Lying
&
Your Children

by
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This e-booklet is a collection of posts about lying from the Shepherd Press Blog. Because of the interest in these posts, they were collected into one document for easy reference.

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Why Your Children Lie

When children lie it is often tempting to see the reason for the lie as a mystery. For example; “Why would my child lie about taking that toy from his brother, when it is so obvious that he did do just that?” Then, deepening the mystery, parents often ask, “Why would he make up such a far-fetched story to cover up his actions? The lie and cover up seem so illogical and unnecessary.” Thus, parents sometimes tend to treat the problem as one of logic and intelligence; they puzzle over why their children would lie. Scripture solves the mystery. Children are born liars. When we sin, we lose the ability to be logical. We are blinded by self-interest (Proverbs 4:19).

Lying is the extension of a self-centered nature. Children tend to lie in two types of circumstances. First, they lie when they fear a consequence so much they will do anything to avoid it, e.g., punishment for hitting. Second, children tend to lie when there is something they desire, and they see lying as the best way to get it; e.g., I am angry with my brother, so I will make up something to make him look bad. In both situations the reason for the lie is the same—a self-centered viewpoint.

Children lie because they fear exposure. They think their thoughts and doubts are hidden, and a lie is the best way to solve the problem. However, nothing is hidden from God.

Lying is an indication that children are much more self-aware than they are often given credit for. It is compelling evidence of their true heritage: original sin. Children don’t have to be taught to lie, it comes naturally.

So when you hear your children lie, remember that one of the elements behind the lie is fear—fear of being exposed for who they really are. The answer, of course, is Christ. Even in the midst of hearing their lies, you can have compassion for your children. Yes, they are sinful, unkind, and even cruel with their lies. But at the root is a heart in need of Christ. Without Christ, fear dominates. Fear can make one stupidly deny the truth, just as Sarah did.

When your children lie, or even when you think they may have lied, you always want to remind them that God knows their hearts and thoughts even better than they do themselves. You want to call them to repent and trust in Christ, for he alone can help them overcome the fear of self-exposure. Only the power of the Gospel can free them from the tyranny of lying. You can and should confidently tell them that God knows whether they have been truthful or not. Discipline for lying must come from compassion for a lost heart. Yes, your children have offended you with their lies, but more importantly, they have offended and mocked God. Help them to see this reality. It is sometimes difficult to realize that a child who is defiant and seemingly unfazed by lying may actually be dominated by fear. Yet this is often the case.

Ephesians 4 says that the opposite of lying is truth-telling. The way to expose lying for what it is, is to tell the truth yourself. If you make your children’s lies primarily an issue between them
and you, you are actually distorting the truth. A child must be right with God before he can be really right with parents. Lying is a deeply personal sin of the heart. Only Christ can address this issue. You want to point your children to Christ to address this sin. More on this and the second reason for lying in the next few posts.
Why Your Children Lie - Part 2

Children tend to lie in two types of circumstances. We looked at the first reason in the last post. The response of immediately trying to deny responsibility comes naturally to us and to our children. Children are fearful of the consequences of their sin and lie to avoid them. Christ must be shown as the one who can bring peace to a fearful heart. It is vital that this pattern be addressed quickly and thoroughly. If it is not, then the habit lying will take root and become a means to other ends.

The next progression in lying is to lie when there is something to be acquired. This type of lie can range from trying to make someone else look bad to scheming to obtain something that cannot be had in a way that pleases God. In both situations the reason for the lie is the same—self-centeredness. But in this second type of lie, the reason for the lie moves beyond mere self-protection to the point of lying to achieve personal desires, even if it means hurting others. The story of Amnon illustrates this type of lie:

“Now Amnon had a friend named Jonadab son of Shimeah, David’s brother. Jonadab was a very shrewd man. He asked Amnon, “Why do you, the king’s son, look so haggard morning after morning? Won’t you tell me?”

Amnon said to him, “I’m in love with Tamar, my brother Absalom’s sister.”

“Go to bed and pretend to be ill,” Jonadab said. “When your father comes to see you, say to him, ‘I would like my sister Tamar to come and give me something to eat. Let her prepare the food in my sight so I may watch her and then eat it from her hand.’ ”

So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. When the king came to see him, Amnon said to him, “I would like my sister Tamar to come and make some special bread in my sight, so I may eat from her hand.” II Samuel 13:3-6

