

“The Mattoon Conspiracy”

Deuteronomy 19:15-21

Series: Breaking Bad Week 9. Do Not Give False Testimony

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

Woodside Church

August 26, 2018

Mattoon, Illinois, population 19,000, is a carbon copy of a thousand other small Midwestern towns. South of Chicago, east of the capital Springfield, Mattoon has quaint storefronts on its Main Street, farm equipment and car dealerships on the outskirts, a scattering of aging factories and a mayor named Wanda. Who would think quiet little Mattoon would be the epicenter of a global conspiracy bilking at least 10,000 people around the world of more than \$20 million? Not Mayor Wanda. “We all know each other here,” Mayor Wanda Ferguson said. “You have someone who doesn’t have much money and then all of a sudden they have lots of it, you’re going to notice.”

The Mattoon Conspiracy started in 1994 when Clyde Hood, a retired electrician, and his wife created Omega Trust & Trading. Clyde went to church groups and proclaimed the Lord gave him a mission. He claimed to represent a group of international traders who cut secret multimillion dollar deals to benefit humanitarian causes. An investment of \$100 would pay out a promised \$5,100. Put down \$5,000 your yield is \$225,000. It seemed like a perfect win-win for Christians – help starving people and make a bundle at the same time. He asked for the money to be wrapped in aluminum foil and sent by Federal Express. None of the money went to charity. None of the promised returns were paid. It all went to the conspirators. Clyde purchased a fleet of classic cars, vacationed overseas, and left \$5 tips for a \$2 coffee. Chris Engel bought a shiny new fleet of trucks for his construction company. Police officer Bryan Boes opened a chain of sandwich shops. Corrections officer Jim Turner built the Blue Bird Diner. Among the Omega nineteen there was even a minister.

But when the promised payoffs didn’t appear, the conspirators held off investors with elaborate excuses about delays caused by bankers and irritating government agents. Eventually several government agents from the FBI, IRS and the Postal Service did move in and the Omega pyramid came tumbling down. Hood was sentenced to 14 years in Federal prison. He died in 2012. “You don’t like to see things happen like this in your community,” Wanda Ferguson said. “But you’re glad to see all the rotten little apples caught.” Joyce, a farmer and life-long resident of Mattoon, sighed: “I just didn’t think our hometown people would succumb to temptations to this extent. It broke my heart.”¹

A lie has a life-span. The Mattoon Conspiracy is a perfect portrait of a lie gone a rye. Lies are always conceived and born in the mind of someone. In its infancy, a new born lie seems harmless. But as it grows in strength and size, it becomes impossible to manage or control. Often, a lie will multiply and reproduce. It usually draws other people into its sphere of influence and control. It feeds on other lies to grow and keep alive. Eventually, it dies, but not before it breaks someone’s bank account, someone’s trust, someone’s friendship, someone’s heart, even someone’s life.

¹ John Kelly, “Global Scam is traced to small town in Illinois” in [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#), August 31, 2000.

In our Breaking Bad Series on God's Commandments we've reached number nine: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor," (Exodus 20:16). The ninth commandment refers specifically to lying in court. There can be no justice if those who take the stand do not tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Later in Deuteronomy, Moses stresses several safeguards to prevent courtroom liars. Conviction requires two or three eye witnesses. The trial is held before the watchful eye of the priests, the judges and the Lord Himself. If, after careful investigation, a witness proves to be a liar, the punishment falls on the witness instead of the defendant. The point is to impress upon God's people the deadly seriousness of lying in court. Moses adds,

The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you (Deuteronomy 19:20).

