

**“And this Gospel,”
shall be preached...
Matthew 24:14**

Sermon Summaries from Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

Honesty

by Brian Knowles

How many people do you know today who are truly honest in the most profound sense of that word? I almost guarantee that before I've finished you will be convinced that human beings are fundamentally dishonest.

When I speak of dishonesty I don't mean a person who just deliberately lies. Although telling lies may be the most blatant form of dishonesty, dishonesty can be much more subtle than that. It can be a state of mind, a state of being.

Here's how the dictionary defines honesty: "Free from deception; truthful; genuine; real; credible; marked by integrity; innocent."

To how many people do you feel you could apply *all* of those adjectives? Could you apply them all to yourself? I couldn't to myself.

An honest person is a person of integrity. He or she is incapable of being false to a responsibility or a pledge, according to the dictionary. Honest people keep their word. They fulfill their promises. They're reliable and you can depend on them to come through with what they have promised. Now that, of course, eliminates most politicians.

Now let's look at the opposite case. A dishonest person is said to give the "Judas kiss." He's somebody you can't trust because he might be giving you a big crocodile smile while stabbing you at the same time. Some people are like

that. They'll draw you out; they'll put on a pretense of friendliness and when they've finally got the goods on you they will stab the knife in between the fourth and fifth ribs and twist it. We've all met people like that, who you can't really trust.

A dishonest person is a person full of guile and subterfuge. Guileful people resort to deceitful cunning, duplicity and trickery. They're inconsistent. They lead you astray, deceive you, and make you think a certain thing is the case when something else really is.

Our Right Example

Jesus Christ didn't withhold things from His friends. John 15:15 is an example of the honesty with which Christ dealt with His own friends:

"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (RSV throughout). Now that's the difference between a friend and a servant. A servant is somebody with whom you do not communicate fully—you do not tell them the whole story. But a friend is somebody you can tell everything. You can be your worst or you can be your best and you feel that you can trust a friend. And your friend trusts you.

The ideal relationship that human beings ought to have is that of friend and friend, not that of a master and servant. But, unfortunately, because of the desire to gain power, retain power, wield power and so on, most human beings seem to exist in the master/servant relationship rather than a friend/friend relationship. You'll find that the issue of power is the key to understanding a lot of human relationships.

Jesus was an honest man and He spoke with candor to His disciples. They never had to fear deception from Him. He accurately represented His Father's teaching, His Father's wishes and instructions. He had no need to color the story or to interpret His Father's wishes to His disciples. He just simply transmitted—faithfully and accurately.

If Jesus Christ were among us and said something to us, then we would know what He said was the absolute truth, that there was no subterfuge involved.

Jesus Christ also admired and respected honesty in other people wherever He found it. We have an example of this in the first chapter of John, verses 43-47. "The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. And he found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, 'We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!'"

No deceit, no cunning, no treachery, no deception, no trickery, and no gimmicks. Nathanael was a straight shooter even before he was converted and he was *not* typical of the Israelites according to Christ's evaluation.

Remember Jacob (whose name means supplanter) through guile and trickery got Esau's birthright. And, of course, he was supposed to be the typical Israelite because his name was changed to Israel (or prince of God). Perhaps in Christ's sight Jacob was just a little worse in that action than Esau who didn't value his birthright as he should have.

Sometimes we try to justify our own dishon-

esty by the dishonesty we see in others who are considered great in the Bible. But let's always remember that Christ is our ideal example—He is the epitome of character—and not any human being.

How Honesty and Dishonesty React

An honest person represents reality exactly as he perceives it. Now that doesn't mean his *perception* of it is always accurate. But it does mean his *representation* of his perception is faithful—that he tells you exactly what he feels and thinks and believes.

An honest person, in the academic sense, is a person who follows the truth wherever it leads no matter what. Now that sometimes is the most difficult thing in the world for us. When we begin to sense that we are about to lose something that is very precious to us, we want to abandon the search for truth. We may have to give up something that is very dear to us, some internalized "sacred cow," or something that we may have considered axiomatic in the past, a universal absolute that could not possibly be questioned. Many times we find ourselves in danger of losing some power in a relationship, losing some authority, some money, something of our image or prestige or our lifestyle.

It seems to be a principle of life, then, that whenever something major stands to fall under the onslaught of truth, people abandon the search. It seems to be the kind of rule you might find in the book of Proverbs.

The habit of dishonesty usually starts very young in most of us, and once started it is almost impossible to break. And it begins to dominate every area of life and thought and action. Turn to James and notice a statement he made, which was an observation, I think, of this reality.

James 1:8: "For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord." A double-minded person is inconsistent, saying one thing one minute and another thing the next. He believes one thing today, and another thing tomorrow. The only pattern, which no one can follow, is his or her predictable unpredictability. Such a person has become so dishonest that he changes his tune to suit the situation and has totally become a creature of expediency.

How Dishonesty Prevails

Now with all that in mind let's see if we can see how dishonesty is formed in people in the first place.

Dishonesty is a survival mechanism in most of us. It's a means of coping that humans adopt.

You can find situations where dishonesty exists because the employer wants to be told a certain thing even though the employee may feel quite differently. The employee is expected to say, "I support it 100 percent" when he might think it stinks and it's probably not going to work and later he's going to say, "I told you so." But to say it now would upset the boss who would maybe dock his pay.

