

Counseling the Parents of a Child Who Lies

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Abstract

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Lying is a sin that is nearly universal (Jn 8:44). I have not yet found anyone who has not confessed to have lied in one or more of its various forms at some point in their lives. Indeed, lying is so serious to God that it earns a place in the Decalogue (Ex 20:16) and the list of the seven deadly sins (Prv 6:17). The sin of lying is not a respecter of sex, race, economic or social status, age, or any other factor. It is a sin that tempts all humans, and it is likely that all humans have committed it and been impacted by others who have sinned in this way.

Experience indicates that lying is typically something that starts early in life. While young children have not usually been tempted to sexual sin, or not honoring the Sabbath, or taking the Lord's name in vain, they have usually been tempted to lie and have given in to that temptation. Children do not have to be taught to lie; lying is part of being born into sin (Jn 8:44). Apart from selfishly demanding attention and general rebellion—such as resisting a parent's instructions—lying is often the first sin that a child actively, volitionally commits. Parents are often shocked at the first instance of their child willfully lying or deceiving.

The typical parental response to a child lying is to exact some type of punishment and issue a warning not to lie again. The emphasis is predominantly on stopping the behavior and threatening future consequences if it persists. This type of response leads to behaviorism and does not address the root issues behind the deception. Unfortunately, very few parents take the time and effort to delve into the “why” behind the lie. Behaviors may be modified by this approach, but desires at the heart level have not been changed.

The impetus for this project is to provide a resource to help parents explore the heart issues driving a child to lie (Jer 17:9). It will uncover various desires that motivate a child to lie as the form of deception used to get something he wants. Identifying these desires—heart motives—can provide tremendous insight to parents that they can use to point their child to Christ. Having an understanding of the motives and idols of a child's heart is a valuable tool parents can utilize to produce lasting change, instead of simply modified behavior.

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I. Introduction

A. Purpose Statement

1. The objective of this thesis is to provide a counseling resource to parents of children who lie.
2. The ninth commandment—"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex 20:16)—is one of the most basic instructions for living the Christian life.¹
3. The thesis will help parents view the problem of lying as more than a sin that needs to be stopped, but as a bad fruit of underlying heart idolatry issues.
4. Understanding lying from the Bible's viewpoint will help parents avoid addressing the problem using legalistic, behavior modification methods that only deal with the outward manifestations instead of the heart (Jer 17:10).
5. Parents need resources to help them understand that behind their child's sinful behaviors are heart motives seeking to satisfy various idolatrous desires. Defining those idolatrous desires will help parents put their child's lying into a scriptural context and provide insight into the motives behind their deception.
6. When parents can trace their child's lying to specific heart idols, they will be equipped to address the sinful idolatry that lies beneath the sinful behavior.²
7. Parents who address the matters of the heart will be equipped to point children to their need for the gospel and grace, as well as provide them hope for lasting change.³

B. Intended Audience and Scope

¹ Lou Priolo, *Deception: Letting Go of Lying* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2008), 5.

² Brad J. Bigney, *Gospel Treason: Betraying the Gospel with Hidden Idols* (P & R Publishing, 2012), 25.

³ Edward T. Welch, "Motives: Why Do I Do the Things I Do?," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 22, no. 1 (Fall 2003), 7.

1. The audience for this project includes parents of children who are exhibiting an increasing or prevalent pattern of lying (Ps 34:11-14).
2. The focus will be on dealing with a repeated sin issue, when the pattern of lying becomes clear to the parents.
3. It is not necessarily intended for those who have caught a child in an isolated lie, though the information in this resource will still be of some benefit to them if the problem begins to manifest itself more frequently.
4. This research will be for parents who already assent to the Bible's clear teaching that lying is a sin, and who have a basic knowledge regarding the commands against bearing a false witness.
5. My research will briefly address why lying is a sin, but it will not seek to establish the sinfulness of lying or attempt to convince parents that a sin problem exists. It is assumed that the parents are Christians.
6. This will benefit parents that understand the problem exists, and who acknowledge that God requires them to deal with it, but who do not know what disciplinary steps to take next, or how to address the issue biblically.

C. Statement of Need

1. Currently, the major biblical counseling publishers have no widely available resources that specifically and comprehensively address this precise topic.⁴
2. I define "resources" to mean targeted, issue-specific biblical counseling assistance for the layperson, such as mini-books or booklets.

⁴ This assessment is based on a review of the product offerings listed on the web sites of the following publishers: New Growth Press, Shepherd's Press, Focus Publishing, and CCEF.

