

Sowing the Wind and Reaping the Whirlwind: Cheating in Our Society¹

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Introduction

My subject today is cheating. While not as broad as Dr. Engle's topic of two weeks past (it is in fact a sub-issue of public morality), it is sufficiently broad that, because of time and space constraints, I will not explore every aspect of this issue. Nor will I even say all that I could say on the aspects which I will examine today. What I will do, after giving a short testimonial, is *first* paint in broad strokes a picture of the problem of cheating in our contemporary American society, focusing on cheating in academia. This in particular has been a "hot topic" in the media as of late. *Second*, I will then discuss briefly what I and many others see as the root cause of the problem. *Third*, I will turn our attention to the Scriptures to see what light they shed on the topic of cheating. *Fourth* and last, I will make some practical suggestions based on the study.

I am personally acquainted with cheating. I have done it as a student (not at BBS) and have dealt with it as an educator (not yet at BBS). As an unsaved high school student I cheated my way through one class by obtaining old exams and memorizing the answers. And I was a "good kid." I went to church every Sunday, said my prayers every night, and served in my church. I believed in God and never used His name in vain. And yet I cheated in school. What were the "bad kids" doing? And this was over 20 years ago. Fast forward a couple of years when, as a newly-saved spiritually immature college student with a spotty track record on honesty, I used "cheat sheets" to pass a final exam. And these are only the obvious examples I happen to recall at the present.

On the other side of the table, I've dealt with cheating as a public high school teacher. In one case, being less experienced in catching cheaters than in being one, I failed to confiscate the evidence. The parents (influential) paid a visit to the principal. Since it was the student's word against mine, and since according to the parents this sweet little girl would never cheat, whose side do you think the school took?

Most recently, I dealt with cheating among Bible school students in Eastern Europe. Talk about the ultimate hypocrisy: cheat your way into the ministry. It's as if they'd never thought of it before, or hadn't been taught honesty in their churches, or hadn't had honest role models at home. But I get ahead of myself. I share these personal experiences up front, particularly the confessions of guilt, only to make the obvious point that cheating is not new. But something does seem to be different today: the problem appears to be reaching epidemic proportions.

¹ This paper was originally presented as a Faculty Forum paper in Chapel at Baptist Bible Seminary on November 17, 2000.

The Prevalence of Cheating Today

“Cheating is at or near an all-time high,” according to Donald McCabe, president of the Center for Academic Integrity based in Durham, N.C.² In 1998 the Josephson Institute of Ethics released the results of a survey of 20,829 middle school and high school students. Among the findings were that 70.2 percent of the high school students and 54 percent of the middle school students admitted to having cheated at least once on an exam within the previous 12 months.³

Stephen Davis, professor of psychology at Emporia State University, who has gathered data on more than 17,000 students, notes that 50 years ago only about 20 percent of high school students admitted to having cheated. Today a range of studies shows that that figure has exploded to anywhere from 75 percent to 98 percent.⁴

According to the 2000 poll of students honored in *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, four out of five teens at the top of their classes say they got there by cheating. A full 80 percent admit to having cheated during their impressive academic careers. This represents a four percent jump from last year's survey and the highest percentage in the 29-year history of the survey.⁵ This reveals another trend in cheating. In the past, students who worried about failing were the ones who were most likely to resort to cheating. Now “even the best and brightest are trying to get an edge, like an athlete taking steroids.”⁶

Of course it is not only grammar school students who are cheating in droves. As the subtitle for the *US News* article cited above puts it, “‘Everyone's doing it,’ from grade school to graduate school.” In one survey, 87 percent of college students say they cheated on written work, 70 percent cheated at least once on a test, 49 percent collaborated with others on an assignment, 52 percent copied from someone, and 26 percent plagiarized.⁷ Cheating has recently become a hot topic at Purdue University. In 1999 Assistant Dean of Students Kellie Cox personally handled 104 cases of academic dishonesty and received information from faculty who handled 172 more cases themselves. But even that, Cox says, is only the “tip of the iceberg.” Cox believes the

² William Hageman, “Look Who's Cheating,” *Chicago Tribune* <<http://www.messengerinquirer.com/education/921602.htm>>, Dec 29, 1999. “Studies tell us that cheating in school has moved from being commonplace, to being epidemic, to being nearly universal. Almost every student admits to cheating at one time or another” (David Summergrad, “Calling It What It Is,” *Education Week* <<http://www.edweek.com/ew/vol-18/43summer.h18>>, Aug 4, 1999.

³ Hageman, “Look Who's Cheating.”

⁴ Carolyn Kleiner and Mary Lord, “The Cheating Game,” *U.S. News and World Report* <<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/991122/cheating.htm>>, Nov 22, 1999.

⁵ *Who's Who Among American High School Students 29th Annual Survey of High Achievers* <<http://www.eci-whoswho.com/highschool/annualsurveys/29.shtml>>.

⁶ Harry Bruinius, “School Cheating Up as Stakes Rise,” *Christian Science Monitor* <<http://www.csmonitor.com/durable/1999/12/14/fp1s1-csm.shtml>>, Dec 14, 1999. This is an interesting observation in light of the spate of disqualifications for banned substances during the recent Sydney Olympics. Cheating in sports is yet another example of the broader honesty crisis in our society. Again, the problem is not new; Paul addresses cheating at sports in 2 Tim 2:5. But the problem seems to be worsening. Along with checking the daily medal count during the Sydney Olympics, I found myself checking the daily drug disqualifications. See my concluding suggestion regarding cheating at games.

