

Integrity: From Sinai to Silicon Valley

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Years ago I was an undergraduate member of a research team working on the viability of alternative sources to replace the increasingly expensive and dwindling reserves of crude oil. These sources included tar sands and oil shale, both of which held some promise economically and scientifically. As with all good research, we were building on previous work by both academics and students. Along the way, we discovered that a previous graduate student had fudged some important data, and we could not duplicate his work. This set our research back several years and wasted important resources. The data affected graduate students who relied on the integrity of the previous work to proceed in their efforts. Eventually, with a change in economics and political climate, the resources were shifted to other pressing research, and I left the industry. This experience caused me to be a little more cautious personally and more distrusting generally of industry.

Recent scandals in the corporate world have had widespread effects. Bishop Richard C. Edgley, first counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, explained the far-reaching consequences of corporate dishonesty:

In the past few years an increasing number of business leaders have been exposed for dishonesty and other forms of bad behavior. As a result, tens of thousands of loyal, long-term employees have lost their livelihoods and pensions. For some this has resulted in loss of homes, change of education and other life plans. We read and hear of widespread cheating in our schools, with more concern about receiving a grade or degree than learning and preparation. We hear of students who have cheated their way through medical school and are now performing complicated procedures on their patients. The elderly and others are victims of scam artists, often resulting in the loss of homes or life savings. Always this dishonesty and lack of integrity are based on greed, arrogance, and disrespect.¹

As disturbing as the corporate scandals are, there is nothing inherently dishonest in industry or the business world. As with any structure or scientific endeavor, the integrity of the whole is compromised by a lack of integrity in any individual component. Again, Bishop Edgley warned, “There will never be honesty in the business world, in the schools, in the home, or anyplace else until there is honesty in the heart.”² The question of integrity therefore becomes a personal quest.

I have observed an interesting phenomenon among active Latter-day Saints as they evaluate their personal worthiness to enter the temple. As their bishop, I ask them the standard recommend questions about tithing, chastity, the Word of Wisdom, and other issues of faithfulness; their responses are generally precise and simple. With a *yes* or a *no*, they evaluate their eligibility to go to the temple. But they appear to struggle when asked the question, “Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowmen?” This question often solicits the response, “I try to be,” or “I think I am.”

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1. Richard C. Edgley, “Three Towels and a 25-Cent Newspaper,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 73.
 2. Edgley, “Three Towels and a 25-Cent Newspaper,” 73–74.

What is it about honesty that makes this question seem so difficult? Perhaps an examination of its foundations in biblical law and its application today will help us understand our struggle with the vital issue of honesty. This investigation also necessitates a brief analysis of our cultural climate in order to understand our need to return to a standard of honesty that is at odds with the world's standard. The words of modern prophets will help us to step beyond the culturally deprived levels of honesty and rise to God's requirement of integrity.

The Law

As Moses brought the stone tablets down from Sinai, he delivered a law prepared for a fallen people. Part of the law states, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Exodus 20:16). The Lord reiterates this commandment both to the Nephites in the Book of Mormon and to the New Testament peoples during His earthly ministry. Later, during the Restoration, He seems to divide this commandment into at least two different ideas. First, He commands: "Thou shalt not lie; he that lieth and will not repent shall be cast out" (D&C 42:21). He also commands in the same section, "Thou shalt not speak evil of thy neighbor, nor do him any harm" (D&C 42:27). Are there differences in the law given to the children of Israel in Moses's day and the law of the gospel given to the Church during the Restoration? The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible offers evidence that the law changed according to the righteousness of the people:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Hew thee two other tables of stone, like unto the first, and I will write upon them also, the words of the law, according as they were written at the first on the tables which thou brakest; but it shall not be according to the first, for I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore my holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them; for my presence shall not go up in their midst, lest I destroy them.

But I will give unto them the law as at the first, but it shall be after the law of a carnal commandment; for I have sworn in my wrath, that they shall not enter into my presence,

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into my rest, in the days of their pilgrimage. Therefore do as I have commanded thee, and be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present thyself there to me, in the top of the mount. (Joseph Smith—Translation, Exodus 34:1–2)

This passage reminds us that the law presented to Moses and the children of Israel was “as at the first” yet adjusted to their level of righteousness. The law was intended to help them out of their carnal existence. An examination of the Old Testament and some examples of this law will help determine its application in today’s world.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament contains examples of a few notable individuals who apparently violated the commandment not to bear false witness. For example, Rahab lied to protect the Israelite spies from death (see Joshua 2). Later, Hebrews 11:31 presents Rahab as an example of great faith. The case of Abram and Sarai stands out even more. We often invoke custom or culture to dismiss Abram’s deceit in telling the Egyptians that Sarai was his sister. He may very well have lied to protect himself from death and her from rape. From these two examples, it appears that to bear false witness was sometimes appropriate with an appropriate cause. The question then arises as to when we might have good cause to bear false witness.

