

Text: Josh 2.1-7

Our question this week is “What about lying? – specifically the lies we find in Scripture that don’t seem to earn any rebuke, and even seem to earn praise.

Perhaps the most notable one is Rahab’s lie when she hid the spies, so let’s read that passage:

Josh 2.1-7

We could also mention the lies of the Hebrew midwives, and there are a few others.

The ninth commandment is:

Ex 20.16 ¶ “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

What are we to make of these apparent lies?

These questions have occupied Christian ethicists for a long time.

Rahab’s statement is an apparent lie in v. 4. Yet she and her family were spared by Israel, she is commended highly in Heb 11.31 and Jas 2.25 and she appears in the line of the Messiah in Mt 1. (In fact, she was Boaz’ mother, making her the mother-in-law of Ruth.)

Proposition: It’s complicated!

I. Preliminary observations: apparent lies, apparent blessing, and reality**A. Apparent lies**

1. God told Samuel to say he was going to Bethlehem to sacrifice when his main purpose was to anoint David (but he *was* going to sacrifice)
2. Elisha, outside the city, told the blinded Syrians seeking his life that “this was not the city” [true] and this is not the way, then led them to Samaria, where their eyes were opened and they say he had led them directly to himself
3. Jesus told his brothers that he was “not going up to the feast” and then later he did, secretly — yet he was not going up openly as they suggested

B. Apparent blessing

1. Rachel appeared to “get away with her lies” about stealing Laban’s idols, but fades out of prominence in Jacob’s story and ultimately dies a painful death
2. Abraham received much wealth from Pharaoh after his lie about Sarah, but he also endured much trouble as he waited on God’s promise: wealth is not always blessing

C. Reality: we don’t know the whole story

1. We only know what was recorded
2. While what we have recorded is true (inspired) we don’t have every detail
3. Some situations may have had the parties being completely truthful, but God didn’t reveal all circumstances to us (We can’t know what we can’t know)

II. Ethical dilemmas: two strong ethical principles

A. The apparently conflicting absolutes in Rachel’s case:

1. It is wrong to tell a lie
2. One must protect human life

B. Whenever a dilemma is present, there are conflicting absolutes

1. If there were no other absolute imperatives, there would be no dilemma
2. The conflicting absolute may simply be that obeying man will mean disobeying God (even though the man may have legitimate authority)

III. Ethical proposals: ways men solve dilemmas

A. Lesser of two evils (sometimes called “realism”)

1. The absolutes don’t have equal rank, one is more important than the other
2. It is still wrong to disobey the lower absolute, but if you are obeying a higher absolute, God will forgive you (if you repent?)

“If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true grace and not a fictitious grace.... Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world.”¹

But since Jesus was tempted as we are, yet without sin, he certainly would not have committed a “lesser” sin to avoid a “higher” sin

B. Hierarchicalism or graded absolutism

1. Ordered hierarchy of absolutes
2. Some absolutes higher than others, when a dilemma occurs, obey higher command
 - a. “the greater good”
 - b. “better to obey God rather than man”
3. This would justify Rahab’s actions (also argument that “lying” or at least deception is permissible in war)

Yet the Bible doesn’t lay out any revelation as to which commands are higher or lower.

Though Jesus said some matters of the law were more important than others, he noted that we were not to leave the lesser ones “undone.”

C. Nonconflicting absolutes

1. God doesn’t set aside any absolutes
2. God calls us to faith, promises a way to escape every temptation (1Cor 10.13)

¹ M. Luther, “Letter to Philip Melanchthon, August 1, 1521,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 48 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 281–82, quoted in R. Higginson, *Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision Making* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1988), 131, quoted in David M. Howard, *Joshua*, *The New American Commentary* 5 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 107.

3. Following this principle, Rahab should have looked for a third way, “Yes, I hid them, what are you going to do about it?” Or some such other way of faith

“Despite some apparent problems, the position here is that “nonconflicting absolutism” would best seem to fit the scriptural data, entailing the fewest difficulties. The ends do not justify the means (Rom 3:7–8), as some hierarchicalists seem to argue. To act otherwise shows a lack of faith in God’s ability to protect or provide, even in desperate situations.”²

Conclusion:

Of all these views, I would most favor Geisler’s graded absolutism, for this reason:

Jas 2.25 In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

Howard, in his Joshua commentary, thinks Rahab should have looked for a third way. Since the Bible commends her for the way she took, I am forced to a kind of graded absolutism. (Also, you must obey God rather than man.)

However, as I said in my proposition:

Proposition: It’s complicated!

“Narrative texts in which a person lies fall into one of a few categories: First, some cases were not lies but only legitimate utterance of part of the truth. Second, in most cases of clear lying, there is no indication that God approved of the falsehood. To the contrary there was usually some kind of judgment. In cases that can legitimately be called divinely approved falsification, such as the midwives in Exodus 1, there is unavoidable conflict with a higher moral law. It is when there is a rare, *unavoidable* conflict with one of God’s higher moral laws that he suspends our duty to truth.”³

² Howard, 109.

³ “Lying in Scripture,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, by Norman L. Geisler, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1999), 435.

Resource: *Christian Ethics, Options and Issues*, Norman L. Geisler Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989.