⁷ Carol Innerst, “Students Are Pulling Off the Big Cheat,” *Insight on the News* <http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1571/n9_v14/20386666/print.jhtml>, Mar 9, 1998.

faculty are starting to address cheating because the problem is so much more obvious. Cox notes that in some informal polls, 75 to 90 percent of students say they have cheated.⁸

But what about students who profess to be Christians? According to a recent survey conducted by *Campus Life* magazine, a subsidiary of *Christianity Today*, 80 percent of their readers said that they had cheated in school. Most admitted to having cheated only “once” or “seldom,” but only 6 percent stated that they had never cheated.⁹

But can we really say that cheating is any more prevalent today than, say, 75 years ago? Not according to Larry Nucci, a professor of education and psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In his view, “Cheating has been going on at least as long as it has been studied. The most famous studies on cheating were done in the 1930’s. And they discovered that everyone cheats if the condition is right.”¹⁰ I pray for our sakes he is overstating the case. Cheating may not be new, but the high percentage of *confessing* cheaters definitely is. This by itself points to deeper problems. Cheating just doesn’t carry the social stigma that it used to.¹¹ Fifty-six-year-old Michael Josephson, founder of the Josephson Institute, explains, “It wasn’t that kids didn’t cheat in my day. But they’d be sneaky and wouldn’t even tell their friends. You knew you were a cheater. And it was a bad thing. That’s not the case today. There were always kids who cheated, but it wasn’t the majority. Now it’s the majority, and there’s no peer pressure [to discourage cheating].”¹² Cheating has increased as attitudes toward it have changed.

Attitudes Toward Cheating

According to one observer, what has changed in recent years is “the scope of the problem: the technology that opens new avenues to cheat, students’ boldness in using it, and the erosion of conscience at every level of education.”¹³ Technology is an issue I will touch upon below; but first, what about attitudes? The majority of students seem quite blasé about their cheating. In the *Who’s Who* survey, 53 percent said cheating was “no big deal.”¹⁴ David Summergrad, a middle school teacher, notes, “Students shrug off the guilt of cheating as easily as they might brush dandruff from their Gap-clothed shoulders.”¹⁵ According to one student interviewed in another article, “Cheating is something that just happens—it’s like asking directions.”¹⁶ What concerns Don McCabe of Rutgers “is that students have a different perspective on cheating now. Twenty or 30 years ago, they might do it out of necessity but feel guilty about it. Today, there’s very little guilt.”¹⁷ Ironically, in the *Who’s Who* survey almost twice as many students this year than

⁸ Kevin Cullen, “Cheating Hot Topic at Purdue,” *Journal and Courier* (Lafayette, Ind.), Feb 22, 2000.

⁹ Mark Moring, “Everybody’s Doing It,” *Campus Life* <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/cl/9c3/9c3034.html>>, Nov/Dec 1999.

¹⁰ Hageman, “Look Who’s Cheating.”

¹¹ Bruinius, “School Cheating.”

¹² Hageman, “Look Who’s Cheating.”

¹³ Kleiner and Lord, “The Cheating Game.”

¹⁴ *Who’s Who 29th Annual Survey*.

¹⁵ Summergrad, “Calling It What It Is.”

¹⁶ Kevin Bushweller, “Generation of Cheaters,” *The American School Board Journal* <<http://www.asbj.com/199904/0499coverstory.html>>, April 1999.

¹⁷ Ibid.

last year (46% versus 25%) point to “declining social and moral values” as the biggest problem facing their generation today.¹⁸

Students have their own definitions for cheating—cheating is in the eye of the beholder.¹⁹ For example, in some discussions students differentiate between “trivial” cheating on daily quizzes and homework and “real” cheating on exams. Or their behavior depends on the class. “I would never cheat on a math test,” explains one student. “But a gym test? Yes. I would feel morally bad cheating on algebra.”²⁰ Other students have separated cheating from morality because school has become a game in which the goal is to get good grades, not to learn or get something out of the class. “And in those situations, kids don’t think cheating has anything to do with morality. They see school as unfair and tests as bogus,” according to Larry Nucci.²¹

Technology and Cheating

Umpteen pages to plow through for honors English, anatomy, and U.S. history . . . Geometry problems galore . . . It was a typical weeknight for high school sophomore Leah Solowsky. Before tackling her first assignment—a Spanish essay on healthy eating—the honor-roll student logged on to her computer to chat with pals. Suddenly, it hit her: Perhaps she could download some of her workload. Solowsky cruised to the AltaVista search engine, clicked on “Spanish,” and typed in “*la dieta*.” Fifteen minutes later, she had everything she needed to know about fruits, vegetables, and grains—all in flawless *español*. She quickly retyped the information and handed in her paper the next day. “I had a ton of homework, I wasn’t doing that well in the class, and I felt, hey, this is one way to boost my grade,” explains Solowsky, now a junior with a B-plus average at the highly competitive Gulliver Preparatory School in Miami. “I didn’t think it was cheating because I didn’t even stop to think about it.”²²

How else is technology making cheating easier? There are graphing calculators that can be programmed to show formulas that can be called up during a test.²³ Other “Y2K cheating wonders are pagers and Palm Pilots with infrared technology that can beam messages (and test answers) across the room. E-mail and cellular phones have made communicating between class much easier, bringing the copying of homework to a new level. There have also been instances of students hacking into school records to change their grades.”²⁴

This is all quite apart from the Internet term paper industry. As part of a Teaching Effectiveness Seminar held in March 1999, Coastal Carolina University presented data on Internet “paper mills.” Over 80 sites were collected that were active as of October 2000.²⁵ Site names range from

¹⁸ *Who’s Who 29th Annual Survey*.

¹⁹ See below on moral relativity.

²⁰ Hageman, “Look Who’s Cheating.”

