
Is Honesty Still the Best Policy?



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Some questions that create some scenarios you may encounter. Here are some of them.

You have just got home from shopping with two young children. They are tired and need to go for their afternoon nap. It is also pouring. After all, its Vancouver! As you unpack the groceries and get their coats and boots off, a small packet of candies falls out of one of their pockets. They have obviously taken it when you were busy and distracted in the store. What do you do? Do you get them dressed and return the candies to the store. After all, you are tired and it's raining?

You work in an office where people regularly take home small items such as pens and stationery supplies for personal use. After all, everyone does it. It's a big company and the company can afford it. It is no big deal. What do you do?

The line at the check-out is long and the trainee cashier is working as fast as she can. You are given \$5.00 extra in your change. You have only a split second to react. What do you do?

The order and harmony of society is held together by very flimsy thread. For the most part,

the great majority of people live and abide by the defined rules of community. Rules are what we live with whether we like them or not.

Let me take you back in time to where we are in the Old Testament as the nations travels in the wilderness. Every few days things have to be packed up and no doubt some things are forgotten. There is no lost and found department. There are no locks on tents. You may be away from your tent for some time as you fetch water. You can't lock up your camel.

The life of the community is held together by a flimsy thread in the human spirit. The thread of honesty and trust. When you think about it, this is the way it still is today. Without the approval of the majority, the work of the police would go from hard to impossible and we would experience the chaos of anarchy. We saw last year in Vancouver at the Stanley Cup riots how hard it is for the police to control a mob. Some of the few people who have been charged said, I got caught up in the heat of the moment.

There is a thought in history that the French Revolution in which so many people died in the chaos did not cross the channel into England because of the

growing influence of the Methodist church and people like Samuel Wesley, they were sowing the good seed of reformation rather than revolution.

This thread, this invisible glue that creates community comes from a basic notion of honesty—you shall not steal.

But in so many different ways this is being questioned.

The ethics of consensus—everyone's doing it.

The ethics of pragmatism—the end justifies the means.

The ethics of selfishness—they owe it to me.

Insurance companies tell us that we all pay for the high cost of crime and theft. If you have ever had your car stolen or if your house or condo has been broken into, you know that. I read an article recently which said, about 1/3 of all insurance claims against household policies are false. People trying to get more back than was stolen.

What is stealing?

1. The first and obvious meaning. It is taking what belongs to someone else.

2. It is squandering something. We may not steal it, but we misuse it. We can steal time from our employer.

3. It is withholding what is needed. We are stealing when we do not give what is needed.

Proverbs 3:27-28

Do not withhold good from those who deserve it

When it is in your power to act.

Do not say to your neighbor – come back later, I'll give it tomorrow when you now have it with you.

All of us understand that bank accounts work in two principles, deposits and withdrawals. The trouble for most of us is that we are better at one than the other. But we also need to think of a different kind of bank account. It is an internal one and just like the other, it also operates on deposits and withdrawals.

The interaction of these internal deposits and withdrawals is what creates character, which is our internal bank account or our internal moral compass.

Definition:

Character is the courage to develop and practice our internal moral agenda apart from the pressure of people's

opinions and expectations and external circumstances.

In other words, we do not live by what other think or do. We do not follow the crowd.

Traits such as honesty are not created in a classroom or learned in a seminar or even from reading a good book about character. Character is only forged in the heat of real life situations in which we are either investing in ourselves, making a credit in our inner life.

WHEN ARE HONEST—WE ARE INVESTING IN OURSELVES.

WHEN WE STEAL—WE ARE ROBBING OURSELVES.

The Bible has no specific word for character, but it is a theme that is woven through the Scriptures. The Book of Proverbs defines character as our 'name'. We might also call it reputation.

Proverbs 22:1 A good name is better than riches.

How do we make positive deposits in our inner bank account? 2 ideas are crucial.

1. SMALL DECISIONS ARE THE TRAINING GROUND FOR LARGER DECISIONS.

It is too easy to think that the small decisions do not really matter and somehow we are keeping our moral stamina for

some large decision that may come.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact those small decisions, which may appear to be insignificant and trivial are the training ground for the large decisions. We learn in small events how to make the kind of decisions that build character into our lives when some big decision comes.

Those daily events in life where it is too easy to yield, where no one is watching. Those small choices which we face every day matter deeply in the development of character.

For most of us the development of our character will be built on countless small decisions. Each of them trivial in themselves. Most of them apparently insignificant, but more than we know, they will shape our lives. They look forward to perhaps those few times when the moral decision we make will be absolutely crucial for our future.

That is why it is crucial to develop character in young children. We cannot wait until later. We start now.

2. PRIVATE VICTORIES COME BEFORE PUBLIC VICTORIES.

We want people to see us as honest and upright in public. Politicians talk about their public image. Then the way to this is that we will have to develop character in private where no one is watching us. Whenever we want to be seen with credibility and integrity in public, we will have to win that victory in private.

We cannot be one person in private and a different kind of person in public.

Someone has said, character is what you are when no one is looking.