3. There is an abundance of resources for very specific topics that affect small segments of the population, such as transgenderism, suicide, singleness, and sexual abuse, yet there is none available for this topic that is a very common issue for parents and their children.
4. Research points to the prevalence of lying among children.
 - a) PubMed Center conducted research in 2012 to study the lie-telling abilities of children between the ages of three and eight years old. For the project, lying was defined as “making a false statement with the intention to deceive the recipient.” The study involved a situation where the children had been told not to peek at a concealed toy, then they were left unsupervised. The study found that 64% of the children in the study group disobeyed instructions and peeked at the toy and lied about it when questioned, including 38% of the three year-olds. This study produced very comparable results to previous tests conducted by other research groups that used a similar test mechanism.⁵
 - b) A 2015 study from the Netherlands found that the primary difference between children and adults was not the prevalence of lying, but simply that the proficiency in fashioning believable lies grows with age.⁶
5. In light of this research, it appears to be a glaring omission that no widely published biblical counseling resources are available to help parents when lying first begins to manifest itself in a child’s life.⁷

⁵ Victoria Talwar and Kang Lee, “Social and Cognitive Correlates of Children’s Lying Behavior,” *Child development* 79, no. 4 (2008): 866–881.

⁶ Theodor Schaarschmidt, “The Art of Lying,” *Scientific American*, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-art-of-lying/>.

⁷ Lou Priolo, *Deception: Letting Go of Lying*, 5.

D. Research Methodology

1. A primary source will be exegesis of Scripture passages that address lying. These passages will include: commands, proverbs, and narratives.
2. A focus of my biblical studies will be exploring passages that address the heart issues behind lying, where the passage either explicitly or implicitly identifies the heart idol.
3. I will research books, journals, and blogs that deal with heart motivations for sinning. Where such material exists, I will prioritize those that contain an emphasis on lying.
4. I will not limit my sources to those that only address children because heart motives apply to all ages.

E. Limitations

1. I will address the most common heart motives, listing the primary idols at the root of sinful behaviors.
2. I will cover the primary types of lies children employ, and give examples of potential heart motives and idols that might influence a child to utilize each type of lie.
3. I will not attempt to cover all possibilities of heart motives for each type of lie that is prevalent among children.
4. I will give basic guidance for parents on how to instruct and discipline their children who lie (Prv 19:9).
5. The goal of my counsel for parents is to equip them to instruct and guide their children to recognize and confess heart idols, repent of them, turn to the gospel, put off lying, and put on truth-telling.
 - a) Idols are God-substitutes.
 - b) Desiring or attempting to satisfy a heart idol is false worship and sin.

- c) Parents must teach their children to recognize why they lie to satisfy a heart idol, and point them to the need for the gospel, either to save or to sanctify.
- d) Parents must lead their children to practice truth-telling.

II. Defining the Problem

A. Defining the following two key terms is helpful for understanding this subject. Of particular importance is the need to distinguish the clarity of biblical terms from the more ambiguous terminology used by secularists.

1. Biblical terms

- a) Deceit/deceive/deception – Deceit involves deliberately communicating—verbally or non-verbally—to another person something that one does not believe to be true. Deception can be manifested in several forms, and is accomplished by falsifying information or concealing information.⁸ Proverbs 10:18 says, “He who conceals hatred has lying lips.” Concealment is a form of deceit that is prevalent among children. They often conceal things from their parents that the parents have a need and right to know.⁹
- b) Lie/lying/liar – Lying is a specific type of deception. The ninth commandment presents lying as bearing a “false witness” (Ex 20:16), or making an untrue statement. It is contrasted with speaking the truth. Christians are told to put off falsehood and speak truth to their neighbors (Eph 4:25). God is presented as the One who is always true, while men are presented as liars (Rom 3:4). God,

⁸ Lou Priolo, *Deception: Letting Go of Lying*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

for whom truth is one of His attributes, detests lying and delights in truthfulness (Prv 12:22).

2. Secular view

- a) Deceit/deceive/deception – The secular mindset is that deception is situationally determined as to whether it is right or wrong. In this worldview, deception is acceptable—even encouraged—if it serves what one considers to be a greater good. For example, modern-day secular schools are regularly encouraging children to lie to their parents (by concealment or affirmative lying) about their “gender identity” if they believe their parents will respond negatively. In one sense, secularists are utilitarian, meaning, they believe certain types of deceit is morally acceptable when the resulting consequences minimize harm or maximize benefit (according to their worldview).
- b) Lie/lying/liar – The world essentially views lying as a violation of the basic rights of others, or a violation of societal rules and norms. Secular psychologists view it as a “mild” symptom of a conduct disorder¹⁰ or as a personality disorder.¹¹ These views leave the door open to interpretation based on what a society has formed as its rights, norms, and rules. It is culturally “relative.” A popular Christian family ministry seems to even minimize the sinfulness of lying by making a separate category for “lies told out of

¹⁰ American Psychological Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 469-471.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 659.

playfulness.” It recommends that children learn to discern this type of lying

“that doesn’t harm others” from “selfish, avoiding, or deceptive dishonesty.”¹²

B. Many Christian parents, and many parenting “manuals” for Christians, stress a behavior modification approach when responding to children who lie or practice deception.