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Leah’s case is typical. What is less typical is that she was caught, earned a zero, and was barred from the National Honor Society (Kleiner and Lord, “The Cheating Game”).

²³ Hageman, “Look Who’s Cheating.”

²⁴ Bruinius, “School Cheating.”

²⁵ “Cheating 101: Paper Mills and You,” *Teaching Effectiveness Seminar at Coastal Carolina University* <<http://www.coastal.edu/library/papermil.htm>>, Mar 3, 2000. The list was updated after the seminar took place.

the sublime (“Academic Research Group,” “Research Assistance”) to the ridiculous (“BigNerds,” “The Cheat Factory”).²⁶ How much does it cost to get a paper? It varies. Some sites give papers away for free. Some require only that you register. Some will exchange your submitted paper for another. Some charge a flat membership fee that provides access to vast data bases. Most sell by the page, charging from \$1–\$10 or more per page (major credit cards are accepted). Some offer special services, such as immediate delivery via e-mail if your paper is due tomorrow (for an extra \$15), custom writing a paper for you (for an exorbitant fee), sales, and “summer blowout specials.”²⁷ This explosion of cheating sites has of course led to the creation of plagiarism detection sites, with names such as “Plagiarism.Org,” “IntegriGuard,” and “WordChecksystems.”²⁸

Internet technology has complicated the issue of defining cheating. As students do more research on the Internet, many are lifting information from various Web sites and calling it their own. They don’t attribute their sources or consider it plagiarism.²⁹ Susanne Hambrusch, a professor of computer sciences at Purdue University, states that because students have gotten so used to pulling information from the Internet, “they feel it is not cheating to cut and paste [from it]. They don’t think it is wrong. It is a different way of cheating.”³⁰

Students Aren’t the Only Ones

Over the past few years, reports of cheating educators and administrators have surfaced in several states, including Arizona, Connecticut, Maryland, Texas, and Virginia.³¹ One of the more highly-publicized scandals came to light in New York City in 1999. An elementary teacher in the South Bronx finally blew the whistle on her principal and other top administrators who “had demanded that teachers raise scores on standardized tests by giving children the answers.”³² After New York City Board of Education investigators did nothing, the teacher went higher to special commissioner Edward F. Stancik. After 17 months of work, Stancik released a report which led to the suspension of 52 teachers and administrators at 32 different schools. According to the report, some of the cheating methods proctors used included correcting wrong answers, giving answers outright, writing answers directly on the student’s exam, prompting students to change answers, and giving students actual questions from the test ahead of time.³³

In another scandal, at least 52 teachers from five states were caught cheating on their competency tests. It was discovered that they paid \$1,000 bribes to exam supervisors in

²⁶ The entire list can be viewed at <http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm>.

²⁷ “Cheating 101.”

²⁸ Full list available at: <http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills3.htm>.

²⁹ Cullen, “Cheating Hot Topic at Purdue.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Bruinius, “School Cheating.”

³² Nicholas Stix, “Scandal Du Jour Rocks New York City Schools,” *Insight on the News* <http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1571/4_16/59187720/print.jhtml>, Jan 31, 2000.

³³ Ibid. This raises the issue of standardized testing, in which “everything from teachers’ pay to principals’ jobs is linked to student performance—intensifying the pressure to ‘do anything’ for high scores” (Bruinius, “School Cheating”). Standardized testing pressure aside, the willingness to cheat in order to protect one’s job, promotion, salary, or recognition simply reveals the self-centeredness and moral relativism of our day.

exchange for extra time and help with answers. The scam took place at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Ark. and was run by a former college employee. "It's a terrible violation," stated Mississippi Superintendent of Education Richard Thompson. Trudie Kibbe Reed, Philander Smith President, had this to say, "It is a crime when the integrity of our institution is compromised by one person's greed and lack of loyalty to the mission of our campus." All the guilty teachers had their test scores cancelled by the Educational Testing Service, and more teachers are expected to have their scores challenged during ongoing investigations.³⁴

Recently a professor at Albright College in Reading, Pa. told his students he would not be enforcing the college's academic dishonesty policy this semester because of allegations that the college president lied on his résumé. "If he can get away with it, I see no reason why my students can't," said the professor of communications. The college president is alleged to have misrepresented claims of book publishings and postdoctoral fellowships at Harvard and MIT.³⁵

What Is the Real Problem Here?

William Bennett, in his book *The De-Valuing of America*, puts his finger on what he sees as the root problem in American education:

Although there are many reasons for America's educational decline, none is more important than the fact that many educators have forgotten the answer to the basic question: What is the purpose of school? My view, to put it simply, is that the purpose of school is to make students both smarter and better, to develop intellectual and moral character. When the American people are asked what they want from their schools, they consistently put two tasks at the top of their list: first, teach our children how to speak, write, read, think, and count correctly. And second, help them to develop reliable standards of right and wrong that will guide them through life.³⁶

"Values Clarification" and Moral Relativity

Bennett points to the "values clarification" programs which began turning up in public schools in the early seventies as a major factor in the recent moral decline. According to this philosophy, the school refuses to pass down the time-honored moral values of old, but rather allows children to "clarify" their own values, values which adults have no "right" to criticize. Bennett reacts, "The 'values clarification' movement didn't clarify values, it clarified wants and desires. This form of moral relativism said, in effect, that no set of values was right or wrong; everybody had an equal right to his own values; and all values were subjective, relative, and personal. This destructive view took hold with a vengeance."³⁷

³⁴ Paul Payne, AP, "Teachers Accused of Cheating," *The Inquirer* <<http://web.philly.com/content/inquirer/2000/08/18/national/TEST18.htm>>, Aug 18, 2000.

