

Truth as an Asset



AS JOHN WALKED DOWN THE STAIRS TO THE dispatch desk, he was not in a good mood. For nearly two hours he and other senior managers had been going over the options for their construction rental operation. With construction mired in a recession-within-a-recession, they were faced with the need to reduce expenses, which also meant reducing staff.

Usually recessions are good news to rental operations because companies turn to rentals when they can't afford to purchase the equipment they need. Unfortunately, the number of rental firms had increased over the past five years, and fierce competition drove prices and profits to razor-thin margins. In addition to the normal headaches that come with staff reductions, John suffered the added burden of being friends with most of the workers. In fact, with very few exceptions, most of the mechanics, truck drivers and rental counter staff had been with the company since the early days when John and two friends had set up shop. With an office immediately behind the rental counter, John's contact with the staff was constant and informal, inviting an esprit de corps that served the firm well most days.

"Hey boss!"

John felt a twinge of guilt as he looked up to see the ever-cheerful dispatcher greeting him. Maria wouldn't be at her desk in a week, and she had no idea it was coming.

That was the hard part. Nobody had any idea layoffs were coming.

Nine months earlier, when things started looking

bleak, the senior management team made a crucial decision to hide the fiscal facts of the firm from the workers. Instead they adopted a "no worries" mantra they hoped would bolster the confidence of the sales force and hold onto the skilled workers they needed in the shop.

At first the lies were easy. While nearly everyone could tell rentals were down, parts sales and repairs to customer-owned equipment appeared to be on the increase, and it was easy to sell the idea the scales were balancing out. When workers quit and left the firm their duties were shifted to existing workers, so it was easy to sell the idea expenses were falling fast enough also.

What wasn't obvious, though, was that the firm was drowning in debt with little wiggle room left. As recently as ten days ago, in a crucial "town meeting" discussion, the partners dodged disclosure, choosing instead to promise workers they would never lay people off.

The assurances worked partly because the staff wanted to believe them, and partly because the senior management team had gotten used to covering the facts.

Today they were out of options. At the end of the day, Maria and nine other workers would hear from John there was no longer work for them here.

As he shuffled the stack of final checks, John wondered how to start the discussions.

What would you say?



Scripture Passage

Genesis 12:10-20

In Depth

The objective of this set of five studies is to move us from the place where we're comfortable with moral relativity to a place where others would describe us as having a steadfast character. Steadfast character honors God, but it also benefits us and serves others well. In the first lesson we tackled one of the key barriers to making changes in our character: peer pressure, especially criticism and opposition by difficult people. Our second lesson recognized conflict in the workplace as a reality, and we identified ways to resolve conflict that still honored God while being consistent with our faith. This study addresses truth-telling, the most visible and least visible measurement of character.

From corporate fiscal malfeasance to kernel-of-truth (barely) advertising claims, business and business people have retreated from the idea lying is wrong. Deception on the part of managers leads to an atmosphere of deception that spreads to their workers. Deception on the part of workers in the office seldom stops at the threshold of their jobs ... it gets carried home. Still, we trudge on with little or no real concern about the creeping influence of the tiny lie that gives birth to larger, unnoticed lessons. For example, have you:

- ever asked a coworker to “say I’m not in right now”? (Or worse, have you ever asked your kids to say that!?)
- ever fought a speeding ticket by using a technicality, even though you know you broke the law?
- ever told a child of 12 to say they’re eleven to save a buck?
- ever stretched a point on a resume?
- called in sick when it wasn’t true?

From marking up a price on an item before marking it down for a sale, to denying culpability for injury or accidents until the other side “can prove” we did it, we find ways to shade honesty while blinding our eyes to the collateral damage of the shading. From how we word our corporate brochures to how much we tell our workers in times of duress, we find justification in not being truthful.

Why do people tell lies? Why do people tell lies at work? Discuss or make a list of your answers to these two questions.