1. The basic goal of behavior modification is to persuade the child to stop or alter the undesired behavior, either through punishments or rewards.
 - a) Parents that follow this line of thinking attempt to control their child’s choices and activities.
 - b) This method leaves parents acting more like policemen than parents, relegating them to spend much of their time doing detective work, searching for evidence of lies.¹³
2. In the case of lying, the behavior modification approach aims to stop the child from lying and force him to tell the truth. Most parents resort to some type of punishment when the child is “caught” lying.
3. This approach usually rests upon the thin argument of using guilt trips to convince the child that lying is bad, and that getting caught lying will result in unpleasant consequences. The child may actually start telling the truth, but only as a means to get something else he wants, such as attention, praise, or opportunities to play. His satisfaction comes from getting his desires fulfilled, not from obeying God’s commands.

¹² Danny Huerta, “How Do I Get My Child to Stop Lying?,” *Focus on the Family*, last modified September 27, 2021, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/behavior-discipline/how-do-i-get-my-child-to-stop-lying/>.

¹³ Paul David Tripp, *Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens, Second Edition*, 2nd edition. (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2001), 110.

4. The behavioral modification approach falls short because it does not get to the root issue of why the child lied in the first place. The behavior may change, but the attitude and reason behind the lying remains in place.¹⁴
 5. Christian psychology rarely frames the problem in terms of an offense against God, but as a social and relational problem. For example, a popular Christian family ministry counsels parents to “teach how honesty is about seeing the value of the other person,” and to “point out the strength of truth-telling and how important it is for relationships and personal growth.”¹⁵
- C. The biblical approach is to address who God is, what He has done, why He deserves full obedience, and what is going on in the child’s heart when he chooses to sin. The commission of any form of deceit reveals that the child desires something so badly that he is willing to disobey God in order to obtain it, or to prevent losing it.
1. A sinful action reveals a heart idol, or desire, behind the sin.
 2. Examples of heart idols that children typically hold are the desires for: love, pleasure, acceptance, significance, meaning, recreation, control, and comfort.
 3. Depending on the child’s age, these idols are often driven by a self-centered desire for immediate pleasure or satisfaction, or a fear of man (that is, holding others in higher esteem than that given to God). The child desires to please self or another person more than God, and he is willing to sin against God in order to satisfy his desire for pleasure or to find favor or approval from man.
 4. Biblical parenting will seek to address the heart issue behind the lying (Prv 20:5).

¹⁴ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 4.

¹⁵ Danny Huerta, “How Do I Get My Child to Stop Lying?”

5. Biblical discipline will still require proper behavior from the child, but it emphasizes exposing the desires of the heart that led to the deceit.¹⁶

III. Research

A. Exegesis of truth versus lies, and exegesis of wisdom versus foolishness.

1. God is true, and in Him is no falsehood (Jn 3:33; Rom 3:4; 1 Jn 5:20). Truth aligns with His character, while anything false is a corruption of the creation that He made very good (Gn 1:31) and reflects a lack of fear for Him (Ps 34:11-14).
2. Since God is true and hates falsehood, He forbids His creatures from practicing any form of deceit (Ex 20:16; Eph 4:25) and commands believers, especially, to be holy (1 Pt 1:14-16).
3. God underscores how much He particularly detests lying tongues (Prv 6:27; 12:22), especially associates it with Satan (Jn 8:44), and calls out lying for particularly harsh punishment (Prv 19:9).
4. Scripture presents using our tongues to lie as being foolish, while speaking truth is shown to be a characteristic of wisdom (Prv 13:13; 21:23).
5. The Lord commands us to commit ourselves to speaking only what is true and right (Prv 8:6-8).
6. Scripture indicates that believers must intentionally seek God's help to speak truthfully (Ps 19:14; Ps 141:3).

B. Scripture identifies the heart as the source of all human motivation, including sin.¹⁷

¹⁶ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, 4-5.

¹⁷ Edward T. Welch, "Motives: Why Do I Do the Things I Do?"