³⁵ Tina Moore, AP, "Professor Calls College's Cheating Policy Hypocritical," *The Scranton Times/Tribune* (Sept 23, 2000).

³⁶ William Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Focus on the Family, 1992), 38.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

This philosophy remains firmly rooted in our schools and society to this day. My wife Sharon and I attended a PTA meeting some time ago. A reading program was announced. Participating children would read a book, then meet together with the teacher to discuss what they had read. All the children would be encouraged to share their thoughts “and there are no right and wrong answers,” the catchphrase of values clarification. It does not seem to matter what the author meant when he or she wrote the book. What matters is that little Johnny and Susie be given the freedom to express themselves, to “clarify” their own views and values (wants and desires).

Many in our society have abandoned the notion of absolute right and wrong. Right and wrong are personalized, relativized, and subjectivized. Right and wrong are what are right and wrong “to me.” And now as a society we are reaping the fruits of moral relativity, and rampant dishonesty and cheating is just one example. We have sown the wind and are reaping the whirlwind (Hos 8:7). It is interesting to look at this verse in its context. Hosea denounces the sins of Israel. They have transgressed God’s covenant and rebelled against His law (v. 1). They cry out, “My God, we of Israel know Thee!” (v. 2),³⁸ but they reject the good (v. 3a). Hosea goes on to describe what they have embraced in place of what is good: kings and princes unapproved by God (v. 4a); silver and gold idols (v. 4b), in particular the calf of Samaria (vv. 5–6). They have sown the wind—that is, they have pursued “empty” sins.³⁹ They have sown the seed of futility, and now they will reap the harvest of destruction.⁴⁰ In applying this passage to the present situation, because many in our society have rejected the good—the absolute standards of right and wrong handed down from the God of Scripture—we are reaping the fruit, the systematic unraveling of the moral fabric of our society.

Addressing the Moral Problem of Cheating

Educators are attempting to address cheating as a moral problem. The question is, are they touching the real problem and can they succeed? For example, in the fall of 1999 the Educational Testing Service, in conjunction with the Ad Council, launched a national public service campaign which used broadcast and print ads to discourage academic cheating. The ETS campaign targets children between the ages of 10–14, using a referee representing the child’s conscience as the campaign icon. The catch phrase is “Cheating is a personal foul,” and an oft-repeated line is “Listen to the referee in your head.” The campaign has a Web site (www.nocheating.org), a toll-free number (888–88CHEAT), and various publications.⁴¹

Will such campaigns solve the problem of cheating? According to one student, no. “This is something kids don’t take seriously. I don’t think commercials will make a difference.”⁴² A classmate adds, “It’s like the tobacco billboards. They make you think something is getting done, but it’s not.”⁴³ Michael Josephson agrees, “I don’t think any ad campaign by itself will stop

³⁸ Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are from NASB.

³⁹ Leon Wood, *Hosea*, EBC, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 201. In wisdom literature, “wind” stands for what is “illusive and elusive, for what amounts to nothing (Eccl 1:14,17; Prov 11:29; Job 7:7)” (James Mays, *Hosea*, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], 119).

⁴⁰ Mays, *Hosea*, 120.

⁴¹ Hageman, “Look Who’s Cheating.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

cheating.”⁴⁴ While this campaign may be on the right track by bringing attention to the human conscience, it does not go far enough (see below).

Schools are attempting to reintroduce and reinforce moral values. For example, the Chicago Public Schools system has begun a character education initiative which incorporates values such as honesty and truthfulness into classroom lessons and assignments.⁴⁵ The Josephson Institute also launched a program called Character Counts!, which is now used by numerous school districts, sports organizations, and YMCAs around the country. The program promotes ethical values such as trustworthiness, responsibility, and fairness among youth, but “in a *nonreligious* ... way.”⁴⁶

The italicized word above underscores the truth that such programs are not addressing the real issue and explains why they will have trouble succeeding. What such programs are attempting to do is lift up the conscience but not its Creator, promote the good with no mention of the One who alone is good, elevate laws but ignore the Lawgiver, proclaim what is just with no appeal to the Judge of all the earth. People want to have their cake and eat it, too. As a society we want our children and our neighbors to follow rules, but without accountability to the Ruler of the universe. The term “nonreligious values” is an oxymoron.

Ethical Systems and Cheating

John and Paul Feinberg note that there are two ways ethical systems view the criteria for right and wrong actions. First, according to the *teleological view*, “what is morally good or bad . . . is determined by the non-moral value produced when the act is done.”⁴⁷ In other words, consequences or results determine what is right and wrong. Teleologists may differ as to what is good in the non-moral sense. Hedonists, for example, identify good with pleasure and evil with pain. Other teleologists identify good with such non-moral values as power, knowledge, and self-realization.⁴⁸ The Feinberg brothers explain further that there are two sorts of teleological positions: “The first kind focuses on producing the greatest good for oneself (ethical egoism). The second type emphasizes producing the greatest good for the greatest number (ethical universalism).”⁴⁹ While we would hope for the good of society that the majority of teleological ethicists would fall into the latter category, it is easy to imagine that the self-centeredness of human nature would lead many to ethical egoism: “what is good is what helps me.”

