prayer. God doesn't get many prayers as sincere as that, so it will touch His heart. It is the sort of prayer that He delights to answer. God will pour out self-knowledge to a person who asks for it genuinely, and is not just seeking justification and vindication, but to truly see themselves as they really are. That's the key. Your prayer must be sincere.

Have you ever been in a situation where a friend or colleague asks you what you think of the rights and wrongs of a conflict they are engaged in? Have you ever tried to answer them, only to discover that they were not seeking an honest answer, but just your support and affirmation.

Your prayer must not be like that. Don't just ask God so that He can agree with you and take your side. Ask God *with a real willingness to be corrected, and even to be rebuked*. The more honest and open you are, the more gracious and polite He can afford to be. If you don't approach it that way then you leave God with only two options:

- a) to leave you in ignorance and self-delusion or
- b) to get some other person to speak to you. However, they are not going to be anywhere near as gracious as God would be in the way they tell you about your faults.

Though you may not realise it at the time, if you are in a position where you are not listening to God, then it is much better for you if He chooses option (b) above. Therefore He will make sure to send people into your life who will tackle you and tell you the truth about yourself. It was a revelation to me when I began to realise that such people, though they didn't know it, were all working for God. They were giving me some very blunt messages that I needed to hear.

As I look back at over 30 years as a Christian, I can see many such people whom God clearly sent my way to point out my faults and failings. God often uses bosses for this. They are one of His favourite types of 'sub-contractor' or 'agent' that He engages to do such tasks for Him. God uses our bosses to correct us because they have the right, and the need, to tackle us. It is also because we are obliged to listen to them and cannot ignore them.

God will also use older Christians, and parents, even non-Christian parents. We need to become willing and even eager to listen to all such people. In fact we need to go to them and seek out their honest views and to reassure them that we really do *want* them to be frank. You need to emphasise that. If not, people will tend to go easy on you for fear of causing offence. So, go looking for constructive feedback and criticism. *Ask for it*. Then it makes it so much easier for God's 'messengers' to speak the truth to you.

As well as that, go straight to God and ask Him to speak to you directly, not just through other people. If you ask for that He will correct you in all sorts of ways that are far easier to take than being corrected or rebuked by others. God will speak to you through:

- a) the Bible - as you read it certain passages or words will 'leap out at you'. Some character in the Bible will be acting in a certain way and the Holy Spirit will whisper the thought into your head *"He's making the same mistake you make"* or *"His attitude is wrong, but so is yours"*.
- b) other people saying things in passing - even where they aren't speaking directly to you. God will cause certain words or phrases to resonate with you. It could be something in a book or on the

TV or radio. God will "*make it go fluorescent*" or somehow make it *resonate* in your mind as being applicable to you.

- c) speaking directly into your mind or your spirit - this is similar to what has been said above. You may be just getting on with your work when God will plant a thought in your mind. It will contain some truth about you, your motives, or your shortcomings.

Whenever God chooses to speak to you, and whatever method He uses, the crucial thing is to be open to it. Don't brush Him aside or forget what He says. Be teachable and willing to listen. He will then speak to you more clearly and more often.

However, the moment you start to become willing to listen to God's voice the demons who hang around with you will seek to join in. They too will seek to plant thoughts in your mind. The only difference is that the thoughts that they put into your head are lies. So, you'll need to learn to discern the difference between God's authentic voice and the false whisperings of demons.

That requires you to be alert to weigh up the *tone* and *content* of whatever thought comes in to your mind. Is it constructive, wholesome, consistent with Scripture, and in line with all of God's ways and principles? If so, it will probably be God's voice. But if it is destructive, condemning, contrary to Scripture or clashes with one or more biblical principles, then it is demonic.

Once you start to analyse your own thoughts in this way it will become progressively easier to tell the difference. It's largely common sense. For example, if someone claiming to be from your bank rang up asking you to reveal your personal PIN number, you'd quickly realise something was wrong. At least you should realise it. Some don't, and just hand over the information.

