

## Every Day Ethics: When Telling the Truth is Wrong

Pretty much everybody regards the Golden Rule – “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” – as the best guide to moral behavior. But did you ever consider this rule in terms of speech, in how you talk about others?

We all acknowledge that it’s wrong to spread untruths about people, but many of us seem to feel that it’s okay to say anything about another as long as it’s true. But the fact that something is true doesn’t mean that it is necessarily anybody else’s concern. Do you want every aspect of your life made known to others – even if true?

How important is it to guard our tongues?

A lifetime of experience suggests to me that unfair speech is a major, not a minor, issue. I often ask listeners at workshops I conduct on the ethics of speech: ‘How many of you can think of at least one embarrassing personal incident, that were it to become widely known, would negatively impact your life?’

Almost all the hands go up, except for those who have led very boring lives, or have poor memories, or are lying. What is perverse about human nature is that while we don’t want others to know about such events in our lives, almost all of us are just aching to learn and speak about such events in the lives of others.

Now, let’s analyze this further. Why exactly don’t we want people to know about a highly embarrassing episode? After all, for most of us, the deep secret that we’re concealing doesn’t involve a criminal act. But we all know that if people learn about this one thing, it can easily become their primary association with us and with our name.

Why is this so?

Because, what is most interesting about people is what’s not so nice about them. This is pretty much true of just about everyone. As Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Nobel Prize winning writer, used to say, “Even good people don’t like to read novels about good people.”

If you’re thinking that what I have said so far does not apply to you, that you rarely speak about others, and that when you do your comments are always fair, then let me pose a question and a challenge. Can you go for twenty-four hours without saying anything unkind about anyone?

Invariably, when I make this challenge people laugh nervously. I can read their minds: “One day without any negative comments about anybody? My boss? My co-workers?” They’re not sure they can do it.

“Then you have a serious problem,” I tell them. “Because if I were to ask you whether you can go for twenty-four hours without drinking alcohol and you said that you couldn’t, that means that you’re an alcoholic. And if you can’t go for twenty-hours without speaking unkindly about another that means that you’ve lost control over your

mouth.”

Regaining such control will require considerable discipline. But such self-control will also bring great comfort, admiration and trust from all those in your life. Anyway, every perceptive person knows that if you bad mouth others to them, you will surely bad mouth them to others!

One final thought: Before you relate something negative about another, and even if you feel quite sure that what you are saying is factually accurate, ask yourself three questions: Does the person to whom I am speaking really need this information? Is what I am saying fair? Why am I saying it?

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