

The Truth and How We Tell It

Colossians 3:1-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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In seven years of doing this Faith Questions sermon series, I think I've probably had fifty plus questions sent my way.

Some of these have surprised me. Many have not (mostly because your questions are my questions, too, or at least have been at various points on my journey).

This week's question is easily among the most curious ones that I have received.

Actually, I should rephrase that. It's not the question itself that surprised me—the question of whether there are times when it is ok to lie or to “finesse the truth” in certain morally ambiguous circumstances is one that I suspect most of us have wondered at some point.

It was what provoked the question that surprised me. It came via an article from a website called “GeekWire.” The name of the article was “An Ethicist's Take: Is it OK to Lie to an AI Chatbot During a Job Interview?”¹

I can say with confidence that the question of whether it is morally permissible to lie to an AI Chatbot during a job interview had *literally* never occurred to me.

So, naturally the first thing I did when presented with this unusual question was... ask a chatbot 😊. I typed, “Is it morally permissible to lie to artificial intelligence?” into Chat GPT.

Here's the response I got:

The morality of lying to artificial intelligence (AI) is a topic of debate. Some argue that because AI does not possess consciousness or feelings, lying to it does not

¹ <https://www.geekwire.com/2024/an-ethicists-take-is-it-ok-to-lie-to-an-ai-chatbot-during-a-job-interview/>

have moral implications. Others suggest that honesty should be maintained as a principle of integrity, which could foster responsible and ethical interaction with technology. Ultimately, the moral permissibility may depend on the context and the potential consequences of the lie.

Thanks for nothing, chatbot! That doesn't do much more than restate the question.

I went back to the original article. How did the writer, a certain Robert Trumbull, approach the question? Well, he jumped right into the deep end of the pool with the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Kant's famous moral principle was called "the categorical imperative."

(I took an upper-level course on Kant way back in university and this is almost literally the only thing I remember, other than thinking that most Enlightenment philosophers wouldn't have been much fun to hang out with!)

What is the "categorical imperative," you might be wondering? I'm sure you're at the edge of your seats. Well, it comes down to two basic ideas:

- "Act only on a principle that you could intend to operate as a universal law"
- "Never treat humanity as a means only, but always as an end"

So, to simplify (probably oversimplify):

- If a moral law can't be applied to everyone and in all circumstances, it shouldn't be applied to anyone in any circumstance.
- Respect others; or, as Jesus simplified, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Applying the categorical imperative, Kant believed that it was always wrong to lie, even in extreme situations.

To his credit, was consistent. According to the article an English philosopher once presented the following scenario to him:

Suppose your best friend arrives at your door breathless... chased there by a violent pursuer — an actual axe murderer, in fact — and your friend asks that you hide

them in your house for safety. And then suppose, having dutifully done so, you find yourself face-to-face with the axe-murderer now at your doorstep. When the murderous cretin demands to know where your friend is, isn't a lie to throw him off acceptable here, Herr Professor?

Absolutely not, Kant answers, to the shock and horror of first-year philosophy students everywhere. Telling a lie is never morally permissible and there just are no exceptions.

Wow.

Kant clearly couldn't have imagined a world of chatbots conducting job interviews. I don't know if he would have objected to machines being treated like ends.

My suspicion is that he still would have said that the universal principle of truth-telling would apply in all situations, but I'll leave that one to the philosophers and the ethicists, or the writers at Geekwire.

Well, Immanuel Kant's view on things is interesting (maybe). But here in church, we're more interested in what the original Immanuel might think, aren't we?

And while questions about the ethics of lying to chatbots may be intriguing, we're probably more interested in broader issues around the truth and how we tell it.

Is it ever ok to lie?

This faith question came to me in early December right around the time of our church Christmas banquet. And the banquet provided a few humorous moments around the question of truth-telling.

Those who were there may recall that the condition for your table being allowed to go to get food was coming to the mic and telling a Christmas joke of some kind.

