

## **Whatever Happened to Honesty?**

Micah 7:1–7

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September 9, 2018

What would life be like if you could not trust anyone? If there were no trust, society as we know it would crumble. Because there is so little trust, our nation is crumbling.

Trust is the skeleton which holds up every institution that gives our lives meaning.

Micah was a prophet that lived in the eighth century before Christ. He gives us just a little insight into what it was like to live in a world so dishonest that you could not trust the ruler, the judge, your neighbor, or members of your own family.

When people are this dishonest, it becomes a dog-eat-dog world. Fear rules the day. There is a stark realization that what one needs for survival is missing: trust and honesty.

Until it's missing, we sometimes don't realize how important trust and honesty are as stack poles for relationships and for a country to function or any meaningful institution.

Micah said it was like going out to gather summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard, only to discover there was no cluster of grapes to eat and no early figs that he craved.

Have you ever thought about honesty like this? It's as vital to our survival as fruit at the harvest.

Many people think just the opposite. Many people think about how much more they can have if they are dishonest.

If I don't report all my earnings to the IRS, I can have more.

If I cheat God and hold back my tithe, I can have more.

If I get more change than I'm owed by a cashier, instead of being honest and giving it back, I can keep it and have more.

If I cheat on my spouse, I can have more intimacy.

If I steal answers from my classmate's test or have someone else write my paper, I can have a higher test score.

If I lie to my child or my parents, I don't have to deal with the weeds of the truth.

If I hedge on my timesheet at work, I can have more money.

If I lie to the voters, I can get more votes.

If I create a more impressive resume, I can get a better job.

If I lie to my spouse, we can avoid an argument.

At first glance, dishonesty almost always looks appealing. It would not be tempting to be dishonest if we did not see some upside, some benefit to us.

Even when we see some negatives to dishonesty, we are tempted to lie because we rationalize them away.

We say things like, "I would have performed well if I had studied, but I couldn't because I didn't have time."

"He doesn't deserve to know the truth because of the way he's treated me."

"The government doesn't need my money. It wastes too much of it already."

"It's just a little white lie. Everybody tells them."

"I can say this is true, even though it's not, because my opponent is lying about what he/she is saying. I have to lie to balance out the lies."

Few believe we will erode as a society or that we will become morally bankrupt as a person by a little dishonesty. Few think life will get as bad as Micah describes.

In Micah's day, it was so bad people couldn't trust members of their own family. Husband and wives in the same bed had to be careful what they said to each other.

However, dishonesty is eroding our society.

We live in a day when networks can have the same piece of news and spin it two different ways so that it becomes two different stories.

We live in a day when politicians deny, deny, deny until we all know is that the denial is a lie and by the time the lie is acknowledge, no one cares.

The importance of honesty in our American culture is on a fast decline. What is scary is that Americans are beginning to accept this as the new norm. The new norm is that everyone lies, so what does it matter?

Few people talk about the importance of establishing honesty as a virtue worth striving for within American politics, journalism, the economic system, the sports/entertainment world, the American workplace, the education system, or our religious institutions.

Our religious leaders used to hold our government accountable for the truth, but not any longer.

If the lies fit into a larger narrative that supports an agenda that's favorable to the religious community, our religious leaders will put a spin on the lies that make the lie sound almost righteous.

Perhaps there is so little talk about truth because so few want to be a spokesperson for honesty. To do so places those people under extreme scrutiny. Who wants to be under a self-righteous microscope?

We desperately need examples among us; people willing to say, "I'm not perfect, but a core value of this company, of this administration, of this firm, of this staff, of this church, is to be honest, to speak the truth, to live ethically, and to build trust."

