



Seeing a World of Difference

Lesson 6

by

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The Garden-Variety Lie

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"...[They] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."

— The Apostle Paul (Romans 1:25)

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate."

—Moses (Genesis 3:6)

The Garden-Variety Lie

After watching the soft, enticing, 3D beauty of the imaginary world Pandora in the movie *Avatar*, some viewers had suicidal thoughts, hoping to discover a **utopian**ⁱ Pandora by leaving this world with all its woes and suffering. Unfortunately, our utopian creations are artificial and fanciful. But if Paul is right that there is only one Truth and one Lie, then each offers us a utopia, and we need to know which is real and which is imaginary. Not everyone speaks the truth, because versions of truth contradict one another. It's possible to imagine that everyone might be lying, but that would be a cruel fate, since we all seem to have implanted in our souls the desire to make the world a better place. We hope that the best is yet ahead, somewhere beyond the rainbow, where things will be wonderful. Humans have searched in many directions to find meaning.

Take science, for instance. The study of our planet became much easier once we could study the globe from the outside. But scientists cannot fly outside the *universe* to send back pictures of the cosmos, as the astronauts did when they took those stunning pictures of the blue planet earth. We cannot roam the outer reaches of our mental world, either—standing outside ourselves, our world, our brains—to make meaningful statements about the whole of life.

The Ant Colony

Human beings are like a colony of ants, deep in the hold of an ocean liner. The ants may find their way to the sugar in the cook's cabin and think they have created utopia, but from their

ⁱ Though the original meaning of "utopia" actually means "no place," it has come to mean an idealized, hoped-for society, often with little chance of becoming reality.

corner on the lowest deck, they cannot see the decks above or the vast ocean that threatens their existence, should the ship's engines fail. They know neither their port of origin nor their destination. Because we are embedded in existence, we cannot prove our worldview objectively, and so we all function by "faith." Even non-religious people make ultimate, unproven faith statements about the world. The statement, "There's no meaning to life," claims to know the meaning of life (that it has no meaning). In that sense, even atheists are religious, because they make belief statements without being able to prove them.

In fact, the very act of speaking expresses confidence in an underlying structure of meaning that allows us to communicate. We believe in speech and in the meaning of words. We make verbal and written contracts and expect others to stick by their word. So the confident statement: "I don't believe there is any meaning in life," counts on a belief that speaking makes sense—even though the statement affirms the contrary! Here, "belief" and "meaning" are inexplicably tied together. Being human means thinking about being human. Making sense of it all is daunting, but we all do it, using some kind of religious worldview. Overwhelmed by the vastness of life, we are still sense-seeking and sense-making beings, and so we construct a worldview, as consistently as possible. Many of us don't stop to worry about these issues, and assume that we live quite sensibly. Our culture assumes that we will gradually figure out more things. Anything new must be better, right? But old notions were new once, so perhaps that's not a great way to build a worldview. The passage of time does not guarantee wisdom. I'll bet you know some pretty foolish old people—and, perhaps, some wise young people!

So, if we can't determine truth by whether it's old or new, how do we choose what's true? What worldview choice is the best?

The One-Two Choice

Some time ago, a Russian lady visited California. Her hosts took her to a supermarket. No sooner had she set foot in the door than she stood stock-still. "Are you ok?" her hosts asked her. She shook herself out of her temporary trance and answered, "I'm fine, it's just...." She stopped speaking and looked at the rows of canned goods, cookies, cereals and house supplies. "How do you ever decide?" She explained that when she went shopping (in then economically restricted Russia), there were only two choices: meat or no meat; vegetables or no vegetables.

Our choice of worldview seems just as baffling. Which of the hundreds of religions should we choose to follow? But, the choice is not as baffling at it seems. In spite of what we are

told, there is no grocery aisle full of paths to wisdom. Paul tells us in this text that there are *only two ways* of finding spirituality: Oneism or Twoism. Scholars sometimes refer to them as “esoteric” or “exoteric.”