1. The Proverbs tell us that the heart should be watched over with all diligence because the issues of life flow from it (Prv 4:23), indicating that any sinful thoughts or deeds originate in the heart.
2. Jesus said that all evil things proceed out of the heart, and named deceit as an example of the sins originating in the heart (Mk 7:21-23).
3. Jesus describes the mouth as a source of bad fruit and evil treasure manifested by careless words. He further elaborates that our words will either justify or condemn us (Mt 12:33-37).
4. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that the heart itself is more deceitful than anything else, implying that all people are prone to self-deception (Jer 17:9-10).

C. The heart is prone to the sin of idolatry.

1. God commands that we love Him more than anyone or anything else (Mt 22:37-38).
2. God commands that we not worship idols, or have other gods before Him (Ex 20:3).
3. Scripture identifies all sin as a form of idolatry (Dt 4:23).
4. An idol is not just a stone or wooden statue, but “an idol is anything that captures our hearts, minds, and affections more than God.”¹⁸
5. Examples of common heart idols are: pleasure, power, love/intimacy, comfort, meaning, control, freedom/autonomy, peace, happiness, significance/reputation, success, respect/admiration.¹⁹
6. Idols are the tools men and women use to satisfy their heart’s desires. Lying—like money, alcohol, sex, and numerous other devices—are simply the means they use to

¹⁸ Brad J. Bigney, *Gospel Treason: Betraying the Gospel with Hidden Idols*, 24.

¹⁹ Edward T. Welch, “Motives: Why Do I Do the Things I Do?,” 52.

- get what they want. The person's goal is not to exalt the idol above himself, but to use the idol to satisfy his desires.²⁰
7. God warns that He will not give His glory to another (Is 42:8), which would include worshipping an idol of the heart.
 8. The Apostle John commands believers to avoid idolatry (1 Jn 5:21).
 9. Idols are exposed when a person is willing to sin in order to obtain them or to prevent losing them.
 10. Behind all conflicts are sinful desires to obtain or hold on to something (Jas 4:1-3).
 11. The Apostle Paul equates worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator with exchanging truth for a lie (Rom 1:21-25).
 12. Sinning has been described as "What you do when you are chasing after something other than God, namely one of your idols."²¹

IV. Biblical and Theological Considerations Regarding Lying

A. Lying at its root is a lack of trust in God and Scripture.

1. The liar does not fear the Lord (Ps 34:11-14).
2. The liar does not believe Scripture's promise that the Lord delights in those who are truthful (Prv 12:22).
3. The liar is more afraid of the harm men might do to him if he tells the truth than he is of God (Mt 10:28).
4. The liar has decided in his heart that siding with Satan, the father of lies (Jn 8:44), is safer than siding with God.

²⁰ Edward T. Welch, "Motives: Why Do I Do the Things I Do?," 51-53.

²¹ Ibid., 26.

5. The liar does not take seriously Scripture's warnings about the punishment liars will receive (Prv 19:9).

B. Liars use lying as a tool to obtain something that is motivated by deeper heart idols.

1. Satan lied to Eve to manipulate her into trusting him more than God (Gn 3:1-5). He desired to be worshipped by men and lying was the tool he used to obtain it.
2. Those who have hatred in their hearts toward others use lying to disguise their hatred (Prv 10:18).
3. Those who refuse to believe Christ and turn to Him for salvation lie to cover up their unbelief by making it appear to be genuine questioning (Mt 21:23-27).
4. Lying by publically promising to do something while having no intention of fulfilling the promise is a tactic used to deceive others into thinking highly of the one making the promise (Prv 25:14). For example, the promise-maker may be leading others to think he is more generous, or more obedient, than he actually is in his heart by making a public pledge to donate to a charitable fund or to help someone in need.
5. Slandering is lying about another with malicious intent (Lev 19:16). The slanderer seeks to have others respect him by putting others in a bad light.
6. Flattery is an attempt to influence someone by praising him above and beyond that which his character merits (Prv 28:23). This type of lie is intended to cause the flattered person to think highly of the flatterer, and thus to like him or do things for him (Prv 29:5).²²
7. Denying guilt and lying by proclaiming innocence is a common tactic for those who seek to justify their sin (Prv 30:20).

²² Lou Priolo, *Deception: Letting Go of Lying*, 19.

