

Question: Is there ever a situation where one would be justified before God for lying? For example, what if someone's life is being threatened by another person?

Lying is the act of knowingly reporting an untruth or intentionally deceiving someone in order to do harm or obtain personal gain of some kind. This means that a person who may bear witness to something he/she thinks is true although it is not true, is not a liar. There was no intentional effort to deceive or report an untruth. One is not a liar who compliments or speaks words of kindness and encouragement that may be exaggerated and not entirely true. There is no harm intended nor personal advantage to be gained except to promote healthy self-esteem and well-being of someone. However, one is a liar who intentionally deceives others to their harm and/or to gain some personal advantage even though nothing may have been spoken or partial truth has been presented.

Jesus Christ and God, the Father, have both indicated that lying is a very serious matter for them. In the foundational moral laws that God gave in the Ten Commandments, we are told, "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Some people translate this simply as, "Do not lie." Jesus said that the devil "is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44 NIV). The book of Acts tells us that God struck Ananias and his wife Sapphira dead immediately because they lied (Act 5:1-11 NIV). A sobering verse near the end of the Bible says: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and ***all liars***-- they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death" (Rev. 21:8 NIV).

In spite of the above considerations, the Bible tells of at least two situations where those who told lies were blessed by God. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all of the male children at birth. The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. When the king asked the midwives why they let the boys live, they answered that "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive" (Exodus 1:19). Even though, this statement may have been true, the midwives were intentionally deceiving the King of Egypt in order to save the lives of these children. We are

then told that God was kind to the midwives and “because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own” (Exodus 1:21 NIV). In a similar situation, Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, hid two spies from the Israelites in her house and lied to the king of Jericho about it (Joshua 2). Yet, latter the lives of Rahab and her family were saved when all other residents of Jericho were killed. In the New Testament, Rahab is listed as one of the ancestors of Jesus our savior (Matt. 1:5).

These individuals found themselves in a dilemma between the command to not lie and the command to not commit murder (Exodus 20:13, 16). Since they feared God more than they feared the kings of Egypt or of Jericho, they lied in order to save lives. They understood that to knowingly allow murder when they could have prevented it would have made them a party to that murder (Read Exodus 21:28-29).

When the disciples of Jesus were accused of violating the Sabbath law, he explained how that there are times when one law must take precedence over another. He reminded the accusers that when King David and his men were desperately in need of food, “he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” The law that preserved life took precedence over the law of priesthood and the tabernacle. In explanation, Jesus added this comment, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:26-27 NIV). In other words, the purpose of God’s law is to serve the good of his people, and not merely to restrict them. Our God has always valued the lives of people above some legalistic interpretation of his instructions. Therefore, we should not be surprised to see that when the two laws may come into conflict with one another, God has valued the law against murder more than the law against lying.

I have not written this article to give anyone justification for lying or carelessly rationalizing disobedience of any law of God. Lying continues to be a serious matter with God. But I have said these things to illustrate that the interpretation and application of any part of God’s law must be done in consideration of the whole of his law and his divine purpose for those laws.

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