Last May, former New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg gave the commencement address to Rice University. He centered his remarks around the university's code of honor, which has a heavy focus on honesty. (<https://www.mikebloomberg.com/news/mike-bloomberg-delivers-2018-commencement-address-rice-university/>)

He told the students that Rice University almost didn't become a university because the founder, William Marsh Rice was murdered at his own home in Manhattan, just a few blocks from his company's headquarters by two schemers who tried to rewrite his will. (Ibid)

However, his killer's were caught, and his money went where he wanted it to go, and the university was built. (Ibid)

Think about it – two people thought they could get more by being dishonest, but instead, they were caught, which usually happens when are people dishonest, eventually anyway. Ironically and fittingly, an honor code was created that has been central to student life of the school since it was founded. (Ibid)

Every time a student at Rice takes an exam, that student signs this statement: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this exam/quiz/paper."  
([https://futureowls.rice.edu/futureowls/Honor\\_Code.asp](https://futureowls.rice.edu/futureowls/Honor_Code.asp))

Not only are Rice students expected to have honor in such a way, but they are supposed to report those that are not following the honor code.

Whatever happened to people's honor?

I think I know. It's hidden in one of the most horrible children's stories of all time, "Little Red Riding Hood."

That's right; I did say, "most horrible children's stories of all time."

I'm convinced if this story were written today it would never get published. It's gruesome.

Think about it – a grandmother gets eaten by a wolf and the wolf gets killed by a woodman and out pops grandma at the end of the story from the wolf’s stomach, all so we can teach children not to talk to strangers.

Any more lessons learned from this story have also caused insomnia in children for generations.

In case you need a refresher, Red Riding Hood doesn’t obey her mother. She doesn’t go straight to Grandma’s house. She stops and picks flowers, watches butterflies, and listens to frogs. Today, the mother would get into trouble for allowing her to go walking through the woods unattended.

But worst of all, Red Riding Hood talked to a wolf, and she gave him her grandmother’s address.

The wolf took a shortcut through the woods. He went inside grandmother’s house. Then he dressed up like grandma and waited for Little Red Riding Hood. Then he ate her.

Here are the lines most of us grew up hearing the most.

Red Riding Hood knocked on the door. The wolf jumped into bed and pulled the covers over his nose.

“Who is it?” he called in a crackly voice.

“It’s me, Little Red Riding Hood.”

“Oh, how lovely! Do come in, my dear,” croaked the wolf.

When Little Red Riding Hood entered the little cottage, she could scarcely recognize her Grandmother.

“Grandmother! Your voice sounds so odd. Is something the matter?” she asked.

“Oh, I just have a touch of a cold,” squeaked the wolf adding a cough at the end to prove the point.

“But Grandmother! What big ears you have,” said Little Red Riding Hood as she edged closer to the bed.

“The better to hear you with, my dear,” replied the wolf.

“But Grandmother! What big eyes you have,” said Little Red Riding Hood.

“The better to see you with, my dear,” replied the wolf.

“But Grandmother! What big teeth you have,” said Little Red Riding Hood her voice quivering slightly.

“The better to eat you with, my dear,” roared the wolf and he leaped out of bed and began to chase the little girl.

We learned that the wolf was a liar.

Now, I want you to think about this story differently this morning, differently than you’ve ever thought about it before.

What if this story were a parable about how people are deceived, and I asked you to identify with one of the characters.

Which character would you identify with? The mother, grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood, the woodsmen, or the wolf?

If you mostly warn people about being deceived, then you might identify with the mother.

If you are gullible and easily deceived, then you might be Little Red Riding Hood.

If you are still licking your wounds from those that have deceived you and devoured you, then you might be the grandmother.

If you often come to the rescue of those that have been deceived, you might identify with the Woodsman.

However, few of us want to admit that we have also been the wolf, the deceiver.

But if we are going to tell the truth, we have all played that role, whether we want to admit it or not.

The Bible says that Satan is the father of lies. The father of lies not only lies to us, but his job is to get us to deceive others, just like Jacob tricked his brother Esau into giving him both his birthright and his blessing.

The reason Micah’s society was in such shambles was that you could be sleeping with the wolf and not know it. Your neighbor could be the wolf, and you wouldn’t know it.

Most people had allowed themselves to become wolves to some degree, but they might still be walking around in sheep’s clothing.

Why? Because they had been a prosperous people and they had benefitted from the superpowers around who did not bother them, at least not at first.