[Author's note: One of the more enjoyable "road trips" people take when they do Bible studies on lying is whether or not there are times when it's acceptable to lie. People who say "yes" use the story of Rahab hiding Israel's spies to support their contention, while opponents use the huge volume of passages in Scripture that disdain lying to support their viewpoint. Inevitably the discussion moves past normal circumstances to "worst-case" scenarios. I think God sees any lie as sin, but that's not the object of this lesson, so as you work your way through this study, I encourage you not to chase this rabbit. It shifts your thinking from a commitment to truth-telling to consideration of extremes.]

One of the first things we learn about lies is they're seldom one-time events. Somebody once said "lies beget lies," and there are few maxims truer than that one. Let's explore in Scripture how one example of lying carried forward from generation to generation.

Read Genesis 12:10-20. (Note: Remember God later changes Abram's name to Abraham, and Sarai's name is often spelled Sarah.) What motivated Abram to tell this half-truth?

How would you feel if you were Sarai listening to Abram's request?

What should Sarai have done? Why?

Who else suffered as a result of Abram's lie, and how?

What impression of Abram was left in the minds of Pharaoh and the people of Egypt who knew about this deception?

Is there anything in this passage that might indicate what God thought of this deception? Describe it here.

Now move forward to Genesis 26:1-10 and read an account of Abram and Sarai's son Isaac. First, notice the similarity of circumstance—the famine. Geography dictates that moving to Egypt as Abram did makes sense, but God tells Isaac not to do so. Though it's purely conjecture, now that you know of Abram's deception, does an idea present itself to you about why God might tell Isaac not to go to Egypt?

What does that suggest about the residual impact of lying?

Once again, a husband asks his wife to lie. What impact do you think that has on the relationship of Isaac and Rebekah. Describe some of the steps they must take to maintain the lie?

In verse 8, Isaac and Rebekah slip up. What's their mistake? What do you think Abimelech felt when he realized Isaac and Rebekah were married and had been deceiving him?

What do you think Abimelech thought of Isaac after that?

Think for a minute. In future passages, Egypt and Philistine will become enemies of the descendants of Abraham and Isaac. What role might these deceptions have played in the relationships of those nations? What does that say about the long-term impact of lying?

Now move on to the story of Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob in Genesis 27:1-40. (Note: This is a long passage, but it's important because it shows the steadily increasing effects of the willingness to deceive passed down from generation to generation.)

Who introduces deception into this episode?

This time we don't have to guess the impact of the lying; Scripture lays it out for us. Describe the effects this episode of deception has on the following people:

- Isaac

- Isaac's relationship with Rebekah

- Isaac's relationship with Jacob

- Isaac's relationship with Esau

- Rebekah

- Rebekah's relationship with Jacob

- Rebekah's relationship with Esau

- Esau

- Esau's relationship with Jacob

- Jacob

How does this series of Scripture passages compare to the opening workplace snapshot?

What steps could John and the senior management team have taken to change the outcome of this episode?

How can truth be viewed as an asset in the short-term circumstances of this rental operation?

What long-term impacts will the management team's deception have on the following?

– Employees being laid off immediately

– Employees remaining

What other side effects of their deception might they expect?

Think of times when you've lied at work. What motivated you to do so? Were you caught? If so, what effect did it have? If not, what would have happened if you had been caught?

How do you think God feels about lying at work?

This week, make a list of the lies you've told at work. For the next five weeks, continue to draw up such a list, asking God how He would have you handle the lies and the circumstances resulting from those lies. Steadfast character rests on a foundation of integrity. If we really want to move from moral relativity (the idea white lies are okay sometimes) to steadfast character (my word is my bond), then we must make truth-telling one of the central components of our journey of faith and work.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Lies lead to more lies.
- Lying always has consequences.
- Lying leaves a poor impression of our faith on those who don't know Christ.
- Lying is contagious.
- Truth-telling offers team members the opportunity to overcome obstacles; lies hide those obstacles from them, making it impossible for them to help to overcome.
- Truth-telling avoids the demoralizing effect of deception.
- Nobody wants to be lied to; even if we think it's for their own good.
- God disapproves of lying.
- Deception is never a good human resource strategy; it's never a good marriage strategy; and it is an inheritance we don't want to leave our children.