Now you and I know lying is not just a problem for the legal system. In fact, when you look at all the other commandments – idolatry, murder, adultery, theft, and so forth – lying is a parent of them all and the power behind them all. It was so in Biblical times and it's still true today. Jerold Jellison writes in USA Today

Each of us fibs at least 50 times a day. We lie about our age, our income, or our accomplishments. And we use lies to escape embarrassment. A common reason for "little white lies," we're told, is to protect someone else's feelings. Yet in so doing, we are really protecting ourselves.²

If you don't believe we lie that much, see if any of these fibs sound familiar:

- The check is in the mail.
- I'll start my diet tomorrow.
- Yes dear you look great in those clothes
- Give me your number and the doctor or repairman will call you right back.
- I wasn't feeling well.
- One size fits all.
- Your luggage isn't lost, it's only misplaced.
- Leave your resume and we'll keep it on file.
- I need just five minutes of your time.
- Your table will be ready in a few minutes.
- Open wide, this won't hurt a bit.
- It's not the money, it's the principle.
- But we can still be good friends.
- This hurts me more than it hurts you.³

"Those are just white lies," you might say. But as Austin O'Malley once commented, "Those who think it's permissible to tell white lies soon become color-blind." We can easily wander into more serious lies.

² Jerold Jellison, USA Today.

³ Bits & Pieces, December 9, 1993, pp. 12-13.

Lying actually takes more brain power than telling the truth according to a study at Temple University.

With brain imaging technology, they can see how a lie sparks activity deep in the limbic system, the center of emotion and self-preservation. The lie gathers support from the memory banks in the left and right temporal lobes and then makes a dash to the frontal cortex, where a decision is made to suppress what the brain knows to be true.

Dr. Scott H. Faro says, “Lying is a complex behavior...There’s more activity and more interactions that occur during a lie than in truth telling.”⁴ In other words: God made us to tell the truth yet our brain works harder to suppress the truth when we lie.

We know lying was a rampant problem in Biblical times because so many passages of Scripture warn against it. But two types of lies are especially dangerous. The first is ***Deceiving Others***. Paul warns the Colossian Christians,

Now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other. (Colossians 3:8-9)

He also warns us to avoid divisive people.

Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. (Romans 16:17-18)

Some deceive by boasting about their achievements and padding their resumes. A survey of 7,000 resumes reveals many job seekers misrepresent themselves.

- False number of years in a job: 71 percent
- Accomplishments exaggerated: 64 percent
- Size of organization managed exaggerated: 60 percent
- Partial degree indicated as full degree: 52 percent
- Compensation exaggerated: 48 percent

Others lie for profit. In one *Peanuts* comic strip, Lucy writes an essay on the first day of school. “Vacations are nice, but it’s good to get back to school. There is nothing more satisfying or challenging than education, and I look forward to a year of expanding knowledge.” After receiving a compliment from the teacher, Lucy leans over to Charlie Brown and whispers, “After a while, you learn what sells.”⁵

Deceiving others has even become an art. The cashier rang up Keri Wooster's items when she realized she didn't have her wallet. Dashing to her car she returned empty-handed to face the

⁴ Ronald Kotulak, “Lips Can Lie, But Your Brain Will Spill the Beans,” Chicago Tribune

⁵ Illustration contributed by William Nieporte

line of waiting, irate customers. Talking into her phone the other shoppers heard her say with parental exasperation, “Jordan, did you take my wallet out of my purse? I’m holding up this line! You need to put things back.”

Wooster, who has no children, was not talking to a Jordan or anyone. Yet her monologue served its purpose, earning her sympathetic looks from the frustrated crowd at her local Wal-Mart.

Call Wooster a cellphony – someone who uses a cell phone to carry on fake conversations to deceive those around them. Cellphonies use fake calls to avoid contact with annoying coworkers or supervisors. Some pretend to be finishing a call when they arrive late for a meeting. Sophisticated cellphonies actually call voice-activated phone trees, so it sounds as if someone is talking on the other end.⁶

Underneath all these lies and deceptions is fear. We tell lies because we are afraid we will not get ahead, that people may not like us, that someone may harm us, that we will not make enough money, that others will know the truth about us, that we may lose someone. Think about the last lie, even a white lie that you told. Now look for the motive behind it and I believe you will find fear has sunk its roots down into your soul.