Learning the real truth about yourself is bound to be a long and uncomfortable process of discovery. Coming to terms with what sort of person you really are, "*warts and all*", is a vital first stage to the project of changing. That's what God is really after. It requires this rare quality of being honest with yourself, no matter where that takes you, or what it costs. Make that your aim and cooperate with God as He seeks to build that level of honesty in you.

If you'll compromise on truth what else will you compromise on?

You may think I'm over-emphasising the importance of truth and focusing on it too strongly. I don't think so. It is at the centre and it holds everything together. That's why apostle Paul, in Ephesians chapter 6, refers to the "*belt of truth*". It holds all the rest of our 'armour' in place:

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Ephesians 6:10-18 (NIV)

A soldier's belt holds together all the rest of the kit that he wears and also provides a place to which he can attach ammunition and other equipment that he carries. It keeps it all in place. Likewise, truth, if we really love it and value it, will hold all the other parts of our lives together and keep us on the right path. If instead we are casual about truth, and willing to compromise on it, then every other part of our lives will become distorted and fall apart.

Are there ever any exceptions when it's OK to lie?

This is the sort of question which few people ever ask themselves, It only arises if you love the truth so strongly that the question of exactly how truthful we are meant to be starts to become an issue. The average person never feels the need to ask this question. He lies, exaggerates or compromises, whenever it is necessary in order to protect himself or his own interests. It's just not a problem to him.

However, if you are truly serious about committing yourself always to tell the truth, then extreme or complex situations will arise from time to time which really test you to the limit. Sometimes situations arise for me where I suspect that even the prophet Daniel might wonder what to do for the best.

However, there can be certain extremely unusual circumstances where telling a deliberate lie can become the right thing to do. It is very rare indeed. Nevertheless, there are some examples of this in the Bible which we ought to examine, for completeness, so that we have looked at honesty from every angle.

The lie told to Pharaoh by the Egyptian midwives to save the lives of Israelite boys

We read in the book of Exodus of how the Israelites went to Egypt at the time of Joseph. They were welcomed by the Pharaoh of that time. However, four centuries later they had grown into a nation of about two million people and the Pharaoh of that time was very hostile to them. Therefore he even gave orders that any boys born to Israelite women were to be killed. He ordered the Egyptian midwives to put them to death deliberately and only to allow baby girls to live:

¹⁵ Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; ¹⁶ and he said, "When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live."

Exodus 1:15-16 (NASB)

No doubt some midwives carried out these orders. However, these two particular midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, refused to do what Pharaoh had ordered. It was impossible for them to openly oppose Pharaoh or to refuse his orders. So, they lied to him and told him that the Israelite women gave birth so quickly that the boys were born before they could get to them. The clear implication is that that was not true. It was only said to mislead Pharaoh and to obstruct his wicked plans:

¹⁷ But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?" ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife can get to them." ²⁰ So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. ²¹ Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

Exodus 1:17-21(NASB)

Some have argued that perhaps what the midwives said was true and that the boys were saved purely because the Israelite women gave birth quicker than Egyptians women. However, that cannot be the

case. Firstly, it is inherently unlikely. Secondly, there would be no need for God to reward any of the midwives if this was the explanation. They would have done nothing to reward.

Therefore we are faced with the inescapable fact that God is praising and rewarding the actions of these Egyptian midwives. When faced with the choice of killing Israelite babies or lying to Pharaoh, they chose to lie. Misleading Pharaoh was the only way that they could have saved those children. If they had told the truth, then the Israelite baby boys would have had to die.

In that context, when dealing with questions from a wicked man, and where the lives of children were at stake, God evidently deemed it right and proper for those midwives to lie to Pharaoh. That creates an ethical and theological complication, but it is one that we cannot get away from. It is plainly there in the Scriptures. And it is not the only example:

The lie told by Jehu in order to trick the followers of Baal so that he could destroy them

There was a King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel called Ahab who was exceptionally wicked. He also had a remarkably wicked wife called Jezebel. Between them they dragged Israel down to their level and led the people into sin and idolatry on a huge scale. Under Ahab's reign, Baal worship flourished and expanded rapidly. Therefore God declared through the prophet Elijah that He would destroy the whole house and lineage of King Ahab.

