

Learn to value honesty!

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everybody. Nice to see you all. I believe this week it's going to warm up. Somebody told me that. This gray will lift. The gray has been around for days, hasn't it?

Not seen the sun. That's why I chose my top. Yes, because normally, as you know, I wear yellows and oranges. Right. We're going to read from Proverbs 11, verses 1 to 3.

And we're thinking on the theme of learning to value honesty. Life skills to live by. The series is lessons from the book of Proverbs.

Learning to value honesty. I've been preaching a long time now, a long, long time, and I can't remember ever preaching a sermon on honesty. It's kind of one of those kind of things that we take for granted that we ought to be, and especially those of us who profess to be Christian, we ought to be honest.

But actually, it's very rarely addressed. And I was struck by that as I prepared last week. So, chapter 11, rather, 1 to 3.

[1 : 13] The Lord abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight. When pride comes, then comes disgrace.

But with humility comes wisdom. The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

Amen. And the Lord will bless to us the reading of his holy word. So, hands up, those of you who have never told a lie in your life.

Well, look around, Johnny. Look around. They're all liars in here. No, I said told a lie. Not lived out one, but I mean, living out one is true as well.

So, well done, at least, for passing the first test. Because if anybody had put their hand up, I would have expected you to be extremely young, extremely naive, or just a liar.

[2 : 19] George Washington, of course, might have put his hand up when he was a young man, because you will remember that George Washington, who was originally English, of course, from what is now Washington in the Northeast, had a family home in which he apparently cut down a cherry tree, and then was asked who did it, and he said, Father, I cannot tell a lie.

It was me. Well, well done him. I wonder if at the end of his life, he would have repeated the statement, I cannot tell a lie, especially because in the end, as well as a military man, he became a politician, and we all know they never lie.

Until they get into power. What is a lie? Well, a lie is a sin, isn't it?

A sin. It is a transgression of the law of God. God is a God of truth, and he deals in truth. However, uncomfortable, the truth makes us feel.

But then apparently, a child, a very wise child, if it was a child, I suspect it's a made-up story. A child was asked in Sunday school, What is the lie? And the child replied, It is a sin against God, or a very present help in time of trouble.

[3 : 40] Now, we've all used lies in that way, haven't we? We're in trouble. Before we can even think about it, in order, a natural self-defense mechanism, we say, Wasn't me.

Even if it was so obviously me. It wasn't me. It was somebody else. Or there was a good reason why I did that. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

The line comes quite naturally to us. How are you today? I'm fine, thank you. Even if you're not. Do you like my hair? Oh, it's lovely. Even if it isn't. What do you think about my dress?

Or my new jumper? Oh, it suits you, even if it doesn't. Lies trip off the tongue so very easily. But to be an honest person is something that is highly valued in society.

We admire people who are honest. Straight up and down people tell us the truth. But it's all about how they tell us the truth, isn't it? Because to be honest is one thing.

[4 : 49] But to be brutally honest is quite another. And we'll come back to that in a little while. Brutal honesty is not very generous or kind or loving or gracious.

It can be cruel and vindictive and manipulative and damaging. So it isn't just about telling the truth. It's what scripture calls speaking the truth in love that we aim for in this world.

Abraham Lincoln, as a very young man, faced the crisis of integrity when he discovered that there was an error in his accounting. He was an accountant and a lawyer before he became president of the United States.

He knew that if he allowed the error to go, he would benefit personally. But he was too honest to do that.

So he owned up to the financial mismanagement that had a short-term impact on his reputation. But over the long term, Abraham Lincoln became known as Honest Abe.

[5 : 56] Honest Abe. A man who was known to be honest in all of his dealings as a lawyer and eventually as a politician.

And ultimately as America's greatest president, arguably, with George Washington. So in the book of Proverbs, we're learning about a father's advice to his son.

