

“TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH....”

There's a Dennis the Menace cartoon in which Dennis is sitting on the front step of his house. His mother is standing behind him in the doorway, a scowl on her face and her arms folded—obviously upset. Dennis' father has just arrived home from work and Dennis asks him, “*Would you rather hear the truth...or MY side of the story?*” That's a humorous example of a sad fact and that fact is that...we lie. We lie for all kinds of reasons. We lie about our age: when we're young we tell people we're older than we are and when we're old we tell people we're younger than we are. We lie about our past lives because we're ashamed of things we did. We lie about our courage because we want people to think we're braver than we are. We lie to win arguments by citing “facts” that aren't really facts. The point is, we lie—and we probably lie a lot more than we think we do.

That's why from time to time we find ourselves saying, “To be perfectly honest with you...” and “To tell you the truth...”? Why would we need to say those things if we were honest and told the truth all the time? Expressions like that are ways of acknowledging what we all know anyway: in spite of all our protestations, a good part of the time we don't tell the unvarnished truth.

Our motives for lying range from the crass to the sophisticated. Sometimes we're trying to enhance our image in other people's eyes. Sometimes we're trying to cover up something. Sometimes, we're trying to spare other people's feelings—or at least that's what we tell ourselves. But the fact is, most of the lies we tell are for selfish purposes. Like Dennis, we lie because we figure that lying will serve us better than the truth would.

A teenage couple on a date fell asleep in the car and woke up to discover that it was way past the girl's curfew. As he was driving her home, her boyfriend came up with an elaborate story she could tell her parents to explain why she was getting home so late. She asked him, “*Why don't we just tell them the truth?*” “*No way!*” he exclaimed. “*Why take a chance on the truth when we've got a really good lie?*” The story illustrates a scary thing about lying: once we've begun to lie, sooner or later we come to the point where we trust lies more than we trust the truth.

Now there are active and passive forms of lying; lies of *commission* and lies of *omission*. The former is actively stating what you know to be false. The latter is withholding the truth—or just arranging the facts in a way that is calculated to leave a false impression. It's my experience that we do a lot more of the latter than the former. We're all inclined to withhold the ugly truth about ourselves so that other people will retain a higher opinion of us than we deserve. We want everybody else to think we have it all together when we're coming apart at the seams. We'd like other people to think that our sins are inconsequential when inwardly we're consumed with lust or anger or vanity or the compulsion to gossip. And other people are content to have us think the same thing about them. And the net effect is that we leave each other alone with pride-bound, unconfessed sins, and we plug along, outwardly at peace but inwardly in turmoil. I remember a time about thirty years ago when my family was having a huge row in the car on the way to church. When we walked in the building and I saw all the other families smiling and talking together I thought: “*Am I the only one here who as he was screaming at his wife and kids as we turned into the parking lot?*” It was depressing.

Well, now that I've been a pastor for 22 years I've learned two things: the first is that we all have complicated, stressful and even tortured lives. The second is that we all try to conceal this fact from each other. The result is that most of us end up leading lives of what Henry David Thoreau called “quiet desperation.”

There's a name for this kind of passive lying, the kind that encourages other people to hold a higher opinion of us than we deserve: it's called *hypocrisy*. People who practice hypocrisy are called *hypocrites*. The *New Testament* gives us a prominent example: the Pharisees.

Now to be fair, the Pharisees were not insincere about their religious faith. They were bonafide believers and they were very diligent about their prayers and other religious practices. But like everyone else, they were susceptible to hypocrisy. Once you've identified yourself as someone who advocates a high standard of ethical behavior, you naturally feel compelled to live up to that standard. When you fail, which you certainly will, it's humiliating and it becomes tempting to conceal your failures. So it was with the Pharisees. As religious leaders, they had committed themselves in a very public way to a high standard of moral behavior, and since they were incapable of living up to that standard, they hid their sins behind a façade of outward piety and righteousness. We can understand.

Still, Jesus reserved some of his harshest language for the Pharisees. He called them "whitewashed tombs," and told them, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

Passive lying—hypocrisy—turned the Pharisees into whitewashed tombs—clean and pure on the outside, but harboring death and decay on the inside. And how are we any different, if we too lead lives of conscious hypocrisy?

It's tough to confront the truth about ourselves. We lack not only the *strength*, we lack the *discernment* to see ourselves as we really are, because it's not only other people we fool with our hypocrisy, it's ourselves as well. We not only withhold the truth from the world, we withhold it from ourselves. And we have done such a good job of it that the lies have become an integral part of our personalities. Nowhere is the wisdom of my favorite American philosopher, Pogo the Possum, more relevant than here: "*We have met the enemy and he is us.*" We don't recognize the lies that are in us are because those lies *are part of us*. Remember—the last one to become aware of the water is the fish who lives in it. It's such an integral part of his existence, he fails to distinguish between it and himself. So it is with us and our silent lies.

The Bible says this in many ways and in many places. Solomon wrote in the Book of Proverbs: "*The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters.*" David wrote: "*Who can discern his errors?*" and prayed "*Forgive my hidden faults.*" Sin is not just what we DO; it's what we ARE—and much of what we are is hidden from us.

So what do we do? How do we stop being what we are, and become something better?

First, we have to come to terms with our hypocrisy. We have to acknowledge that we are poor, miserable sinners in this respect as well as in many others. By confronting the full extent of our sin we begin to pry open the doors of our heart so that we can receive from God the gift of *repentance*—the desire to change, to turn away from lying and seek the truth. "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*"

Second, we flee to Jesus for forgiveness, knowing that he died on the cross for our lies as well as our other sins, and knowing that his death has reconciled us with God who has sent His Spirit to live in us and show us the truth about ourselves.

Third, we develop a taste for the truth by going to the source of all truth: God's Word. The Bible is a vast reservoir of truth and wisdom, bequeathed to us by a God who cannot lie and by His Son who IS the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus said, "*If you continue in my Word, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*" He prayed for his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, "*Sanctify them by the truth; your Word is truth.*" Of course, truth is like brussel sprouts: it's an acquired taste. It isn't very appealing when you first bite into it. But over time you can learn to take joy in it, and its rewards are unimaginably great.

There's one more thing you can do. You can pray to God that He will put someone in your life who will tell you the truth about yourself. And He will do it. He did it for me. And even though I know it may embarrass her, I'm going to tell you who it is: I'm talking about my wife Karen. For

forty-four years she has always spoken the truth to me. Now I won't lie to you, it has taken a little getting used to. Sometimes it goes down more like anchovy paste than brussel sprouts. But to know without a doubt that I am hearing the truth and only the truth from the person who knows me better than anyone else in the world is the greatest blessing I could ask for in this life.

God wants us to know the truth. He has given us eyes to see it and ears to hear it. It's ours for the asking.

Amen.

Isaiah 45:18-19

For this is what the LORD says— he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited— he says: "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.' I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right.

Romans 1:16-21

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

John 8:39-45

"Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things.

You are doing the works of your own father. "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!