Elijah's grim prophecy was all fulfilled in due course. In particular, let us look at what was done by a man called Jehu. He was actually anointed on the instructions of the prophet Elisha to be the next King of Israel, precisely in order that he could wipe out the whole family line of Ahab and all that he stood for:

⁴So the young man, the servant of the prophet, went to Ramoth-gilead. ⁵And when he came, behold, the commanders of the army were in council. And he said, "I have a word for you, O commander." And Jehu said, "To which of us all?" And he said, "To you, O commander." ⁶So he arose and went into the house. And the young man poured the oil on his head, saying to him, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, I anoint you king over the people of the LORD, over Israel. ⁷And you shall strike down the house of Ahab your master, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD. ⁸For the whole house of Ahab shall perish, and I will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. ⁹And I will make the house of Ahab like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah.

2 Kings 9:4-9 (ESV)

Jehu then proceeded to wipe out every member of Ahab's family, so that none of them could ever claim the throne of Israel again. That sets the context and brings us to the main point I am making, which is that Jehu then set about wiping out all of the followers of Baal. They were occultic and idolatrous and had led many of the people to forsake God and worship Baal.

In the process of doing this Jehu told a lie in order to trick the followers of Baal so that he could gather them all into one place and destroy them. He did it by pretending to be a follower of Baal himself. He commanded all the priests and other followers of Baal to gather in one place and declared that he would be an even bigger follower of Baal than King Ahab had been:

¹⁸Then Jehu assembled all the people and said to them, "Ahab served Baal a little, but Jehu will serve him much. ¹⁹Now therefore call to me all the prophets of Baal, all his worshipers and all his priests. Let none be missing, for I have a great sacrifice to offer to Baal. Whoever is missing shall not live." But Jehu did it with cunning in order to destroy the worshipers of Baal. ²⁰And Jehu ordered, "Sanctify a solemn assembly for Baal." So they proclaimed it. ²¹And Jehu sent throughout all Israel, and all the worshipers of Baal came, so that there was not a man left who did not come. And they entered the house of Baal, and the house of Baal was filled from one end to the other.

²² He said to him who was in charge of the wardrobe, “Bring out the vestments for all the worshipers of Baal.” So he brought out the vestments for them. ²³ Then Jehu went into the house of Baal with Jehonadab the son of Rechab, and he said to the worshipers of Baal, “Search, and see that there is no servant of the LORD here among you, but only the worshipers of Baal.” ²⁴ Then they went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings.

Now Jehu had stationed eighty men outside and said, “The man who allows any of those whom I give into your hands to escape shall forfeit his life.” ²⁵ So as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, Jehu said to the guard and to the officers, “Go in and strike them down; let not a man escape.” So when they put them to the sword, the guard and the officers cast them out and went into the inner room of the house of Baal, ²⁶ and they brought out the pillar that was in the house of Baal and burned it. ²⁷ And they demolished the pillar of Baal, and demolished the house of Baal, and made it a latrine to this day.

2 Kings 10:18-27 (ESV)

So, Jehu told a direct lie in order to lure the followers of Baal into his trap. He said it while intending to do the very opposite. It is clear that God approved of Jehu’s actions. At any rate, God rewarded Jehu and said nothing to indicate that He did not approve of the lie:

And the LORD said to Jehu, “Because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.”

2 Kings 10:30 (ESV)

Let us now consider how God viewed Jehu’s lie and why God did not disapprove of him for telling it:

- a) Jehu had been anointed as King of God’s people, Israel, i.e. the Northern Kingdom. It was therefore his duty to do God’s will and to fight against God’s enemies.
- b) The followers of Baal were God’s enemies.
- c) Jehu was commanded to make war against the whole house of Ahab and to wipe out his line and try to reverse the harm that Ahab had caused. This necessarily involved wiping out the followers of Baal. They were like cancer cells within the nation of Israel
- d) The only way to destroy them was to lure them into a trap. That could only be done by deceiving them, because they would never come willingly to be destroyed.
- e) In short, Jehu was waging war on God’s behalf. Therefore it was legitimate to tell a lie in the pursuit of a war objective.

