

Title: Virtue Mountain
Date: March 19, 2023
Subject: Christians are to be people of virtue.
Scripture: Ephesians 4:25 - 28

Virtue Mountain is part of West Glacier Park in Canada. Though it's 9925 feet in height, apparently, it's shy. I wasn't able to find a photo of it. There was a site that gave a kind of 3D look of what can be seen from it. We can still use the idea to indicate how we're to live our lives – as people of virtue.

We get into a section of Ephesians with rapid fire specifics of wrong behaviors and attitudes to put off and virtues to put on. We'll slow our pace and not cover huge sections of scripture so as not to become overwhelmed. We'll focus on 4 verses and 3 components.

Read Ephesians 4:25 - 28

I. Lying. V. 25

The Burlington Liars Club hands out an award for the lie of the year. The club got its start during a slow news period around Christmas of 1929. Two freelance newspaper reporters made up a story based on the gatherings of the local police and fire departments where they shared stories - some true and some not quite so much. They called the group a "liars club." The story was run in Milwaukee, Chicago and Racine. People ate it up and wanted more. The reporters hadn't anticipated it becoming an annual event. They determined the judges of the best lie needed to be experts at recognizing or uncovering lies. Therefore, the judges should be newspapermen and lawyers. Politicians were excluded from submitting lies as they were viewed as professionals. The most recent winner is Daniel B. Lohnis: "The list price of my new car was so high I was able to use the cash back rebate to purchase my first home." The youngest winner was a 12 year old who claimed her sister was so thin she used a cheerio as a hula hoop. Anyone can become a card carrying member of the liars club or sign up someone else for \$1 along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Research indicates 91 percent of Americans lie regularly and only about half of parents teach their children to be honest. It doesn't help when mental health professionals say things like: "Lying is an important part of social life, and children who are unable to do it are children who may have developmental problems."

Steven J. Cole (condensed from bible.org/seriespage/lesson-32-tell-truth-ephesians-425) enumerates ways we bend the truth: *half-truth*, tell your employer not feeling well, sort of true, but not so ill as to miss work, just wanted to do something else. *white lie*, a supposedly "innocent" lie that doesn't hurt anyone "Thank you, I just love fruitcake!" *cover for someone or for ourselves*: The boss is in the next room, but you say, "He's not here to take your call." Often, the rationalization is the truth would hurt too many people. Undercover lies or *exaggeration*. Stretch the story to make self look better or evoke sympathy. *the silent lie*. Someone assumes something that makes you look good, but you know it to be untrue, yet you don't say anything to correct it. *evasive lies* change the subject or don't directly answer the question.

However falsehood is communicated or the motivation, we need to remember: “The Lord hates those whose lips tell lies. But he is pleased with people who tell the truth” (Proverbs 12:22. NIRV).

Two of the more notorious liars in the Bible are Ananias and Sapphira. They sold some property and gave money to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 5) portraying it as the total amount. They lied. It was only part. Peter told them since they’d conspired to lie, God would strike them down in judgment.

The same happen drastic judgment didn’t happen to other biblical people who lied – Abraham, Isaac, Rahab. Let’s shift to more common consequences. Lies cause hurt. Often when a person engages lies they need to continue to tell more and only dig themselves in a deeper hole. They create alienation from God and from people. Lies create a lack of trust as people feel they can't believe what a person says.

God calls us to put off lying, falsehood. We’re to counter it by putting on truth and honesty. This command is different 4:15 where speaking the truth is in opposition to false teaching. The current concern is how we communicate in the ordinary aspects of life, particularly in our connections in the body of Christ.

We can get guidance from questions. Is it true? Speaking truthfully is more than just stating the facts. The captain of a ship and first mate didn't get along. One day, when the first mate was drunk, the captain entered into the official log: “First mate drunk today.” The first mate protested it was the one and only time he’d ever been drunk. He was deeply sorry and it would never happen again. He asked the captain if he would please change the record. The captain replied, “What I have written, I have written.” A few days later the first mate was in charge of the ship and recorded the day's events: “Captain sober today.”

Both statements were true but were worded to create a different and erroneous impression. They were misleading and intended to deceive. That's not how we’re to go about telling the truth.

