

Text: Exodus 23:1-9

Title: "Honesty"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: It is significant that historically we Americans expect our heroes to be men and women who were honest. You can go to Washington D. C. and find the Lincoln Memorial, and we remember that Lincoln used to be called "Honest Abe." The Washington Monument is also there, of course, and early in our nation's history the Cherry Tree Legend about our first president's boyhood surfaced.

It was first told in 1806 by Mason Locke Weems in his book, *The Life of Washington the Great*. "In the original story, when Washington was six years old he received a hatchet as a gift and damaged his father's cherry tree. When his father discovered what he had done, he became angry and confronted him. Young George bravely said, 'I cannot tell a lie...I did cut it with my hatchet.' Washington's father embraced him and rejoiced that his son's honesty was worth more than a thousand trees" [<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/cherry-tree-myth/>].

In 1836, William Holmes McGuffey include this story in his *McGuffey's Readers*, which sold over 120 million copies and were used for over 100 years to teach American children how to be honest as they taught them how to read.

Ironically this story, which was crafted to teach children honesty, was not a true story. Today we remember it as the "Cherry Tree Myth." In 1835, the circus showman P. T. Barnum hired a slave woman named Joice Heth, whom he claimed had raised George Washington as a young boy. He

used Heth as a side show to tell stories about the boyhood of Washington and sell tickets to his circus. "The Cherry Tree Myth" became quite an attraction from the lips of Heth, and it did not matter that she needed to be 161 years old to be telling the truth.

We live in a world where even stories intended to teach honesty have a hard time being honest. This is because the world in which we live operates under the influence of the enemy of truth. "Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2:2-3).

Jesus called Satan the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). The best lies of this world have tried to teach honesty. The worst lies are doctrines of demons designed to murder the souls of men – lies like "preborn children are a body part of their mother," lies like "the science of evolution has proven man does not have a Creator God," and lies like "Jesus was merely a good man." I could go one all morning. These are merely three examples from a long list of lies that dominate the world today. The enemy uses them skillfully to destroy men and women eternally.

It is in this world of the lie that God calls us to be an honest people who love truth. Jesus our Lord is the way, the truth, and the life. A quick survey of the word *honest* in our KJV shows that disciples of Christ are to be honest people:

Rom. 12:17 – "Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men."

Rom. 13:13 – “Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.”

2 Cor. 8:21 – “Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.”

2 Cor. 13:7 – “Now I pray to God that ye do no evil; not that we should appear approved, but that ye should do that which is honest . . . .”

Phil. 4:8 – “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

1 Thess. 4:12 – “That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing.”

1 Tim. 2:2 – “[Pray] for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.”

Heb. 13:18 – “Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.”

1 Pet. 2:12 – “Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.”

It is clear from these NT verses that the Lord wants us to be honest, like Jesus was honest. Our passage in Exod. 23:1-9 is the last in a series of injunctions of civil law that focus on the virtues necessary for a holy people. Beginning in chapter 21, the Lord has been applying the Ten Commandment’s moral code to the everyday requirements of living a holy life in society together: masters and slaves (21:1-11), violent crime (21:12-36), thievery (22:1-15), worldliness (22:16-20), and care for the needy (22:21-31). And now in

the first nine verses of chapter 23, the Lord explains what honesty requires in a world of lies. I see three things.

I. Honesty requires being outnumbered (vv. 1-3).

Illustration: An October 25 CNN news article read this way: “Facebook knew it was being used to incite violence in Ethiopia. It did little to stop the spread, documents show.” The article explained that Facebook has 1.84 billion daily active users, 72% of whom reside outside of America and Europe.

Application: Ethiopia has been experiencing the suffering and bloodshed of civil war over the last year, and Facebook’s ability to enable what verse 1 of our passage seeks to disable is a major reason why. It is not new news to say that social media has destroyed much by enabling falsehood.

Both countries and individual lives have been destroyed this way. In February of this past year, Brigham Young University published the results of a 10-year study that established a correlation between suicide risk among teen girls and excessive use of social media [<https://news.byu.edu/intellect/10-year-byu-study-shows-elevated-suicide-risk-from-excess-social-media-time-for-young-teen-girls>].

Their website explained: “They found that while social media use had little effect on boys’ suicidality risk, for girls there was a tipping point. Girls who used social media for at least two to three hours per day at the beginning of the study – when they were about 13 years old – and then greatly increased their use over time were at a higher clinical risk for suicide as emerging adults.

