

Must We Always Tell the Truth?

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The third and ninth commandments, especially, commend the truth to us, as do many other teachings of Scripture. God is a God of truth. He doesn't lie (Tit. 1:2, Heb. 6:17-18, Num. 23:19). He wants us to image him in that as in other ways. Note the biblical polemic against lying in such passages as Psm. 31:18, 63:11, 101:7, 119:29, 163, Prov. 6:17, 12:22, 19:5, 9, Zech. 8:16, Eph. 4:25, 1 John 2:21, Rev. 21:27, 22:15. Satan is the father of lies, John 8:44, and sinners are dominated by lies, Rom. 1:25, 3:8-18, 2 Cor. 4:2-4, 2 Thess. 2:9-12. Scripture condemns false prophets, who tell lies about God, Deut. 13:1-18.

But there are other passages in which people mislead other people without incurring biblical condemnation. Note:

1. Ex. 1:15-21, the Israelite midwives in Egypt.
2. Josh. 2:4-6, 6:17, 25, Heb. 11:31, James 2:25, Rahab's deception. Note that apart from what Rahab *told* her countrymen, even *hiding* the spies amounted to a deception.
3. Josh. 8:3-8, the ambush at Ai. As John Murray recognizes, God himself authorized this deception.
4. Judg. 4:18-21, 5:24-27, Jael and Sisera.
5. 1 Sam. 16:1-5, Samuel misleads Saul as to the reason for his mission.
6. 1 Sam. 19:12-17, Michal deceives her father's troops.
7. 1 Sam. 20:6, David's counsel to Jonathan.
8. 1 Sam. 21:13, David feigns madness.
9. 1 Sam. 27:10, David lies to Achish.
10. 2 Sam. 5:22-25, another military deceit.
11. 2 Sam. 15:34, Hushai counseled to lie to Absalom.
12. 2 Sam. 17:19-20, women deceive Absalom's men.
13. 1 Kings 22:19-23, God sends a lying spirit against Ahab.
14. 2 Kings 16:14-20, Elisha misleads the Syrian troops.
15. Jer. 38:24-28, Jeremiah lies to the princes.
16. Luke 24:28, Jesus acts as if he intends to go further.
17. 2 Thess. 2:11, God sends powerful delusion so that his enemies will believe a lie.

Nevertheless, the predominant view among Reformed Christians is that we should never tell lies under any circumstances. This view was held by Augustine and has more recently been defended by John Murray in *Principles of Conduct*.

Murray explains the above passages by the following principles: (1) In some of them, such as #2, Scripture commends what the liar accomplished without commending his/her lie. (2) As in #5, it is legitimate to withhold the whole

truth from someone, but not to misrepresent. (3) As in #3, we need not always act in ways consistent with the mistaken interpretations of our acts made by others (in this case, the residents of Ai).

The first explanation is inadequate in regard to Rahab, for what Scripture commends is precisely her *concealment*, her creating a false impression in the minds of the Jericho officials.

As for the second principle, we can grant that it is sometimes right to withhold truth. But the question is whether it is ever right to withhold truth when withholding it may reasonably be expected to create a false impression in someone else's mind. If it does, as it did in 1 Sam. 16:1-5 and other passages on our list, then it can scarcely be distinguished from lying.

And the third principle depends on a sharp distinction between words that mislead and acts that mislead. Murray is saying in effect that we should never mislead with our words, but we may mislead people by the way we behave. That distinction is not cogent.

And none of these explanations helps us to understand why God himself deceives people in passages #13 and #17.

Charles Hodge says that we are obligated to tell the truth only when there is a "virtual promise." Essentially, Hodge here is placing the burden of proof on those who wish to *require* truthfulness. But it is not clear what a virtual promise is, or what the criteria are for concluding that one has or has not been made.

Meredith Kline explains the biblical examples of deception as "intrusion." In his view, the ethics of the end-times differ from the ethics God has given to us in the law and Jesus' teaching. In normal times, we are to love our enemies and protect them. But in the end times, the enemies of God will have neither a right to life or a right to truth. Now sometimes, Kline says, the end times enter our present time (and so "intrude"). The intrusion is a time of divine judgment, and, in that time, it is legitimate to kill the opponents of God (as did Joshua and David) and also to withhold truth from them.

Scripture, however, does not distinguish two different ethics. Some of God's commands (like God's command to Joshua to kill the Canaanites) are for temporary situations. And Kline is right to say that often those situations are instances of special divine judgments. But capital punishment and just war are also subjects of regular, normative ethics. There are times even in advance of final judgment when the wicked deserve to lose their lives. Perhaps even such "normal capital punishment" can be assimilated to the intrusion model, but if so we need to know that intrusion is a normal part of our ethical life, as limited and defined by God's revelation.

It does appear that the Bible passages listed above all have to do with the promotion of justice against the wicked who are seeking innocent life. Whether or not we speak of these as intrusions, we should note that in the ninth commandment the requirement to tell the truth is conditioned on a relationship, that of “neighbor.” In context, that relationship is specifically legal. The neighbor is the defendant, and the individual “you” is called to the witness stand, in which he must not lie.

This is not to say that the commandment is limited to legal witness, for many other Bible passages, as we have seen, condemn lying more generally. But in these passages, our obligation to tell the truth is based (as in the ninth commandment) on a relationship. In Eph. 4:25, the relationship is our union with one another in Christ.

Now when one person seeks illegitimately to take the life of another, are the two people neighbors, in the sense of the ninth commandment? The Good Samaritan parable does, indeed, extend the meaning of “neighbor” to all needy people who cross our path. But in the situation where someone is seeking to destroy innocent life, rather than to help and heal, does such a neighborly relation exist? I think not. At least, I doubt that those who misled others in the seventeen passages mentioned earlier were in a neighborly relation to their opponents. Certainly those who deceived in those passages didn’t think so. And I think Scripture concurs in their judgment.

There are also other, more trivial situations where questions of truth enter the discussion. Is it wrong to mislead people as a practical joke? No, if it’s a sort of game that will bring enjoyment; not if it hurts. Is it wrong to engage in the flatteries that are a normal part of social etiquette (“Sincerely yours,” “I had a lovely evening.”)? In my judgment, many of these phrases have come to mean far less than a literal reading of them would indicate. Since everybody knows that, it is not hypocrisy to use them that way.