

21 Questions: Am I Honest? Sunday, 10/14/18

1 Today we're wrapping up our journey with John Wesley's 21 questions and the underlying question, "Is Jesus real to me?" I hope that Wesley's 21 questions have helped you to honestly check in on your spiritual health by reviewing the attitudes and behaviors of your day and week. The series ends today, but if you've found the discipline of examining your life through questions helpful, I hope you'll continue that practice, and even consider adopting some new questions to keep it fresh and to challenge yourself to grow in new ways.

2 Do you remember the story of Pinocchio, the boy whose nose grew longer when he told a lie? Today we're looking at two of Wesley's questions that are related. "Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?" And the second, "Can I be trusted?" Honesty is a character trait that leads honest speech and honest actions. Trustworthiness is a character trait that relies pretty heavily on honesty. Could you ever really consider someone trustworthy who wasn't honest? I suppose one could be reliably dishonest, but that would hardly qualify as being trustworthy!

Groucho Marx once said, "The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made."² William Shakespeare wrote, "No legacy is so rich as honesty."³ On the other hand, Plato honestly observed that "Honesty is for the most part less profitable than dishonesty"⁴ and playwright Noel Coward commented, "It is discouraging how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit."⁵

Not only has honesty been a central issue in great writing and art, it turns out that a great many of the teachings in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, address the character of honesty. Listen now to just a few of them from the Bible's collection of proverbs: "The integrity of the honest keeps them on track; the deviousness of crooks brings them to ruin" (11:3); "Truthful witness by a good person clears the air, but liars lay down a smoke screen of deceit" (12:17); "God can't stomach liars; he loves the company of those

¹ Sermon series concept adapted from Adam Hamilton, COR

² <https://www.brainyquote.com>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

who keep their word” (12:22); “Better to be poor and honest than a rich person no one can trust” (19:1); and “An honest answer is like a warm hug” (24:26).

Just like our attitudes toward money, we find so many teachings about honesty in the Bible because it’s always been a real problem for us. Going all the way back to the Garden of Eden, dishonesty with God- basically, an attempt to cover up sin- was part of what originally set us down the path of broken relationships we suffer today. Our walk with God is fractured by secrets we pretend we can hide from God, and our relationships with others are fractured by omissions, half-truths, and outright lies that we often offer up without even thinking. So are we honest in all our acts and words? Are we trustworthy? I think the honest answer is that all of us can grow in those character traits, and we can do that starting today.

3 Why do we lie, anyway? What’s in it for us? A report in National Geographic⁶ laid out these assorted reasons: About a third of our lies are made to protect ourselves, either to “cover up a mistake or misdeed” or to “escape or evade other people.” Almost half of our lies are used to promote ourselves to “gain financial benefits” or “benefits beyond money,” to “shape a positive image of ourselves,” or “to make people laugh.” A relatively small percentage of our lies are intended to “hurt other people” (4%), “help people” (5%), or “avoid rudeness” (2%). In other words, we mostly lie to protect and promote ourselves. Does that surprise you? Children learn to lie shortly after they learn to walk. The good news is that although we tend to lie the most during our adolescent years, our tendency to lie does decrease as we mature, even if the habit of lying never really leaves us completely.

The issue of lying has always been a staple of the political arena in particular, and most recently in the confirmation hearings over the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Did he lie about his drinking and sexual assault? Did his accusers lie? We may never know the truth, but we all care because the behavior of lying is a crucial indicator of character. Whether you sit on the Supreme Court or sit on your couch watching Netflix, character matters, and our truthfulness reflects on our character.

4 If honesty really is the first chapter in the book of wisdom, what can we do today to be more honest with each other and with God? Like most bad behaviors, change begins by

⁶ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/06/lying-hoax-false-fibs-science/>

becoming aware of how we're lying, to whom we're lying, when we're lying, and why we're lying. Let's focus on the type of lying John Wesley was most concerned about in his question- exaggeration. It's not hard to see how we might lie by exaggeration to make ourselves look better than we really are. For example, a person like me who regularly stands up in front of a crowd to speak might exaggerate the number of people in attendance on a Sunday in order to inflate my own importance. It doesn't matter whether you're a pastor or a president, we all like to think that when we speak, what we have to say is important and relevant. Inflating the numbers of those who are listening validates our self-importance and promotes our importance with our peers and our friends.