At one point in the evening, one of the young children (I forget which one) came to the mic to tell a joke for their table. I'll confess that I didn't get the joke, but I laughed because I

wanted the child to feel good. It clearly took a bit of courage to come to the mic and speak to a full room of adults! I wanted to affirm them.

Later that night I told this story to someone, and they reacted in mock horror. “What?! The pastor telling a lie!”

Later still, little Jayden wanted to arm-wrestle me, and I faked losing. Perhaps also a no-no! In retrospect, I can almost feel the sting of Immanuel Kant wagging his moral finger at me.

Now, I suspect there are few people whose trust in their pastor has been shattered by these stories (at least I sincerely hope not). But the question of how far the demands of truth stretch is an interesting one, isn’t it?

We might assume that the bible is clear. Thou shalt not bear false witness, etc. Lying is always wrong.

And yet, the bible portrays numerous instances of people who speak or act deceptively who are not explicitly condemned. Some are even rewarded for it.

1. Rahab lies to her own people about the whereabouts of Israelite spies and is praised and rewarded. She becomes an ancestor of Jesus (Joshua 2:4-6; Matthew 1:5; James 2:25).
2. The Egyptian midwives lie to Pharaoh, and God rewards them (Exodus 1:18-20).
3. Elisha accepts a bribe, tells a foreign king what he wants to hear—a barefaced lie—and is not condemned (2 Kings 8:10).
4. Moses lies to Pharaoh about the intentions of the Hebrews (we just want to head into the wilderness for a really long church service!) and is not condemned. (Exodus 5:3).
5. Samuel, under God’s orders, anoints David as king under false pretenses (1 Samuel 16:1-5).
6. Abraham lies without condemnation about his wife being his sister (Genesis 20:1-17). She *was* his half-sister, but the intent to deceive is clear in this story.
7. Isaac tells a similar lie and is not condemned either (Genesis 26:1-11).
8. Jacob and his mother lie to Isaac. In this case Jacob endures the distress of not seeing his mother alive again and he lives in fear of his brother Esau (Genesis 27). But he still enjoys the privileges and promises of the birthright he acquired by lying and deception.

So, whether it's in the case of the saving of Hebrew babies or trying to get the Israelites out of the chains of Egypt or even providing safe refuge for Israelite spies in the land of Canaan, or even securing the blessing of Isaac, it seems that Scripture is willing to accept dishonesty in some exceptional circumstances.

At the very least, it is difficult to extract some kind of universal ethical principle that applies rigidly and in precisely the same way in all circumstances.

And yet, as Christians we believe on a deep level that we are to be lovers and tellers of the truth. We believe that when Jesus said, "let your yes be yes and your no be no" (Mat. 5:33-37) he was pointing to a bedrock principle about the importance of the truth.

The truth absolutely matters to Jesus! One of the more sobering moments in the NT is when Jesus is in a heated dispute with the Pharisees over his identity and he says these words:

⁴⁴You 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** (John 8:44).

Jesus takes lying very seriously, associating it with the devil himself. Indeed, in the story of Scripture, the human condition turns on a lie, on the whisper in the garden, "You can't trust God... take and eat, you can be like God."

And yet, Jesus came full of truth and grace. And the grace is where I think we must fit these really vexing moral questions where telling a lie might save a life or protect someone who is vulnerable.

If someone came to me with the scenario that Immanuel Kant was presented with, I would not hesitate to tell the lie. I don't think Jesus would condemn me for it.

For me, it would be in the same category as the Hebrew midwives lying to protect vulnerable children who would have been subject to the murderous whims of Pharaoh.

I think we should also be honest that these situations will likely be vanishingly rare. Far more frequently, our temptation will be to lie to protect ourselves, not others.

And in these situations, we must hear Jesus' stern warnings. Lying is from the devil. It is wrong and we should avoid it. We must tell the truth, even when it doesn't flatter us, even when it may make things harder for us.