Perhaps one answer might be found in the historical context. The law specifically prohibited the bearing of false witness in a legal sense. However, for the protection of life and during times of war the Israelites may have been granted an exception.

In these two Old Testament examples of Rahab and Abram, there appears to be a choice between protecting lives and telling the truth. A choice is made for the higher good. The children of Israel always had the obligation to tell the truth except in cases that would give advantage to the enemy or allow for rape, murder, or other warlike acts. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught this same principle. In addressing the issue of sharing truth with the enemies of the Church, he stated: “All we have said about them is truth, but it is not always wise to relate all the

truth. Even Jesus, the Son of God, had to refrain from doing so, and had to restrain His feelings many times for the safety of Himself and His followers, and had to conceal the righteous purposes of His heart in relation to many things pertaining to His Father's kingdom."³

The Pearl of Great Price account of Abraham offers additional information to explain the situation:

And it came to pass when I was come near to enter into Egypt, the Lord said unto me: Behold, Sarai, thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon;

Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see her, they will say—She is his wife; and they will kill you, but they will save her alive; therefore see that ye do on this wise:

Let her say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live.

And it came to pass that I, Abraham, told Sarai, my wife, all that the Lord had said unto me—Therefore say unto them, I pray thee, thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake, and my soul shall live because of thee. (Abraham 2:22–25)

This account clarifies that the Lord commanded Abram to have his wife pretend she was his sister. This important addition helps clarify when it might be appropriate not to tell the truth. As in the account of Nephi's slaying Laban in the Book of Mormon, the only one who could override the law was the Lawgiver. The Lord had to command Nephi to kill Laban contrary to the law he understood as He had to command Abram to have Sarai lie.

A word of caution is appropriate at this point: the previous discussion is not intended to give license to lying. Even in the Old Testament, the Lord counseled against bearing false witnesses, as is mentioned in Proverbs: "These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet

3. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 392.

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that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren” (Proverbs 6:16–19). This is evidence that when He came to fulfill the law, He did not dismiss the obligation to be truthful. If there was any change in the law, it would likely be to compel us to live it more fully.

Today

With the overriding principle of honesty still in force, why is it so difficult to answer the question, “Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowmen?” I doubt that when we struggle with this issue it is because we have had to lie to preserve life or virtue. We likely have not been at war or hidden spies. Many of the Old Testament justifications do not seem to fit. Perhaps part of the reason we struggle with honesty can be found in our cultural environment.

A constant erosion of values over time has shaken the very foundations of our morality. Along with every other value, honesty has taken a beating. The social-policy writer Stephen L. Carter made an observation while watching a football game with his children. During the game, a player who was supposed to have made a catch did not. He acted like he did, and the referee missed the call and signaled it complete. This was before the instant replay rule, and the call stood. Professor Carter said that the whole viewing audience was aware that the catch had not been made. He speculates as to what the outcome would have been if the player had told the truth:

Now, suppose that the player had instead gone to the referee and said, “I’m sorry, sir, but I did not make the catch. Your call is wrong.” Probably his coach and teammates and most of his team’s fans would have been furious: he would not have been a good team player. The good team player lies to the referee, and does so in a manner that is at once blatant (because millions of viewers see it) and virtually impossible for the referee to detect. Having pulled off this trickery, the player is congratulated: he

is told that he has made a heads-up play. Thus, the ethic of the game turns out to be an ethic that rewards cheating.⁴

This is a scenario that most of us can relate to. We have all witnessed something similar to this and brushed it off as part of the game. Perhaps we should consider what it means about our cultural integrity. Lives are not hanging in the balance. Perhaps we feel that there is one ethic for game playing and another one for living.

