

IT'S DISCOURAGING TO THINK HOW  
MANY PEOPLE ARE SHOCKED BY  
HONESTY AND HOW FEW BY DECEIT.

—*Noel Coward*

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UNDER  
THE LAMPLIGHT:  
**Honesty**

## ADIOGENES' SEARCH

**T**ravel back through time over 2,300 years to Athens in the fourth century BC. As you wind through the stone streets of the city, the bright light of the sun casts harsh shadows on the stone pathway before you. You wind through these mottled streets on your way from the marketplace to your home . . . carrying your meager purchases for tonight's meal in a small sack by your side.

As you round a corner, you spot a man in the distance carrying a lighted lamp. How odd! Why is he carrying a lamp when the sun is so bright? You watch as he pushes the lamp into the faces of oncoming pedestrians. He draws closer, and now you make out the simple garb and bare feet of this walking lamppost. He is almost beside you before his shaking hands thrust the clay lamp into your face. Then he asks his penetrating question: "Are *you* an honest person?"

You've just met Diogenes . . . the Greek philosopher asking uncomfortable questions. Diogenes belonged to a school of philosophy whose members believed virtue was the only good. They sought the essence of good in self-control and independence, so while looking for an honest individual Diogenes searched for someone who was not motivated by self-interest.

You feel strangely uncomfortable by his penetrating eyes and abrupt question. What does he know about you? You hesitate but a moment before answering, but even as you begin to speak you are sure he noticed the catch in your voice. He moves on in his search for someone honest, and you head home—pondering the uncertainty of your answer.

### A WHO'S WHO AMONG THE DISHONEST

If you were to ask your friends and colleagues what groups of people they felt were most untrustworthy, you might hear

journalists, celebrities, telemarketers, used car salesmen, policemen, and others. But almost everyone would include politicians on such a list, and have done so for a long time. Mark Twain penned, “It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctively native American criminal class except Congress.”<sup>6</sup> Will Rogers wisecracked, “A politician is just like a pickpocket; it’s almost impossible to get one to reform.”<sup>7</sup> Even the French general and politician Charles de Gaulle said, “Since a politician never believes what he says, he is quite surprised to be taken at his word.”<sup>8</sup>

We distrust politicians because some (thankfully, not all!) make outrageous promises to get elected that they cannot possibly keep. Working in Chicago has given me new insight into the reality of politics and corruption. One recent example is that of former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich who seems to embody the hubris and deceit we have come to expect in politicians. After the governor spoke at his impeachment trial, State Senator Matt Murphy summed up the sentiment of many. “He reminded us today in real detail that he is an unusually good liar.” The Senate then voted 59–0 to remove Blagojevich from office.

Unfortunately, Rod Blagojevich is not an isolated case. Three of Illinois’ last seven governors have gone to prison. Amanda Paulson wrote an incisive article explaining why a “culture of corruption” seems to pervade Illinois politics. “Politicians blame, in part, Illinois’ loose system of ethics and campaign-finance laws. But the deeper issue may be an entrenched political culture in which trading favors—and money—is often expected and encouraged, people enter politics thinking more about power and personal gain than public service, and the public holds their elected officials to a low standard of ethics.”<sup>9</sup>

Diogenes would have a tough time searching out a totally

honest individual in Springfield, Illinois . . . or in Washington, D.C. Politicians are not any more evil or corrupt than society as a whole. But they are under more scrutiny because the promises they make are public. We entrust our leaders with the authority to do what is right, but they face added temptations that come with being part of the power structure. Edmund Burke wrote, “The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse” . . . and that is a danger faced by all politicians.

### An Honest Politician

Had Diogenes lived two centuries earlier, he could have found his honest man. And that honest man was a career politician! His name at birth was Daniel, which means “God is my judge.” Daniel was born into a royal family in the kingdom of Judah. But his silver spoon soon tarnished. As a young man he watched the army of Nebuchadnezzar march on Jerusalem. The city surrendered, and Nebuchadnezzar demanded the collection of several royal “hostages” that he could take back to Babylon to guarantee the cooperation of this captured nation. Daniel was one of these.

Daniel spent three years in Babylon learning the language, laws, and literature of the Babylonians. He graduated *summa cum laude* . . . top honors in his class! He then entered his career in government. A career that lasted over six decades. A career that saw numerous promotions and honors. A career that spanned the rule of at least four kings in two separate empires.

In six decades a politician can make many friends—and even more enemies. Enemies seething with jealousy, envy, anger, and resentment . . . emotions that gnaw at the insides of otherwise competent people and force them into irrational acts.