Second question: Is it necessary? Truthfulness doesn't mean we tell everything we know. Bill's and George's families got together at George's house. George asked Bill, “How was your day?” Bill: “What a day. Martha burned the toast this morning. It wasn't as bad as her snoring last night which sounded like a freight train and a tornado coming through the house. Billy Jr. flunked math and English. And he didn't brush his teeth before we came.” What Bill said was the truth, but it wasn't necessary, not even under the call for transparency. George didn’t need to know those things.

Cole’s counsel: “If you need to keep a confidence or if you think that making the truth known would be damaging, you may simply reply, “I’m not free to talk about that matter.” Being truthful does not require sharing your thoughts on everything. If being silent would imply agreement when you disagree, you may need to clarify things. But, sometimes wisdom requires keeping your thoughts to yourself (Prov. 10:19).”

There are times we should put a lock on our mouths and throw away the key, better to remain silent.

Third question: Is it kind? Our text reminds us we're members of one body, interconnected in numerous ways. We're also brothers and sisters in God's family. We're all objects of God's love. Therefore, we’re to care about each other. We’re to love others as Christ has loved us. Loving others intersects with speaking truthfully in that we speak to help, not harm. There’ll be more on this next week.

II. Anger. Vv. 26, 27

The initial part, especially in other versions which state “be angry,” sounds like permission be angry in any way about anything. Some might get that idea through speed reading or seeing what want to see. There's a quick qualifier - “do not sin.”

How do we not cross the line into sin? First we have to understand that not all anger is sin because if it were, then this verse would have been different. It would simply state “do not be angry.” Plus the Bible mentions over 300 times when God was angry and we know he's sinless. Anger is a combination of feelings and expressions.

Biblical counselor Norman Wright states “There are three main characteristics of righteous anger. First of all it must be controlled... The mind must be in control of the emotion so that the ability to reason is not lost... Second, there must be no hatred, malice or resentment... The final characteristic of righteous anger is that its motivation is unselfish” (Living Beyond Worry and Anger, pp. 28, 29).

For instance, we can and should be angry about children being abused or the lack of respect for the sanctity of human life but bombing abortion clinics isn't the way to channel our anger. It needs to be funneled into proper causes as in helping pregnancy care clinics, voting, writing editorials, etc.

We also need to understand the source of anger is from within us. Other people or circumstances don't cause us to be angry. Anger is a response to something or someone. The person feels they haven't been treated with the respect or they have wounded pride.

Improper anger comes when a person's mind isn't in control of the emotions and loses the ability to reason. Instead, the person uses the mind to figure out how to get revenge. There's also the desire to retaliate or get revenge.

A woman compared her problem with anger to a shotgun blast. She pulls the trigger and it's over in an instant. Someone bravely pointed out to her that it can also cause great damage in an instant.

One source summarizes the God's stance: “What the Bible is saying, in brief, is that anger is wrong when it represents an impulsive eruption at the frustration of our will, and when it is nursed and becomes a grudge” (The Encyclopedia of Christian Parenting, P. 40). Dr. James Dobson: “I see unacceptable anger as that which motivates us to hurt our fellow man - when we want to slash and cut and inflict pain on another person” (Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions, P. 317).

Even when our anger is justified, we aren't to hold on to it. V 26 tells us “do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.” This command is drawn from Psalms 4:4: “In your anger do not sin; When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.”

The command doesn't mean it's okay to be angry until you go to bed and then get rid of it. The idea is anger should be short term. Don't feed it. Don't fixate on it. Don't let it hang around just in case you need it. It's to be temporary, not a settled way of life where anger is boiling under the surface just waiting to come out.

Deal with the situation and then don't dream up ways to settle the score. Don't allow anger to turn into resentment or bitterness or hold on to some real or imagined slight. Allow our hearts to be silent.

We can control our anger and our experience proves it. We've all heard of people involved in a heated quarrel and then the phone rings. The phone is answered and instantly the tone of voice changes. The person exhibited control.

We can control anger, even shut it off when we don't want it to be seen by somebody. The same thing is done at work when a manager does something that just really irritates you. You refrain from speaking or doing something that would cause you to lose your job.