I was alarmed at the response I received when as a high school teacher I often asked a class of Latter-day Saints whether they had ever cheated on a test. In these informal, anonymous surveys, over 90 percent indicated they had cheated. Though not terribly scientific, the results were depressing. As the students discussed their reasoning, it became apparent that winning, or in this case getting the good grade, was much more important to them than honesty. I suspect what fosters this kind of thinking in our culture is the erosion of absolute truth. As a society, we have dismissed God from our very existence. We cannot pray to Him in public setting or acknowledge His influence. For some, believing in Him represents “a kind of mystical irrationality.”⁵

Because of our dismissal of the Lawgiver, His laws become abstract. Without a solid basis for truth, we are left with relativism. We then begin to make our choices depending on the situation rather than basing our decisions on truth. A rational choice becomes the preferred choice. Professor Carter has suggested, “The consistent message of modern American society is that whenever the demands of one’s religion conflict with what one has to do to get ahead, one is expected to ignore the religious demands and act . . . , well, . . . *rationally*.”⁶

This rational approach leaves us with the opportunity to choose when we think it is appropriate to lie and when it is not. Unlike the Old Testament examples cited, there is no standard of war or morality, and without God as the guide, we can hardly claim divine revelation as our justification for a lie. We are therefore left with real questions about

4. Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity* (New York City: HarperPerennial, 1997), 5.

5. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York City: BasicBooks, 1993), 7.

6. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*, 13.

the validity of our dishonesty. Without an anchor, lying has become rampant. Elder Mark E. Petersen asked, “But in our society is there anything more widespread than the tendency to lie and deceive?”⁷ He then listed a litany of ways our culture answers affirmatively to this question. It is obvious that he was convinced that dishonesty is one of our major concerns in today’s society.

It is fortunate that as Latter-day Saints, we know there is a God and that His prophets and scriptures are among us. When the law is attached once again to the Lawgiver, we regain our moral compass. We realize that if we were ever to legitimately need to mask the truth, the Lord would let us know. But through His prophets, we are given counsel that aids us in our attempt to escape the deceit of our day. As previously mentioned, the law in the Doctrine and Covenants suggests two dimensions of this commandment for us today: “Thou shalt not lie” and “Thou shalt not speak evil of thy neighbor, nor do him any harm” (D&C 42:21, 27). The scriptures and the words of the prophets invite us to understand that these are closely related. A discussion of lies will lead to an understanding of the harm we might do to our neighbor.

As Elder Petersen pointed out, lies can take various forms. We might lie to cover a sin. We might lie to protect our image or even to take advantage. We can lie to others, to ourselves, and even to God. But after all is said and done, a lie is a lie. The scriptures refer to some who lie and believe they are justified. In one instance, Joseph Smith had lost the manuscript of the Book of Mormon through Martin Harris. The Lord revealed to Joseph the plan of his enemies to change the manuscript to catch him in what they supposed was a lie:

Yea, he [the devil] saith unto them: Deceive and lie in wait to catch, that ye may destroy; behold, this is no harm. And thus he flattereth them, and telleth them that it is no sin to lie that they may catch a man in a lie, that they may destroy him.

And thus he flattereth them, and leadeth them along until he draggeth their souls down to hell; and thus he causeth them to catch themselves in their own snare.

7. Mark E. Petersen, “Honesty, a Principle of Salvation,” *Ensign*, December 1971, 72.

And thus he goeth up and down, to and fro in the earth,
seeking to destroy the souls of men.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, wo be unto him that lieth to deceive because he supposeth that another lieth to deceive, for such are not exempt from the justice of God. (D&C 10:25–28)

One of the ways Satan persuades us to be dishonest is by making us believe it is appropriate to lie in order to catch another in a lie. The outcome of such logic is evident in the above scripture. Lying is one of those things the Lord hates (see Proverbs 6:16).

Sometimes we try to evaluate whether a lie is big or small. I have yet to see a distinction scripturally. The trap is often set for us to believe in the “white lie.” This is reminiscent of Nephi’s warning of our day where he stated, “And there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, *lie a little*” (2 Nephi 28:8; emphasis added).

More recently Elder Marvin J. Ashton taught: “In recent days all of us have witnessed many who have weakened themselves even to the point of falling completely as they have sacrificed the leading principles of honesty and integrity in order to climb an artificial ladder of accomplishment. No lasting great personal heights are ever reached by those who step on others to try to push themselves upward. It is not surprising to learn that people who tell white lies soon become color-blind.”⁸ Elder Ashton’s classic statement about white lies suggests that we can not afford to try to distinguish between colors of lies. We would do well to avoid all lies.