The crisis came near the end of Daniel’s governmental

career. The king appointed Daniel as one of the top three administrators over the government. (He had reached the level of senior cabinet minister.) But future promotions were on the horizon. “Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom” (Daniel 6:3). Though in his eighties by this time, Daniel was still leaving the competition in the dust!

And how did his political rivals react?

“At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs” (Daniel 6:4a). How do you stop a politician in his tracks? Look for the dirt. Find the skeletons in the closet.

Consider how well you would fare if a group of powerful individuals secretly decided to investigate you. They would spy on you at work. Record the time you arrive each morning and the time you leave every night. Count the paper clips and pens in your drawer to see if even one is missing. Follow you home to see where you stop along the way. Look through your mail and magazines to see what you are reading. Rifle through your trash to see what you are eating. Monitor your television and your computer to see what you are watching. Check your tax returns for “irregularities” or unreported income. Look through your bank records to verify all deposits and checks. In short, what would your file look like if a group of enemies pulled out all the stops and spared no expense to uncover the “real” you?

Picture the scene in the darkened boardroom the night the private eyes presented their report. A few flickering

*DANIEL HAD FAITHFULLY DONE THOSE THINGS HE WAS ASKED TO DO TO THE BEST OF HIS ABILITY.*

torches mounted on the glazed-brick walls reveal images of lions, their bared fangs and wild eyes mirroring the ferocity of the gathering band of conspirators. Packed into the room were 120 satraps and the other two administrators. They came in vengeful glee hoping to unmask Daniel and prove to themselves—and to the king—that Daniel was no better than anyone else. The investigation had been long and arduous, made even more so by the need for secrecy. Neither Daniel nor the king could know of this “private” investigation. Had Daniel known, he might have been able to block the effort or take extra precautions to hide any incriminating evidence. Had the king known, he might have shown his displeasure at their petty jealousy by ordering their dismissal . . . or their death!

The room grew silent as the chief investigator stepped to the podium. With a grim frown on his face he announced to those gathered that the investigators “could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent” (Daniel 6:4*b*). Daniel was squeaky clean!

The group of would-be antagonists reluctantly admitted two essential facts about Daniel’s actions. First, they could find no evidence of corruption. Daniel had not taken bribes, skimmed money from the public treasury for private gain, received kickbacks, or provided political favors to friends. No sins of *commission* could be found.

Second, they could find no evidence of neglect. Daniel had not slacked off, cut corners, or ignored his responsibilities. He had faithfully done those things he was asked to do to the best of his ability. No sins of *omission* could be found.

No corruption. No neglect. Daniel was as honest as politicians come, and those gathered at this secret meeting had to be thinking the same thing that had been going through the king’s mind: Daniel was in a league of his own.

A sharp tapping on the podium momentarily silenced the murmuring of the satraps. “Don’t abandon all hope,” the speaker said as his face twisted into a sinister grin. “Our search uncovered one other item.” Though ignored at first, this one characteristic offered a ray of hope in an otherwise gloomy report. “We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God” (Daniel 6:5).

Could there be a connection between Daniel’s faith and his actions? Was Daniel such a “straight arrow” because of the heavenly Archer he served? To this group of disgruntled advisors Daniel’s one vulnerability was his unswerving devotion to his God. Daniel’s was so honest and consistent in his actions that an attack against his religious beliefs would not force him to change his routine.

Their plot was ingenious. Flatter the king by suggesting that all prayers for thirty days be directed only to him. Obviously the law was impractical and unenforceable, but that didn’t matter. These leaders designed the law to entrap just one individual, and it worked to perfection. Daniel, Mr. Honest-as-they-come, was not about to deny his God . . . or hide his public commitment to his God. As soon as the king signed the law, the conspirators hurried to Daniel’s house. Some gathered in the street along the west side of Daniel’s house, others climbed to the roof of the building just across the street. They were all seeking a clear view into one particular window in Daniel’s house—an upstairs window that opened toward the west, toward Jerusalem! For nearly seventy years Daniel had lived in Babylon, but he never forgot his hometown, or his faith. This was the place where he had prayed daily, and they were hoping he wouldn’t stop now. As they expected, they found him praying in his open window “just as he had done before” (Daniel 6:10).

Anyone can display godly character when the going is easy. Few steal if they are satisfied with what they possess. Few lie when speaking the truth is to their advantage. Few cheat on exams when they know all the answers. But character is formed in the crucible of adversity.