C. Scripture provides several narrative examples of people who lied and gives insight into their heart motives.

1. Cain lied to God to escape the consequences of murdering his brother (Gn 4:9). He was angry that he had not received approval from God for his sacrifice, while his brother's sacrifice was accepted.
2. Abraham lied to Pharaoh because he feared that he would kill him (Gn 12:10-20). At that point, Abraham did not believe God's promise to preserve him long enough to provide him descendants that would make him into a great nation (Gn 12:2, 7).
Though Abraham exhibited great faith in other areas of life, he resorted to lying when the pressure was on, demonstrated in two instances over thirty years apart.²³
3. Jacob lied to his father, Isaac, in order to receive his blessing instead of his brother, Esau (Gn 27:5-38). He did this to please his mother, seeking her approval rather than the approval of God.
4. Potipher's wife lied about Joseph to cover her own lust and to prevent losing respect brought about from the humiliation of being rejected by Joseph (Gn 39:7-18).
5. Rahab lied to the king's guards because she feared for her life, both from the guards and from the God of the spies (Jo 2:3-5).
6. David lied to the Philistine king, Achish, pretending to be insane because he "greatly feared" him (1 Sm 21:10-15). In this instance David feared man more than God, who had already anointed him king through the prophet Samuel.
7. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church and Peter by leading them to believe they had given more to the offering than they had actually given (Acts 5:1-11). They

²³ Howard E. Dial, "Counseling the Chronic Offender: Becoming Alert to an Area of Weakness: Recognizing One's Achilles Heel," ed. Howard Eyrich, *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 4, no. 1 (1980), 7.

attempted to cover their love for money because they wanted the church and its leaders to think highly of them.

D. There are some heart idols that are motivators to lying which are more prevalent among children.

1. The idol of recreation or pleasure is often a motive for children to lie. For example, a child may lie by telling his parents that his homework is complete so that he may be released to play outside, or to play video games.
2. The idol of wanting to be loved is a powerful heart motive for children. For example, a child may lie about not feeling well so that his parents will direct nurturing attention to him for a time.
3. The idol of desiring meaning or significance could be manifested by a child lying about not being able to understand his homework. In this case, the desire behind the lie is to get his parent or teacher to give him individualized, undistracted attention.
4. The desire for respect or admiration (or even a fear of man) might be behind a child lying to his friends by exaggerating about his physical skills or talents.
5. The desire for comfort often manifests itself in some form of laziness, by which a child might lie in order to avoid fulfilling responsibilities. This could be as simple as lying by saying "I forgot to do my chores," when, in fact, the child knew what was required but did not want to expend the effort.
6. The idolatrous desire for freedom or autonomy may be the motivating factor for a child lying about what he did with his time while unsupervised.
7. A child may lie about being sick to draw attention to himself and away from a conflict out of a desire for peace in a home where his parents are frequently fighting.

8. The desire for pleasure may be what drives a child to lie about snacking on junk food that he has been forbidden to eat.
9. The fear of man could lead a child to lie about starting a fight at school, knowing that his parents have threatened to impose a harsh punishment on him for such behavior.
10. The fear of man and desire for approval of educators, media, and other children could be the root motive of a child who claims to feel like he is the opposite sex. The transgender movement thrives on being presented as “trendy” and “cool” to children.
11. A child who lies about watching inappropriate content could be trying to cover a love for pleasure and the lust of the eyes (1 Jn 2:16).

V. Counseling Helps for Parents: Instructing a Child Who Lies

- A. The first step a parent must take when addressing a child who lies is to frame the problem in terms of God and His point of view.
 1. Explain who God is by describing His attributes that are most applicable to the sin of lying.
 - a) God is holy, meaning that all moral excellency is found in Him. There is nothing sinful found in Him. Because God is holy, He hates all sin.²⁴
 - b) He is the God of truth, and in Him are no lies (Ps 31:5; Is 65:16). In fact, it is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:18).
 - c) God is sovereign, meaning that He reigns from His throne and has the right to set the rules for His creation (Ps 115:3).
 - d) The omnipresence of God is the reality that God is present everywhere, and everything is in His presence. This means that we have God’s undivided

²⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 41.

attention at all times, and particularly when we sin.²⁵ No one, including the liar, is able to hide from God's watchful eye (Ps 139:7-10).

- e) God is also omnipotent, holding power over all of His creation. The implication for one who lies is that God has the power to enforce His commandments and the penalties for breaking them (Dan 4:35). To openly defy Him who has all power necessary to judge or discipline us any moment He pleases is the height of foolishness.²⁶

2. Explain the reason God gave His commandments.

- a) Whatever God commands is a reflection of His good character and is for man's benefit and flourishing (Jas 1:17). The law enlightens us about who God is, what He is like, and what He expects (Ps 19:7-11).
- b) He commands us to be holy as He is holy (1 Pt 1:16) because those who practice sin cannot abide in His presence (Ps 101:7).
- c) His commandments shed light on human sinfulness by showing how impossible it is for us to keep the law in our own efforts (Rom 7:7-25).
- d) God's laws point us to Him as the only source of power for removing the penalty of sin and defeating its power over us (Rom 8:1-4).

