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Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Little Black Lies

The truth makes us free, the Bible says. But truth is hard to come by — especially in this year of political elections.

When is it permissible to tell a lie? Machiavelli approved lying for princes. Nietzsche reserved the privilege of lying for his exceptional hero — the Superman. Emmanuel Kant insisted all lies were immoral — even those told to a murderer to protect an innocent life. Erasmus disagreed, but Cardinal Newman said Kant was correct. Instead of lying to a murderer, the cardinal said, we ought to say nothing, knock him down, and call the gendarmes. The Talumd allows for lies for “bed” (inquiries into one’s sex life) and “hospitality” (if a host was generous, one could lie about it so the host would not be inundated by unwelcome guests). And, of course, the Bible says no liar will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

So, what do we do with politicians who stand before us and tell bald-faced lies — or who make promises they know they can never fulfill?

American social psychologist Jerald Jellison estimates that the average American outstrips Pinocchio by telling a whopping 200 lies a day. Incredible. But that includes lies to oneself (“Today I’ll start on my diet.”), lies to one’s wife (“Honest, honey, I did not eat that last piece of banana cream pie. One of the kids must have come down in the middle of the night.”), and lies to others (“I’m sorry I’m late. My wife had a terrible time picking out what dress to wear.”)

The fact that lying has become a socially and in some instances legally accepted practice gives us little comfort. The government lies to us. The requirement for the doctor to be honest with his patient is no longer in the medical oaths and code of ethics and is often frowned upon by most teachers of medicine. Journalists use deceptive methods to uncover deception. Preachers joke about “ministerial exaggeration.” And in a typical experiment in social psychology, the subject is misled about the aims of

the study to see how he reacts under pressure.

Then we wonder why politicians have such a hard time with the truth. Lying, by the President of the United States, the director of the CIA and the members of Congress — not to mention those who are promoting garbage like casino gambling — has so corrupted politics that the latest Cambridge Survey indicates 69 percent of the public believes the country’s leaders have consistently lied to it.

So, when it comes time to cast my ballot, I listen for the man who will tell the truth. The Bible says “if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” I want a man representing me who can apply some divine wisdom to these mortal problems we have created. And if he lies, then he has cut off his source of wisdom.

So, like a lot of other good Americans, I sit — and listen — and vote. And hopefully liars will not only be blocked from heaven, but from Congress, the county commission and the city council as well.