

Adult Lesson Eleven

Honesty

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor (Exodus 20:16, NRSV).



The power of the spoken word to build up or tear down is an awesome thing. Lies, half-truths, and gossip can destroy lives and communities every bit as much as can adultery, murder, and covetousness. In an earlier lesson we examined the power and responsibility intrinsic in knowing and taking the name of God. Likewise, a people entrusted with the duty of spreading his word must themselves be trustworthy. This commandment is set in a courtroom. If one is testifying about another member of the community, he or she must speak the truth so that justice may be served. But to stop at the courtroom door denies the thrust of the commandment. If a community is going to stay in a proper relationship with the LORD, they must speak the truth. Since God is truth, to be a proper reflection of God demands truthfulness.

OBJECTIVES

- Establish that it is God's will we live in an honest community because without trust there is no law and order.
- Examine the positives of living life in complete honesty.
- Consider the idea that our honesty or truthfulness in speech defines who we are.

SCRIPTURE

- Exodus 20:16
- Matthew 12:33-37
- Matthew 5:33-37

WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of Handout #11.1 for everyone in class
- Chalk/chalkboard; marker/dry erase board; or something else to write on

Part 1 - Liar, Liar

Handout #11.1 has two scenarios on it. Before the class session begins ask someone to be ready to read each one out loud. Open today's lesson by reading each scenario. Allow for the discussion of each question. Then ask **What are some other times when you've become aware that you or someone you knew who claimed to be a Christian was not being completely honest. How did you deal with it?** (Be very careful to emphasize that names should be changed and no stories from the current church should be used.)

Part 2 - Only sticks and stones?

Say, **Today we're talking about the ninth commandment. Will someone read Exodus 20:16, please?** After it has been read, ask **What do you think "give false testimony" means?** (False testimony refers primarily to a courtroom setting, but the implication is much broader. God is trying to define his community as one where people speak the truth.) Explain **In the Hebrew mindset, the spoken word had great power. Does anyone remember how God created the world?** (He spoke everything into existence.) **Once God or man spoke a word it was considered to have a life of its own and the ability to actually do something. We see this in the blessing that Isaac gave Jacob instead of Esau. Once Jacob had been blessed, even though Isaac realized the mistake, it was too late. The blessing was understood to have already taken effect. So it was with a testimony and talking about others. When a Hebrew gave a testimony in court, he or she was "re-creating" the event and the court's decision would be based on the testimony. So, no matter what actually happened, the future of the "neighbor" would be based on the testimony. In a very real sense the past was altered and re-created falsely when testimonies were lies.**

This is still true today. I recently saw a talk show about promiscuous teenagers. The host asked one sixteen-year-old girl why she had started having sex. Her answer was heartbreaking. She said, "I was a virgin, but some friends of mine got mad at me and started telling everyone that I slept around. Soon everyone was saying that I would sleep around. Finally I decided that it didn't matter whether or not I did because everyone thought I did. So I started having sex." The words spoken about her literally re-created who she was. Ask Can anyone think of times when lies were told about you which eventually might as well have been true, since everyone seemed to believe them? Allow for some time to talk about this. You may want to have a story about yourself to facilitate this discussion.

Part 3 - Honesty, a lonely word?

Read or ask someone to read Matthew 5:33-37. Say **We are tempted at times to think that it's okay to not tell the whole truth. What are some times when we may feel like it's okay to tell "little white lies"?** (Income tax time, using sick days at work when you are not ill, getting out of trouble with a spouse or traffic patrolman.) **The Jews of**

Jesus time had the same temptation, saying that an oath to God was binding, but other oaths weren't. What does Jesus say about that in this scripture? (Anything we say should be binding and true, not just in particular situations.)

Be ready to write the following list on the chalkboard. Say **Mark Twain said, "Tell the truth and you won't have to remember anything."** It's true that telling the truth takes a lot of pressure off us to remember exactly to whom we told what. What are some other positives to living in complete honesty with your family? (Complete trust of your mate, set an example for your kids, trust of your kids, etc.) **At work?** (Trusted employee, faith of your boss, set a good example for those below you, integrity never questioned, etc.) **With your friends?** (Their respect, maintain a good witness, be a trusted confidante.)

Part 4 - Pants on fire

Say **So far we've talked about the importance of being honest. But what does it tell you about a person if he or she is honest?** Ask **Who knows someone who is unusually honest?** When someone volunteers, ask **What does their honesty tell you about them?** (They have integrity, they are a Christian, they are truly good, etc.) Ask **Do you think it is possible to be a Christian and to be a liar? Why or why not?**

Have someone read Matthew 12:33-38. Say **As we've seen before, when Jesus talks about truthfulness he moves to the problem of the heart. What does this verse tell us about people who lie?** (It is a reflection of who they are and what is in their hearts.) **Are words and sentences important in Jesus mind?** (Yes, so important that Jesus said that we will have to give an account one day of everything we say. Our words will justify or condemn us.) **According to the scripture passage, how do we get a tree to produce good fruit?** (We must first make the tree good, then the fruit will be good as well.) **If Jesus is right, if we are going to stop being dishonest, what will have to happen first?** (We will have to be changed. Our hearts will have to be made good.)

Although we started with a seemingly simple problem, lying, Jesus said that the larger problem is the kind of people we are. If we want to be honest and good, we must be changed. Can we change ourselves? (No.) If not, who can change us and make our hearts good? (Only God can change us through Jesus Christ.) Explain God is still trying to do the same thing he was some 3400 years ago: form us into a community that is pleasing to him and brings glory to His name. We are to be a people of truth, whose words can be trusted. In this way we will be a reflection of Him to the world. If you are having a hard time with being truthful and you want to change, Jesus wishes to forgive you and to change you.

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Close the class in prayer. Allow for a time of commitment to Christ and a request to be changed. You may want to lead in a prayer that they can repeat. If you know that you have some non-Christians in the class, you may even want to lead in the sinner's prayer. The key is to stress the role of God in changing who we are so that truthfulness natural behavior.

Case Studies

Scenario #1

Pam works with you in your office and attends your church. You have been friends since she began working there two years ago. Although you've never heard her tell a "big" lie, you do know that she called in sick three days last summer to take a mini-vacation with her kids. That left her several vacation days for the holidays. You also know that last week she told her boss that she'd finished a report, but left the computer disk at home, when she actually hadn't even started it.

Questions

1. Do you consider Pam to be "honest"?
2. Would you confront Pam about these lies? If so, how or why?
3. You have been witnessing to a friend at work who has commented to you about Pam's lies for several months. Pam overhears your conversation one day and joins in. When Pam walks away your friend says, "She's supposed to be a Christian, too?" and subsequently ends the conversation about spiritual things. What do you say to Pam? What do you say to your friend in the future.

Scenario #2

John, a Sunday School teacher and board member at your church, owns a farm and a hundred head of cattle. For tax purposes, if a calf dies that had been purchased that year, the purchase price can be written off as a loss, but if a calf that is born to one of John's own cows dies, it cannot be written off. John loves to tell this story with a grin and say, "You know I haven't lost one of my own yet!"

Questions

1. Is John doing anything wrong by reporting the death of a calf born to one of his cows as a loss?
2. Would you consider John honest?
3. If you were positive that John was lying about this on his tax forms, would you question his placement on the ballot for the church board next year?