It takes great courage to be honest. A man was hired to be the personal secretary of the owner of a large department store in London. When a call came in, the secretary told him who was calling. “Tell him I’m out,” the boss replied. But instead the man handed his boss the phone and said, “You tell him you’re out.” When the call was finished, the store owner was furious. “Why didn’t you follow my direction?” he demanded. The secretary simply replied, “If I can lie for you, then I can lie to you.” The owner paused and had a second thought. Years later the secretary was promoted to be an executive because he proved to be the most trusted employee in the organization.

Even more dangerous, however, than deceiving others is **Deceiving Ourselves**. Have you ever noticed no one likes their picture or the sound of their voice? My theory is we all have an image of what we look and sound like but this imaginary person tends to clash with reality. One quality that separates us from other animals is the ability to deceive and fool ourselves. We can rationalize and justify anything. We are experts at denial. There is always an explanation or an excuse for what we do. We criticize and judge others for doing something we’ve done. We expect others to live up to standards we can’t fulfill.

The Apostle John writes,

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives” (I John 1:8-10).

⁶ Amy Harmon, "Cellphonies Know How to Fake It," Dallas Morning News (4-25-05)

There are some who wallow in their sin and will not let it go. But others who say they are pretty good, that they have no sin or, at least, that their sins are small enough they can handle them on their own. Friends, according to the Scripture, that is a lie. And if we say we are without sin then, according to John, we are also calling God a liar.

So what's the answer? Instead of deceiving yourself, instead of denial, bring your sins, bring your self-deceptions, bring your lies into God's Light. Confess them to God and to a Christian friend. If you bring your sins into the Light, then God promises to forgive them through the blood of His own Son Jesus Christ and to make you clean. Coming clean, bringing your sins into the Light, can be terrifying. How do you know that God will keep His promise?

At the trial of Jesus there were many false witnesses. According to the Law, the priests and leaders of the people should have carefully investigated their stories. But instead they took part in a mockery of a trial and sent Him to die. Now according to Deuteronomy 19, the punishment of death should have fallen upon the false witnesses and the corrupt judges. But instead, the full weight of it crushed Jesus until He bled to death. Now He did that, says John, not just for their sins, "and not only for our (sins), but also for the sins of the whole world" (I John 2:2). And He stands today next to the throne of His Father. Whenever you bring your sins and lies into the Light, Jesus, Himself, pleads your case to His Father. And the Father always listens to His Son.

Ed Rowell learned just what can happen when you let a lie out.

When I was in high school, I had a friend named Christina. Christina was pretty gullible, and we loved telling her ridiculous things because we knew she would always believe them.

Once I told Christina that I was going to have surgery. When she asked what kind, I told her they were removing my liver. She bought it hook, line, and sinker. She asked for details about my surgery, which I provided in great detail. When our conversation ended, I figured the first person she told about my condition would tell her that no one can live without a liver.

When I came home that night, my mother was furious with me. She had gone to our small town's general store to get some groceries, and there on the counter sat a gallon jar with my picture on it. A sign taped to its side said, "Donations for Eddie Rowell's Surgery." Mom was, in her words, "embarrassed to death," and wanted to know where that story had started. So I told her.

Though Mom pummeled me a bit, I still thought it was funny. My smile faded when she made me call Christina.

As we talked on the phone, Christina thought it was even less funny than my mother. She didn't consider it a joke; she considered it a lie. Out of compassion, she'd gone all around town telling people about my surgery, and she was hurt, angry, and embarrassed. She started crying and hung up. I started thinking that maybe it wasn't so funny after all.

Things were never the same after that. I thought a lot about apologizing to Christina, but could never quite bring myself to do it. Just two years after we graduated from high school, Christina was killed in a car wreck. I've wished a hundred times since that I had told her I was sorry I lied to her. I would have loved to have heard her say, "You're forgiven."

You never know the harm that can come when you let a lie out.