The second way ethical systems view the criteria for good and evil is known as the *deontological view*, an entirely different notion altogether. According to this view, it is not the non-moral consequences of an act which makes it good or bad; rather, there are other considerations which make the act morally right or wrong, such as the fact that it keeps a promise, is just, or God

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁴⁷ John Feinberg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1993), 27.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

commands it. “The key for deontological theories is that an act is right because it is one’s duty to do it, and it is one’s duty for some reason other than the consequences stemming from the act.”⁵⁰

John and Paul Feinberg identify themselves as deontological ethicists, and for good reason. As Evangelical Christians, they and we take our ethical norms from Scripture. Our understanding of right and wrong is based on divine revelation. God has commanded in Scripture what is good, and He has forbidden what is evil. This conviction is a form of what is called *divine command theory*: right is what God commands. However, unlike some divine command theorists,⁵¹ we do not believe God’s commands are arbitrary or irrational. God’s commands proceed from and reflect His own nature. For example, because God is just, He knows what acts are just and prescribes them. Conversely, He knows what acts are unjust and therefore forbids them. Because by His very nature God is true and cannot lie, He commands truth-telling and forbids lying. Thus, according to the biblical understanding, “certain acts are inherently right and others inherently wrong. They are so because they either reflect or do not reflect the character of the God who made the world and all in it.”⁵²

What Does God Say About Cheating?

What, then, does the God of Scripture say about cheating? Before we look at the biblical terminology involved, let’s start by defining our English word *cheat*. According to *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, the first definition under the entry *cheat* is “to deprive of something valuable by the use of deceit or fraud.”⁵³ In other words, to cheat someone means to take something of value from him or her by means of deception. I’ll point out some practical applications of this in my concluding suggestions.

OT Teaching

Does the word *cheat* appear in the Bible? In NASB the word appears twice, so let’s start there. First, in Gen 31:7, Jacob laments to Rachel and Leah that, in spite of how well he had served their father Laban, “Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times.” The root behind the verb form translated *cheated*, לָלַץ, means *mock, deceive, trifle with*.⁵⁴ KJV and NKJV translate it *deceived*, while NIV and NRSV agree with NASB and render it *cheated*. While an obsolete meaning of *deceive* in English is “cheat,” its contemporary definition is “cause

⁵⁰ “Deontologists do not ignore consequences altogether. They only claim that consequences are not the basis for deciding the moral rightness or wrongness of an action” (Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 28).

⁵¹ E.g., William of Ockham claimed that God could have commanded the opposite of the Ten Commandments, making murder, stealing, and lying our moral obligation (Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 28; cf. 26).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30. The issue of which OT laws carry into the NT is an important one. Briefly, I agree with the Feinbergs and others that the OT ceremonial and civil law are no longer in force. The NT believer is not under the Mosaic Law, but rather under the Law of Christ. There is, however, overlap. Certain ethical principles are grounded in God’s nature and will always be in force, although they find expression at different times in different codes (*Ethics for a Brave New World*, 34–40).

⁵³ *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* <<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>>.

⁵⁴ Francis Brown, S. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), 1068, hereafter abbreviated BDB.

to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid.”⁵⁵ This is what seems to be the situation in Gen 31:7. Ten times Laban told Jacob what his wages would be, and ten times what Laban said proved to be false.

Other uses of the root **תָּלַל** convey this same meaning. For example, in Judg 16 Delilah complains three times that Samson has *deceived* her (vv. 10,13,15), which is further defined as having told her lies (vv. 10,13) and not the truth regarding his great strength (v. 15). We find the same thing in Jer 9:5 (MT v. 4). Here NASB translates **תָּלַל** *deceives*, “And everyone deceives his neighbor.” The meaning is clearly related to truth-telling, as the rest of the verse makes clear, “And does not speak the truth. They have taught their tongue to speak lies.” What we have discovered, then, is that while the Hebrew root **תָּלַל** clearly means *deceive*, it does not specifically carry the idea of *cheating* in the sense of taking something of value from someone by means of deception. So *cheat* is probably not the best translation for **תָּלַל** in Gen 31:7.

The second place where the word *cheat* shows up in NASB is Amos 8:5. Here the Lord speaks of those who can’t wait for the Sabbath to end so they can “open the wheat market, to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales.” The root of the verb form rendered *cheat* is **עָוַת**, which means *be bent, crooked*. Here it is in the Piel stem, meaning *make crooked, falsify*.⁵⁶ The phrase **וּלְעֹוֹת מֵאֲזוּנֵי מִרְמָה** may literally be translated “and to falsify balances of deception.” The object of the verb **עָוַת** is the balances or scales, not the shoppers. You falsify your scales; you cheat your customers. So once again, then, I disagree with NASB: *cheat* doesn’t appear to be the best translation for the root **עָוַת** in Amos 8:5.

But while *cheat* may not be the meaning of the particular verb **עָוַת**, it is surely the topic of the verse as a whole. The merchants described here are using three methods to cheat their customers (i.e., take something of value from them by means of deception). First, by using a smaller than standard bushel (ephah), they are tricking their customers into thinking they are receiving a full measure of wheat when in fact they are receiving less. Second, by using a larger than standard shekel (weight), the merchants are tricking their customers into thinking they are paying out the proper amount of silver when in fact they are paying more. We see, then, how these clever merchants used a small ephah to measure what they gave, and a heavy shekel to determine what they received.⁵⁷ The third way they cheated their customers was by selling the “refuse of the wheat” (v. 6), which was “the mixture of chaff and trash left after winnowing.”⁵⁸ Customers who thought they were buying clean grain were paying for “something extra.”

The practice Amos is addressing here is not new, but was expressly forbidden in the Law of Moses. According to Lev 19:35–36, Israelites were to “do no wrong in judgment, in measurement of weight, or capacity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt.” Here the

⁵⁵ Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.

⁵⁶ BDB, 736.