3. Explain God's commands regarding lying, emphasizing its dangers and consequences.

- a) Scripture tells us that it is wise to buy truth, and not to sell it. Truth is to be valued above any perceived benefit that lying can provide (Prv 23:23).

²⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, Illustrated edition. (London: Tyndale Momentum, 1998), 43.

²⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 51.

- b) God warns that the tongue is a world of evil, deadly poison, and has a direct pipeline to hell! Lying, and other evil uses of the tongue, has the power to affect the entire course of one's life in a destructive way (Jas 3:2-12).
- c) Parents should use the Westminster Larger Catechism (or a similar resource), question 145, to instruct children on what the ninth commandment forbids. For example, among the actions the catechism lists as forbidden are: speaking the truth unseasonably or maliciously to a wrong end, talebearing, and scoffing.²⁷
- d) Parents should teach children some of the key passages that warn against lying, such as: Prv 4:24; 6:16-19; 12:22; 19:5; 21:23; Rv 21:8; 22:14-15.

B. The next step a parent must take is to instruct the child on the nature of man.

1. Explain to children why they sin.

- a) Sin is more than just weakness or an inconvenience; it is defiance against God.²⁸
- b) Parents should assure the child that the reason they know he is in rebellion against God is because Scripture assures them that the lies from his mouth reveal what is in his heart (Mt 12:33-34).
- c) Explain to the child that he is lying in order to get something he does not have, or to keep from losing something he already has. This could be any of the heart idols mentioned above (comfort, peace, safety, love, autonomy,

²⁷ General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990), 102-107.

²⁸ Howard E. Dial, "Counseling the Chronic Offender: Becoming Alert to an Area of Weakness: Recognizing One's Achilles Heel," 8.

freedom, pleasure, recreation, intimacy, meaning, respect, significance, approval, happiness, success).²⁹

2. Explain that sinning to obtain a heart idol is a substitute for God and it moves a person outside the circle of God's blessing into a fearful area of discipline, and potentially, wrath.

- a) The first commandment forbids placing greater value on anything more than God (Ex 20:3).
- b) Many heart idols are related to the fear of man, meaning that the liar values what another person thinks of him or can do for him more than he values God's law. This fear of man is a trap (snare) that will surely cause him trouble (Prv 29:25).
- c) Warn the child that lying bears Satan's image, not God's (Jn 8:44).³⁰
- d) The believing child should be admonished that God will discipline him for disobedience (Heb 12:7-11).
- e) The unbelieving child should be warned that his lying will not go unpunished, and that God's wrath rests upon him (Rom 1:18).

C. Instruct the child on the key elements of the Gospel.

1. Present the gospel as the only hope for lasting change.

- a) Lying has revealed the child's need for heart change (Rom 7:7-8).

1. The unbelieving child sins because his heart is enslaved to sin (Rom 3:10-12; Eph 2:1-3).

²⁹ Edward T. Welch, "Motives: Why Do I Do the Things I Do?," 49

³⁰ Lou Priolo, *Deception: Letting Go of Lying*, 23.

2. The believing child cannot continue to practice lying if he is to have unbroken fellowship with God (1 Jn 1:5-7).
 - b) Each of us are hopeless and helpless apart from the Savior.
 1. The unbelieving child is completely unable to please God on his own (Rom 3:23; 8:7-8).³¹
 2. The believing child must have God's help to fight the ongoing battle against sin (Eph 6:10-17).
 - c) Jesus kept God's law—including never lying—and is, therefore, qualified to take the punishment of those who broke it (2 Cor 5:21).
2. Explain confession and repentance.
 - a) Confession
 1. The unbelieving child must confess Christ as his only hope for salvation from the wrath of God (Jn 15:5; Rom 10:9-10).
 2. The believing child should confess sins to God to maintain fellowship with Him (1 Jn 1:9).
 - b) Repentance
 1. The unbelieving child must turn from his lifestyle of sin and turn to Christ, following Him in obedience (Acts 2:38-39).
 2. The believing child must repent of his sins of lying and commit to bear fruits of righteous works (Mt 3:8; 7:16-20).
3. Explain forgiveness of sin.

³¹ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, Illustrated edition. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 468.

- a) The unbelieving child must be instructed that he needs forgiveness from God and that he will receive it when he believes in Christ to save him from the penalty of sin (Rom 8:1-4).
- b) The believing child must be assured that when he practices confession of sin that Christ will forgive him and restore him to fellowship (1 Jn 2:1, 4-5).