This is the road to authenticity. We cannot win battles in public that we have not won in private. We will only win public battles when we have faced that enemy in private, when we have waged war against our inner opponent and won.

These two ideas taken together create what we will call **THE EDUCATION OF THE CONSCIENCE**. This means that we nurture and cultivate in our lives the fact that there must be congruity, agreement between what we believe and who we are on the inside and how we live and act before others. Our inner life and our outer world must agree.

When someone asks or even asks, how much can I get away with? That very question reveals their lack of internal honesty. The reason for this is that everything that is genuine in our lives always flows from the inside to the outside. It never flows from the outside in.

There is an emphasis today on values.

A gang may have values, what it means to belong, but this does not mean that they are based on principles. Principles come before values. Principles are fundamental. Principles are based on truth.

This is hard for us because our society talks about values as being important and they are. We have value based education. We watched a TV program a while ago trying to teach young people about value-based conversation. The point was that instead of using language that puts down, we can learn to use language and vocabulary that affirms, but we live in a culture that does not believe in absolute truth, so what are the values based on?

It seems that the number #1 virtue today is not to be valiant for truth, but rather to be tolerant of values.

We need to be people whose lives are based on principles, no matter which way the wind is blowing.

When the moral fibre of a nation collapses, it is not because of major decisions made in the corridors of power. Rather it is because ordinary people in ordinary places stopped being honest about ordinary things in their daily lives.

WHEN WE ARE HONEST, WE ARE INVESTING IN COMMUNITY. WHEN WE STEAL WE ARE ROBBING FROM COMMUNITY.

Theft does more than steal things. It steals trust. That destroys the reality of community. It means, I can no longer trust you.

We lock our homes and cars, but we still do not really trust one another, so we buy alarms for our homes and anti-theft devices for our cars.

We need to remember that the work of the cross and the work of the Spirit is not just about saving people. It is really about transforming people. Our goal is not only personal transformation—community transformation.

Ephesians 4:28

28 He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he

may have something to share with those in need.

It is an interesting truth. There is no such thing as a born-again thief who still steals! The hands that used to steal and be nimble at picking pockets now have to be turned towards honest work.

The person who took from the community now has to be the one who gives to the community.

3 steps that bring people to a change of lifestyle.

REMORSE

That means we are sorry for what we have done. I think there is a great lack of remorse in our culture. Many people are not sorry for what they did. They are just sorry that they were stupid enough to get caught. The next time they will be smarter, which means they will try not to get caught.

REPENTANCE

This is being sorry enough to change, turning our feet in a new direction.

RESTITUTION

This means that we pay back. We go back and make amends. If we do not have the money then perhaps we work it off in service. We do not do that for the sake of the person we robbed or stole from. We do that first for ourselves. Restitution is not because we

want forgiveness, but because we have received forgiveness. That is a crucial understanding.

People laugh at that, but these are the steps that set people free. These are where people make a deposit in their own internal back account.

We may face adversity in life. We may face difficult situations that press in upon us, situations that demand that we dig deep into some deep well inside us. But that kind of adversity or pressure that never damages us on the inside, it is dishonesty and deceitfulness damage us. We are only damaged by anger and bitterness.

WHEN WE ARE HONEST WE ARE INVESTING IN THE BEAUTY OF GOD. WHEN WE STEAL WE ARE ROBBING GOD OF HIS CREDIBILITY.

Titus 2:9-10

9 Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them,

10 and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

Slavery was part of the fabric of the Greco-Roman world. It was expected that slaves would steal. Perhaps many of them did

this just to survive each day. They stole food from the kitchen to have enough to eat. They stole small items from the house that would not be missed that they could sell in the market.

This petty pilfering was a way of life, but Paul's advice to his Christian slaves is straightforward. Stop it! No more!

Note the interesting reason. It is not connected to our personal credibility although that is important, it is not connected to our testimony although that is also important, it is connected to the doctrine/teaching about God. It is linked to the beauty of God. It is what will make God attractive.

We are faced with a humbling realization. When we live and act with honesty in those small and unseen acts of daily life, we are making God attractive. It makes God look good!

All of us probably know someone who says, I don't want anything to do with God or church or Christianity because of what some Christian did. We have all heard that and we all wear that. We make God look ugly! His beauty is made unattractive.

Here is the antidote to that. It is character forged by those small invisible daily choices, where belief and behavior walk hand in

hand and it creates a fragrance an aroma, a perfume and that makes God attractive to people.

The question we need to ask every day is this, am I investing in the character of God and I making God attractive to people?

2 Cor 2 picks up this idea:

14 But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.

15 For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

Back to where we started. So what do you do with those 3 scenarios.

The candy you find when you come home from the store? What do you do?

Taking small items home from the office?

When the cashier gives you too much change?

Remember we are always making internal deposits or withdrawals in our inner life. In the area of character, the community and ultimately to the character of God.

In the final analysis, he fleshed out the life of God and he made God attractive. Even as he hung on a cross where there was no beauty in him, he was making God attractive. The cruelty was demonstrating that God is love.

The ultimate irony is this, Jesus was crucified between two thieves and in the final moment. One of them turned and became an honest man!