



## **Lesson 8            *Be Honest***

"Honesty is the best policy;  
Be honest in all you do.  
Tell the truth and treat people fairly  
And they'll do the same for you."

So goes the song by The Smothers Brothers on their Aesop's Fables record album which I listened to again and again as a child. It's a good lyric to be branded in my head. Honesty really is the best policy for relating to others.

I've already dealt with the subject of speaking the whole truth, in which we are to be honest about the good in others. My subject here is about being honest with ourselves. I've touched on this already when I spoke about freely owning one's mistakes and asking for help. I want to develop this subject more.

As noted before, ministry leaders are reticent to admit error for fear of appearing incompetent or weak and unfit for their task. But real honesty has the effect of building trust and confidence; indeed, it has the effect of causing others to treat you positively. As the song goes, "Tell the truth and treat people fairly, and they'll do the same for you."

Jill confronts Mary about being curt with her in a meeting. Mary's impulse is to get defensive, especially because she thinks Jill is oversensitive. Yet Mary realizes that she had been unnecessarily curt. So she responds honestly, "You are right. I was curt and shouldn't have been. I've been feeling anxious lately, and I should not have been short with you." How will Jill respond? Odds are she will not only accept Mary's apology but end up making her own confession. "I shouldn't have been so sensitive. I could see something was bothering you." She will even become Mary's supporter. "I don't see how you act so patiently with all of us. You are doing a great job."

What happened? How did Jill go from feeling offended by Mary to becoming her apologist and defender? Honesty. Once Mary defused the issue and acknowledged Jill's feeling as legitimate, she could move into the position of supporter. Because Mary let down her defenses, Jill let down her own defensive stand.

Mary's instinct would have been to defend herself, thinking that if she gave in then Jill would feel vindicated and smug about being right. That is a possibility, but as



Christians indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we more likely to soften with honesty. Honesty has a way of disarming the most vehement critic, while pretense frustrates even the most forgiving.

Here is another example. I recall once having to appear before a church court regarding a discipline matter. At one point I was asked why I and other elders had not been keeping contact with a particular person. I went for broke and decided on honesty. I told the questioner that to be honest we just didn't like dealing with this person who was angry with us. The questioner smiled and acknowledged he understood, as he could think of certain persons in his own church that made him feel the same way.

Most Christians can accept another's admission of sin and weakness because the Spirit convicts them of their own sins. This is not to excuse sin but merely to acknowledge the same sinful condition that afflicts us all. The times that apologies fail is when we suspect that they are not honest apologies, but rather mere attempts at acting Christianly.

Honesty makes others better listeners and more willing to accept our judgments. Say I am called upon to make a decision in a disciplinary matter. During the process, someone exhorts me to be careful of going too easy on the person in question because that is my tendency. I reply with honesty that he is right; I do tend to go easy because I don't like upsetting people. I will have to be on guard for that. The exhorter will not then shoot back, "I knew it! I knew you were not to be trusted." Rather, he will thank me for being honest and is more likely to my judgment even if I do end up being easy! Why will he trust me more now that my weakness is revealed? Because he knows that I am operating with open acknowledgment of it and thus being on better guard.

I know that my comments here may seem naive. There are people who seek to expose flaws in order to bring others down. But I am speaking in the context of normal Christian relations. And understand this, even if the other person has evil intent, your honesty is your greatest protector against attack. Even if he jumps unfairly on your admission, others will all the more respect you and lower their estimation of your attacker.

By the way, when on occasion someone threatens to bring grievances against me to others, I always encourage that person to do so. As a Christian I should desire for



grievances to be judged by others (especially church elders) when the matter cannot be resolved between myself and the one feeling offended. If I am in the wrong, then I will learn from my error; if I am in the right, I will be vindicated. Of course, it is possible for church leaders to err (even to sin!), but true vindication is in the hand of the Lord. My concern about vindication ultimately reveals my trust in God to work all things that happen to me for his glory and for my good.

Now a word on what I don't mean by honesty. It is not appropriate to make everyone and anyone your spiritual confessor. I will undermine confidence in my leadership if I volunteer every doubt and every sin that dwells within me. Proper honesty is not about how transparent I am (a term that is growing in popularity), but how real I am. It is not proper, for example, for me to tell you each time I've had a negative thought about you. That kind of honesty may get guilt off my chest only to leave you with anger and anxiety to deal with. However, if my negative thoughts really are part of a negative attitude against you, which is affecting how I treat you, then I do need to come clean. This is especially so if you confront me about it.

It is not proper honesty to publicly reveal all our fears and self-doubts. Constant confession conveys an obsession with self which becomes wearisome to those who must keep hearing us. Again, the issue is not about transparency but about being real. Be honest that you do not have all the answers, but don't burden people with every doubt that you have. Be honest that you are a sinner, but don't lay on the shoulders of everyone, especially those under your charge, the burden of having to hear every sordid sin.

What are other examples of good, practical honesty? You are teaching a class and a student asks you a question you don't know the answer of. Instead of manufacturing an answer or trying to shirk it off, you should honestly reply that you don't know the answer (perhaps adding that you will get the answer.) You are at a meeting where you announce a new policy for your ministry. Someone asks if you had considered such and such negative effect of the policy. You honestly reply that you did not. Perhaps you are able to respond to the issue raised then, or perhaps you will need to say that you will consider the matter. If necessary, you can still institute your policy with the understanding that you may need to change it later.



Don't avoid honest questions and don't appear stubborn. There is a difference between decisiveness and stubbornness. A decisive person is one who recognizes when decisions must be made and understands the consequences. A stubborn person is one who acts without considering consequences or accepting responsibility. There are times when I make decisions that I know may backfire. I am decisive if I've honestly weighed the possible consequences and accepted responsibility for my action. I am stubborn if I have acted without due consideration of counsel and valid criticism, and if I have refused to accept responsibility for my decisions.

Also be honest in evaluating your ministry. If you are honest in grading certain elements of your ministry with C's and D's, your grades of A's for other aspects will be more likely accepted. None of us can score A's across the board. We all have our weaknesses. If we are honest about our weaknesses, others will acknowledge our strengths. Indeed, they are likely to be kinder in their grading than our honest grades to ourselves. No one likes arrogance or hypocrisy; but people admire integrity in a person even when they differ with his beliefs and actions.

Finally, being honest with others makes it easier to be honest with yourself and, most importantly, with God. You can lie to yourself, which as a Christian you are more likely to do than a nonChristian. You know that it is wrong to lie to others and so you have to convince yourself that you are not lying but being honest. All the more then your hypocrisy will become evident and annoying to others. Honesty is the best policy not only for the sake of others but for your own health and relationship with God.