So, it was legitimate, on that very specific occasion, for Jehu to deceive the followers of Baal. But *that does not provide any general authorisation to us to tell lies*, not even if done in order to pursue God’s objectives. If we could do so at all, it would only be if we were in equally exceptional circumstances. Let us now consider another unusual example:

Rahab of Jericho telling a lie about where the Jewish spies were hiding

Rahab (the harlot) lived in Jericho at the time when the Israelites were leaving the wilderness and entering into the land of Canaan to take possession of it. Their leader, Joshua, sent two spies ahead to the city of Jericho, to do reconnaissance and bring back information. Rahab was not an Israelite. She was a Canaanite.

But she knew that God was going to destroy Jericho and give the land to His people, the Israelites. So she chose to cooperate with God. She therefore sheltered the two spies in her house and told a lie to

the men of Jericho (Canaanites) who were searching for them. She said they had left earlier, which was not true:

¹Then Joshua the son of Nun sent two men as spies secretly from Shittim, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there. ²It was told the king of Jericho, saying, "Behold, men from the sons of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." ³And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." ⁴But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. ⁵"It came about when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." ⁶But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. ⁷So the men pursued them on the road to the Jordan to the fords; and as soon as those who were pursuing them had gone out, they shut the gate.

Joshua 2:1-7 (NASB)

Rahab's motives for telling that lie are set out later in Joshua chapter two:

*⁸Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof,
⁹and said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you.
¹⁰"For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed.
¹¹"When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.
¹²"Now therefore, please swear to me by the LORD, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth,
¹³and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death."
¹⁴So the men said to her, "Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the LORD gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you."
¹⁵Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall.*

Joshua 2:8-14 (NASB)

So, a promise was made to Rahab that in return for her help (the lie she told) and for continuing to keep the secret, the invading Israelite army would not harm Rahab or her family,. They agreed not to attack anybody within Rahab's house. She was told to hang out a scarlet cord to identify where she and her relatives lived.

But note what God then does and how He deals with Rahab. Far from punishing her, He rewards and protects her when the city is destroyed. God told Joshua to march around the city walls for seven days, at the end of which God promised to cause the walls of the city to collapse:

⁴"Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. ⁵"It shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people will go up every man straight ahead."

Joshua 6:4-5 (NASB)

The Israelites did as God said and He knocked down the entire walls of the city, except for one short stretch of wall in which Rahab's house was built. People used to have houses actually on and within the city walls.

¹⁵Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall.

Joshua 2:15 (NASB)

²²Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the harlot's house and bring the woman and all she has out of there, as you have sworn to her." ²³So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives and placed them outside the camp of Israel. ²⁴They burned the city with fire, and all that was in it. Only the silver and gold, and articles of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD. ²⁵However, Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Joshua 6:22-25 (NASB)

The old city wall of Jericho is completely destroyed, right down to the base, for its entire length, except for one small section where part of the lower section of the wall still remains. That was where Rahab lived. The point is that it was God who destroyed that wall and it was God who preserved the part of the wall which Rahab lived in.

But why would God do that to reward a woman even though she had told a lie? Indeed, we have to go further than that and face the fact that He was rewarding her *because* she had told a lie to protect the Israelite spies. It doesn't even end there. Look at what is then said in chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews. It lists a 'hall of fame' of individuals whose faith was very great and who did exceptional things for God. Guess who's in there - it's Rahab:

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

Hebrews 11:30-31 (NASB)

So, not only did God reward Rahab, He even praises her actions in Hebrews Chapter 11 and describes her behaviour as 'faith'. What's the explanation? It is that Rahab faced a situation of war where God's chosen people the Israelites, were in great need and two of Joshua's best men, the spies, were in mortal danger. If they had been caught by the search party they would have been killed. Plus, they wouldn't have been able to bring the information back to Joshua. So, it was a life or death situation for them. And, on top of that, it involved the protection of God's chosen people.

