



The Struggle for Inner Peace

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

LESSON 5: BENDING THE TRUTH

One Sunday evening after church, Mrs. Arnold spotted the Bradleys and invited them to the house for coffee.

"We'd love to come," Mrs. Bradley said, "but we must get the children home and off to bed. Tomorrow is a school day and they've had a busy weekend. Maybe another time."

Mrs. Arnold was a loud, talkative woman; the Bradleys did not want to subject themselves to an hour with her. Mrs. Bradley's answer got them off the hook and did not hurt anyone's feelings.

On the way home that night, Mr. Bradley agreed with his wife that she had handled the situation extremely well. They both believed that she had done a wholesome and constructive thing by turning down Mrs. Arnold's invitation without hurting her feelings. This "invented reason" reply to the invitation was, however, a cover-up for why they did not accept the offer. Their answer was nothing short of a lie.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul explained that God had given the church various skilled people to help it grow up—like evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Because of their ministry, he reminded the Ephesians: "We should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but, speaking the *truth in love*, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ" (Eph. 4:14-15, italics added). He later reemphasized, "Putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor" (Eph. 4:25).

With this biblical advice in mind, how should Mrs. Bradley respond to Mrs. Arnold? What options does she have? Is she to bluntly tell Mrs. Arnold she is too loud and talkative? How can she decline without lying? One option is to decline without comment: "No thanks, not tonight" or "No thanks, we prefer not to." If pressed for a reason she could respond, "I prefer not to give a reason" or "Someday I'll tell you."

Truth has a rugged hill to climb. It is natural to deceive. It's much simpler to tell a lie. The other person may be satisfied, but Mrs. Bradley must live with herself.

IT'S WRONG TO RATIONALIZE

Deception is so common and follows such well-defined patterns that the patterns can be described. Taken together they are called "mental mechanisms." One such pattern, *rationalization*, is a process whereby one justifies his conduct. By using it, he gives himself good reasons for doing bad things. Lying, for example, can be called tact or diplomacy. Obviously, anyone ought to be tactfully or diplomatically or lovingly honest. But deception is a sin. It is easy to convince oneself that to do right is wrong, and to do wrong is right. Isaiah wrote, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil" (Isa. 5:20).

Who has not faced the desire to do something that his better self tells him is not right, but still does it anyway? An example is exceeding the speed limit. "I'm late getting home and I don't want to worry my wife," a speeding driver will say. It is a good enough excuse. But looking squarely at the facts, few persons would accept his reasoning as valid for breaking the law.

Most persons are at least vaguely aware of inconsistencies in their lives. It is hard not to rationalize them. How difficult we find it to get down to reality and face conflicts, or to harmonize disagreements. We dislike being shown up, having our pride injured, or having our true selves exposed.

After the last of their children was married, the Gaylords sought counseling for Mrs. Gaylord's incurable loneliness. As we looked into their story, we found more than a yearning to be with the children. Mr. and Mrs. Gaylord were at war with each other.

They had been unfriendly toward each other for years, having a long series of unresolved conflicts between them. Because they found no companionship in each other, Mrs. Gaylord gave herself wholly to rearing the children and he buried himself in his work. The children provided the buffer zone that allowed them to live fairly peaceably under one roof. In the children, they found a way to tolerate each other. They rationalized their solution so that each believed he was giving his all solely for the children.

Even when they sought help, they thought Mrs. Gaylord's problem was loneliness. Mr. Gaylord was very concerned. He said he would do anything to help her get over her loneliness.

Once they faced the real problem—their cold-war-turned-hot now that the children had taken away the buffer strip—they started to work on the solution. It was not easy. They had developed so strong a habit of camouflaging the truth that they needed a great amount of help in breaking out of their almost automatic pattern of self-deception.

As an example, for years he thought nothing of telephoning his wife to say that he had to take a customer out to dinner. The truth was, however, that he at times almost begged a customer to eat with him because he did not want to go home.

Rationalization can become a subtle habit of the inner life. Dishonesty and deception can in time become so easy to live with that you can "kid" yourself into believing whatever you want to believe.

WE DECEIVE OURSELVES

Charles Cook was anxious and restless. He found it hard to concentrate. When he sat down, he could never relax, so he got up frequently to pace the floor, to get a drink of water, to check the time, to look out the window. Cordial and friendly, though, Charles was the type of person who made you feel that in him you really had someone who cared about you and your problems.

"Give me a call—anytime," he would sing out cheerfully to everyone visiting his office. Or, "You've got to come over to the house and tell me more about it."

Some persons took him up on his offers of hospitality. And there was the rub! His friendliness was an act. He didn't really mean for business associates to call him—let alone drop in at his home. He was just making conversation.

Whenever trapped, he had a way of getting out.

"I'd be glad to stop by some night," a client would say in response to his invitation. "How about Thursday?"

"Sounds fine. But let me check with the wife's plans and call you," Cook would say. Not for a minute did he intend to have this guy taking up his evening. The next day he would telephone the client to apologize.

"Sorry, but my wife's got me tied up with the PTA Thursday night. Let me contact you later." Why did he invite people to call or visit him? It was the polite thing to do. Why did he then lie to the one he had invited? He did not want to hurt anyone's feelings.

But occasionally Charles Cook could not get out of his self-made trap. He would have to play the role of genial host to people he did not like. His acting was superb. But what a distasteful way of life! Is there any wonder that he was an anxious, uneasy man? "Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be filled with gravel" (Prov. 20:17).