And the son is ready to hit the ground running, get out into the world to make a name for himself, to make choices in life about marriage and about business and about friendships and about how he will live his personal life out in the big wide world when his father can no longer protect him or put him to bed at night.

And he wants him to choose wisely. Remember, there are two paths in Proverbs. The path of the righteous or the path of the wicked.

And they lead in very different directions and end up in very different destinations. Those who follow the way of the righteous will prosper. Those who follow the way of the wicked will perish.

[7 : 08] That's straightforward, straight up and down language, according to the wisdom of this father. Derechidna, commenting on Proverbs, says, It is a book which seldom takes you.

I think I've got a slide on this, actually. It is a book which seldom takes you to church like its own figure of wisdom. It calls across to you in the street about some everyday matter or points things out at home.

Its function in Scripture is to put godliness into working clothes, to name business and society as spheres in which we are to acquit ourselves with credit to our Lord and in which we are to look for his training.

I like that phrase, putting godliness into working clothes. That's what Proverbs does. It isn't so concerned about the afterlife.

It is concerned about this life and how to make godliness practical, how to make it work differently in society, in our social dealings with others, and in our dealings with our family and ultimately with the Lord.

[8 : 24] We are to acquit ourselves with credit to our Lord in this world. To live a life that pleases God.

I wonder when you get up in the morning and you prepare yourself for the day, whether you ever pray, Lord, help me to live this day in a way that pleases you.

Directly or indirectly, when we say the Lord's Prayer, that's effectively what we're doing. Lord, help me to live this day in a way that pleases you. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Begins with, your will be done in my life. Because if I can make a difference for others and please you by helping and supporting and looking out for others, then if I do it and others do it, what a better world we would have to live in.

How do I equip myself in this world to live a life that pleases God? Well, one of the ways we can put godliness into action and put it into working clothes is to value honesty.

[9 : 37] So, next slide, please. How do we value honesty? Well, first of all, we value honesty by hating what is false. Proverbs 12, 22 says, The Lord detests, notice that word, the Lord detests, turns his stomach, he hates it, like macaroni cheese.

The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy. Well, it was only a little lie, and it didn't do any harm.

It did not. The Lord detests lying lips. There are no such things as little lies. Lies are always designed to deceive, or to manipulate, or to control others, to hide things from others that may prove beneficial.

You might remember last Sunday, Andy quoted Proverbs 6, 16 to 19. Just think about that for a moment. Turn it in your Bible and put your finger there or put a mark there to come back to. There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him. And I'm interested. He doesn't mention a certain brand of politician, nor does he mention a certain style of music, or certain football teams that wear red and white.

[11:04] No. There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him. Three of those are about the sin of the tongue.

Somebody who tells a lie, somebody who causes dissension, and someone who divides brothers. Three things there to do with the tongue.

A lying tongue. A false witness who pours out lies, and a man who stirs up dissension among his brothers. According to Proverbs, then, honesty is considered to be an essential part of righteous life, with a number of verses emphasizing the importance of speaking truth, acting with integrity, and avoiding lying.

Dishonesty, in contrast, is seen as destructive and displeasing to God. So this promotes the idea of an old adage that we used to hear a lot, but hear less of nowadays.

I wonder what that tells you about society. Honesty is the best policy, which is actually very wise. If you do something wrong, and people latch on to it, you're best to fess up, aren't you?

[12:40] Because the more you lie, the more entangled you get. Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive, said Shakespeare. But Richard Wheatley, who was once Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, said, Honesty is the best policy, but he who is governed by that maxim is not an honest man.

Think about it. Honesty is the best policy, but he who is governed by that maxim is not an honest man. If you have to tell yourself, well, I've been found out, I need to be honest, that implies that you were dishonest.

John Blanchard said, For the Christian, honesty is not the best policy. It is the only one. It is the only one. Being honest is something the Lord loves.

Lying lips is something He hates. Proverbs 11 opens by encouraging honesty in our social dealings and interactions.