The motivation for not sinning in our anger is we don't want to give the devil a foothold. It's like a salesman who has learned the trick of sticking his foot in the doorway so the door can't be closed. It's like an army establishing a beachhead so they can bring in more soldiers and equipment.

The devil's intent to gain a foothold and then more territory. He desires that our anger would grow and cause more problems. He wants a foothold so he can attack the rest of the person. He'd like to fan the spark and get a good flame going.

If the Church of Jesus Christ only speaks out on social and moral issues through angry messages and actions, it will become known as "mad and angry people." The issue will fade into the background because all that people notice is the anger. The devil has a foothold and a wedge.

In the context of the body of Christ, anger can be used by Satan to create divisions. This would be a compounding of the evil.

III. Steal. V. 28

This verse illustrates the power of punctuation. Verse has been read "he who has been stealing must steal. No longer must he work."

Obviously, that's not a good understanding of what the verse says or God's plan. By the way, did you know that both liars and thieves are listed among the habitual lifestyles of people who are referred to as wicked who won't inherit the kingdom of God? (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; Revelation 21:8, 27).

The good news is God is in the business of forgiving those who steal. This is evidenced by Jesus forgiving the thief who was hanging on the cross next to him.

We can define stealing as taking without permission or the consent of the owner something that doesn't belong to us. It often stems from coveting what another has or greed. The person in question has a well-developed habit, something ingrained that he responds to if given the opportunity. Kleptomaniac.

Stealing, as in shoplifting and looting at riots, has been in the news quite often. California changed the law about shoplifting to make it a misdemeanor instead of a felony for items worth under \$950. This was interpreted by people as open season to shoplift since police have bigger fish to fry. News reports show people going into stores and walking off with stuff they didn't pay for and had no intent of doing so. Walmart closed stores in Portland, OR and the northern part of Milwaukee because there was too much retail theft.

There are other kinds of stealing, thievery. Students cheat on tests because it's easy to do, helps their grades and "everyone does it." Cheating on income taxes. Employees steal rationalizing their employer doesn't pay them enough. When the cashier inaccurately gives too much change and the shopper decides to keep it because the store makes tons of money.

The story is told of a young man who applied for the position of bank teller. He made a good initial impression and it must have been a pretty nice bank as the president took the man out to lunch with some of the executives. The president watched as the young man went through the cafeteria line. He took two pads of butter and hid them under the edge of his plate so the cashier wouldn't see them and he wouldn't have to pay for them. The president immediately thought if the young man would do that over some butter what might he do with the money entrusted to his care? The guy didn't get the job.

Contrast that with a seminary professor who was given too much money at the bank from the check he cashed. He called it to the teller's attention and gave the money back. She exclaimed, "Thank goodness that you're honest!" He didn't take the credit: "I'm not honest by nature. I would have ripped you off, but Jesus Christ is now my Savior and Lord. He makes me honest."

Stealing is part of the old sinful nature that is to be taken off and thrown away. Followers of Christ are to shift from dishonest labor like stealing to honest labor like working for money. We change from hurting others to helping others, from serving ourselves to serving others, from taking to giving, from being irresponsible to being responsible.

There's no shame in working even though it seems like the current culture may portray work is unnecessary and to be avoided. This past week I saw an intriguing headline: "Millionaire and billionaire CEOs say thousands of laid-off tech staff just did 'fake work'." (Hasan Chowdhury, Shona Ghosh, Emilia David, Tue, March 14, 2023, news.yahoo.com/silicon-valley-elites-warring-over-100100960.html). The article highlighted the feelings of the current chief executive of e-commerce firm Open Door (Keith Rabois) who spoke at a conference where he went on a tirade about fake work. He believes big tech firms had hired too many people to boost the "vanity metric" of their headcount and to keep workers from signing on with a competitor. He said many were "so-so, spoiled workers" who were "extraneous" among the thousands who were essentially kept around to do nothing. "There's nothing for these people to do — they're really — it's all fake work."

The purpose of the honest labor isn't so we can accumulate but so we can help meet the needs of others. As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).