Then, Tiglath-pileser III came to power. His leadership, coupled with the weak leadership of the kings of the northern kingdom, led to Assyria crushing the Northern Kingdom of Israel and destroying its capital of Samaria in 722 B.C.E.

To escape a similar fate, the people of Judah and those of the capital of Jerusalem started paying tribute to Assyria.

In other words, they had to pay Assyria not to come down and whip them like they whipped the northern kingdom. They lost their independence, and they began to allow foreign gods and religious practices to take place because they thought it would help them prosper.

They were wrong.

During this time of change, there was a massive erosion of values and faith. People began to live by a different code of ethics. Part of that loss was a loss of truth.

Micah's job as a prophet was to sound the alarm and to tell them the reason their world was in such a mess.

If I can play that role this morning, I'd like to say that God is still a God that values truth.

Proverbs 6:16-19

<sup>16</sup> There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: <sup>17</sup> haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, <sup>18</sup> a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, <sup>19</sup> a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

When we do not value truth, we cannot look at ourselves objectively. We cannot see ourselves as others see us and certainly not as God sees us. This is how pride develops. God hates "haughty eyes."

When we do not value truth, of course, we are going to lie. We will produce a false reality of our own making and choosing that we believe will be beneficial to us. God hates this.

When someone sheds innocent blood, how often do they come forward to turn themselves in? What is the norm? They also lie about what they have done. They try to hide their crime because they know what they have done is morally wrong and if caught, they are going to be punished. God hates the crime and the cover-up.

People that devise wicked schemes do whatever needs to be done to carry out their plans. This usually means playing loosely with the truth. This verse reminds us that these schemes begin in a person's heart. Being honest takes a back seat to get what they want. God hates this.

People that rush into evil are people that care little about truth. Have you met any honest robbers lately? How many spouses verbally abuse their mates and admit it? What misogynistic males have you met that are willing to confess their sin? What you get is denial and lies and a false witness, the very thing God hates.

Finally, this proverb says that God hates it when a person stirs up conflict in a community. How does this happen? It usually occurs when a person says things that are not true. It is gossip. It is a half-truth, which makes it a lie, but there is enough truth to make it believable. However, because it stirs up conflict, it is not something that pleases God.

In Micah's day, dishonesty was so prevalent, that the trust had eroded everywhere. His society was coming apart at the seams. Micah sounded the alarm.

Bloomberg told the students at Rice that the hardest part of their honor code was not being honorable themselves and signing their exams papers saying they had done the work themselves but being willing to speak up and point out when others were acting in a dishonorable way.

This is very difficult given that none of us are perfect. However, to Bloomberg's point, if we are going to maintain any standard at all, a norm that we wish to strive for and to emulate, we must be willing to call out those who are consistently trying to create an alternative reality by stating things that are blatantly false.

It is not stirring up conflict to confront people that are lying. They have already begun that process. We are merely trying to keep their lies from being accepted as truth.

If we do not stand up for truth, who will?

Truth is the poles about which the canopy of our society is hung. Without those tent posts, our nation could one day look like Micah's.

When trusts erode, our families collapse. If trust were to erode in our banks, we would suffer a run on the banks, and we would have a depression. If trust were to erode in our police force, there would be anarchy in the streets. If trust were to erode in our judicial system, people would take the law into their own hands we would return to the wild, wild west. When trust erodes in denominations and churches, they split, people become disillusioned and leave the church. When trust erodes in a marriage, it dies. When trust erodes in a friendship, it dies. People become enemies. The world becomes all about self. The world becomes a dangerous, empty, cold and cruel place to be.

Contrast to the way Jesus taught us to live. Jesus claimed to be "The Way, Truth, and the Life."

I want to ask you to examine your life this morning. If there is any falsehood in your life, any lack of truth in your relationships, in your ethics, in your speech, in your finances, in how you present yourself to God, admit to God that you have played the role of the deceiver. Come before God today and confess your sins. Be a part of the solution to what is wrong with our world and be a light to others and point them to Jesus, who is the "Way, Truth, and the Life."

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