It could be in a situation like marriage, or parents and children, or any type of relationship that involves a power structure. We're all conditioned—when one person has power over another—to play the game of the emperor's new clothes. This is the old Chinese story of the emperor who was conned into going about in the nude by the story that his beautiful new garments could only be seen by those who were worthy, and, of course, no one, including the emperor himself, dared admit to anyone else that he saw nothing. So all his subjects praised him for his great robes and his beautiful new clothes because they were afraid to be honest.

You remember the situation between Jeremiah and the king. Jeremiah spoke the truth based on God's revelation to him. The king didn't like it so he threw him into the dungeon. "Don't come to me with bad news. I don't want to hear bad news. I want good news." Then he rewarded the false prophets for bringing him lies. They got to be the palace guards, the guys in the nice clothes who lived the "life of Riley" around the king.

And that's the story of mankind, because very few people can handle the truth in its most obvious form.

Now notice Isaiah 30:9-10, speaking of the people of Israel at a particular time in history: "For they are a rebellious people, lying sons, sons who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, 'See not'; and to the prophets, 'Prophecy not to us what is right; speak to us

smooth things, prophesy illusions . . .'" How like our people today!

Most of us don't want to hear the truth because truth often hurts and no one wants to get hurt. We reward people for telling us what feels good and we punish those who tell us what feels bad, even if it is the absolute truth in the situation. We compliment, we encourage, we give gifts to, we promote, we exalt people who tell us what we like to hear even though it may be false, while we mock, insult, and ridicule people who make us feel insecure, upset, wrong, crazy or disoriented even though it is the truth because we don't want to feel that way. Anybody who tries to take away our security blanket of ideas and axioms and beliefs and concepts is seen as the Enemy. We feel more comfortable with the status quo, even if it's a lie, because we have adapted to it.

Learning how to cope with life, with reality, is a process that is full of pain. But a truly honest person is a person who is not going to try to avoid the pain by denying or refusing the truth at the price of his own honesty, his growth and future well-adjusted happiness. Rather, he is one who will follow the truth wherever it leads no matter how painful it becomes. The point where you stop following truth wherever it leads is the point at which you become dishonest.

Dishonesty the Cause of Pain

Now as Mr. Herbert Armstrong has pointed out many times, most people in our societies are taught how to earn a living—how to survive materially—but *not* necessarily how to live or how to cope with painful reality. Learning how to cope with life, growing in knowledge is a process that produces pain and often robs you of your sleep at night because you can't shut your brain down. You can't stop it from working and chewing over information and data that's coming in. You lie there tossing and turning trying to come up with solutions and answers and to work the whole thing through.

Let's notice something in Ecclesiastes 2. This refers to a laboring man—a man who works hard physically—but it can apply just as well to a person who works with his mind. Verses 22-23: "What has a man from all the toil and strain with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days

are full of pain, and his work is a vexation [that is, a frustration]." Why is it that we have to work so hard and seemingly achieve so little for all the work that we do and all the energy we expend? Why does life seem to have so much pain in it—both physical and mental? Sometimes the psychological pain of life is even greater than the physical pain.

Continuing in verse 23: "... even in the night his mind does not rest. This is also vanity." The word vanity means emptiness or futility, meaninglessness. It doesn't mean vanity in the sense of ego, looking in the mirror and checking yourself out—not in Ecclesiastes. It just means futility, a waste of time.

Society in general has punished honesty and rewarded dishonesty just as parents have, just as bosses have, just as husbands and wives have. If you're going to be utterly honest, people are going to make life a living hell for you. And chances are the punishments for being truly honest and objective will be so great that you'll revert back to that conditioned reflex of being at least mildly dishonest in your day-to-day dealings with people and in the way you function and live.

Utter honesty probably is a virtual impossibility in this life consistently; however, it is certainly a great goal for us to work toward. I think we can all agree on that. And you really don't have the option of not choosing it. Even if to choose dishonesty would not hurt your conscience—though of course it would—you would necessarily reap the wages of this sinful attitude in the end.

Points for Your Profit

Sometimes people think that to be honest means we must tell everything in every situation. There are times when it is better to say nothing rather than tell the truth. That's not lying—it need not be deceptive. That's just not saying anything.

Instead of freezing some intellectual configuration or set of arguments as the absolute truth, think of your statements or beliefs in terms of the best approximation of truth you can arrive at right now—what appears to be the truth of the matter, though tomorrow you may see it differently, more correctly.

Knowledge is dynamic, life is dynamic, infor-

mation, perceptions of reality are dynamic. They're always changing, always growing, always being modified, always being refined. What's important is the process and the direction in which you're going.

The Bible hasn't changed. The Bible remains the same year after year—the same book, the same words—but our *perception* of it may change—ought to change—as we grow spiritually. So the truth is fixed in the sense that the Bible is truth, but our perceptions of it are dynamic and ought to be growing.

The apostle Peter commanded all Christians to be growing. II Peter 3:18: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Since you are commanded to grow in knowledge and yet you let your knowledge remain the same as it was before, how could you say you have grown in knowledge? It doesn't make any sense. Growth is education. And growth is change, and so we have to see life as a process of constant growing, changing, developing and we have to learn to reward honesty and not punish it nor bring injunctions against people who dare to be honest about whatever it may be.

Let's look at one section of scripture in closing. Perhaps these verses will summarize the subject. I know you know there are many verses I could have used that talk about exalting wisdom, exalting knowledge, pursuing truth and all this kind of thing but I did not think it was necessary. You can look them up in your concordance and go through them. But I would like to point out a few verses here.

Proverbs 12:17-22: "He who speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.

"There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

"Truthful lips endure for ever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.

"Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan good have joy.

"No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble.

"Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully [honestly] are his delight."