

Originally published in Plain Truth, May/June 2001

## Telling the Truth—Does it Pay?

By Stephen Lim

We are a nation of liars. In a national survey<sup>1</sup> 91 percent of Americans admitted to lying regularly. Thirty-six percent confessed to telling serious lies which hurt others, are totally self-serving or break the law.

Does it pay to tell the truth? If others lie, aren't we putting ourselves at a disadvantage if we don't? Working my way through school, I delivered special delivery mail for the U.S. Postal Service. Each morning the dispatcher handed drivers a pile of letters and packages. Before starting our route, we recorded the number of stops we had to make. While the other drivers padded their figures, I didn't. This made me look bad in comparison, lowering the supervisor's opinion of my performance.

This consequence was minor, however, compared to those suffered by many who choose honesty. Consider a few: Because they do not cheat on assignments and tests to boost their grades, some fail to get into the college of their choice. Others don't succeed in getting a coveted job because they refuse to puff their resume. "It's harder and harder to be an honest person," laments Michael Josephson. "You feel like a jerk in a world where other people are getting ahead by taking shortcuts."<sup>2</sup>

Besides outright lies, people tell *half-truths*. While what they say may be true, it implies something else. The statement, "Bob hasn't flirted with anyone for two months," insinuates that he did so prior to that time.

As project director, Joseph B. Strauss had a major role in building the Golden Gate Bridge. He also took credit for designing it, and a statue stands adjacent to it honoring him for this dual achievement. Recently, however, the American Society of Civil Engineering concluded that he allowed the real brains behind the innovative design, a shy professor named Charles Ellis, to complete his work, and then fired him so that he could gain the recognition.<sup>3</sup>

We also lie through our *actions*. False claims for workers' compensation are so widespread that private investigators in San Francisco spend 75 percent of their time investigating suspected cases.<sup>4</sup> Boarding a city bus, a man noticed the woman in front of him handing a transfer to the driver. He remarked, "This transfer is dated yesterday." Straight-faced, the woman responded, "Well, that shows you how long I've been waiting."

Our *silence* when we should speak is another form of Lying. One-third of HIV positive individuals, for example, have not informed their spouses or partners of their condition.<sup>5</sup> For decades tobacco companies knew their product to be addictive but concealed it from the public.

People lie for many reasons. First, they do so to *get out of trouble*. While driving her cousin's car, Candace accidentally bumped it, causing a dent. Her father urged her, "Make up a story."

Secondly, some lie to *hurt others*. In the New Testament, false witnesses spoke against Jesus and Stephen during their trials. For political advantage, candidates routinely exaggerate negative views of their opponents, even when they know these are untrue.

Thirdly, others lie to *avoid embarrassing others*. "How did you like the dinner?" your hostess eagerly inquires. Though you were barely able to choke it down with generous quantities of water, you smile, "Delicious." In these cases, a third choice between brutal honesty and lying is gracious truthfulness.

A fourth motive for lying occasionally arises—to *prevent a greater evil*. Suppose a terrified mother appears at your door clutching two young children, seeking a place to hide. Moments later you hear a frenzied pounding at the same door. You open it to a disheveled man with drug-crazed eyes and a butcher knife glistening in his hand. "Where's my family?" he snarls. Would you say, "I cannot tell a lie. They're in the basement?" Or would you choose the lesser of two evils and lie, mourning such a necessity in a fallen world?

Mostly, however, we lie for *personal advantage*. We plead sickness to get time off from work, exaggerate qualities to sell our products and list extra deductions to pay less tax. In 1990 when the IRS required dependents to be identified with a Social Security number, 7 million names mysteriously vanished from income tax reports.<sup>6</sup> Research shows that men like to stretch the truth about themselves to impress women. A college drop-out, for example, might claim a degree from M.I.T.

One of the best liars in history was Eric the Red of Iceland. Banished from his country for three years for killing some neighbors in an altercation, he sailed westward to an unpopulated land that was 86 percent ice—some of it two miles thick—and rock. The only thing that could grow was a little moss

on the beach during the summer. Eric claimed the barren expanse as his realm. As he explored and mapped this land, he named many geographic features after himself.

Returning home he enthusiastically urged others to join him in what he called, "Greenland." They pictured trees, flowers and rolling hills of grass, which promised a welcome change from Iceland. Twenty-five shiploads of people followed Eric to his frozen domain.

### **Why Be Truthful?**

Why should we tell the truth? The Bible commands: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16), and "Speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). While we may simply follow this standard in a dutiful way, we obey with greater conviction when we grasp the reasons behind it. God gave us his commandments in order "that we might always prosper" (Deuteronomy 6:24). In what ways does telling the truth benefit us?

First, healthy relationships require *trust*. The greater the trust, the closer the relationship. Lies erode the bond of trust. Families and friendships could scarcely exist if people doubted each other. Can a lie be harmless? If others catch us in one—however small—will they fully trust us in the future? In the back of their minds lingers the thought, "He lied once, will he lie again?" Unless we acknowledge our wrong, a wedge enters the relationship.

*Society deteriorates* when falsehood multiplies. When people mistrust others, the philosophy rapidly spreads, "It's everybody for himself." Selfishness and greed proliferate. In the end, we all suffer.

Lies also create *stress*. We worry about getting caught and expend energy remembering what lies we told, to whom and why. Unless we can squelch our consciences, guilt breeds anxiety. At the core of our being, we do not experience the integrity needed for peace of mind.

Most importantly, we tell the truth because God wants us to reflect his nature and spirit. The Bible says, "God...does not lie" (Titus 1:2), and "it is impossible for God to lie" (Hebrews 6:18).

We need to be led by "the Spirit of truth" John 14:17, instead of the spirit of deception. While Lying seems less serious than

many offenses, it reflects a direction of life, moving us away from the God of truth. For this reason we should avoid even white lies. Many lies seem of little consequence, but the cumulative effect erodes the character of truth in us.

Lying may give us an immediate advantage. But consider the eventual costs—the breakdown of relationships with people and God. In the short-term, truth-telling doesn't seem to pay, but it rewards us with what's important—relationships of trust, peace of mind and spiritual health.

1 James Peterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York Prentice-Hall, 1991), pp. 45-46.

2 Michael Josephson is quoted by Elizabeth Venant, "A Nation of Cheaters," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 7, 1992, p. D-4.

3 Editorial, "Stealing the Golden Gate Bridge," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 6, 1994, p. A-16.

4 Ken Garcia, "Sleuth Techs Replacing Sam Spades," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 27, 1998, p. A-17.

5 Peterson and Kim, p. 237

6 Elizabeth Venant, p. D-4.