Charles Cook imagined himself a cordial and polite individual because he sounded like one. But by his rationalization, he was covering up a basic dislike of people and had fooled even himself into thinking he was a congenial man.

He needed to face the fact that his geniality was only a front. But to deceive even himself was easier than squaring up with the truth. Yet he could not get away with his duplicity. "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7).

Charles had to make up his mind what he wanted in life—whether to be around people or not. If he wanted to accept others, he would need a change of heart. Whatever his decision, if he was to be free of his anxiety, his behavior had to be changed to match the desire of his heart.

Bruce Hampton, a senior in college, had just gotten word that he would not graduate because he failed two subjects. He came close to passing in both, but narrowly missed the needed grades.

In both cases, the professors were known to be sticklers for utmost accuracy, allowing no leniency in their marking systems. Both were particularly hard on athletes—and Bruce had played four years of football and basketball. This was a simple retaliation, according to Bruce.

The fact was that 95 percent of the students in these classes passed and Bruce Hampton failed only because he neglected to study. But it is hard to say, "I seldom cracked a book and took my chances on passing or failing." It is natural to dodge the truth and come up with an excuse that sounds reasonable. As Sir Walter Scott once wrote, "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

Through rationalization, it is possible to persuade yourself that an actual weakness of your character is a virtue. A white-hot temper can become, in your thinking, an instrument to produce righteousness in others. A real difficulty can be regarded as a big joke. Good deeds can be a mask for an appetite that thrives on praise. A spirit of revenge can be cast in the framework of a search for justice. You can make yourself appear better than you really are and by your effort mislead others.

Rationalization starts when you are unwilling to admit the unpleasant truth. Cheryl and Dave, just out of high school, were very much in love. Their parents said they were too young to get married. Dave ought to get more schooling, and Cheryl needed the maturation a job would bring. But the young couple saw the future differently.

He was a carryout boy at a supermarket. He didn't make much money, but they knew that somehow they'd get along on it. So despite the pleading of both sets of parents, they were married. They found a dingy apartment in a part of town that neither was used to living in, gathered up some odds and ends of furniture, and began life together.

Theirs would be the most romantic of marriages. They would rise from rags to riches. Then in their third month of marriage, Cheryl got pregnant.

How thrilled they were that soon they would be parents! But one day, Dave came home from the store to find Cheryl crying. She had been crying most of the day. The dingy apartment depressed her.

Dave's heart was touched. He decided to surprise her. The next day he ordered a new electric stove. As if by magic, Cheryl was transformed into a radiant person. She enjoyed life again. But not for long.

The contrast between the new stove and the rest of the room was too much for her to take. So Dave went out and ordered a decorating job and more new kitchen equipment. She became happy again—for a while.

When they came for counseling, they had a newly painted and papered apartment, all new furniture—and debts that had all but drowned them. And Dave had an unhappy wife again.

Both wanted to believe that their only problem was a matter of what their apartment looked like. On the basis of this rationalization, they plunged in over their heads in debt. Their problem was much more involved.

Both were willful persons. They had paid no attention to the advice of their parents and friends who cautioned them not to enter marriage hastily. They simply were not able to afford marriage, but they had refused to look at this fact. They could not stand their tiny apartment on the wrong side of the tracks. Cheryl resented her pregnancy. He despised her cooking, having assumed that all girls could cook as well as his mother and finding out that she was the one great exception. Neither Dave nor Cheryl could even shop wisely. But they desperately sought to rationalize their problems by covering them with paint on the walls and a new rug on the floor.

Their unwillingness to recognize the root of their unhappiness and conflicts caused them to turn to self-deception, which led them into a new set of problems that was as frustrating as the old.

Both were basically selfish. When their wills coincided, there was no problem. But she demanded a nicer place to live. When she had to admit they could not afford it, she became difficult. He went into debt to avoid being the one to receive the brunt of her misery, but he resented having to do so. And all the time they told each other that if their parents would cut out the nagging and he could just make a little more money, they would be supremely happy.

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

Deception violates a biblical standard. "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight" (Prov. 12:22). "May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaks proud things" (Ps. 12:3). "We are meant to

hold firmly to the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into Christ, the head" (Eph. 4:15, PH).

If you form the habit of ignoring facts, brushing aside the truth, making things come out to suit yourself, you will react in just these ways when a serious crisis comes into your life. You cannot rationalize the small decisions and then expect to make the major decisions in good, unfettered judgment. By practice, you can become an expert at dodging issues or at facing them frankly and honestly.

The biblical standard of dealing only in truth is not designed to be a nuisance to the one who would abide by it. Rather it is the pathway to peace. Rationalization, on the other hand, will thwart your progress in life.

The key to inner peace is self-discovery. The method is to forsake the wrongs you discover. "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Prov. 28:13).

Questions for review:

1. Spend some time looking up Bible verses on deception and lying. What is the overarching message of Scripture on this subject?
2. Can you think of an example from your own life in which you rationalized behavior that fell short of God's standards? What do you think was your motivation for doing so?
3. If you become accustomed to rationalizing small things in your life, what do you think will happen when larger mistakes are made?
4. Now it's time to do some real heart searching. Can you identify any character weaknesses within yourself that you have rationalized or excused away?
5. Are you willing to confess these weaknesses to God and to let Him change you? If so, spend some time in prayer with Him about this.

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