We might exaggerate our role in the success of a project at school or at work, retelling the story by recasting ourselves as the primary hero rather than one of many who each made a small contribution. The ultimate example of this kind of lying is the spate of fake research that's come to light in recent years that's been used to garner media attention, research grants, and book deals. For example, just last month Cornell University announced that one of their professors, Brian Wansink, had fabricated some of the data his research was based on, exposing the lies behind "one of the most respected food researchers in America."⁷

Of course, sometimes we do just the opposite, exaggerating our flaws to make ourselves look worse than we really are. Whether we exaggerate to inflate or deflate our self-worth, the core of the problem remains the same. Our human value comes from our identity in Christ, not from the things we do and how well we do them. When we're dishonest about our skills and accomplishments, it tends to hurt others, it robs us of the possibility that we can learn and improve, and it advances the deeper lie that our value comes from our productivity and achievements rather than our place in the body of Christ.

5 Sometimes we exaggerate the bad behavior of someone else in order to justify ourselves. Gossip is a prime example of that. By highlighting someone else's mistakes, we try to reassure ourselves that our behavior isn't so bad. In Christian circles, gossip sometimes travels under the camouflage of concern. When someone's bad behavior or unfortunate circumstances come to mind, ask yourself what the most helpful response might

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/sunday-review/cornell-food-scientist-wansink-misconduct.html>

be. There are so many helpful things you might do rather than start a gossipy conversation about it. Write a note of encouragement. Offer to help in some particular way. Quietly lift them up in prayer. Sometimes we spend more time talking about the problems than we do in lending a helping hand or interceding in prayer.

6 The last kind of lying by exaggeration that I have for you this morning is what I'm calling, "Where's Waldo." In the Where's Waldo cartoons, we're presented with a vast crowd of people, but with only one Waldo figure to find. Where's Waldo lying happens when we recruit an imaginary crowd to represent the particular opinion or action we're advocating, when in reality we're standing in a crowd of one or two. The classic example is when a well-meaning, concerned person pipes up at a meeting and says something like, "Everybody's talking about..." or "A lot of people are upset about..." Now sometimes a large number of people really are talking about something. More often, however, this is a Where's Waldo ploy, creating the illusion of a groundswell of support for a position that's actually held by one person and one or two close friends. Where's Waldo is a fun game, but it's not a helpful way to communicate. When we clearly and accurately identify those we're speaking for, we're speaking more honestly. Better still, strive to speak for yourself and let others speak when possible.

7 Sometimes the dog really does eat your homework! My son was once trapped in a dormitory elevator on his way to a final exam in college and arrived at the classroom late. You can imagine what the professor thought when he heard that excuse! Sometimes the most improbable and unbelievable things do happen and even our best efforts to speak and act the truth fall flat. Is there such a thing as too much truth? Consider this- there's a difference between honesty and transparency. Being honest doesn't mean that we should be completely transparent, exposing all the details of our lives to each other. More typically, we have the opposite problem; we're overly opaque, and what we do share is often dishonest. One estimate is that we're lied to between 10 and 200 times every day!^s If that's true, then someone is doing the lying. Let's see what we can do to be a part of the solution.

^s <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201309/why-we-lie-and-how-stop>

Your challenge this week is to listen carefully to the things you are saying, with particular attention to exaggeration. Are you exaggerating to entertain, or to deceive? Are you trying to cover up something you're ashamed of, or to make yourself look better? Are you playing Where's Waldo instead of honestly owning your own opinion? It's not easy to monitor yourself- you can't do that for long without going crazy. You might try putting a post-it on your computer, or setting an alarm on your phone to remind yourself to ask the question: "Am I being honest in my acts and words?" And when you find yourself lying, there's only one solution: only the truth will set you free.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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