

Making Truth False

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

12 April 2026

Children's Talk: Lying by Telling the Truth

The Word says that we should not bear false witness; that means that we should not tell lies. What is a lie? Some lies are very obvious. I am going to make a few statements, and you tell me if it is a lie or not:

Sometimes though we convince ourselves that we are telling the truth even when we are lying. It is not always so obvious that something is a lie. In this story, Saul had been told two things: get rid of every single person in Amalek; and get rid of all their animals. That was the instruction. Saul said he had followed the instructions, but Samuel could see that the king of Amalek was still alive and many of their animals had been taken. But let's see if Saul is truthful:

And Saul said to Samuel, "But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." (1 Samuel 15:20-21)

Saul said he had followed the Lord's rules: he had gotten rid of all the Amalekites (except one); and he had gotten rid of all their animals (except the people kept the best ones).

We do the same thing:

- When your mom asks if you brushed your teeth: you say yes, because you did brush your teeth yesterday.
- Your dad asks if you've done your chores; and you say yes because you did some of them, he didn't ask if you did all of them.
- Someone asks if you will give them your turn in a game, but then you change your mind; but when they say you said, you reply, But I didn't promise.

If something is only partly true, than it's partly not true; and that makes it a lie. We have to make sure that we are telling the whole truth and being fully honest. Not all lies are obvious. We have to make sure that we think about what the Lord and other people actually want to know, and be honest with them, and be honest with ourselves as well.

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What's the opposite of the truth? A lie, a falsity, an untruth, something along those lines. We set truth and falsity against each other as opposites, and that makes sense, because they are! But they can actually be quite similar to each other, so much so that something true, with only a subtle adjustment, can be made into a falsity. And for that very reason falsified truth is much more dangerous than an outright falsehood: the falsehood we can identify and reject outright, provided we have the truth that contradicts it. But a falsified truth has all the appearance of truth, and so it takes something more to identify and correct it.

I want to start with a story from the Old Testament, from a time when the Children of Israel were slaves in Egypt. The Lord sent Moses to lead them out. When Pharaoh would not let the people go the Egyptians were stricken with plagues. The Teachings of the New Church indicate that each plague stands for the consequences of evil and falsity in a person's life. The plague we are going to look at represents the falsification of truth. Water here stands for truth from the Lord's Word, and blood for that same truth falsified, and so unable to quench the people's thirst:

Then Jehovah spoke to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their streams, over their rivers, over their ponds, and over all their pools of water, that they may become blood. And there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in buckets of wood and pitchers of stone.'"

And Moses and Aaron did so, just as Jehovah commanded. So he lifted up the rod and struck the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants. And all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood. The fish that were in the river died, the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink the water of the river. So there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. (Exodus 7:19-21)

So in this plague the waters all turned to blood, making it undrinkable.

In short, water represents truth from the Word: just as we take water from its source to sustain our lives, truths from the Lord's Word sustain our spiritual life.

Blood, in a positive sense, can stand for truth too; but it can also stand for the opposite:

In the opposite sense "blood" denotes violence done to Divine truth, and as this violence is done by means of falsifications, "blood" denotes the falsification of truth. (*Secrets of Heaven* §7317)

When used negatively, as here, blood stands for the truth violently abused, that is, falsified, rendering it unsuitable for sustaining any kind of real spiritual life.

Here's the crux of the matter: violence is done to truth not by rejecting it, but by falsifying it. One example given in the Teachings of the New Church is what some people do with the truth that all good is from the Lord, no good is from a person. That is, in itself, a true statement. You could disagree and say, "that's not true!" And you might be wrong, but that's not the worst thing in the world. The problem is if someone takes that truth and concludes, "well if all good is from the Lord, then I guess I can't do anything truly good, so why bother?" It's further falsified when that person not only thinks that way, but starts to justify evil by means of it: "well I'm neglecting my relationship and not really showing up, but that's just human nature. Goodness comes from God not me; so if I fail to show up that's not my responsibility." The truth that all good is from the Lord has now been thoroughly falsified. And notice how in its falsified state it cannot sustain any spiritual life: it is rather used to justify spiritual apathy, inaction, or neglect.

Now there's an interesting detail to the story that illustrates something further about falsifying truth:

So all the Egyptians dug all around the river for water to drink, because they could not drink the water of the river. And seven days passed after Jehovah had struck the river. (Exodus 7:24-25)

The people frantically and desperately dug all around looking for other sources of uncontaminated water. This represents a search for further genuine truth by those who falsify truth. Why would they need the truth in the first place if they're going to just falsify it? Falsified truth borrows its power from genuine truth. This actually explains why we too falsify truth instead of outright rejecting it: We need the veneer or façade of truthfulness in order to justify ourselves. In the previous example, the person who says, "I just don't want to do good things for other people" doesn't have any defence beyond that they are just lazy or selfish. But the person who falsifies truth can behave the exact same way but then claim they are simply applying what the Word teaches. We do this in many subtle and insidious ways, when we take something that is genuinely true in itself, but then apply it only to justify some behaviour:

- Honesty is important, even brutal honesty: that painting, poem, meal, speech, whatever, was terrible! I'm just being honest.
- Doing it for their own good: don't invite someone because they would be hard for you to manage, given the dynamics of who they are and how they interact with other people who would be there.
- Gaslighting - "it was just a joke, you are overreacting, pay attention to my motives, they are what actually matter."
- Have to love yourself before you can love others: so it's ok to make it all about me and my needs.

