

Learning to Live Without Lying

August 14, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 5:33-37

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' ³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

According to author, Vanessa Van Edwards, who wrote the book *Cues* writes that there are certain cues that people give when they are lying. These cues or "tiny body signals," as Van Edwards defines them, are not surefire ways to tell if someone is lying, but if a person gives enough of these cues, you can almost be sure they are lying.

- 1) The lip purse – when someone presses their mouth in a hard line (Lance Armstrong did this when he first told the press that he did not use performance-enhancing drugs)
- 2) Distancing – when we don't like something we physically distance ourselves from it. This happens when someone leans away from you, take a step back or scoot their chair away, or turn their head while speaking to you.
- 3) Ventilating – this is when you attempt to draw airflow to the skin to prevent a nervous sweat, such as pulling at their collar, lifting their hair, or fanning themselves
- 4) Comfort Gesture – such as rubbing arms or wringing hands, rubbing the back of one's neck, stroking thighs or calves, cracking knuckles, biting nails or pens, sucking on cheeks or biting lips
- 5) Preen – this is when we use self-touch to try to make ourselves look better, such as touching or stroking or twirling hair, fix one's makeup, or fidget with clothes
- 6) Suprasternal Notch Touch – this is the indent right between your two collar bones. People may place their finger directly there or play with a necklace, a tie, or a scarf that is located near there.
- 7) Body Block – we can block our bodies with our arms, our hands, or with a prop such as a laptop computer or a smartphone to make us feel protected but signals close-mindedness
- 8) Mouth Block – same thing as a body block, but we cover our mouths to cover our vulnerability. Biting one's nails is both a comfort gesture and a mouth block, making it a habit very hard to break.
- 9) Eye Block – similar to a body block but when people cover their eyes, take off their glasses to rub at their eyes. "A quick eye touch is one of the fastest ways to calm down."

- 10) Shame — when you put both hands to your forehead and look down or a downward tilt of the head.
- 11) Anger – when you pull your eyebrows down in a furrow
- 12) Nose Flare – when your nostrils widen, many times accompanied by a tightening of the jaw; it's a non-verbal signal of aggression
- 13) Sadness – when our corners of our mouth are drawn down even while we are trying to convince someone else that we are fine
- 14) Mouth Shrug – sometimes referred to as a deep frown, expressed when you expressing doubt or disbelief
- 15) Contempt – otherwise known as the smirk, where one side of your mouth is lifted up. It can signal scorn, disdain or superiority, yet can also confusingly express boredom, apathy, and apprehension
- 16) Punctuator – an expression or gesture they use to punctuate or emphasize their words; these could also be misinterpreted as negative cues, showing contempt and disrespect¹

I don't know about you, but when I read about these cues from Vanessa Van Edwards, I became a bit self-conscious. How many of these cues do I express when I am talking with someone? There's a reason we get self-conscious about lying. We know in our hearts that it is the wrong thing to do (it's hard to fool a lie detector machine). And we know that we lie much more than we would care to admit. If you just thought to yourself, "I don't lie!" Then you just told yourself another one. If you have ever said, "Why am I getting pulled over when I am only keeping up with traffic?" or you sign on the dotted line that you have read the documents for your medical checkup or computer program when you really didn't or when you say "Fine" when someone asks how you are doing, then you have lied.

According to author James Bryan Smith, there are two main things that drive us to lie: "(1) fear of what will happen if we tell the truth, and (2) desire for personal gain if we lie."² Let's take a closer look at each of these. Most of our lying is fear-based: we lie to avoid getting into trouble. We are afraid that people will think poorly of us or that we can avoid the consequences of what we have done if we do not tell the truth. A person may lie when they get caught doing something they know they should not be doing, such as cheating on an exam or sneaking another cookie from the cookie jar. The second reason people lie is for desire, to gain something they want. People may lie on their resumes, or on their taxes when they want to gain something. Both the fear and the desire stem from the false narrative that "It's all about me, and I am all alone." "The first clause justifies all our actions; the second clause forces us to use our own resources, which are limited, to get what we want. One of our fleshly resources is deception. We can be sure that we are not operating within the kingdom when we choose to lie. We are running on our own strength. ...We think we need to [lie] (1) in order to get what we want, or to

¹ Vanessa Van Edwards, *Cues*, pp. 131-159.

² Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2)*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

(2) avoid something we don't want. And if the universe revolves around us, then the lying is justified. ...Unfortunately, we are destroying the integrity of our own souls. According to Jesus, even if we gain the whole world but lose our soul, we have truly lost what is most important."³

[In the Sermon on the Mount] Jesus is dealing with the issue of "swearing," which does not refer to cussing or using profane language, but to making a verbal promise that what is said is true, such as taking an oath. Once again, he creates a distinction between what is considered "righteous" behavior and the kind of behavior expected of those who live in the kingdom of God.

The "old law" simply states that we must not lie under oath. When a person swears to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," we demand, by law, that they do so. Perjury, the failure to tell the truth under oath, was a punishable offense in Jesus' day, as it is in ours. Telling the truth is necessary in order to find justice, and that is why the courts insist on it. In order for a society to get along we must be able to trust what someone is saying. But we cannot count on people telling the truth on their own—especially if they fear the consequences, or the desire for gain is involved.

... In Jesus' day, swearing went beyond the courtroom and into everyday business transactions, and even into daily communication. For example, when selling a cow, the seller would often "swear by God" or "swear upon" his own life that he was telling the truth about the condition of the cow. Today, to establish their credibility some swear what they are saying is true. Jesus' teaching on this is very clear: we do not need to swear at all—not by God or by heaven or on our own life.

As he has been doing, Jesus continues to address the heart, the inner person, the place from which all things flow. The standard of righteousness in Jesus' day was clear: You can tell lies and not be liable (until you get caught), but if you lie "under oath" you are guilty. Jesus, as always, is aiming for something higher, for a new kind of person with a new kind of character. He is saying, "Under oath or not, those who live in the kingdom can and should tell the truth."⁴

People who dwell in the kingdom of heaven will find lying less and less a part of their lives. That is because the kingdom addresses all of the reasons we give for lying. First, in the life with God (the kingdom) we can let go of our fears. We don't need to fear what will happen as long as we are living under his rule and reign. Telling the truth may cause discomfort or embarrassment, but we live with a God who protects us and provides for us. If we choose to lie, we are not in harmony with the kingdom, and losing that is much worse than the consequences of telling the truth.⁵

We are citizens of the kingdom of God, and so, we can risk telling the truth because we are covered by God's grace. "We want our speech to be acceptable not only to the people we

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

address but also to God. The bar is set high. Our words need to be honest and true, but they flow from the heart, so our heart has to be honest and true."⁶ This will take time and practice, but as long as we continue "pickling" in the kingdom of God, we will have an easier time of it.

I have to admit that there are instances when it is better to withhold the truth or just be silent when the truth would only make matters worse for someone else. I remember a time when I was in college and a friend was hiding from someone who was stalking her. When he asked me if I knew where she was, I told him no, even though I knew exactly where she was. I feel no remorse about that kind of lying, to protect the safety of others who are vulnerable. Paul the apostle wrote, "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). "That is a great phrase: speaking the truth in love. And love is willing the good of another. Sometimes "willing the good" will mean telling the unvarnished truth. At other times it may mean withholding the truth. The issue is not easy, but fortunately we have prayer and the Holy Spirit to guide us."⁷

When we know who we are (people in whom Christ dwells) and where we live (in the kingdom of God) we are more able to be straightforward, simple, clear and honest. As long as our hearts are good and we intend no malice, we are in a position to put away falsehood and offer plain speech to others. Beyond that, we can use our speech to give grace to people, which is one of the reasons God gave us the ability to speak. We can learn how to let our yes be yes and also to bless.⁸

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.