“‘Something about that specific social media use pattern is particularly harmful for young girls,’ said BYU professor Sarah Coyne, the lead author of the study. She noted that

girls' social tendencies likely make them more susceptible to the negative effects of social media.

“Research shows that girls and women in general are very relationally attuned and sensitive to interpersonal stressors, and social media is all about relationships,’ Coyne explained. ‘At 13, girls are just starting to be ready to handle the darker underbelly of social media, such as FOMO (fear of missing out), constant comparisons and cyberbullying. A 13-year-old is probably not developmentally ready for three hours of social media a day.’”

Our passage addresses FOMO. Rejecting the fear of missing out is an important requirement for living an honest life in a world of lies. One of the challenges a small church like ours faces is that we all would rather be a part of the safety of a bigger crowd. The Lord wants us to understand, however, that honest people will never be the bigger crowd. The poor man of verse 3 refers to someone politically powerless. We must not treat the powerless differently because they have no political power. Honesty will always require a willingness to be outnumbered, even courage to be powerless.

II. Honesty requires Christlike love of enemies (vv. 4-5).

Application: I believe that the more we come to understand God's love, the more we will find that it is an unrequited love. Jesus's love is a love that reaches beyond His friends to His enemies. God the Father's love is a love for those at enmity against Him. Jesus asks us to love others like He does in this regard: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for

he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?" (Matt. 5:43-47).

Where this love becomes a requirement for honesty is the scenario in which we have to be honest about our own heart's unwillingness to love this way (v. 5—"and wouldest forbear"). Our natural tendency is to let our enemy suffer his just deserts rather than love him and help him. Remember that the Lord is talking to Israelites about how to live together as Israelites. The point is that Israelites should not be enemies in the first place, and if we face that honestly, we will confess our lack of love for one another and begin to love the way we should – which is to love even when we have not been loved.

III. Honesty requires equal justice before the law (vv. 6-9).

Illustration: These past weeks our nation has been spellbound by a murder trial in Kenosha, WI. The social media site, Facebook, made this announcement in anticipation of the trial: "We've designated the shooting in Kenosha a mass murder and are removing posts in support of the shooter." The mainstream media seemed poised to cover race riots in response to a not-guilty verdict for a white defendant who, it was found, killed three black men in self-defense. Megan Fox covered the actual response in an article she titled, "Kenosha Crowd Reacts to Rittenhouse Verdict and It's Not What the Lying Media Told You Would Happen" [<https://pjmedia.com/news-and-politics/megan-fox/2021/11/19/kenosha-crowd-reacts-to-rittenhouse-verdict-and-its-not-what-the-lying-media-told-you-would-happen-n1534562>].

In that article, Megan wrote: “Not only is the crowd overwhelmingly cheering for Rittenhouse and his right to self-defense, but the majority of the cars driving by were honking their horns in support of the verdict. This reaction gives me hope for America. Perhaps Americans do understand why our Constitutional rights are still important and why the mob cannot be allowed to have power over the law.”

Application: These Bible verses speak of the importance of equal treatment before the law. Jurors, judges, and everyone else who is in authority must endeavor to be impartial in matters of right and wrong. Honesty requires equal justice before the law, and thankfully the good citizens of Kenosha, WI understood the importance of that this past week, much to the new media’s disappointment.

Conclusion: Equal justice before the law is a form of honesty, but it is bad news for us sinners, who are all guilty before God’s law. The truth about us is that we have often been dishonest. We have gone with the crowd; we have not loved our enemies; and we have judged unequally.

McGuffey’s lesson on the Cherry Tree Myth included follow-up questions at the end of the lesson: “How did his father feel toward him when he made his confession? What may we expect by confessing our faults?”

Honesty about the faults of others is always less difficult than honesty about our own faults. This is because of the way sin affects the nature of our heart. Jeremiah the prophet explained this heart damage to a nation of Israel that had been seduced by many lies: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (17:9). The most dangerous liar you and I face each day is our own heart. It is only when we accept this undeniable truth that we are ready find honesty in a world of lies.

George Washington's father died when George was 11 years old. But the way the legend answers McGuffey's question is a type of a real and true antitype. The legend says that Washington's father accepted his son's confession, forgave him, and restored him to the family.

Jesus paid the penalty of our sins so that our heavenly Father can give the same answer when we come to Him in honest repentance and faith. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-9).

Let us not try to make God a liar this morning. He cannot lie. Instead, let us say we have sin, we need forgiveness, and the blood of Christ can meet that need this morning. Jesus can cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*