

Is a Lie Ever White?

Scripture: Joshua 2:3–6

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You're likely familiar with the concept of a "white lie." It's any lie that, due to mitigating circumstances, honorable intentions, or limited scope, is considered *negligible*. Plenty of people believe that lying can be acceptable and even justifiable in certain circumstances. They argue that noble motives and the need of the moment can erase the sinful weight of the lie.

Pivotal to their argument is the story of Rahab.

And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. It came about when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. (Joshua 2:3–6)

By lying, Rahab prevented the capture of the Israelite spies and helped pave the way for Israel to conquer Jericho. Remarkably, Rahab is the only Gentile honored for her faith in Hebrews 11. By commending her faith, is Scripture also condoning her methods? Was hers the rarest of circumstances in which lying was *the right thing to do*?

Scholars and ethicists have argued over that question, going all the way back to the earliest rabbinical history. Let's face it, it's not an *easy* question.

Scripture clearly teaches that "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight" (Proverbs 12:22 NKJV). God Himself *cannot* lie (Titus 1:2; Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29), and therefore He cannot condone or sanction a lie.

On the other hand, some argue that because of the circumstances, Rahab's statement to her interrogators was not technically a "lie," but a military feint—a legitimate stratagem designed to trick or outwit the enemy in warfare. Others argue that any lie is acceptable if the motive serves a greater good. Such a situational approach to ethics is fraught with very serious problems.

I see no need to try to justify Rahab's lie. Nor do I see any biblical basis for defending her deception as righteous. God certainly could have saved Rahab and the spies without her lie.

There is an interesting story that Corrie Ten Boom told about some people in Germany who were hiding Jews from the Nazis. They had nailed the legs of their kitchen table to the floor. Beneath the

table was a carpet concealing a trap door. Lifting the table would open the door to a secret basement where the Jews were hiding.

When the Nazis came to the door they would accuse the people of protecting Jews in their home and demand to know where they were hiding. The owner of the house would simply reply, “They’re under the table.” The Nazis would mock them and leave the house thinking they were crazy. The point, of course, is that they told the truth because the Jews were under the table. They just didn’t reveal how far beneath the table they were hiding.

I don’t believe you have to say everything that could be said at every point. There is some virtue in keeping your mouth shut.

I have experienced a similar situation in my own life. Many years ago I smuggled Bibles and other books into China with my wife and children. The church there had asked if we would bring some Christian literature, including some of my books, that had been translated in Chinese. We all had those books tucked away among our clothes in our suitcases.

Our strategy was simple. We told our children to proceed through customs as usual. If the authorities didn’t ask us anything, then we didn’t need to say anything. We also made it clear that if any of them were asked if they had any books, they were to tell the truth without hesitation.

In the purposes of God, the Chinese authorities didn’t stop us. We went straight through without any questions and made it safely to the designated drop-off location and delivered our precious cargo.

God works in amazing ways and always achieves His sovereign purposes. My love for the truth and convictions concerning it remain unchanged—we should honor truth *regardless of the situation*.

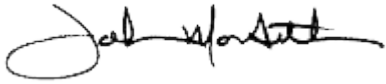
Still, the lie was never the point of Rahab’s story. There is no need for clever rationalization to justify her lie. Scripture never commends her lie. Rahab is never applauded for her *ethics*. Rahab is a positive example of *faith*. In fact, Hebrews 11:31 explicitly commends Rahab’s hospitality to the spies and nothing more.

In the moment she lied, her faith was newborn, weak, and in need of nurture and growth. Her knowledge of Israel’s God was meager. It is likely that she had never met worshippers of God before that night. She probably had no understanding of the value He put on truthfulness.

On top of that, she was a product of a corrupt culture where ethics were virtually nonexistent. Lying was a way of life in her society—and especially in her profession. The way she responded is just what we might expect from a brand-new believer under those circumstances.

The point is that Rahab’s faith, undeveloped as it was, immediately bore the fruit of action. She “welcomed the spies in peace” (Hebrews 11:31)—meaning that she not only hid them, but also implicitly embraced their cause. She thereby entrusted her whole future to their God. And the proof of her faith was not the lie she told, but the fact that “she received the messengers and sent them out by another way” (James 2:25)—when she might have handed them over for money instead. The *lie* is not what made her actions commendable. It was the fact that she turned down an easy reward, put herself in jeopardy, and thus staked everything on the God of Israel. Nothing but faith could have

made such a dramatic, instantaneous change in the character of such a woman.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John H. Stott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*Twelve Extraordinary Women*](#))

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