

Dear Grace

Answers to Catholic Questions

Vol. 2 No. 43

Dear Grace,

I understand that lying is wrong, but is it always wrong? Are there not situations when it would be permissible?

Lying is indeed a very serious matter and many do not even realize how serious it is. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes St. Augustine's teaching that "a lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving" (CCC 2482). The Eighth Commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. This is because God, who is the Truth, calls us to live in truth.

The Catechism goes on to say that, "the gravity of a lie is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims... to lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error" (CCC 2484). We can see, therefore, that every case must be considered and evaluated individually. We would do this in order to decide how grave the sin of the lie is, rather than to decide if the lie was itself good, because lying is never in itself a good thing.

Is it the same when you tell your friend that you like her new hairdo when in reality you do not, as when you tell your husband or wife that you were working late, when in reality you were out with someone else? In both cases, one might claim to be lying in order not to hurt the other person. *The Catechism* tells us that, "by its very nature, lying is to be condemned, but that the culpability is greater when the intention of deceiving entails the risk of deadly consequences for those who are led astray" (CCC 2485).

So, lying is never really good, but let us say that there may be certain situations when it would be morally permissible to withhold the truth. "The good and safety of others, respect for privacy, and the common good are sufficient reasons for being silent about what ought not be known or for making use of a discreet language. No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it" (CCC 2489). In other words, sometimes people do not have the right to know the truth, such as when someone asks you questions about your personal life and they have no need to know. In such a case, you are not bound to give them the truth.

Sadly, today lying has become so habitual that people do not even seem to know the difference anymore. Children lie to their parents, spouses lie to each other, people lie on their tax forms and applications, and the list goes on and on. If we were to sit and meditate on it deeply, we would realize that in every situation where there is lying, something is always wrong. Sin is always at the root of every lie, even the most seemingly innocent ones. Why is it that Jesus called the devil a liar and the father of lies?

One way to avoid the sin of lying is to pray and ask God for His help and merciful guidance. We cannot do it alone. If we are sincere and ready to do all we can to change and live a life of truth as He wishes for us, He will grant to us the strength and grace to be victorious in overcoming this temptation. It is always a wonderful thing to know a truthful person. Telling the truth is a great witness to the Christian faith.

© Copyright 2001 Grace D. MacKinnon

Grace MacKinnon is a syndicated columnist/writer and public speaker on Catholic doctrine. Readers are welcomed to submit questions about the Catholic faith to: Grace MacKinnon at grace@deargraceministries.org. You may also visit Grace on the Internet at www.deargraceministries.org. The material in the "Dear Grace" column may be reproduced for use in subscriber's parish publications only. All other reproduction is prohibited without permission from the writer.