In that very narrow and highly unusual context, what Rahab said and did was right. Indeed it was noble and brave. So, again we can say that there are some extremely exceptional circumstances where to tell a direct lie is right. But we must always remember how very rare such circumstances are. So far, in my own life, I don't think I have ever come across any such circumstances.

However, God also rewarded Betsy Ten Boom for doing the very opposite of what Rahab did.

Let's look now at a similar situation where another person chose to handle it very differently from Rahab. Yet, God still honoured her for it, and came to her aid. It involves Betsy Ten Boom, the sister of Corrie Ten Boom, of the famous Dutch family. They risked their lives to shelter Jewish refugees in their home and to help them to escape from the Nazis. So, we have a roughly similar situation. God's people, the Jews, were in danger and needed to be hidden and protected.

However Betsy Ten Boom was a remarkable person. She was extraordinarily sincere and had decided, years before, that she would never tell a lie. It became for her an unbreakable principle. One day some German soldiers came unexpectedly to the door and burst in to the house to search it, looking for Jews. There was a family of Jews hiding in a chamber under the floor. They had gone down through a trap door hidden under the table.

A German soldier asked "*Are there any Jews hidden in this house?*" Betsy Ten Boom had no time to think, or even to pray, about what to do. So, she just acted on instinct, in accordance with the ingrained habits she had built up over many years. She blurted out "*Yes, they are hiding underneath the table*". I don't think God *wanted* Betsy to say that. She didn't *need* to say it. She had no *duty* to say it.

The Germans had *no right even to be there, let alone to ask that question*. Moreover, their purpose in asking it was abominable. They were seeking to kill God's people, the Jews, which is the very reason why the Ten Boom family were hiding them. So, Betsy's family were horrified at what she had just said.

However, God's heart was evidently touched by Betsy's sincerity. So He honoured it, and her, and intervened. God must have planted a thought into the German soldier's mind, because he immediately got the wrong end of the stick. He assumed Betsy was making fun of him and that she couldn't possibly have meant what she had just said. He mistakenly took it as sarcasm, which is the exact opposite of what it actually was. He therefore became red-faced. He felt that if he looked under the table everybody would laugh at him. So, he turned and left the room. The Germans then searched the whole of the rest of the house, i.e. everywhere *except* under the table, but they found nothing.

It all ended happily. That group of Jews who had been under the table all survived the war. God preserved all their lives. In part, I expect He did so in honour of what Betsy had just done, due to the strength and sincerity of her conviction. God covered up for Betsy and saved her, and the Jews, from the consequences of her own honesty.

However, we must face the fact that He will not always do so. As we have seen, there is often a heavy price to pay for being truthful. But He did intervene on that occasion. Thus we have two very similar situations handled in totally opposite ways by two women, Rahab and Betsy Ten Boom. Yet God honoured both of them.

What about using deception in a war?

Ever since God established the separate nations of the earth, at the time of the Tower of Babel, nations have gone to war with each other. Sometimes they have been justified in doing so, at least the non-aggressor, which is defending itself. In warfare soldiers kill each other. Since the twentieth century, they also kill civilians. You will have your own view of this, but mine is that warfare can be justified in certain circumstances. That means that the killing of men can be justified, where it is essential in pursuit of a legitimate war.

If that is so, then it follows that one is entitled to use deception as a weapon of war, i.e. to trick and mislead the enemy so that its performance is impaired. Such deception may save the lives of your own men. It may also cost the lives of the enemy's men. But, it would be justified, in my view, provided that the war itself is justified.

So, to reduce it to a phrase we could say that "*If you're morally entitled to kill a man, then you may be entitled to lie to him*". Thus we have another exception where we may be entitled to tell a lie. An example of this would be where the Allies sought to trick Hitler into believing that the invasion of France would come at Calais. In fact it came at Normandy. That process of deception saved many lives.

Hitler insisted on keeping a number of German Panzer divisions tied down at Calais, even after the Normandy invasion had begun, because he was so convinced by our elaborate deceptions. These involved fake tanks, aircraft and other military equipment being stockpiled near Dover and fake radio messages being broadcast by fake divisions which did not even exist. It was all done so that the Germans would think that the real invasion would come at Calais.