The key to Daniel's success in surviving both the political investigation and the infamous lions' den that followed was his honesty. After his miraculous deliverance Daniel explained why he had been spared. "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king" (Daniel 6:22).

### Where Has Honesty Gone?

Honesty is a character trait held in high regard throughout history. Millions of American schoolchildren grew up knowing the tale of George Washington confessing to his father, "I cannot tell a lie. I chopped down the cherry tree." Now, it is a bit disconcerting to find out the story is untrue! Mason Weems, an American Episcopal clergyman, who wrote a popular biography of George Washington entitled *The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington*, invented the story. Somehow it seems ironic that a clergyman falsified a story about George Washington because he wanted to teach children about honesty.

Though the story was not true, the lesson conveyed did influence another American some years later. Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky and grew up on the Indiana frontier. Formal education was the exception on the edge of civilization, but two books profoundly influenced Lincoln's life. The first was the Bible, and the second was Mason Weems's biography of George Washington. With these two books as his guide, is it any wonder that Abraham Lincoln

became known as “Honest Abe”?

In just over a century the Western world has moved from extolling the virtue of honesty to believing that honesty is not always the best policy. Don't get me wrong. I'm *not* saying that society was honest a century ago. Dishonesty has marred God's creation almost from the beginning. The first tempter, Satan, is called “a liar” (John 8:44). But the frequency of lying and the acceptability of lying has increased at an alarming rate.

Sadly, this trend is as true for those who claim to follow Christ as it is for those who don't. Rod Handley highlighted the severity of the problem. “Numerous studies indicate that Christians are just as likely as non-Christians to falsify tax returns, plagiarize, bribe, shift blame, ignore construction specifications, illegally copy software, steal from the workplace, and selectively obey the laws of the land.”<sup>10</sup>

Trust is a fragile commodity. Once lost, it is extremely difficult to recover. We struggle to trust someone caught in a lie.

### Why Bother with Honesty?

In the back of our minds we all believe in the virtue of honesty. And yet, we all struggle with being honest. Well, actually we don't like to think of it in those terms. We prefer to say we “fudge” a little on a report or test. We only tell “little white lies” so we won't hurt the feelings of others. And we “shade the truth” to enhance our popularity or fit in with the crowd. In effect, we lie to ourselves about our dishonesty with others.

But why should we tell the truth? What personal benefits will honesty bring? The Bible presents three specific, positive results of honesty. Honesty promotes trust, provides a positive role model for others, and pleases God.

## Honesty promotes trust

Whom do you trust? Stop right now and make a list of five individuals you consider to be trustworthy. They may be close friends, church or community leaders, coworkers, radio or television personalities, national or international leaders. But the one common element must be that you trust them. Now look at your list and ask yourself what elements these individuals have in common. One specific item I'm sure they share is that you perceive them to be people who are honest. What they say, what they do with their money, how they per-

form at work, how they treat others—you trust those who have a reputation for honesty in these areas.

Now, make a list of five individuals you don't trust. They can be people you know or public figures. Again, look at the list and ask yourself what elements these individuals share. Those you trust least are those you perceive to be dishonest. They have lied, cheated, or been dishonest

in some way . . . and that's why you don't trust them.

Why is God trustworthy? Because He doesn't lie and He doesn't make empty promises. In short, He's honest. Period. We stake our eternal destiny on God's promises. "We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God . . . And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:9, 11–12). God's honesty to us promotes trust in Him. And that trust is essential for our eternal destiny.

Are you trustworthy? You like to think so. (You certainly *hope* others trust you!) But trust is a by-product of honesty. If

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you lie to others, no matter how small or insignificant the lie is, eventually you will be exposed. To the extent you compromise your standards of honesty, you will lower the level of trust others have in you.

Honesty provides a positive role model

The past few decades have seen a steep decline in honesty. People distrust politicians, and what little trust remains erodes deeper at each election when candidates hurl charges and countercharges against each other. Political commercials, blending half-truths and distorted facts, promote one candidate by tearing down the character of another. Even “Honest Abe” would have struggled under all the mud hurled by today’s politicians.

Yet this is no time for Christians to give up. The truth of God’s Word shines most brightly in the darkness. The age we live in does not have a monopoly on dishonesty. The same moral decline gripped the Roman Empire when the church began. Christians stood out because they displayed characteristics that were lacking in those around them.