We must put to death our "earthly nature," to use the language of our text from Colossians today. Lying is associated with the "old self" we are to leave behind.

Our lives should be a constant process of taking off that which does not conform to the pattern of Jesus and putting on the "new self" which is *being renewed* (note well the ongoing nature of this—it is a process, not a one-time thing!) in the image of its Creator (Col. 3:9-10).

I called my sermon "The Truth and How We Tell it." Perhaps I should have slightly rephrased it to, "The Truth and *Why* We Tell It."

We tell the truth because God commands it and because we believe that God is truthful and because we are to be conformed to God's image.

But we also tell the truth because of the importance of trust. As human beings, we need trust to have healthy relationships, healthy families, healthy communities, institutions, and nations. Without trust, these things fall apart.

And trust is in short supply these days. There is an increasingly widespread sense that nobody can be trusted.

Trust in the media is perhaps at an all-time low. News outlets are now often prefixed with terms like "left-wing" or "right-wing" thus demonstrating our awareness of and expectation that the news comes to us heavily filtered and edited for ideological conformity.

We suspect that nobody is telling us the whole truth, that inconvenient data is always being hidden from view, and that, as always, profit is the driving force behind it all.

Add to this the toxic sludge and hysteria of social media and you're left with a communication ecosystem that is a breeding ground for misinformation, disinformation, and partial information.

I can think of two instances right now in my immediate orbit where people's careers are being threatened, and institutions are being rattled because of something untrue (or at least *far* less than the whole truth) that someone posted on social media.

Trust in politicians wouldn't rank much higher than that of the media. Sadly, we've long tolerated and expected from our elected officials a base level of deceit, self-interest, and meaningless jargon that makes little contact with our reality.

We don't trust health professionals and scientists. The pandemic and how it was politicized laid waste to this, for many people.

Sadly, many people do not trust pastors or spiritual leaders whether it's because of some moral scandal or evidence of corruption or some other thing.

So, trust has fallen on hard times. A world where nobody really trusts institutions or one another is a sobering one me to contemplate.

It leaves each of us as individual arbiters of our own preferred version of the truth. It is a context that leaves us uniquely vulnerable to authoritarianism and manipulation, and of course the polarization that we see all around us.

I'm not a politician or a scientist or a health professional. I'm not even an expert on media, much as I like to pontificate about it.

But what I can say with some confidence is that we need trust to thrive (or survive) as human beings and as communities.

On the deepest level, trust is inherently relational and inherently personal.

I trust Naomi because I have known and loved her for three and a half decades. I know her character. I don't require her to earn my trust from scratch every morning. It is a given in my life.

Similarly, I trust in Jesus Christ because I have walked with him for nearly five decades. I have seen in his call to pursue the good, the true, and the beautiful validated in my experience of the world. I have experienced the freedom of unmerited forgiveness and mercy in my own life.

My imagination has been expanded, my vision liberated, and my hope enlarged. I have tasted grace and have been bound more closely to its source.

To return this to the question of the week, and to state the obvious, trust requires truth-telling.

Truth is not ultimately about timeless universal ethical principles articulated by philosophers; it is profoundly, and irreducibly relational.

Yes, there are really complicated grey areas where occasionally where telling the truth might do more harm than good.

In these situations, we pray, we wrestle, we ask ourselves what the loving and just thing to do would be, we make our choice. And we pray that God would honour (or forgive) our choice.

But the big picture is that as followers of Jesus we are to be truthful people. We are to be pursuers of truth, tellers of truth, and lovers of truth in all the complexity of our world.

We are to be the ones who shape communities and families and institutions where we can trust one another to mean what we say, to act in good faith, and where we never treat one another as means to ends.

The truth matters because people matter. Telling the truth is, ultimately, an expression of love.

Which probably should not surprise us. God is love; God created the world in and for love. Truthfulness is bound up in how we give and receive love from God and from one another.

May God help us to be lovers of truth and of one another. May God help us to be trustworthy in all we say and do.

Amen.

