

We Are All A Little Bit Dishonest

I was intrigued by a study recently published by an American psychologist. He had rigged a vending machine so that whenever a customer paid the price and made a selection, not only did that person get the candy they selected but the machine also spit the money the patron had put into the machine into the change return. A sign was placed on the machine that asked patrons to call the owner at a specified telephone number if they spotted problems with the machine. He sat back and collected the data. He reported that out of the 1,100 people who used the machine, not one person called to report the problem.

He reported that about half of the people took their candy and the money they had put in the machine and merrily went on their way. The other half had put their money into the machine two or three more times, taking back the money they had put into the machine and the candy they had selected. About a quarter of the users phoned a friend, who also came to get candy and the money they had put in the machine back. A very small minority of this group, two people, used their money to get seven or eight candy bars each.

The host of the program interviewing the psychologist pressed him to shed light on the experiment. What did it mean? What were its implications? The researcher was surprised that virtually every subject so easily committed a crime. Once money was placed in the machine in exchange for the candy, the money belonged to the owner of the vending machine. Those that took the money and the candy had committed a petty theft and broken the law. He seemed relieved that a clear majority of people were restrained enough to limit their pilfering to one candy bar. He was disappointed in those that milked the malfunctioning machine for more than one candy bar and especially those who phoned a friend. He expressed relief that there were so few 'big time' petty thieves. Any user could have emptied the machine yet the biggest pilferers kept their haul to 7 or 8 candy bars. The overall finding of his experiment was that: "We are all a little dishonest."

He believed that the subjects who were content to take one candy bar and the money they had put into the machine, had rationalized their situation. They remembered the times that they had put money into a vending machine and had not received their candy bar. They were simply 'evening-up the score' when they took this candy bar plus the money they had put into the machine. Those that took more than one candy bar, he said, were clearly milking the situation. Their conscience was not bothered by the loss that would be suffered by the machine's owner. To them, it was a perfect crime: how would anyone ever know that they had taken some loot without paying for it? He believed that those who took more than one candy bar and then phoned a friend, wanted to share their windfall but also wanted to share the guilt. The fact that a friend would also take advantage of this situation eased any guilt they may have felt.

The researcher asked the host and the audience to consider the implications of his study for government, industry, commerce and the retail business. Most people believe that they, and most of the people around them, are pretty good and honest people. Our focus, individually and as a society, is thus placed on the people who are the brazen criminals and the embezzlers; the ones that steal or

embezzle a lot. The criminal and civil judicial system would focus on the subjects of the experiment that took the seven or eight candy bars. They would prosecute and punish them, making an example of them, with the surety that the apprehension and punishment of big time criminals would act as a deterrent to the others. However, our researcher asked all those who believe this to look at the data he collected. The economic damage to the owner of the vending machine caused by the two subjects who took 15-16 candy bars between them is a mere drop in the bucket and completely insignificant when compared to the damage caused by the 549 in the experiment who limited their theft to 1 bar and the remaining 549 subjects that took 2-4 candy bars. The researcher concluded that the damage caused by 'big time' or career criminals and embezzlers is just a drop in the bucket when compared to the impact of the petty larcenies and sins we commit with impunity every day.

The researcher was bang on with his conclusions. For centuries, the Holy Bible has taught that we are all dishonest in our relations with others, with ourselves and with God. We fool ourselves into believing we are basically good people. Yet when we are 'tested' (that is, when we find ourselves in a situation where lying, cheating and/or stealing provides an advantage that we believe can't be detected), more often than we are willing to admit, we fall prey to the temptation and lie, cheat and steal. If we are honest with ourselves, we will often invent excuses for our blatant sinning in order to soothe our conscience and justify our behaviors if our malfeasance becomes known to others.

The author of the study was right on the money when he concluded that, because most of us see ourselves as basically good people, we tend to focus our wrath and indignation on those of us that are brazen enough to sin boldly and get caught. We compare ourselves to the public sinners and come off pretty good. We demand that they be punished for what they have been done and that they should pay back all those that they have hurt. We insist on a justice that demands: "If you commit the crime, you have to do the time."

Jesus has a problem with this view of life: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3)

When we focus on others, we fail to see our own sins, particularly the little sins; the petty thefts, little lies, inappropriate fantasies, and the times we 'hardly cheated at all'. We fail to see that all the little sins add up over time. If each of our little sins were represented by a marble, by the time we reach our golden years, the sack it would take to hold all the marbles would be rather a large sack. I know mine is. In its own way, each little sin I committed impacted my life and conscience, and the consciences and lives of those touched by each sin. Just think of all the people I impacted with my petty sins. The cumulative impact of my sins is huge. Now add in the billions of other people in this world and their sins and those whom they hurt. The impact of all the little sins in the world is devastating. What do we do with all of these little sins? Doesn't justice require I be punished for each of my sins? Shouldn't I be made to provide restitution for those I injured? The answer is yes! However, there are problems. Who will judge me and punish me? How can I go back and make it right? I can't undo what I have done. Many whom I have sinned against are either gone or can't be reached easily.

I believe that God will judge and punish everyone for all their sins. However, God provides a way out through His Son, Jesus Christ who suffers for our sins and all that He requires is that you believe that. God provides a way to help me each day with my struggle with sin. I can pray as King David did: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10). David understood that he could not will himself to be a better person. David knew that God had to create something new in him. God had to take away his sin and put a willingness to follow God within David, from the outside. We believe that it is God's Word that creates something new in us. Come experience God's Word on Sundays at 9:00 and 10:30AM and Wednesdays at 7:00PM.

In Christ

Pastor Ed