Many, many years ago, I was invited to run a Bible study with a gentleman who was in business who was interested in discovering more of the Lord.

[13:56] And when I got to meet him, he talked very eloquently, and I was very hopeful. But then, after a few weeks of this Bible study, he and his son had an argument.

His son and this gentleman were in business together, and his son was casting doubts and aspersions upon his father's genuineness of seeking the Lord by pointing out that he's very crooked in his business dealings.

To which the gentleman businessman said, Son, that's business, and this is religion. It's a different thing. No, no, no, no. No, no. If it's genuine, it makes a difference to the way we do business.

Chapter 11, verse 1, talks about dishonest scales. It's part of the ancient law codes. The Babylonians, long before Proverbs were written in 1750 B.C.

in the Code of Hammurabi, talks about the consequences of loading scales to manipulate and control the trade price or to deny somebody fair dealings with their grain or corn or metal or whatever it might be by threatening forfeiture of an investment and by threatening punishment for corrupt traders.

[15:22] To balance the scales dishonestly is to try and dishonor and to damage the rights of traders who may be harmed in some way by this.

So the poor particularly may be exploited or scammed out of their hard-earned living and monies because of the dishonest scales that were being balanced.

We don't like scammers, do we? We get them on the phones now, don't they? They always kind of ring up with some claim that they're going to benefit us in some way only to kind of steal money from our bank accounts before we realize it.

And the prophet Amos talked about such exploitative practices in this way. He talks about those who skimmed the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.

You know, I like that. It's kind of like those who make these kind of rubbish meats. You know, they get all this, they cut all the best bits off and then all the scraps are put together and they're made

into some kind of patty or some kind of artificial slice.

[16:44] You know, where do you see square cows? I don't know. Square pigs? I don't know. But there you go, you know, and there you get this rubbish stuff that's dead cheap. Well, they were doing it way back, putting the sweepings in with the wheat, mixing the dust in with the wheat and you're getting inferior quality grain.

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, I will never forfeit anything they have done. Will not the land tremble for this and all who live in it mourn?

Interesting, isn't it? God is concerned about the corrupt business practices of people who exploit others for the sake of gaining wealth because the poor suffer.

So this verse reminds us of the importance of honesty in social interaction. It might not be business dealings. It might be any kind of social interaction. It might be the kind of social interaction we have with the tax man or the government in paying our taxes or our neighbors or our friends that we owe to or borrow from or whatever it may be.

Or even, has this happened to you, when somebody gives you the wrong change back? It's quite funny to get the wrong change back sometimes. You know, you've given them 10 pound and they've given you change for 20 and you think, oh, I better go back and say.

[18:09] And then you go back and say, and look and say, what's wrong with you? Why didn't you, why didn't you just pocket it? Well, because you want to be honest and you want to not damage anybody in any way even though it's such a small amount.

Proverbs 11, verse 2 demonstrates that pride leads ultimately to disgrace in contrast to the humble pursuit of wisdom which will lead to honor. Notice again what it says there in verse 2.

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom. The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

A humble person acknowledges their need and reliance upon God, whereas a proud person goes it alone. A proud person's favorite song is Frank Sinatra's I Did It My Way.

Yeah. Imagine doing that, singing proudly about how you overcome all obstacles and you manage to gain some great success entirely on your own.

[19:22] Simply not true, is it? Even if you had success in education, it was because you had some good teachers who instructed you. And if you have success in business, it's because along the way somebody wise and somebody who'd gone there before give you good advice to help you to get to the top.

The reality is, as John Donne said, no one is an island in tire of himself. We need society in order to be successful. And ultimately, of course, the godly man knows that he needs the Lord to do that. Because life could have gone so differently and things could have gone so badly for us, but they didn't. They went well for us and the Lord guides our steps. He directs our way. And so, if we happen to be wealthy and if we happen to be successful, let's thank God that he provided the opportunities to make that possible.

