

## **CHAPTER 11**

### **THE COMPLICATIONS THAT ARISE WHEN WE TELL THE TRUTH, AND A LOOK AT SOME EXCEPTIONAL SITUATIONS WHERE WE COULD LIE**

*<sup>1</sup>Truly 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)*

*<sup>2</sup>Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.  
Psalm 32:2(RSV)*

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

*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)*

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

*2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 (ESV)*

#### **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 in his view. 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. Having said that, there can be certain extremely unusual circumstances where telling a deliberate lie can become the right thing to do. Admittedly, 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:

*<sup>15</sup> Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; <sup>16</sup> 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:

*<sup>17</sup> But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?" <sup>19</sup> 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." <sup>20</sup> So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. <sup>21</sup> 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. Moreover, 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:

*<sup>4</sup> So the young man, the servant of the prophet, went to Ramoth-gilead. <sup>5</sup> And 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." <sup>6</sup> So 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. <sup>7</sup> And 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. <sup>8</sup> For the whole house of Ahab shall perish, and I will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. <sup>9</sup> And 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:

*<sup>18</sup> Then Jehu assembled all the people and said to them, "Ahab served Baal a little, but Jehu will serve him much. <sup>19</sup> Now 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. <sup>20</sup> And Jehu ordered, "Sanctify a solemn assembly for Baal." So they proclaimed it. <sup>21</sup> And 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. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> 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." <sup>24</sup> 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." <sup>25</sup> 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, <sup>26</sup> and they brought out the pillar that was in the house of Baal and burned it. <sup>27</sup> 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.

However, 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:

*<sup>1</sup>Then 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. <sup>2</sup>It was told the king of Jericho, saying, "Behold, men from the sons of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." <sup>3</sup>And 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." <sup>4</sup>But 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. <sup>5</sup>"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." <sup>6</sup>But 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. <sup>7</sup>So 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:

*<sup>8</sup>Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof,  
<sup>9</sup>and 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.  
<sup>10</sup>"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.  
<sup>11</sup>"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.*

<sup>12</sup>*"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,*

<sup>13</sup>*and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death."*

<sup>14</sup>*So 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."*

<sup>15</sup>*Then 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.

However, 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:

<sup>4</sup>*"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. <sup>5</sup>"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.

<sup>15</sup>*Then 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)*

<sup>22</sup>*Joshua 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." <sup>23</sup>So 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. <sup>24</sup>They 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. <sup>25</sup>However, 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:

***<sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By 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 Rehab 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. Indeed, 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 killing can be justified, where it is essential in pursuit of a legitimate war. If that is so, then it must follow that one is also 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. However, 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. However, 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 agonized 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 sympathized 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 quality called 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 far better to have the love of the truth, and therefore 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.

However, 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, on one occasion 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 which are as profoundly important 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 things 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 if 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. 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. Therefore they certainly aren't willing to pay what it costs to develop it.

That brings us to the bad news, which is that there is a cost involved for those who love the truth. Moreover, 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. Being genuinely honest 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 now turn to how this character quality of the love of the truth can be developed. That is what practical steps do you need to take to develop the love of the truth, or to increase it, if you know that you need more of it? I will list a number of steps and then 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 recognizing that He will not do it all for you. It is primarily your choice to develop them, though His help is crucial. Moreover, His help 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 very 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 on each occasion, the louder your conscience will become when subsequent issues arise, 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.