⁵⁷ James Mays, *Amos*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 144.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

word translated *just* is צֶדֶק, which usually refers to moral rightness or righteousness. But what are “righteous” scales? Those that are straight or accurate, conforming to the true standard. Just (straight) scales are the opposite of the false (crooked) scales criticized in Amos 8:5.⁵⁹

Deut 25:13–16 repeats this command more fully, “You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house differing measures, a large and a small. You shall have a full and just weight; you shall have a full and just measure, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. For everyone who does these things, everyone who acts unjustly is an abomination to the LORD your God.”⁶⁰ The word *abomination* (תועבה) is a harsh label God assigns elsewhere to morally repulsive practices such as homosexuality and bestiality (Lev 18:22–23), idolatry (Deut 7:25), human sacrifice (Deut 12:31), engaging in occult activities (Deut 18:9–14), and ritual prostitution (1 Kgs 14:24).⁶¹ Does God view cheating (depriving of something valuable by the use of deceit) any differently than bestiality or spirit worship? I leave it for you to judge.

The third place where Scripture forbids unjust weights and measures is Prov 20:10, “Differing weights and differing measures, both of them are abominable to the LORD.” Here it is important to note three things. First, this is essentially a repetition of the pronouncement of the Law of Moses. Second, the writer repeats the fact from Deut 25:16 that this type of behavior is morally repulsive to the Lord. Third, I point out that this verse is in the third division of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Writings. Thus in all three sections of the OT (Law, Prophets, Writings) God forbids the use of deceptive means to obtain that which does not rightfully belong to a person—in a word, God forbids cheating and calls it a detestable sin.

This leads me to an important point regarding Amos 8:5 and the underlying teaching of Lev 19:35–36 and Deut 25:13–16, something that I have implied but not yet clearly expressed: at its root the practice of falsifying weights and measures was a breach of a more fundamental command of Scripture, namely, the eighth commandment of the Decalogue which forbids *stealing* (Exod 20:15).⁶²

The root used in the eighth commandment, לֹא תִגְנוֹב (לֹא תִגְנוֹב), “you shall not steal”), is the most common Hebrew word for stealing. It appears about 60 times in its various forms and derivatives. Essentially, גָּנַב means “to take that which belongs to another without his consent or knowledge.”⁶³ Two related roots, גָּזַל (*seize*) and עָשָׂק (*extort*), “emphasize the violent aspect of seizing the property of another.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Cf. Mic 6:11 and the criticism of “scales of wickedness” (מִאֲזֵי רָשָׁע).

⁶⁰ In excavations at Tirzah, shops were found dating to the 8th c. BC which contained two sets of weights, one for buying and one for selling (Mays, *Amos*, 144).

⁶¹ R. Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 977, hereafter abbreviated TWOT.

⁶² Mays, *Amos*, 144.

⁶³ TWOT, vol. 1, 168.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Three times in the Mosaic Law God forbids His people to steal. I have already mentioned Exod 20:15. Moses repeats this identical command in Deut 5:19 as he restates the Decalogue. In Lev 19:11, in the context of various laws, the Lord commands, “You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another,” which is a quotation of the eighth and paraphrase of the ninth commandments of the Decalogue.⁶⁵

To put it plainly, Scripture expressly forbids stealing, and cheating is a form of stealing. Remember the definition I gave earlier: cheating is depriving someone of something valuable by means of deceit. It is clear, then, that not only is cheating stealing, but cheating is *worse* than stealing because it is doubly sinful. Cheating is stealing coupled with lying, which is also forbidden according to the ninth commandment of the Decalogue and Lev 19:11. According to the OT, the mathematics are clear: cheating = stealing + lying, a formula for disaster for those who would spurn its truth.

I want to examine two more OT passages which shed light on the formula cheating = stealing + lying. First, in Jer 23:30 God describes false prophets who “steal My words from each other.” Jeremiah explains what this means. They speak visions of their own heart and not from the mouth of the Lord (v. 16). They tell those who despise the Lord that they will have peace (v. 17; cf. Jer 7). They run to preach, but the Lord did not send them; they prophesy, but the Lord did not speak to them (v. 21). They pronounce falsely in the Lord’s name, “I had a dream, I had a dream” (v. 25). They claim to have grain—the Lord’s word properly applied, but are offering straw instead—the Lord’s word improperly applied (v. 28).

Moreover, they use their tongues to declare, “The LORD declares” (v. 31). This last phrase contains a play on the word נִאֻם, “oracle.” Literally, the false prophets are those “who take their tongues and ‘oracle an oracle’” (הַלְקִיחִים לְשׁוֹנָם וַיִּנְאֲמוּ נִאֻם). The נִאֻם־יְהוָה “is a characteristic formula indicating the prophetic oracle,”⁶⁶ which can be translated “oracle of the Lord” or “declares the LORD” (NASB).

Coupled with v. 30, we see the full force of this presentation. The false prophets have received no word from the Lord themselves. Rather, they repeat the Lord’s word which they’ve taken from past prophets, misapply it to their situation, and preach it *as if* they had received it directly from the Lord themselves. Their “word of the Lord” did not come to them from the Lord, but they deliver it “in the form of prophetic address and thus convey the impression that it is an oracle from Yahweh. It is their own word, but ‘they word it, “Yahweh’s word.””⁶⁷ They are cheating, stealing the Lord’s word from others and then, in misapplying it, deceitfully presenting it as received by them directly from the Lord.⁶⁸ Cheating = stealing + lying.

The second OT passage is Mal 1:6–14. Here the Lord condemns the sin of the priests. They were dishonoring God and despising His name by presenting defiled offerings on the altar of sacrifice

⁶⁵ G. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 267.

⁶⁶ John Bright, *Jeremiah*, AB (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 153.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ “To their lies they add plagiarism; their words were not original but stolen from others. Here was spiritual bankruptcy indeed!” (Charles Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, EBC, vol. 6 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], 525).