It's all about humility. A recognition that we are what we are by the grace of God. And not because we are better, wiser, and more intuitive, and more skillful than other people.

Humility teaches us to be dependent, where pride teaches us to be self-reliant. The Christian can never sing, I did it my way, because he knows they're but for the grace of God.

[20:47] For I. the Lord detests lying lips because of the harm they cause. Proverbs 25, 18 says, a false witness is like a club, a sword, or a sharp arrow, destructive and deadly, because a false witness lies in order to disadvantage other people and to harm them in some way, especially if that's the case in court.

the Ten Commandments warns against bearing false witness. And Solomon warns us here against bearing false witness and violating the Ninth Commandment because truth is fundamental to a well-functioning and just society.

Imagine if we lived in a society where people routinely lied to each other. Imagine if you went up to the bank, into the bank, and you said to the bank teller, how much money do I have in my account? And they say, oh, well, you have 10,000 pounds. Oh, great, I'll go out and I'll buy some new furniture. Actually, they lied to you, it was only 10 pounds.

You find yourself in debt. Imagine if that was the case. Of course, you'd quickly kind of have people angry with the bankers, wouldn't you, if they routinely lied to you. Imagine if you went to the doctor and you said to the doctor, the doctor just had serious blood tests.

[22 : 08] Did they all come back okay? And the doctor said, yes, they did. Actually, they didn't. The blood tests reveal that you've got something seriously wrong with you. You're dying of a cancer. Imagine if the doctor, in order to make you feel better, told you a lie rather than told you the truth.

We wouldn't be very pleased with that doctor, would we? I think that doctor would be struck off, wouldn't they? For lying to their patients. Imagine living in a society where people's word could not be believed, where you had to check it before you believed it.

Such a society would be a terrible place to live. We should never and would never encourage a society where people were told to routinely lie to teachers and the police and lawyers and anybody else because such a society would be destructive.

People's word ought to be their bond. All of us believe, at least in principle, that honesty is integral to a just society. Imagine living in a society where your politicians routinely lied to you.

Now you're not so sure, are you? Imagine politicians who might claim expenses that they shouldn't claim to build duck houses.

[23 : 31] Imagine that in 2009. That was the scandal, wasn't it? It was a scandal. Too many politicians did that and they were rightly voted out of office.

Now I'm not having a go at politicians per se. I'm simply showing you what happens when society is scandalized by routine lying on the part of those that we should be trusting.

If a society falls into the trap of being fast and loose with the truth, that is not a happy, good, or just society to live in and it must change.

Else corruption takes root and if you look around the world and you look in societies where corruption takes root, where politicians routinely lie and feather their own nest at the expense of their population, that is a society in which people are trying to get out of, they're trying to get away from.

That's why lots of migration happens in the world because of corrupt governments and everything else. It is not a good society to be in. Righteousness is integral to a nation's well-being and sin, the scripture says, is the reproach of any people.

[24 : 47] When words can't be trusted, society falls apart. But what about our words? What if we routinely lie?

How does that harm our relationships? relationships? How does it harm our conversation? If we get into the habit of routinely telling lies, eventually, we won't even believe ourselves.

How can you? If you routinely lie to get out of trouble, you'll believe anything that you tell yourself, except in reality, you won't believe anything that you tell yourself and nobody else will believe you. George Bernard Shaw said, the liar's punishment is not in the least that he is not believed, but that he cannot believe anyone else. That's what happened. The Lord detests lying lips.

The righteous hate what is false. Next slide, please. We need to value honesty by speaking what is true in love. You see, we have to be honest, but I've already talked about the danger of being brutally honest.

[26 : 03] When we're being honest, we have to ask ourselves, is what I'm saying true? Is what I'm saying helpful? Is what I'm saying kind? Will what I say help that person to make a difference?

There are some things we could say that we're better off not saying because it won't necessarily be good or helpful or kind. But we have to be careful.