The ESV and NLT translations use the word crafty to describe Jonadab in verse 3. The NIV and NASB translations use shrewd to describe him. Both words provide the picture of a scheming, deliberate liar who is following a selfish agenda. In this passage Jonadab advocates telling lies to obtain favor with a member of the royal family—no doubt an attempt to advance his own status. Amnon embraces the lie as a means to satisfy his raging lust. This is why lying is so despicable and dangerous. This sin uses our own lusts against us. So, you see the progression. This is not simply lying to avoid punishment. This type of lying bears a close connection with the ways of darkness (Eph. 2:1-3). This lie represents a scheming, crafty motivation. This is deceit reaching maturity. Often a young child will blurt out a lie that is foolish – with cookie crumbs all over his face and shirt, your son says, “I didn’t eat the cookie, Mommy.” The scheming liar, the crafty one, makes sure his face is clean and the cookie crumbs are on his sister’s shirt when he lies.
Youthful lusts go hand in hand with this second type of lie. The world encourages the indulgence of these desires. Teenagers are unlikely to tell their parents that they want to borrow the car to go to a party for drugs, drinking and sex. No, the story will more likely be along the lines of "... a couple of the guys want to go catch a movie and a pizza. And since Joe has to go back to school tomorrow I’ll be later than normal, okay? Thanks Dad!"! This is what happened with Amnon. He didn’t care about what God wanted. He didn’t care about his father. He only cared about what his father could provide for him—in this case the object of his lust, Tamar. It is short leap from planting crumbs on your sister’s shirt to attempting to deceive Dad so that lusts can be indulged.

Notice that Amnon doesn’t even question whether it is appropriate to lie. He eagerly buys into Jonadab’s scheme. Amnon is being driven by his own lusts. When you see this pattern emerge in your children, pray for courage to acknowledge it for what it is. Self-pity is often at the base of these lies. Amnon in the throes of self-pity and lust acted without hesitation in following Jonadab’s scheme. It was a fatal decision.

Parents, if your children are sullen or aloof, they are especially vulnerable to this type of crafty scheming—or to following the direction of those who will scheme for them. Find out why your children are sad, withdrawn or sullen. This behavior is not simply a phase. It indicates a self-centered, troubled heart. With young children you have the opportunity to address issues of the heart that, if left alone, can grow to be life-dominating sins. Merely correcting behavior cannot be the goal here. You must address the heart. Christ alone can take the focus away from self-centered pity. Psalm 139 speaks of this reality. Help your children to find comfort in following God rather than themselves.

If you see this pattern in older children and teenagers, don’t think you can easily correct it by taking away privileges. There are deep-seated issues that must be addressed. This is the time to stop, pray and then begin investing yourself in your children to address these struggles. Intentionally conceived lies and schemes indicate a troubled heart.

Amnon trusted Jonadab. Why? Jonadab was willing to feed Amon’s desires. The narrative makes it clear that Jonadab was a self-serving conniver. A little later in the story we see him trying to use Amnon’s death to advance himself with King David. Amnon trusted Jonadab because Jonadab offered what he wanted. Amnon is like the simple fool in Proverbs 9:13-18. He is led to the slaughter by his own lust.

Do whatever it takes to find out what is troubling your child. Be thankful that God helped you to see these lies. Remember that self-pity is a lie in itself. Self-pity proclaims that God cannot be trusted, that his Word is hollow and empty. If your older child or teenager is mired in self-pity he has lost sight of trusting God. He does not believe that God can help him with whatever is troubling him. He may be embarrassed or emboldened by his sinful unhappiness. He may think that being held to Christian standards is short-changing him of the fun his friends are having. He may be driven to lies and alienated by pornography. He may be angry that the in-group at church or school ignores him. It is important to know what is behind the schemes and deceit. By
pointing to Christ, you point your children in the right direction. Work with them. Lead them toward life that is truly life.

We have one more level to look at in this progression of lying. May God provide the grace necessary to battle this sin of lying and lead our children to the rich life of knowing Jesus Christ.
Lying to God

In one sense all lies are lies to God. However, as the passage below shows, there is a particular type of lie that qualifies specifically as lying to God. This is “lying on steroids.” Often, this lie is not only about hiding things that are wicked, but about misrepresenting things that appear to be good, even righteous. This is where the greatest danger lies for children raised in Christian homes. That is why your parenting must go beyond addressing behavior.

“Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet.

Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.” Acts 5:1-4

Here is an example of how this pattern of lying to God starts. One sibling sees that his sister is rewarded for cleaning. So, he is careful to inform his mom that he also helped, even if he did not actually do anything. This child realizes that he can achieve what he wants if his parents only perceive that he is doing good things. Thus, he might participate by appearing to be busy, but only when mom is looking. Internally, he may be resentful of even having to appear to do something he doesn’t want to, but he is motivated by the reward or praise he thinks he will receive. He may even agree that God helped him to obey because he knows that is what his parents want to hear. This deceptive, self-serving attitude may eventually lead to the kind of deception that Ananias and Sapphira practiced. They were seeking praise and status without the sacrificial spirit of truly loving Christ. It was in this way that they lied to God.

As parents, you must not become complacent when your children give only outward compliance to your directions. If you put up with a grumbling, complaining spirit as the price for your children following your directions, you open the door to lying to God. God desires obedience from the heart, not the outward form of ritual sacrifice. (Amos 5:21-23; Isaiah 29:13) So, the mindset that says, “At least he took the garbage out, even though he moaned and groaned about it,” totally misses the point of loving God. This child is not being shepherded. Rather he is being encouraged to believe that God can be misled by mere outward compliance to his commands.