The problems caused for those who have '*scruples*' - is it possible to be too honest?

Is it ever possible to be too honest? Sometimes it is, in a certain sense. Problems can arise for honest people which are the result of inexperience, lack of wisdom and the inability to handle delicate, finely balanced situations. We can find that both honesty and wisdom are needed in combination, but that we have only got honesty, not wisdom.

This problem affects very few people, because not many are honest enough for their honesty to become their problem. Usually it's the other way round. However, there is a small minority of people who spend a lot of their time and energy fretting over what they can and can't say and do, i.e. in terms of truthfulness.

This problem is called '*scruples*'. It means the burden borne, and the problems experienced, by those people who think very deeply about their duty to be truthful. For them lying is not an option. But such people still have to manage to get through their lives as best they can without upsetting people, causing turmoil, betraying secrets and mishandling fiduciary responsibilities. Achieving all of those objectives is far from easy.

One of Mrs Thatcher's cabinet ministers was a man called Sir Keith Joseph. He struggled a great deal with questions of conscience. He used to go back and forth in his mind, questioning himself about the rights and wrongs of his proposed actions and whether they could be justified ethically. Such things mattered to him enormously and he was tormented by it all.

In fact, many feel that he would have become leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 rather than Margaret Thatcher had it not been for the way he agonised over the ethics of the decisions he had to take and the duties he had to fulfil. He suffered in ways which 99% of other politicians never did because his conscience was so highly developed and so important to him.

I sympathised with Sir Keith Joseph because I too have often struggled to know how to handle complex situations where I don't feel comfortable in my conscience with *any* of the options available to me. In some ways I have envied those who did not share my problem with scruples. I have known many people who found it easy to brush aside such concerns, without any difficulty, let alone torment. Yet, I would still not choose to be otherwise.

Such difficult pressure points are one of the inevitable side effects of having the love of the truth. At least they are until you reach a very high level of wisdom and maturity, which I haven't yet managed to arrive at. However, it is better to have the love of the truth, and to face these difficulties, than to be without these problems, but not have the love of the truth. In other words, it is a price worth paying.

When your heart is more honest than your head is wise.

The more you love the truth, the more of a problem this issue of scruples can become. The essence of the problem is that you have a heart which is currently more honest than your head is wise. That has been my problem on many occasions. God has put me into many situations as a police officer, and then as a solicitor and supervisor of other solicitors, where my integrity was more advanced than my wisdom.

There is a mismatch, like where one muscle is bigger than its counterpart. You know you have to be totally honest, and you have committed yourself to be so. But you aren't yet sufficiently mature, wise or discerning to know how to achieve this without getting into excruciatingly tight corners, of the kind that the prophet Daniel would have been able to see coming and avoid.

"Be not righteous over much" - the day when I was corrected by Inspector Bell

When I was in my first year as a police officer I struggled with knowing how to be a Christian in an overwhelmingly non-Christian workplace. Sometimes I behaved too rigidly and legalistically. I was so afraid of doing something dishonest that I didn't allow myself to go anywhere near doing so. That meant I was sometimes overly strict and inflexible with myself, in ways that a wiser person would have avoided. For example, on one occasion I just needed to photocopy one sheet of paper for private use but I felt unable to use the photocopier at the police station. Therefore, when the shift ended, I walked all the way into town to copy it at the post office instead.

On reflection, I don't think I needed to be quite as rigid as I was. I could have just asked and used the Police Station photocopier. That would not have been wrong for just one sheet, if permission was given. But I didn't feel at the time that even the Inspector could validly give me such permission, given that it wasn't his own paper or copier. I would be less rigid today and would accept that an Inspector had got the authority to permit me to do something like that.

That was the sort of stance I took on that and various other issues. One day a senior officer called Inspector Bell corrected me. He wasn't on my shift and so I only knew him at a distance. I assumed that I knew more than him about the Bible and that he wouldn't understand the issues I was facing. However, one day some ethical situation arose and he took me completely by surprise when he suddenly quoted the Bible to me, from the book of Ecclesiastes. He said:

"Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?"
Ecclesiastes 7:16 (KJV)

It was a word in season for me. His quoting of that verse helped me to realise that even in things such as honesty, truth and righteousness, it is possible to 'go over the top' and to become unbalanced and unwise.