We mustn't fall in the trap thinking, well, I need not, I ought not to say something that will upset a person. Imagine if we never said anything that wouldn't upset a person. It's just back to that kind of illustration I give of going to the doctors.

Imagine if the doctor said, I'm not going to tell you you've got cancer because it might upset you when there's a perfectly viable treatment available. And he has to tell you the truth. Now it might upset you, it might make you feel uncomfortable, but ultimately the desire is to do a person good. And that's one of the really important determinants of whether or not you'll tell a person the truth. Do I desire to them good or harm? Are my words reflective of a loving heart, or just a desire to get one over a person, win an argument, to show that I'm cleverer than another person, or to manipulate or control a person in some way.

[27 : 25] There are different ways of being honest, and there are different ways of being dishonest, too. We can pretend we're wanting to do somebody good, whereas in reality all we're trying to do is show off and be clever, or to be controlling in some way.

Well, I'm telling the truth, yes, in order to manipulate and control, and that's dishonest. So, honesty is not just about words, it's about the heart, and love is not just about telling the truth, it's about speaking the truth in love.

An honest answer, said the Proverbs, is like a kiss on the lips. Do you like kissing on the lips? Some people don't, I know, but generally speaking, it's a pleasurable thing. To kiss somebody on the lips is a sign of affection, and trust, and tenderness, and concern.

So, we have to avoid honesty that is brutal, but we have to speak the truth in love, and that's especially true in the church. Speaking the truth in love is especially true in the church.

We have a thing in church called confession. What is confession of sin? It is a speaking of the truth. But in churches, we are very loved to confess sins to one another, even though the scripture says do it.

[28 : 43] We find it very difficult to do it. Why? Because we're giving information away that empowers people, and it empowers people in a negative way toward you, the confessor. They know something about you that they may hold over you, and you have to be very brave and very humble to say, let me confess my sin to you.

Not that you might go away and gossip about it, but in order that you might pray. And a word about gossip. Gossip.

We like a bit of a gossip, don't we? A bit of a gossip. I've got some information. Oh, I ought not to tell you. I know what I'll do. I'll tell you because I'm concerned, and we can pray about it.

Okay. If it's genuine concern, pray about it, perhaps to yourself, and then speak to the person that you were about to gossip about.

But don't pray about it in a huddle, excluding that person, and pray for them without informing them of the juicy morsel that you have received. Gossip is half truth very often, spread in order to damage another person with no intention of making things better.

[29 : 58] And interestingly, the Apostle Paul in Romans 1 warns about gossip and says, gossip is a sign of a society that is turned away from God, that is under the wrath of God.

Gossips and busybodies are part of such a society. We've made an art form of gossip, we call it Twitter or Facebook or something else, and we delight in it and character assassinate.

That's not honesty, and it's not true, and we shouldn't engage in that in the church. Jesus said, the devil is a liar, said, the Richard Ortlund, Jesus said, the devil is a liar and the father of lies.

Why is lying so evil? Because true, sincere, honest words bind us together in community. True words make love and trust and intimacy possible, but false words conceal us from one another, even as we might go on faking community, role playing community outwardly, while something else is really going on in our hearts.

And who wants that hypocrisy? There is nothing divine in it. And so a word of warning to us, let us not be a community where gossip is a routine behavior.

[31 : 21] Whenever we are given information that may be damaging or harmful to another person's reputation, pray about it, then take it to the individual and have an honest conversation and then pray about it some more.

And if you are still concerned because the individual does not respond in a way that they ought to and acknowledges it or omits the offense, then you might want to bring it to an elder or to the pastor to discuss.

But only then, only then, after you have sought to deal with it. Many years ago I was in a church where there was a lot of unhappiness expressed toward the pastor.

And I used to meet with the pastor on a Monday morning. And I learned to deal with gossip that was when I went around visiting people. I learned to deal with the gossip about the pastor in this way. I told them the honest truth was this.

Every Monday morning I meet with the pastor to discuss what we've been discussing in our pastoral visits. So if you would like me to pass on what you have just said, I will happily do so.