1. **Esoteric religion (Oneism)**

In ancient Greek, *eso* means “into,” “within” or “inner.” Applied to religion, *esoteric* means a quest for the divine within the self. The higher self or the deeper subconscious is the source of spiritual experience. So you go within to discover ultimate truth.

2. **Exoteric religion (Twoism)**

Exo means “out of,” “outside” or “outer.” Applied to religion, *exoteric* means a quest for a divinity that stands outside the self and outside human reality. One religion looks inside for truth, and the other looks outside. There are no other directions possible. Both quests seek spirituality. Both hope to create a better world, to help you know yourself and live with others. But in spite of this common vision, they could not be more antithetical. It is a little like the ditty about two opposing views of the Bible: “Both study Scripture day and night, but one sees day and the other sees night.” The choice we make about spirituality and religion affects the way we read our world. An esoteric read will deliver very different conclusions than an exoteric read. Does the world create itself, or is there a Creator, different from the world? Is reality One, or is it Two?

Oneism (all-is-one) is an *esoteric*, inward-looking read on reality. It maintains that everything can be explained by everything else. There are no qualitative distinctions to be found in the universe. The world creates itself and humans are “co-creators” along with everything else. In this system, reality is One. Think of one big circle. Everything is contained within it: rocks, trees, planets, human beings—even God, as a kind of energy. Everything is connected to everything else. There is nothing outside the circle.

Twoism (all-is-two) is an *exoteric*, outward-looking read on reality. It maintains that the world is made by a Creator who is uncreated and radically different from his creatures. There are *two* forms of existence: the created and the one who created it. The two, while deeply related, are qualitatively distinct. Think of two circles, connected but distinct and essentially different.

Into the middle of our muddle comes a Word from the outside, from the upper circle, in language we understand. Quite mysterious—too good to be true. This Word/Truth makes sense to us. It claims to be the Word of the One who, from the outside, made everything—things we know about and a lot of things we know nothing about. This Word proposes a worldview model different than all the other options, for it contains the objectivity or

“outside perspective” for which we crave. As such, it makes sense of our deepest human longings for meaning and significance by giving an overview of the whole.

One hint of the truth of this Word from the outside is its uniqueness. All other explanations come from inside reality and find their source in subjective Oneness. The bright hope of a Word from outside propels our interest in space travel and our extravagant spending on research projects sponsored by the **Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence** (SETI). However, eventual messages from Martians or staccato sounds of extra-terrestrial intelligent life would still come from within the finite cosmic system. The many versions of the Perennial Wisdom, discussed in lesson three, all teach that human beings are the source of meaning and that all is one. They speak of Oneism with one voice, claiming to be “the one true religion.” But the Word from outside the universe claims our attention, for it is entirely other, and gets us “shaking in our boots,” as the old saying puts it. It more than answers our hope! It reveals the Truth of Twoism.

To speak in postmodern terms, there are only two “**metanarratives**”—an ultimate story from within the universe, or an ultimate story from outside the universe. A word from *within*, or a Word from *without*. Either *creation* is divine or the *Creator* is divine. It is one or the other, but cannot be both. To claim that creation is divine is to deny true divinity to the Creator. To say creation is divine, while deep down knowing it isn’t true, would be the most foolish fantasy one could ever believe.

Twenty-Five Words that Changed the World—Romans 1:25

The stark choice between **esoteric** and **exoteric**, between Oneism and Twoism, has existed from the beginning. Many who are interested in spirituality are calling on past sages for wisdom. In this course, we, too, are calling on a past sage—the apostle Paul. The citation at the beginning of the lesson reveals the apostle Paul’s thinking about spirituality as he wrote to believers in Rome two thousand years ago. Paul had a top-notch education, a brilliant mind, a life-changing religious experience and a passionate heart. He was a bold, sacrificial, hard working, humble, tough rabbi/teacher/church planter who died a martyr. The original Christians to whom he ministered lived in the social and religious capital of the first century Greco-Roman empire, which was teeming with spiritual methods and techniques—quite like the world in which we live.