At what point does the quality of the love of the truth turn into the error of excessive scruples?

As we have seen, the essence of the problem of scruples is that you have a highly developed sense of the importance of honesty in all things at all times, but you don't yet have the wisdom and discernment to know how to handle every tight corner. Jesus always made it look so easy. When He was put on the spot by an awkward question He always had a brilliantly inspired answer to give. It stopped people in their tracks and got Him off the hook.

That ability would be marvellous to have and would make life so much easier. But what are we meant to do if we *don't have* a brilliant mind, which can think at the speed of light and instantly come up with the perfect reply or solution?

It is not too difficult to handle extreme, 'black and white' situations, where it is very clear that something is, or is not, dishonest. But what about the issues which are much more finely balanced? For example, what about telling the truth where it would mean betraying a confidence, or causing collateral damage to an innocent third party?

In such situations it is as if one is called upon to distinguish between *light grey* and *pale grey* rather than black and white. The reality is that we can only learn to distinguish “light grey from pale grey” by:

- a) studying the Bible thoroughly, and over many years, until you have a very good knowledge of God’s ways and principles
- b) praying to God regularly for His guidance on difficult points
- c) being determined always to do what is right, and to pay the price if necessary, rather than just do whatever is expedient or easy
- d) being willing to risk making mistakes, and to learn from them, over a long period of time
- e) being determined always to obey your conscience, even in the early years, when your wisdom is too small and undeveloped to enable you to avoid these difficulties

If the truth really matters to you, and you are willing to persist for long enough, and to learn from your mistakes, then God will eventually give you a much higher level of discernment. Then you will know how to handle very finely balanced ethical issues, which were previously way beyond you

Be truthful in your use of the Bible and see every verse in its entire context. Refuse to twist any verse to suit your own purposes or interests

When we read the Bible, and especially if we teach it to others, we are under a solemn duty to be careful and truthful in the way we interpret its meaning. That means that we need to read every verse in its full and proper context and refuse to twist any verse to suit our own purposes. Instead of adjusting the meaning of a verse to suit our opinions we need to change our opinions to get into line with what the Bible says.

This may sound obvious, but it is not what many of us do. We take liberties with the Bible and ignore what we see on the page. We also read things into a verse which aren’t there, so as to get the Bible to fit in with our opinions and traditions. That is wrong. Every Christian must show the utmost reverence towards God’s Word. That includes taking great care to find its *real* meaning, rather than imposing on it a meaning of our own making, which is more to our liking.

Every verse of the Bible needs to be interpreted in accordance with what the whole of the rest of the Bible says. Therefore if you are taught that a verse has a particular meaning, but that meaning is contradicted by some other passage, then what you have been taught cannot be the correct interpretation.

The Bible is fully consistent with itself. That is why the proper context for any verse is the whole of the rest of the Bible. That puts you under a duty to know the whole Bible and to be vigilant to check everything that you are taught to make sure that it is biblical. That means that it is consistent with what the rest of the Bible says. As we shall see in Book Three, every verse of the Bible is *true*, but only the whole Bible, i.e. the sum of God’s Word, is *the truth*:

***The sum of thy word is truth;
and every one of thy righteous ordinances endures forever.
Psalm 119:160 (RSV)***

Therefore you need to study all of the Bible to be able to say that you have got the whole truth. The responsibility is on you to make sure you get that. So, being a disciple involves accepting the

challenge of seeking to become familiar with the whole Bible. Without that you will always be at risk of being deceived or mistaken about the meaning of any particular passage.

People twist the Bible's meaning for a variety of reasons, but if you have the love of the truth you will be vigilant to resist that. You will always want to know the real and true meaning, even if that contradicts your own opinions, or your denominational traditions, and even if it requires you to admit that you were wrong previously.