There are even more subtle ways for us to be trapped in a lie. President Spencer W. Kimball suggested that another way of bearing false witness is to debate or argue, knowing full well that you are on the wrong side of an issue. He taught that this often occurs in politics and religion. He suggested that it occurs in our Sunday School classes:

In the Church we have teachers who develop in a class an argument which they call discussion and, on pretense of getting participation, damage the faith of class members. I heard of

8. Marvin J. Ashton, “Strengthen the Feeble Knees,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 71–72.

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one teacher who proposed to his class during a lesson on the divinity of Christ's mission that he, the teacher, would take the position that Christ was an impostor and his work a fake. The class was to defend Christ's divinity. Being so well prepared and with his class taken unawares, the teacher proved by logic that Christ was a fraud—or at least, when the class was dismissed some vital questions were unanswered and the issue was still undetermined. The man loved to debate, to argue. But his witness was false.⁹

We are under obligation to bear a true witness in all circumstances, especially when we are bearing witness of the gospel. As the gospel of Jesus Christ is established by the law of witnesses, our witness of it must be true and the doctrine we testify of must be pure. Elder Bruce R. McConkie suggested:

To testify falsely about the truths of salvation, or to claim truth and verity for a false system of salvation, is also to *bear false witness*. According to the Lord's system, almost all things are established in the mouths of witnesses. Apostles and seventies, for instance, are given the special calling of standing as especial witnesses of the name of Christ. Every member of the Church is obligated to be a witness of the restoration. Those, however, who teach false doctrines are bearing false witness; and those who claim, falsely, that salvation is found in some system other than the very one ordained by Deity are bearing record of that which is not true—and along with all false witnesses will be rewarded according to their deeds.¹⁰

That our testimonies must be true or we risk bearing false witness puts a heavy burden on us as believers. We must be found standing for the gospel at all times.

The Lord also reminds us of our obligation not only to speak truth but also to act truthfully. As well as warning us against speaking evil of

9. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 53.

10. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 75.

our brother, He reminds us that we should not “do him any harm” (D&C 42:27). The teachings of the Brethren are replete with reminders of our obligation not to gossip and malign our fellowmen. President Kimball reminded us of the far-lasting effects of gossip: “Lies and gossip which harm reputations are scattered about by the four winds like the seeds of a ripe dandelion held aloft by a child. Neither the seeds nor the gossip can ever be gathered in. The degree and extent of the harm done by the gossip is inestimable.”¹¹ We cannot afford to be spreading rumors and lies about our neighbors. Even though we may feel we have accurate information, we must consider the damage done by thoughtless words. Remember the Lord’s admonition to “strengthen your brethren in all your conversation, in all your prayers, in all your exhortations, and in all your doings” (D&C 108:7).

At this point we can return to the importance of personal integrity in the business world. Too often we do not consider the harm we do to others in a shady business deal. Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught us our responsibility:

Scheming promoters with glib tongues and ingratiating manners deceive their neighbors into investments the promoters know to be more speculative than they dare reveal.

Difficulties of proof make fraud a hard crime to enforce. But the inadequacies of the laws of man provide no license for transgression under the laws of God. Though their method of thievery may be immune from correction in this life, sophisticated thieves in white shirts and ties will ultimately be seen and punished for what they are. He who presides over that Eternal Tribunal knows our secret acts, and he is “a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrew 4:12; D&C 33:1).¹²

The business world may be the real testing ground of our integrity. So much is rationalized away as just doing business. How careful we must be not to misrepresent a situation or hide some vital information. God will bless us in our desire to deal honestly one with another.

11. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 54.

12. Dallin H. Oaks, “Brother’s Keeper,” *Ensign*, November 1986, 20.

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Conclusion

This chapter has covered both the historical and present-day applications of the ninth commandment. There may have been instances allowed by the Lord where the truth was not told. These were the exception to the rule. We live under the law today and have an important obligation to bear a true witness in all things and at all times. We would do well to remember President Kimball's admonition: "Not only should we never bear false witness against neighbors, but the scriptures tell us we should love our fellowmen, serve them, speak well of them, build them up."¹³

If the law is written upon our hearts, we will have integrity, and that integrity will follow us into all our endeavors, both professional and personal. Our personal integrity is on the line each day as we live with and serve our neighbors. By preserving it, we are blessed, and we will bless the lives of others.

13. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 99.