The island of Crete epitomized the cesspool of moral values in the Roman world. In Greek literature “to Cretanize” was a euphemism for lying. In Titus 1 the apostle Paul quoted the Cretan poet Epimenides who described the moral state of his country five centuries earlier. “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.” Then Paul explained that the evaluation was still valid. “This testimony is true.”

How could a society with a history of dishonesty ever change? The answer rested in the positive role models of those believers living in Crete. Paul spent the next chapter explaining how older men (2:2), older women (2:3), young women (2:4–5), young men (2:6–8), and even slaves (2:9–10) could become examples who could influence society. Titus was to

“teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (2:1). Cretans may have been known the world over as liars, but the believers in Crete were to live by a different standard.

Passing new laws won't make society honest. There are not enough police today to enforce the laws already on the books. Technology won't make society honest. The Internal Revenue Service uses sophisticated computer programs to uncover tax fraud, but many still cheat on their income tax returns. Stores spend billions of dollars on security, but shoplifting continues.

The world needs examples of honesty in action. They need role models of Christians who live out their faith in real life.

### Honesty pleases God

The bottom-line question on the issue of honesty is not how we feel about the issue but how God feels. What is God's view of honesty?

In Proverbs 11:1 Solomon wrote, “The Lord abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight.” The marketplace buzzed with activity. Each vendor called to those passing by, trying to get them to stop and shop. Children laughed and darted through the crowd, prompting distracted mothers to stop haggling just long enough to shout an unheeded word of warning. The aroma of freshly baked bread mixed with the fragrance of hyssop and the pungent smell of yogurt. Baskets of grain and jars of wine sat beside piles of grapes and figs just outside the city gate. Bargaining was brisk as the vendors hawked their wares. After agreeing on the price, the vendor would set up a pair of scales. The seller would place the appropriate weights on one side while the buyer placed some silver on the other. When the scales balanced, the payment was sufficient.

No bureaucracy existed to test and certify the scales of

that day. Archaeologists have discovered stone weights at numerous sites, and no two sets of weights match exactly. The temptation for the seller was great to make each weight just a fraction heavier than the accepted standard. The average buyer would never know he or she had paid just slightly more than necessary during the transaction. But God knew. The point of Solomon's proverb is that *God* is the one who is pleased, or displeased, by such actions.

God expects honesty from those who claim Him as their heavenly Father. He wants His children to share His "family likeness" . . . and that includes honesty. Yet some Christians use honesty as an excuse for being rude and obnoxious. Does being honest mean we must be offensive?

### SPEAK THE TRUTH . . . AND IN LOVE

In writing to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul spent the first half of his letter describing the spiritual wealth God had bestowed on His church. In the second half of the letter Paul focused on the "so what" of each believer's new position. A believer's new position in Christ should bring practical changes in his or her day-to-day conduct. One of the first areas of change named by Paul is in the area of honesty. "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25).

But we must view Paul's command within the larger context. Just a few verses earlier Paul focused on the motive that is to guide all speech. "Instead, speaking the truth *in love*, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head" (Ephesians 4:15, italics added). Some things may be truthful, but they are best left unsaid if the one speaking is not motivated by love.

Honesty—guided by love—is always the best policy. Sometimes love requires us to hold our tongue rather than lashing back in an unkind way. But at other times love requires us to tell a friend what they need to hear, even if the words are not what they want to hear. Such honesty will deepen most true friendships.

Solomon spoke of a friend’s honesty in the book of Proverbs. True friends are those we trust to say the hard things . . . the rebukes that reveal blind spots in our lives. Solomon described the value of such honesty from friends.

**Proverbs 27:6** “Wounds from a friend can be trusted,  
but an enemy multiplies kisses.”

*[A friend tells you what you need to hear, even if the truth hurts.]*

**Proverbs 27:9** “Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one’s friend springs from his earnest counsel.”

*[Honest advice from a friend should make us thankful for his or her counsel.]*

**Proverbs 27:17** “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

*[A true friend sometimes causes “friction and sparks” in our life, but the results are always positive.]*

## Reflect and Respond

Honesty isn't always easy. It can be uncomfortable, embarrassing, and unpopular . . . but God expects His children to share His passion for honesty.

1. In what areas of your life do you struggle with complete honesty?
2. What can you do in the next seven days to become more honest in your words and deeds?
3. Do you recall any specific instances in your past where your dishonesty hurt others? Pray and ask God to help you resolve the matter, even if it requires confession and restitution.
4. Memorize Ephesians 4:15 and consciously try to “speak the truth in love” in the coming days.

*“Listen, for I have worthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right. My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness.”* (Proverbs 8:6–7)