(vv. 6–7). More specifically, they were sacrificing blind, lame, and sick animals to the Lord (v. 8; cf. v. 13). The offering of blemished animals for sacrifice was expressly forbidden by the Law (Deut 15:21). In fact, to do so was “a detestable thing (תועבה, “abomination”) to the LORD your God” (Deut 17:1). God was not pleased with the priests and would not accept their offerings (v. 10). More severely, God pronounces as “cursed . . . the swindler who has a male in his flock, and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord” (v. 14).

The participle translated *the swindler* by NASB is from the root נָכַל, *be crafty, deceitful*. KJV and NKJV translate *the deceiver*, while NIV and NRSV render it *the cheat*. This priest had set aside an animal for sacrifice, and now it was time to offer it. The votive offering is in view here and, as in the case of the other offerings, the presentation of defective animals was expressly forbidden (Lev 22:18–20). But being deceitful, the priest offered a cheap substitute when the time finally came to keep his vow.⁶⁹ Greed would seem to have been the motivation here—greed coupled with hypocrisy, for this crafty priest was able both to keep his healthy animal for himself and keep up appearances as a pious priest who keeps his vows. But the risk was not worth the price paid for such folly. What arrogance (and stupidity) to think *as a priest* that he could break the Law, cheat God out of His rightful sacrifice, that is, steal from Him by means of deception, and believe he could “get away with it.” There would be no escape. “The *cheat* who attempted to deceive God when paying his vows was *cursed*.”⁷⁰ Cheating = stealing + lying.

NT Teaching

The NT reaffirms the clear commandments of God regarding stealing and lying. Jesus repeats several of the commands of the Decalogue to the rich young ruler, including the eighth and ninth against stealing and lying (Matt 19:18; cf. Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20). Paul repeats essentially the same ones, including the eighth against stealing (Rom 13:9). Paul condemns the Jew who would preach against stealing, and yet steal himself (Rom 2:21).

Paul commands the believer who used to steal to steal no more, but rather to “labor, performing *with his own hands* what is good” (Eph 4:28). Honest pay for honest work is the watchword for the believer in Christ. Regarding lying, Paul commands believers not to lie to one another, “since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices” (Col 3:9).

You may wonder why the NT doesn’t say more regarding such fundamental commands of God. But in light of the crystal clear teaching we have seen in the Hebrew Scriptures, NEED GOD SAY MORE? In the NT, cheating still = stealing + lying, a detestable sin before the Lord.

Before closing this section, let’s look at one NT example from the life of the early church which demonstrates the truth of the formula cheating = stealing + lying. In Acts 4:32–37 we read how the early believers shared their material wealth with one another, in some cases selling property and giving the proceeds to the apostles for distribution. Ananias and his wife Sapphira also sold some land, but they conspired to keep back some of the proceedings and lay only a portion of it

⁶⁹ Joyce Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, TOTC (Leicester, England: IVP, 1972), 231.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

at the apostles' feet (5:1–2). When Peter exposes them, he makes it clear that giving only a portion was not the problem; rather, giving a portion while *pretending* to give it all was their sin (vv. 3–4). In an effort to gain a reputation for greater generosity than they had actually earned, Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive the believing community. However, as F. F. Bruce observes, they were actually trying to deceive the Holy Spirit.⁷¹ They paid for their folly with their lives.

This account is quite similar to what we saw in Mal 1:14. A vow is made to God, but when it comes time to keep it, deception is used to cheat God of what is rightfully His. Bruce notes that Acts five may be implying that Ananias and Sapphira first made their vow to God to give all the proceedings, but then changed their minds, only handed over part, and kept up the ruse with the church.⁷² Solomon has this to say about vows, “When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay” (Eccl 5:4–5). But even more foolish than not keeping vows is thinking you can cheat God by pretending piously to pay them. God takes no delight in fools.⁷³

Several facts are clear from this brief study of Scripture. First, God expressly forbids the believer to steal, that is, to take that which belongs to another without consent or knowledge. Second, God expressly forbids the believer to lie or deceive, that is, to present as true or valid that which is false or invalid. Third, God expressly forbids the believer to cheat, that is, to deprive someone of something valuable by means of deceit. Fourth, cheating is worse than either stealing or lying, since it combines the two into a doubly detestable sin in the eyes of God. Fifth, God calls cheating an abomination, no different in His view from sexual immorality or spirit worship. Sixth, Scripture shows us by the example of some OT priests and some NT parishioners how God deals with cheaters. Abraham Lincoln is purported to have once said, “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.”⁷⁴ This may be true, but you can never fool God any of the time: “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num 32:23).

Some Concluding Suggestions

Here are some practical suggestions for us to implement with regards to cheating. These suggestions are important both for us and for those we are seeking to influence for the Lord.

⁷¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 105.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Bruce points to similarities between Acts five and the account of Achan in Josh 7:1ff. “In both narratives deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.” The term Luke uses to describe Ananias’ act (ἐνοσφίσατο, from νοσφίζω, *keep back, steal*; cf. Titus 2:10, where NASB translates *pilfering*) is identical to that found in the Achan account in the LXX (*The Book of Acts*, 102–3).

⁷⁴ John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, 10th ed. <<http://www.bartleby.com/100/448.html>>, 1919.