[32 : 30] But if you don't want me to pass it on, we're not going to talk about it. Yeah? Sometimes we have to shut it down. Is it kind?

Is it good? Is it helpful? Is it loving? Does it demonstrate a desire to put something right? Or is it just a juicy morsel, but a juicy morsel that defames and damages and harms a brother or sister in Christ?

That is not honesty. It is simply gossip. Thirdly, and lastly. Next slide, please. Value honesty by living in integrity.

What is integrity? Integrity is not perfection. It is transparency. A person of integrity lives straightforwardly, not in any duplicitous way.

So they're not saying one thing and doing another. They're not appearing to be one thing and behaving in another way. They just are what they are, whether they're that at home, whether they're that with their family, or whether they're that in society.

[33 : 40] They're consistent. The Scripture calls us to a righteous life. A righteous life is not a perfect life. It is a life of integrity, where a person seriously seeks to honor the Lord in his life, whether at home, whether at business, whether in personal relationships, wherever they are.

They are consistent. An honest life is a life of integrity. It isn't deceitful. It doesn't hide. It doesn't pretend to be one thing.

It is just straight up and down a life of godliness before the Lord. God. And this is where honesty really hits home.

When somebody asks you in the morning, how are you? And you say, I'm fine, thank you, even if you're not. You're not being honest with them. But guess who you're not really being honest with? Yourself. Yourself. And if I was to ask you today, how are you with the Lord? Would you say, I'm fine, thank you.

[34 : 55] And here we have a chance to be honest with ourselves and before God. Jesus says, I have come that you may have life and have life to the full.

How are you today? Do you have life to the full? If you say, yes, praise the Lord, I have life to the full. Well, we're all going to rejoice with you.

If you say, I'm really struggling today, God. You have integrity. Because you're not pretending. Religion can make pretenders of us.

We can say, oh, I'm fine with the Lord. Me, you know, I'm a good lad, really. I put my tie in. I turn up at church every Sunday. Well, the joy of the Lord is your strength.

How are you today? Oh, I'm fine, thank you. Wonderful. Praise the Lord. I'm really weak and struggling. You have a life of integrity. What does the Scripture say?

[35 : 58] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness. Okay, what is your life like today?

Are you walking with Jesus? Are you living a righteous life? Are you seeking to refuse sin and live in a way that pleases God? You say, yeah, I'm fine. Praise the Lord. Or you say, I'm really struggling with sin.

There's one sin that kind of keeps me down and makes my life really, really different. And I feel wretched. And you say, I'm such a bad sinner. Well, well done. You're a person of integrity.

sin. Because you're confessing it to Jesus, who is forgiving your sin by its precious blood.

Integrity is not perfection. It is honesty. If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to purify us from all unrighteousness.

[36 : 59] Two men went up to a temple to pray. This is the last thing I want to say. Two men went up to the temple to pray. One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up before God and he prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other men.

I tithe. I worship. I sacrifice. I wear these lovely clothes and everybody thinks I'm wonderful. God, I thank you that I'm not like other men.

And especially like, sorry, Johnny. Especially like this tax collector. And the tax collector beat his breast.

He wouldn't even look up to heaven. He looked down on the ground and he said, God have mercy on me, a sinner. man. And Jesus said, that man went down from here justified.

Because the man who humbles himself will be exalted and the man who exalts himself will be humbled. The man of integrity is an honest man, an honest woman, who says, Lord, I honestly need you.

[38 : 15] I cannot do without you. Please forgive me, a sinner. Pride leads to destruction.

The proud person who says, I did it my way. I don't need anybody to forgive me. I will get to heaven by my own way. That man is heading for destruction.

The person who falls on their knees and says, God have mercy on me, a sinner. That person is heading for eternal life. Let's be honest with God, with ourselves.

And if we're honest with God and with ourselves, there is hope for us. Amen.