

IS LYING A SIN?

By Denver Cheddie

Is it a sin to tell a lie? If a woman knocks 5 years off her age when asked how old she is, does she need to repent in sackcloth and ashes? Is it of the same ilk as lying to save someone in court or to condemn someone wrongfully? Or is there a type of lying that's OK and another type that's sin?

We've been told all our lives that lying is a sin. And of course the devil is the father of lies (John 8:44) so who dare question? There are a number of scriptures that seem to condemn lying, but there are scriptures where godly men and women lied with no reproof from God or the writers of the Bible. So what is the truth? Let's dig a little deeper into the various scriptures which discuss the topic of lying.

Definition

Before we look at a few examples of people who lied in the Bible and how God and the authors of the scriptures responded, we need to clarify what exactly is a lie. Is it simply a technical untruth or is it the intention to deceive? The truth could be told in such a way as to give someone the wrong impression e.g. by leaving out certain details or by tone of voice. I think most would agree that lying extends beyond mere technical untruths. The intention to deceive is enough to make it a lie. There was much truth in what the serpent told Eve. He told her that she would not die and that her eyes would be open to know good and evil. Both of those were true in a sense. They did not die physically that day and their eyes were opened, so the devil was technically correct (Gen. 3:4-7, 22). What he withheld from them though is that they would indeed die spiritually and that their eyes

being open was not a desirable thing. The bottom line is that the intention to deceive was enough to make the devil a liar "since the beginning".

Examples

Rahab

Consider the case of Rehab the harlot (Joshua 2:4-6). Rahab was convinced that God was with the children of Israel, so she hid their spies in her house when they were being pursued by their enemies. When the soldiers questioned Rahab about the whereabouts of the spies, she said "they went that way", thus leading them in the wrong direction. A blatant lie to save the spies' lives.

Some people say that Rahab didn't have to lie, and God would have given Israel the victory even if she had told the truth. Maybe He would have, maybe He wouldn't have. All we know is what God actually did, not what He would have done or could have done. But this is completely missing the point. The question is not whether God would have given Israel the victory, but whether Rahab's life and her family's would have been spared when Israel invaded the land. I doubt very much that Israel would have spared her life if she had sold the spies out and then conceded, "Sorry guys, I couldn't bring myself to lie." Besides how would the rest of the army have found out about the red ribbon plan if the spies weren't alive to tell them (Joshua 2:18)?

In Hebrews 11:31 we see Rahab mentioned in the faith hall of fame. By faith her life was preserved. It did not say that by faith she helped Israel defeat the enemy. It could be debated whether God would have given the victory had Rahab not lied, and I personally believe He would have, but it

could hardly be denied that Rahab would have died with the heathens had she not lied to protect the spies. In other words, lying was part of the act of faith which preserved her life and inducted her into the Hebrews 11 faith hall of fame. Selah.

Abraham and Isaac

Two other cases of lying were when Abraham, out of fear, told the king of Egypt that Sarah was his sister and not his wife (Gen. 12:11-20, 20:1-12), and later Isaac did the same thing with Rebecca (Gen. 26:7). Some again say that Sarah was Abraham's half cousin so he was technically correct. Once again, the intention was to mislead. What was interesting in both these cases is that God had to intervene to bail them out. This is the same God who did not intervene to prevent Abraham from "going unto" Hagar and bringing Ishmael into this world. I dare say that God didn't really think Abraham's and Isaac's lies were such big deals.

Other scriptures

"But there are clearly scriptures in the Bible that condemn lying", one may protest. Let's look at a few of them.

The 9th commandment

The first one is the 9th commandment, "Thou shalt not lie." I think quoting the scripture wrongly is a bigger sin than lying. What Exodus 20:16 and Deuteronomy 5:20 actually say is "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." That makes a huge difference, because now it's not talking

about lying in general but a very specific form of lying. Bringing a false accusation against someone is an affront to the justice of God. So it is very clear that God hates this kind of lying. This thought is repeated over and over in the book of Proverbs. That book has many references to lying but many of them are all in the context of lying against one's brother or neighbor to accuse them wrongfully.

Proverbs - Lying tongue, lying lips

In Proverbs 6:16-19, God lists 7 things that he hates: *a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart devising wicked plans, feet swift to run to evil, a false witness speaking lies, and one who sows discord.*

The lying tongue is clearly distinct from the false witness that speaks lies, so it is clearly not the same thing as bearing false witness. So what then is this lying tongue? Most scriptures in Proverbs don't really have a context like some other books of the bible, however there are ideas which are repeated in different parts of the book for emphasis and clarity. The expressions "lying tongue" or "lying lips" are repeated elsewhere in the book of Proverbs (See Proverbs 10:18; 12:19,22; 17:7; 21:6; 26:28). The most notable one is Proverbs 21:6 which speaks of getting treasures via a lying tongue. The emphasis seems to be on using dishonest means of getting ahead financially or otherwise. So again it's not all types of lying, but a very specific form that God detests.

Revelation 21:8 - All liars have their part in hell

The next scripture which condemns lying is Rev 21:8 which states that all liars have their part in the lake of fire. If this verse is read in isolation it definitely gives the impression that it is referring to all kinds of liars. But it actually isn't. All of those sins mentioned in that verse refer to some specific set of events taking place during the tribulation, after all the context is set at the end of the tribulation period. The lying in this context refers to preaching and teaching a lie (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1, 2). It refers to propagating false doctrine. There would be a lot of false doctrine during the tribulation period (many false prophets and false teachers) even more so than today. Note that this does not refer to theologians who hold to a slightly differing viewpoint on peripheral issues. It refers to those preaching doctrines that lead people away from Christ. In the context of Revelation it refers to those who were doing the bidding of the Antichrist. But in a broader sense it refers to anyone who leads people away from the true Christ.

Summary

So the Bible clearly condemns 3 types of lying: bringing false accusation against others, using dishonest means to get ahead, and preaching false doctrines that lead people away from Christ. These are clearly labeled as sin. It is very easy to see that lying about one's age is not quite the same thing. The Bible remains silent on any other type of lying, and so should a lot of people. There may be social consequences associated with certain types of lying, but to call them sin is to run ahead of the scriptures.

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