Paul’s pen is filled with kryptonite. His writing explodes off the page with passion and urgency about life-determining truth (which we can’t afford to get wrong) and the place of

God's high reputation in human affairs. I know of no other text, biblical or otherwise, that states worldview issues more clearly and succinctly.

This one-liner tops Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* or Einstein's $E = MC^2$. The twenty-five words we will examine contained incendiary ideas for Paul's day. They describe two religious worldviews that spawned two different civilizations—Imperial Rome (based on Oneism or paganism) and the civilization of Christendom (based on Twoism or biblical theism). Within two hundred and fifty years, these words had overturned one of the greatest pagan civilizations in human history and given birth to a Christendom that would dominate a large part of the world for seventeen hundred years.

In Romans 1:25, Paul defines Oneism and Twoism, though he doesn't use those terms. He reduces the possible spiritual and religious options to their essential elements. Here is the text, set up with its elements clearly distinguished: They *exchanged the truth* about God for *the lie*, and [they] *worshipped* and *served the creature* rather than *the Creator*.

The Satanic Invader

Paul uses "they" and "Lie." Who are "they," and what lie did they embrace? In his letter as a whole, Paul insists that sin infects everyone, whether Jew or Greek (Romans 2:1–17; 3:9). "They" refers to humanity as a whole and takes us back to our first parents and their disobedience. This will become clearer when we discuss the nature of the Lie. If Paul is referring to Adam and Eve (and thus to all humanity), then we all accept and repeat this lie. According to Paul, it is second nature for all of us to accept the Lie and refuse the Truth. Paul is also referring to a long process of decline, by which the original Lie develops into a *system* of pagan thinking and practice. This is a process, because "they *became* futile in their thinking" (Romans 1:21). The original Fall of humanity drops a seed of corruption into the world that flowers into a *system* of pagan, idolatrous thinking and practice. Paul sees that system at work in the pagan religions of the first-century Greco-Roman empire. It is this system that Paul calls "the Lie."

"A Lie" or "The Lie"?

Your version of the Bible will either say "a lie" or "the lie." Here we have a Greek-to-English translation decision to use the definite article (the) or the indefinite article (a, an). You may think, "Who cares?" But the implications are important. There are numerous reasons to use "the Lie," and virtually none, in my opinion, to use "a lie." Ready for a little Greek? It won't be hard. The word for "lie" in Greek is *pseudos*, which you'll recognize from "pseudonym." In this text, Paul uses the definite article before *pseudos*, just as he does before the word for

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“truth” in the same sentence: “*the lie*” and “*the truth*.” Ancient Greek has no indefinite article, so to make something indefinite, you often drop the definite article. When the definite article appears, the author usually intends something quite specific. This is not always the case, however, so I need to add some weight to my argument. We can look for other translation clues in the same passage. “Truth” has a specific meaning, as indicated by its only other use in this chapter, in Romans 1:18. Here the wicked suppress “the truth” about God the Creator. If *the truth* about God as transcendent Creator is a definite notion, then why shouldn’t its opposite, the suppression of that truth, be just as definite? This is precisely the sense of “truth” in Romans 1: 25, which has to do with the correct worship of the Creator, who is blessed forever. If that is the essential *Truth* about God, then the essential *Lie* would be its denial, which is precisely what our text affirms.

At the risk of “knocking down an open door,” as the French would say, I will bring a few more arguments in favor of using “the lie,” instead of “a lie.” Romans 1:25 is the pivot verse for the entire section (Romans 1: 18–32), so we need to look at the literary structure.

The sentence has four elements that form two parallel couplets, the second of which unpacks and defines the first. In each element, the definite article appears, maintaining a literary balance and identifying the characteristic element of each individual phrase as a highly specific notion:

They exchanged
 the truth about God for
 the lie
And worshiped and served
 the creation rather than
 the Creator

These four definite articles, reflecting the antithetical character of Paul’s thinking (see 2 Corinthians 6:14–17 ESV), here refer to four realities—truth, lie, Creator and creation. *The truth* consists in the worship and service of *the Creator*; *the lie* consists in the worship and service of *the creation*. Paul has in mind a specific notion of “the Lie,” just as in 2 Thessalonians 2:11 NIV, where he again refers to “*the lie*” —“For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe *the lie*.” Jesus taught in a similar fashion. He says to his unbelieving hearers:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to *the truth*, for there is no truth in him. When he speaks *the lie* [*to pseudos*], he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44 NIV).