That last point is the hardest for many people. There is a pride in us which hates the idea of having to admit that the way we have always interpreted a passage, or the belief we have held about a particular doctrine, was wrong. People feel that such an admission would diminish them in the eyes of others and they are not willing to risk that.

As a result, many of us stubbornly hold onto a wrong belief, or refuse even to consider an alternative belief, simply because to do so could involve loss of face. This is a particular problem for many church leaders. But it means that they are deliberately, or at least negligently, holding onto error and rejecting truth merely for the sake of maintaining their own image and prestige. Imagine how seriously God views that kind of failure to love the truth and how He will judge it.

How to *develop* the love of the truth and *strengthen* your conscience

We have spoken of the vital importance of having the love of the truth. But what if you don't yet have it, or if you only have it to a limited extent? The answer is that it can be developed or grown. That's because the love of the truth is a *character quality*. It's not an attribute that you inherit genetically from your parents, like being tall or having blue eyes or blond hair. Those are features that you can't do anything about. You either have them or you don't. They can't be developed and you can't just *decide* to have those things.

That's the crucial difference – you *can* decide to develop the love of the truth. It is entirely a matter of *choice* and depends on your own free will. So that's the good news. Everybody is capable of developing the love of the truth – *if they want it*. But that's the problem. Most people *don't* want it. At any rate, it doesn't matter much to them, if indeed it matters at all, and they certainly aren't willing to pay what it costs to develop it.

That brings us to the bad news – there is a cost involved for those who love the truth, and it can be a very high one in terms of inconvenience, trouble, financial loss and even danger. Those are the disadvantages which you will have to accept if you want to have the love of the truth. There's no point thinking otherwise, because it's a fact. It will cost you.

However, the advantages and benefits that come from having the love of the truth, are infinitely larger. Moreover, they are eternal, whereas the costs and downsides are only temporary. Therefore, any wise person will choose to develop the love of the truth, no matter what it may cost them in the short term

Let's turn then to *how* this character quality can be developed, i.e. what practical steps you need to take if you want to start to have the love of the truth for the first time, or to increase it, if you know that you need more of it. I will list a number of steps and try to explain how to take them:

1. *Recognise your need* for the love of the truth, or for more of it, and for a stronger, better-informed conscience.
2. *Make a decision* of your will that you are going to seek for both of these and that you will do so with all your heart and strength, not just mildly.

3. *Pray and ask God to help you* to develop these, whilst recognising that He will not do it for you. It is primarily your choice to develop them, though His help is crucial. Moreover, it must be sought persistently, not just as a one-off prayer.
4. *Study the subject of judgment* and learn all you can about it from the Bible, in particular the Judgment Seat of Christ, which is for saved Christians.
5. *Ask God to make the prospect of judgment more real to you*, so that it stops being mere theory and becomes something tangible, which is frequently on your mind.
6. Ask God to give you *the fear of the LORD*, and in large measure.
7. *Do a Bible study* on the fear of the LORD.
8. *Resolve to tell no more lies* at all, to anybody, anywhere.
9. If you do ever tell a lie, by lapsing back into the habit, then *correct it immediately*, every time. The embarrassment of doing so will help to prevent you lying again.
10. *Resolve not to exaggerate*.
11. Likewise, if you ever do exaggerate, then *correct yourself, there and then*, in front of people. The discomfort of doing that will put you off repeating it and will help to cure the habit.
12. Also, whenever you tell a lie, however small, *confess it to God and repent*. Take it seriously.
13. *Ask God to strengthen your conscience* and to speak to you more clearly and more often.
14. *Listen to your conscience every time*, no matter how small the issue may seem, or how much it costs. The more you respond, the louder your conscience will become, and vice versa.
15. Help your conscience to become *more informed* by reading the whole Bible, over and over again, in daily readings and also by more intensive Bible study. This will greatly sharpen your sensitivity as to right and wrong.

If you will do all these things, and keep on doing them, you will assuredly change. God will respond and fully keep His side of the ‘bargain’, provided He sees that you are taking seriously the need to become truthful. The effort must come from you, but God’s heart will be touched, and He will help you, if He sees that you really mean business and are determined to change.