4. Explain sanctification.

- a) The unbelieving child should be instructed that sanctification is the ongoing process of subduing the power of sin in his life and enabling him to produce good fruit, which can only take place in those who have believed in Christ and repented of their sin.³²
- b) The believing child should know that progressively becoming more like Christ is what is expected of anyone who names Christ as Lord.
 1. The process of sanctification is initiated by God (Phil 1:6).
 2. Becoming like Christ is not optional (Col 3:10; 1 Jn 3:2-3).
 3. The evidence of sanctification is an assurance of the genuineness of his faith (1 Jn 2:3-6).
 4. Believers are specifically commanded to put off lying (Eph 4:25; Col 3:9; 1 Pt 2:1).

D. Instruct the child of the truth-telling actions and behaviors that he must put on to replace lying.

³² John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, 632.

1. Both the unbelieving child and the believing child should be reminded that the only way to produce righteous works—good fruit—is by the power of the Holy Spirit, who indwells only believers.
 - a) Actions produced by the flesh are dead works (Mt 23:27; Rom 8:8).
 - b) Actions produced by the Spirit are righteous (Rom 8:9-14).
2. It is not enough to simply stop lying. Putting off lying must be replaced by intentionally putting on truth-telling actions (Eph. 4:25).
3. Use the Westminster Larger Catechism (or a similar resource), question 144, to instruct the child of the many positive ways the requirements of the ninth commandment should be interpreted. For example, among the actions the catechism lists as being encouraged are: discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; giving a charitable esteem of our neighbors.³³

VI. Counseling Helps for Parents: Disciplining and Correcting a Child Who Lies

- A. Parents must understand their responsibility to discipline and their children's need to obey in light of God's glory.
 1. God commands that children be brought up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4).
 2. Discipline is a loving action for a parent to take, as it reflects the image and character of God (Heb 12:5-11; Jas 5:19-20).
 3. God gives parents the specific responsibility of teaching their children to fear the Lord and of teaching them His Word and commandments (Dt 6:4-9), and to do it without exasperating them (Col 3:21).

³³ General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 101-102.

4. Scripture commands children to obey their parents, promising blessings for those who do and warning that disobedience brings about serious consequences (Dt 5:16; Eph 6:1-3; Col 3:20).
 5. Chronic sinful behavior has disastrous consequences both for the one who lies and for those around him (Prv 4:10-19). A faithful parent realizes that tolerating such behavior will have long lasting effects, even over multiple generations.³⁴
- B. Properly identify heart motives and address them with effective discipline.
1. Keeping in mind that lying is simply a means to satisfy an idol of the heart, parents should seek to understand what is in the heart of their child and to show them how to understand and evaluate what is in their hearts.³⁵
 - a) A faithful parent will not only teach, but will listen to his child (Prv 18:2, 13).
 - b) A wise parent will develop good heart-probing skills.³⁶
 - i. He learns to help his children express what they are thinking.
 - ii. He learns to help his children express how they are feeling.
 - iii. He learns how to discern heart motives from his children's words and actions.

³⁴ Howard E. Dial, "Counseling the Chronic Offender: Becoming Alert to an Area of Weakness: Recognizing One's Achilles Heel," 8.

³⁵ Ginger Hubbard, *Don't Make Me Count to Three*, 39577th edition. (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2004), 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

- c) A good listener ask questions to draw out the thoughts and intents of his child's heart (Heb 4:12). Asking good questions is key to helping children face who they really are and what they are trying to achieve.³⁷
- d) A wise parent understands that the motives of his child's heart are like deep waters that need to be drawn out (Prv 20:5). The goal is to help the child see the foolish ways in which he has lived for his own glory, and the subtle ways he has exchanged worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of himself.³⁸
- e) Ask heart probing questions, such as David Powlison's X-ray Questions adapted to the child's level of communication and the specific circumstance in which he was discovered to be lying.³⁹ Examples of good questions to ask a child who is lying:
- i. What was it you wanted to happen?
 - ii. What was it you did not want to happen?
 - iii. What were you afraid of, or worried about?
 - iv. What were you planning to do if you had not been discovered?
 - v. Whom do you want to be pleased with you?
 - vi. What were you feeling when you told the lie?
 - vii. What happened to you that made you think lying was your best option?

³⁷ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*, Illustrated edition. (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2002), 180.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁹ David Powlison, "X-Ray Questions: Drawing Out the Why's and Wherefores of Human Behavior," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* Number 18, no. 1 (Fall 1999).