This text is interesting for a number of reasons:

- It associates the lie with the Devil.
- It refers to “the lie” spoken at “the beginning,” that is, in the Genesis narrative of the Fall.
- It uses the same term as Paul, “the lie” (*to pseudos*).

Jesus, like Paul, compares two specific notions of “the Truth” and “the Lie.” The weight of evidence makes me conclude that Paul means the original Lie of Satan in the garden. Our theory about “they” (our original parents) fits with our theory about “the Lie” (of the tempter in the Garden of Eden). A prophet with the same authority as Moses, but with a post-resurrection perspective, Paul comments on what Moses said about humanity in Genesis 3. Moses and Paul make a dynamic duo.

The Garden

In Genesis 3, Moses describes in vivid detail *the coming of the Lie*. The Scriptures reveal that God creates Adam and Eve, the first human couple, to live with dignity in a special relationship with him. He sets them in a perfect and beautiful garden setting with no frustrations, fears, pain or sorrow. They communicate with their Maker in ways that only humans can. Unlike the animals, they are in his “image,” which does not make them divine but does make them persons. When Adam looks for a mate for fellowship and reproduction, bestiality is out of the question. God gives Adam a wife, Eve, who is complementary to him, mentally, physically and spiritually—another person, both like and unlike himself, created in God’s image, to whom is also given dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:28).

They fall in love—with each other and with God the moment they are created! But their idyllic setting is not without danger. God is testing his human creatures to see if they will be faithful when evil raises its ugly head. How could they turn away from the transcendent source of their life, who had stooped to relate personally with them? Theirs is an utterly foolish rebellion. The Lie came into human reality when an outside agent says to Eve: “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4). He boldly contradicts God’s warning that Adam and Eve *would* die if they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan, “the Liar from the beginning,” presents *God* as the Arch-Liar. Eve must decide between two authorities: the Creator or the created Satan. Eve heard the great Lie, the first lie in human history and the origin of all other lies, from Satan, through the mouth of a serpent. Satan, a rebellious angel, whose origin is clouded in mystery, rejects the Creator’s right to define

human existence, just as he himself had denied and suppressed the truth of the Creator/creature distinction (see Romans 1:18). Satan suggests that God's laws for human life are unfair.

When Adam and Eve rebel, God does not destroy them right away. He gives them over to their passion, and to their passion fruit. Their choice will bring consequences, namely expulsion from his presence and from the garden (Genesis 3:22–24). God gives them over to the results of their sin. Paul repeats the notion of God “giving them over” in Romans 1:24, 26 and 28. God still gives people over to their sinful choices. Satan makes Adam and Eve a false promise of deity (“you will be like God,” Genesis 3:5). The power of that seduction is behind Paul's statement that we “worship the creature” as if he were divine (Romans 1:25). Eve wanted “wisdom” from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but got the “wisdom” of committing evil, what Paul calls “claiming to be wise, but becoming fools” (Romans 1:22). This original Lie denies the truth of God's Word and the existence of a transcendent Creator, Whose Word spoke the world into existence. Satan the interloper makes God out to be the *intruder*, rather than the *sovereign Creator*, responsible for the beauty and the complexity of the creation. The Lie was sugarcoated. Satan dangled before Eve not just eye-catching fruit, but the seduction of a humanly-created utopia. Satan played on the fact that Eden was not God's last word about creation. (Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 15:45.) The test would not have endured eternally, and the fruit of the tree of life (some form of endless, “resurrected” life) would have been the reward for Adam and Eve's faithful obedience. In other words, God intended eternal utopia for his creation, but on his terms, not Satan's, and not Adam's or Eve's. Satan proposes the unrealistic dream that human beings, once they sense their own divinity, can bring about the end of the garden probation and realize that final utopian state, using their own wisdom. That is what Satan proposed to Jesus, the last Adam, in the other great temptation scene, which took place not in an idyllic garden but in a hostile wilderness:

