



## Chapter 8 Honorable

### **Philippians 4:8-9**

*From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.*

I honestly don't remember who told me about Brené Brown. Maybe I watched her famous TED Talk before I read her book *Daring Greatly*. I don't remember. All I know is that Brené's purposed way of living life spoke to me. (Yes, I like to imagine I can call her by her first name and we are friends.) Her integrity, authenticity, and approachability made me instantly disarmed and charmed. This honorable way of being comes through her writing, her podcasts, and her videos. Her research and her stories offer a liberation that comes from decades of listening, struggling, and growing. When I sat down to write this chapter, she came to mind.

Brené Brown is a pop culture sensation. Her research on shame and vulnerability and leadership has resonated with so many people. It has changed the way we think about how we show up in the world and Brené models this way of being in all her spaces. She lives genuinely, but takes it to another level by living with a track record you can trust. Her honesty and her quick admission when she messes up is a true example of a human living honorably.

The other thing I love about Brené is her work breaking down barriers for people of color. She has used her platform to make more space for people who are systemically disenfranchised, ignored, and marginalized. She uses her privilege honorably.

I admire Brené Brown and I long to live my life in a way that embodies the honesty and impartiality I see in her. I want Rowan to be this way too.

When Rowan was born, I launched [raisingkidsforgood.com](http://raisingkidsforgood.com). I wanted a place I could write and process the journey of being his mom. I was highly aware that I am a white woman raising a white son, and I don't want to be a "basic" white mom. I wanted a place to write and think through raising my child to be a truly good person. A truly good person knocks down systems of oppression, treats all people with compassion, cultivates brave spaces for all people to be fully themselves, and has the capacity to be authentic. To me, this is what it is to be an honorable person.

So, how do we create conditions in our communities, churches, and homes so our kids (and so we) can grow into honorable people?

## I think the first thing we need to understand is why kids lie.

When I was six or seven years old, I remember learning how to cheat when I played Candy Land. There is a deck of cards you draw from that tells you which square to move your game piece to and, as the oldest child, it was my job to shuffle the deck. I learned that if you were lucky, you could draw a jump-ahead card to visit one of the characters on the board. I loved Queen Frostine. She also was the closest to the finish line.

I remember counting cards and moves and placing the Queen Frostine card a few turns in for myself to draw. I won the game. It was glorious, so I cheated again.

I felt terrible about lying, but no one knew I was stacking the deck in my favor. Plus, winning felt so good and losing felt bad. You got to be celebrated when you won the game, and I wanted to be celebrated. So I lied.

In 2010, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman published a book called *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children*. In the book, they discuss a trip they take to Canada to visit Dr. Victoria Talwar's research lab. Dr. Talwar studies lying in children. Bronson and Merryman were able to watch some of the ongoing experiments she was conducting about lying behavior.

The first thing Bronson and Merryman did was watch videos of children answering questions. They were to watch the videos and decide which children were lying and which were telling the truth. They learned it is really hard to tell when a child is lying. There is a fifty-fifty chance that you will be able to tell based on tone, eye movement, etc.

This fifty-fifty chance is also true with parents and their kids. Parents have what Bronson calls a truth bias, and kids are hardwired to tell lies. Why?

Dr. Talwar's research shows that a child will first experiment with lying around age four to smooth over the relationship between themselves and a caregiver and to avoid punishment. Maybe they ate a cookie and they knew they weren't supposed to. They will lie to keep the parent from getting upset and to avoid trouble. Most parents will address the cookie-eating as the problem, but won't address the lying as a transgression—especially while their children are young. Many parents hope their children will grow out of lying, but research shows that kids grow into lying.

As children grow and create friendships, they will lie to get attention, to vent, or to get higher status amongst peers. Children know lying isn't good, and they know that lying isn't so black-and-white. Lying, believe it or not, is a sign of intelligence! It requires knowing what the truth is and figuring out how to create a plausible counternarrative. It's a way for kids to have power and feel a sense of control when they depend on adults for so much.

I used cheating as a way to have power and control, and I did it because I knew my parents would be happy for the winner. I wanted then to be happy for me. When I look at this story from my adult lens, I have a lot more compassion for Little Brittany and I don't feel as much shame about being less-than-honorable. Little Brittany knew what was right, and she also knew what would make her parents happy. If she didn't get caught cheating, she could win and everyone would be happy for her. If she did get caught, then everyone (including her little brothers) would be very upset. But the risk seemed worth it.

## That's why it's up to the adults to approach honorable living a different way.

Parents don't often address the lie itself when a child lies. Instead, they address the behavior the child is lying about. For instance, if your child hits a friend you may ask, "Did you hit your friend?" Then, your child might say, "No, I didn't hit my friend." You might respond, "I know you hit your friend. Friends don't hit each other. We use gentle and soft touches after we get permission to touch our friends." This example addresses the hitting, but not the lying. It would have been better to respond, "Lying to me makes me very upset. We tell the truth in this family. I know you hit your friend. Friends don't hit each other. We use gentle and soft touches after we get permission to touch our friends." Reminding your child that honesty is important in your family will decrease their impulse to lie some.

One of the things that struck me the most when I was reading the research about honorability and truthfulness in kids (and adults) was that removing the threat of punishment when a child lies doesn't have a whole lot of impact on whether they lie. If a child is lying to avoid punishment, then telling them they won't be punished seems like the way to end the lying. "But this alone doesn't reduce lying at all. The children are still wary; they don't trust the promise of immunity. They're thinking, 'My parent really wishes I didn't do it in the first place; if I say I didn't, that's my best chance of making my parent happy.'"

Almost all of our kids' behaviors are rooted in this truth—our kids have a biological drive and survival need to make their parents happy. It helps them survive.

Because of this, the research shows that telling your child you will be happy if they are honest makes them infinitely more likely to tell you the truth. For instance, if your child hits a friend you might say, "Did you hit your friend? I will not be upset with you and I will be really happy if you tell the truth." Your child might say, "Yes, I hit my friend." You're then left to decide on the consequences of the behavior instead of addressing behavior *and* lying.

## Like every other trait we want to see in our kids, we have to model what an honorable life looks like.

Our children are sponges and are absorbing everything we do. Everything. They notice when we tell our partners white lies to avoid hurt feelings. They notice when we realize we didn't pay for the sodas on the bottom of the buggy at the grocery store and leave without paying for them. They notice when we make up excuses to avoid the company picnic.

If we want our kids to lead an honorable and honest life, we have to show them how to do that. It means having boundaries, using "no" for a full answer, paying for the soda you could easily steal, and not lying ourselves.

This makes me a little nervous! I want to make everyone happy, and I have used half-truths to make sure I don't upset anyone. But I also don't want Rowan to lie. I want him to be compassionate and honorable. Sometimes the most compassionate thing is hard truth. If you, like me, have some difficulty with the need to please, I encourage you to read the book *Dare to Lead* by Brené Brown. One of the things she says in this book is, "Daring leaders who live into their values are never silent about hard things." And a leader, according to Brené, "is anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people." And that is every single adult who raises kids.

Let this chapter sink in a bit. How have you contributed to your child's need to lie? What would it look like to commit to the value of honorability together?