Ananias and Sapphira believed that they could trade the appearance of obedience for spiritual status—for recognition from others that they were devoted to the church and to God. But God is not mocked. He cannot be deceived. Lying expresses the hypocrisy of the human heart. This is why the Lord detests lying lips. As lies progress beyond mere self-protection to the point of lying to achieve personal desires, the danger of lying directly to God increases. Ananias and Sapphira tried to manipulate the appearance of doing good. The fatal mistake they made was thinking they could deceive God as well as people.
Lying is not something to ignore. Don’t allow the busy routine of life to cover patterns of outward compliance. You must address this sin carefully and wisely. This requires a substantial investment of time and biblical wisdom. We will look at this in the next post.
What to do About Lying

Children’s lies are a harsh reminder of the nature of sin. To fully appreciate the immense power and value of the cross in our lives, we must have a profound sense of the ugliness of sin. This awareness must extend to your children as well. My children and your children come into this world as natural enemies of God. Telling the truth and avoiding deceit is not natural for them. They seek first and foremost to gratify their own passions and desires, even if it means that others will be harmed. They are by nature children of wrath. As the Psalmist & Paul say:

Even from birth the wicked go astray;

from the womb they are wayward and speak lies. Psalm 58:3

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience —among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. Ephesians 2:1-3

You must be conscious of the reality of sin in your parenting. Your children are accountable to God. This thought does not sit well with the world, particularly the world as it pertains to the nature of children. G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer in the field of child psychology, described lies as an expression of a child’s mytho-poetic capabilities. Children are assumed to be innocent from birth.

You will not find support from the world around you for the idea that children are objects of wrath. But that doesn’t change reality. Recognizing the true nature of a baby is one of the great tests of faith. I have never been so blown away as I was when seeing each of my five children for the first time. Babies outwardly evoke hope and joy at the promise of a new life. But the reality is that these precious children are in fact children of wrath. Their hope, even though they don’t recognize it at the moment of birth, is that faithful parents will proclaim to them the glorious gospel of God’s grace which alone can transform them into children of the King.

So, in a sense you should not be shocked when children lie. You must not be falsely romantic and think that somehow your child is immune to the ugliness of sin. In reality, your child was born to lie! So, what do you do to confront the lies that your children will tell?

First, understand that your child is not made happy by his lie. As we have seen in the previous posts, there are particular reasons for lies that children tell. Sin, at its core, is deceptive. Lying builds distrust of others. A child who lies is a child that is hurting. He is a child who will become self-focused and insecure about his relationship with others, especially his parents. He is a child who is not able to trust others. Parent, your first step in dealing with lies is to have
compassion for your child. The most profound way to demonstrate that compassion is to lovingly bring the word of God to bear upon those lies.

What to do about lying - age specific

Following the model in *Shepherding a Child’s Heart* about the way to engage children at various age levels is important. With young children you want to firmly establish the authority of God and his directives not to lie. This is the time to establish that lying is wrong because God says it is. Lying is not serving God, and life will not go well for the liar. This is not a time for extensive reasoning and deep introspection. God hates lying, and it must be rejected. Swift, direct and loving discipline is appropriate. Lying is not a stage that will be naturally left behind. If not biblically addressed, lying will become a way of life.

With children in the second age category (ages 5-12), you must begin to appeal to the conscience. Lying is definitely not a character trait you want encourage. Tedd Tripp points out that Nathan the prophet appealed to the conscience of David with the story of the man who had had his lamb taken from him. David responded in anger at this outrage. But his outrage was turned to broken repentance as Nathan told him that he was the man. This sort of appeal takes wisdom and understanding of your children. Nathan carefully selected an illustration that would have the greatest impact upon King David. You must choose your illustrations with understanding of what will impact your own children. Help them to see that their lie will not bring true peace. If a child in this age range lies, something is troubling him. Find out what that is. Do not focus only on the actual lie. What is it that drives this child to believe that a lie will best serve him? Perhaps he is afraid that he will be treated harshly. Perhaps he will say he doesn’t care what his parents think, when in reality he cares so deeply what they think that he is afraid for them to know that. Whatever the issue is, take the time to work this out with your child. The lie is often a symptom of a deeper underlying problem, possibly a broken relationship that you have overlooked.

For teenagers, lying is often about keeping parents out of their lives. Consequences may be feared. There may be embarrassment or fear that parents will find out secret sins such as pornography. There may be the fear that parents will not allow teenagers to do what they want if they tell the truth. For teenagers, the gospel must be internalized. If a teenager who is a Christian lies, he has lost sight of the power of the gospel to bring healing. If the teenager is not a Christian, then whatever it takes to make the gospel central must be embraced. Again, take the time to know your teenager. I know that it is possible that your teenager may not appear to be interested in being known. However, you must make this a priority. Your child needs to know Christ.

For all ages, prayer with and for your children about lying is essential. Direct your prayers to the mercy of God to change hearts to love truth. For all ages, the gospel is the answer, but it is
presented according to the child's growing awareness of himself in relationship to God. Pray for understanding regarding your children and how you can bring wise counsel to them.

These answers are but brief outlines. If you have specific comments or questions please share them with us. Lying is something that we cannot run from and we must see it for the sin that it is. However, we must also rejoice in the power of Christ to conquer sin and bring truth to the liar.