The devil took him [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall *worship* the Lord your God and him only shall you *serve*.’” (Matthew 4:8)

The answer of Jesus, the faithful Son, is the one Adam and Eve should have given. From that moment on, as Paul says, “They [the human race] exchanged the truth about God for the lie and *worshiped* and *served* the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” Their failure corrupted the world. When Jesus successfully fought off the Tempter's false promise to hand him the nations, he was able to announce the coming of God's utopia,

specifically that “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:14–15). Throughout history, Satan has used the same sugarcoated Lie that suppresses the truth everyone knows—an eternal, powerful God made the universe and is its Creator and Re-creator. Today’s version is mouthed by globalist politicians, United Nation documents on the planet’s future, leaders of the world’s religions and self-proclaimed “progressive” Christians (including many Emergent evangelicals). They say we can create a utopia where all people get along, universal justice rules and humans live in unity with nature. Based on this delusional fantasy, it will become a planetary nightmare. Salvation does not emerge from spiritual powers within the human heart or from idealized systems of human evolution and spiritual transformation. Global unity will not overcome egotism and greed. Just as divorce and remarriage will not solve an egotist’s problems, so a system cannot create utopia in a world tainted by selfishness. Yet, the original Lie permeates the atmosphere, luring us with promises of divine capabilities into a Neverland of our own imagination. Thus, in a thousand seemingly original ways, we worship and serve creation.

The Lie’s Effects

Paul discusses three areas that completely change according to the choice we make between the Truth and the Lie:

1. Theology (what we believe about God),
2. Spirituality (how we worship),
3. Behavior (specifically, how we live our sexuality).

We see these three areas in Romans 1. In verse 18, Paul says we “suppress the truth” in “godlessness and wickedness.” Notice that all three elements are present: thought/theology (truth), spirituality (godlessness) and behavior (wickedness). These three areas are repeated in condensed form in the middle of Paul’s argument, in verse 25, which serves as a summary of the section as a whole (Romans 1:18–32). I have laid out verse 25 to show these three areas, as determined by three verbs: “exchange,” “worship,” and “serve.”

1. They *exchanged* the truth about God for the lie (conceptual/theological thinking, worked out in Rom 1:18–21).
2. They *worshipped* the creature rather than the Creator (spiritual activity, described in Rom 1:22–23).

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3. They *served* the creature rather than the Creator (behavioral/sexual actions, worked out in Romans 1:24, 26–28. This leads to other dysfunctional behavior mentioned in Romans 1:29-32).

Paul likes threes, because he has put in two more sets of them. He describes three “exchanges” by which humans deliberately choose the Lie over the Truth:

1. We make a *thought* exchange. (Romans 1:23)
2. We make a *worship* exchange. (Romans 1:25)
3. We make a *sexual* exchange. (Romans 1:26)

Paul also describes three “give overs,” which refer to God’s temporal judgment (prefiguring the final judgment) of those who deny God and choose to live in a way that fails to reflect his will:

1. God *gives us over* to our lust and impurity. (Romans 1:24)
2. God *gives us over* to our dishonorable passions. (Romans 1:26)
3. God *gives us over* to a debased mind. (Romans 1:28)

The Twenty-Five Words—For You

It is said of the beautiful Cleopatra that her nose changed the course of world history. The twenty-five words discussed in this chapter not only changed the course of world history, they reveal the true meaning of all history. Throughout time, the two possible religious choices have always remained the same. Paul is not expressing an abstract theory or a wild opinion. He describes the ultimate issues of truth and falsehood, obedience and disobedience, life and death—as they are affected by the only two possible worldviews: Oneism (worship of creation) or Twoism (worship of the Creator). In the lessons that follow, we will take a look at the three areas that Paul covered: theology, spirituality and sexuality.