2. Parents should also apply discipline measures appropriate to the heart motives behind the specific circumstances of their child's lying.
 - a) For younger children—generally twelve years old and under—the rod should be used to get the child's attention and direct him to his lack of fear of the Lord expressed in the foolishness of his lying (Prv 22:15; 29:15, 17).⁴⁰
 - b) Parents should help their children properly express to God in prayer a confession of their sin (naming the sin as God's Word names it), asking God to forgive them of the sin, and asking God to help them avoid future sin.
 - c) Parents must require their child who has lied to confess his lie to anyone that was impacted by his lie and to ask forgiveness (Jas 5:16). The humility required to correct lies that were told in the past can be a powerful incentive to not tell future lies.⁴¹
 - d) A good "assignment" for children who have lied is to have them write out Scripture passages that forbid lying. Parents can assign specific passages for younger children, while older children can be assigned to research and find the Scriptures on their own.
 - e) Parents should restrict the child's freedom of access to the persons, situations, or things that tempted him to lie. The restrictions should be lifted incrementally as the child proves he can successfully practice the truth under such circumstances.

C. Train the child to put on truth-telling.

⁴⁰ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, 102.

⁴¹ Lou Priolo, *Deception: Letting Go of Lying*, 27.

1. Use practical techniques to train children to replace lies with truth-telling.
 - a) Use Scriptural narratives to teach children how biblical figures like Abraham exhibited a weakness for lying.⁴² Based on the child's ability, assign him to research what Scripture says about the biblical character's sin of lying and to propose motives for the character's sin. Link the biblical figure's heart motives to those of the child.
 - b) Role play typical situations in which the child will be tempted to lie based on his heart motives. Ask him to "practice" providing the truthful response.
 - c) Use situations where others have been observed lying to review biblical principles. For example, when a child's friend has lied about stealing a toy, a parent could ask his child: What did your friend say? To whom did he lie? What does God say about what he did? Who was hurt by his lie? What should he have said or done instead? Why do you think he lied? What might be the consequences of his lying?
2. Recognize and reward truth-telling.
 - a) Recognition and reward of obedience should always be framed in the context of glorifying God (1 Cor 10:31).
 - b) Thank a child for telling the truth, reminding him that God's Word says life will go well for him and that he will enjoy a long life when he obeys.
 - c) Never react in anger when a child has told the truth, even if the truth discloses a different sin issue. A child should never feel that the "safest" option is to lie.

D. Cautions for parents to consider when dealing with a child who lies.

⁴² Howard E. Dial, "Biblical Case Studies for Counseling," ed. Howard Eyrich, *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 4, no. 3 (1980), 13.

1. Use biblical terminology to name the sin of lying. Do not “soften” the sin by using the world’s terminology that has the effect of minimizing the severity of breaking God’s law. Examples of worldly terminology: fib, little white lie, being dishonest, telling a story, tall tale.
2. Parents must not take the child’s lying personally. It is a common mistake for parents to make a child’s sin about themselves. All sin is against God (Ps 51:4), and the child’s core problems are a lack of fear of God and rebellion against Him. When a parent makes the child’s sin about himself, he steals glory from God.
3. Do not hold children to a standard of performance that does not include the message of grace, either for salvation or for sanctification. A parent cannot try to build good character qualities in his child without reference to God.⁴³

VII. Conclusion

- A. The Bible assures parents of the hope of blessing for their children when they teach them to fear the Lord and obey His commandments (Dt 6:4-9).
 1. The world sends various messages that discourage parents from confronting the sin of lying.
 2. Parents who follow God’s ways will find that it requires hard work, but the work produces eternal rewards leading to salvation and sanctification.
 3. Genuine hope is found in making the most of every opportunity to direct a child who lies to God (Eph 5:16).

⁴³ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*, 176.

4. The tough times parents often face in dealing with a child who lies are not a cause for hopelessness but a reason for hope that the child and parents can become more like Christ through the process of biblical parenting.⁴⁴
- B. Instructing and disciplining a child at the heart motive level is the wise, biblical approach.
1. The world's ways of dealing with lying are not effective long-term because they do not address the child's heart and typically seek to only modify behavior.
 2. Parents who address the child's heart out of a love for God and their children will find God's blessing.
 3. Addressing the heart has eternal implications for both the parents and the child that grow them in the fear of the Lord as they obey His commands regarding parenting and truth-telling.
- C. Christian parents are equipped to address the sin of lying.
1. The Bible is sufficient for instructing and disciplining a child who lies (2 Tm 3:16-17).
 2. The Spirit of God gives power to believing parents to faithfully discipline and instruct their children in the ways of God (2 Pet 1:3).
- D. The power of grace found in the gospel enables parents and children to face the sin of lying and find lasting hope and change.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Andrew Nicholls, Helen Thorne, and David Powlison, *Real Change: Becoming More Like Jesus in Everyday Life* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 18.

⁴⁵ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, xxii.

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