In each case there is some concept that is true, but it is being used in a way that justifies selfishness or cruelty.

The question then becomes how do we get out of this when it is so easy to do, and often feels so natural? What's the antidote to falsifying truth? How do we

truthify it again as it were? We might be inclined to think that the first step is through rational arguments about what is really true and that does come into play; but remember, when a truth is falsified it still looks an awful lot like the truth and so it is very difficult argue to argue with. The first step is actually to take a look at what we care about and what our goals are. It is our motives that purify or contaminate truth and determine how true it is for us:

Principles of truth accomplish nothing; if the affection of [the love of self and the world] has dominion, it draws truth over to its side and falsifies it, and if the truth does not fully favour, it rejects it. Hence it is that principles of true faith accomplish nothing whatsoever with a person...
...unless the Lord instils the affection of spiritual love, that is, of love toward the neighbour; and insofar as the person receives this affection, so far he also receives the truths of faith. (*Secrets of Heaven* §7342)

Since love of self and the world are what lead us to falsify truth, it is accepting spiritual love from the Lord, that is, a genuine love for the neighbour, that will begin to restore genuine truth. If you are using something true to possibly justify harmful behaviour, ask yourself, “Am I genuinely trying to love the Lord and love other people through an application of this truth?” In other words, what is your inner motivation? *Why* are you using this particular truth in this situation?

Let’s look at one of the examples from earlier: you don’t invite someone to a gathering, and justify it by saying they wouldn’t want to come anyway, but having to turn down the invite might be hard for them. You’re doing it “for their own good.” There’s a very relevant truth here: sometimes you make choices for other people that you don’t tell them about for their own good. That is a solidly true idea. Now ask yourself: is this the truth your mind goes to because you genuinely want to love this person as best you can? Or is there an element of wanting to avoid the discomfort of having them at the event? Is there a part of you that is nervous they’ll say yes and it will make things less enjoyable for you? Is your goal actually to make life easier for

yourself by not having to manage an awkward social situation? This is hard to do honestly, and disentangling motivations is not simple, but we have to be willing to try. The truth that we sometimes have to do things for other people's own good is only true when it really is for the sake of their own good, not for some self-serving reason.

The other thing we need to make sure we do is to not leave truths in isolation. Why has *this truth in particular* become what you choose to rely on in this situation?

A truth divorced from other truths can be easily falsified.

One truth without connection with others is not confirmatory, but when there are many, because from one may be seen another. One truth does not produce any form, and thus not any quality, but only many truths that are connected in a series. For as one tone does not produce any melody, still less harmony, so neither does one truth. (*Secrets of Heaven* §4197)

Think of it like directions: if someone asks how to get from Checkers to New Church Westville, one step in the instructions will be to turn right onto Perth Road; of course, if they are coming from Checkers in Pinetown, that won't be true: they will need to turn left. Or if I put the instructions in the wrong order, each step may in some sense be a correct step in getting to New Church Westville; but insofar as they are out of order they are incorrect. "Turn right onto Perth Road" is only correct when someone is coming from a certain direction and after they have gone through certain other steps. This can be difficult to catch when the truth we are using seems so obviously right. But if there is even a chance that you are using something true to possibly justify harmful behaviour, ask yourself: "Am I being honest about what this really means, given other truths that the Lord teaches?" In other words, what other true things would equally apply to this situation?

Returning to our example of not inviting someone on the grounds that it's for their own good: it is true that we should make choices for the sake of other people's well-being. But there are other truths that could also be relevant here:

- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you
- Love the good in others and reject the bad, don't reject the whole person
- Internals are what matter, not externals
- It is incredibly important to respect the freedom of choice that other people have.
- We are born for the sake of others, not for our own sake
- We are to shun false witness and practice open honesty

We might go through this list and still decide, it really truly is the right thing to not invite a particular person to the gathering. But we should not make that kind of choice without having considered a collection of truths that apply, not just the one truth that gives us the answer we want. Truth is only really true when it is part of a bigger picture of truths.

Any and all truths can be falsified. We falsify them so that we, consciously or unconsciously, can appear to be righteous when in actual fact we are serving ourselves. The fact that we may be technically correct about some truth does not mean that we have the truth itself. We only have the truth when we are motivated by love for others and we can see how that truth is connected to other truths. We're not going to be able to get this perfect: we always have mixed motives and we never can comprehend the full scope of all the truths that apply to a given situation. Still, we are able to prioritize loving the Lord and the neighbour as our guides, and we are able to gather and compare more and more ideas from the Word over time. If we do these things then we will have more and more of the pure truth. From that, we will have a richer spiritual life that continually grows and allows us to improve.

We began with an image of water turned to blood, contaminated and unusable. But I want to end with an image of life-giving water, which is what the truth can be for us when we apply it lovingly and wisely:

Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." (John 4:13-14)