Challenge People to be Honest to God

In the months leading up to the recent elections, talking about Yahweh was kosher. Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee and a Jew, spoke frequently about God and was applauded for it. One commentator astutely observed that while it was fine for Lieberman to speak of God (12 times in one Nashville speech), it was not fine in the eyes of some for Governor Bush to name Jesus Christ as his most influential political philosopher.⁷⁵ But aside from that, we need to point our children and others to God as it relates to issues of honesty and cheating. Cheating is wrong because the just and true God of Scripture forbids it. Cheating is not wrong because it's embarrassing to get caught, or it might cost you an "A" or your job. One brochure put out by the Education Testing Service advises educators to "focus on kids' sense of pride," or "ask children to consider where the world would be if everybody cheated."⁷⁶ Cheating does have its consequences, but those consequences are not what makes cheating wrong. Cheating is wrong because the God who set the standards of right and wrong says it is wrong. Challenge people to be honest *to God*.

Model Honesty

Even secular educators know that parental involvement and role-modeling makes a difference in the lives of children. According to William Bennett, we teach children values by exposing them to good character and inviting its imitation, thereby transmitting to them a moral foundation.⁷⁷ Mary Warnock of Oxford has written, "You cannot teach morality without being committed to morality yourself; and you cannot be committed to morality yourself without holding that some things are right and others wrong."⁷⁸

Bennett shares a visit he paid as education secretary to an elementary school in Vermont. He asked the students, "Is this a good school?" They answered, "Yes." When he asked why they answered, "The principle, Mr. Riegel, makes good rules, and everybody obeys them." Bennett asked for an example and they responded, "You can't climb on the pipes in the bathroom. We don't climb on the pipes, and the principal doesn't either."⁷⁹ Precisely. Model honesty.

Clearly Define Cheating

We cannot assume our children and students know what is and what is not cheating. Purdue University student Travis Gaither complained that all he gets with his class notes is a brief warning against cheating. "They don't really say what is considered 'cheating'." Assistant Dean of Students Kellie Cox is pleased that the Purdue faculty senate has put cheating in the spotlight because academic integrity "begins with the faculty addressing it."⁸⁰ Stuart Offenbach, professor

⁷⁵ Cal Thomas, "Yahweh in 2000," *Los Angeles Times Syndicate* <<http://www.nandotimes.com/election2000/story/0,3977,500238283-500349503-502024792-0-nandotimes,00.html>>, Aug 11, 2000.

⁷⁶ Sharon Cromwell, "What Can We Do to Curb Student Cheating?" *Education World* <http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin144.shtml>, Jan 24, 2000.

⁷⁷ Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America*, 47.

⁷⁸ Cited in Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America*, 47.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Cullen, "Cheating Hot Topic at Purdue."

of psychological sciences and member of the faculty senate states, “Unless students see that the faculty is concerned and will act, they won’t take it seriously or they’ll repeat it.”⁸¹

Proper teaching starts at home with our children. We ought to be aware of what they are doing in school. We as parents are responsible to teach them about honesty. It also doesn’t hurt us at BBS to be reminded of definitions related to academic honesty (see Appendices).

Teach Your Children to Play Fair

While attending a sports camp in high school, I heard a lecture by a physical education instructor at Keystone College entitled “Sports and Life.” Sports are very much a microcosm of life. We need to teach our children to play fair. I once knew a man in the ministry who liked to bend the rules in games. It was all in jest. But he set a bad example for his children, who habitually cheated in the games they played with our children. This is inexcusable for believers, and even more so for those in the ministry. Let’s teach our children to play fair and play fair ourselves. It’s setting the right example. Cheating is cheating, whether at tiddlywinks, term papers, or taxes.

Call It What It Is

David Summergrad, a middle school teacher in Waylan, Mass., calls it as he sees it:

“I guess that makes you a liar.” The 8th grade student sitting across from me looked as though I had slapped him. His face darkened. He had been caught copying someone else’s homework. Up to this point, he had reacted with a kind of “so what?” attitude. Previous lectures had fallen on deaf ears. . . . “I am not a liar!” the 8th grade offender protested angrily. . . . By calling it what it is, teachers can begin to make a dent in the widespread acceptance of cheating. Focusing on the dishonesty of cheating places a speed bump on the highway of acceptable student behavior. Connecting cheating with lying unmasks the “sleight of mind” that allows students to think of cheating as a justifiable way to act.⁸²

The same goes for stealing. Sharon and I discovered on our first furlough that one of our children had stolen an item from the Polish preschool they had attended the previous year. When we returned to Poland we took our child to the preschool to return the item. When I told the director that “ona go ukradła” (“she stole it”), the director responded, “Oh, no, she didn’t steal it; she didn’t know she was doing anything wrong.” I begged to differ with her. We’d taught our children from the moment they could understand that taking something that doesn’t belong to you is stealing. Cheating is also stealing.

But how is copying answers during a test stealing? The person you’re copying from still has his or her answers. You haven’t *deprived* anyone of anything. You haven’t “hurt” anyone. It’s a “victimless” act, right? Wrong. By wrongfully elevating your grade you are devaluing the grade of the person from whom you’ve taken answers, as well as the grades of everyone else in the class. This is especially true when the instructor grades on a curve. That is stealing from your

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Summergrad, “Calling It What It Is.”

fellow students. Furthermore, by deceit you are receiving a higher grade than you deserve. You did not earn it. That is stealing from your instructor. In the end, you receive your diploma, perhaps even honors, for your ill-gotten grades. That is stealing a credential.

Don't try to get around it yourself, or allow others to make the attempt. Call cheating what it is. Cheating = stealing + lying. Don't sugarcoat the truth with your children, your people, or yourself.

Appendix One

Excerpt from “Writing Research Papers: A Guide to Style for Baptist Bible Seminary Students,” page 3

4. Learn what plagiarism entails and purpose to avoid it.
 - a. Plagiarism is frowned upon in the academic community generally. As Christians, we have an even greater responsibility to acknowledge our sources. Ideas and words as well as things can be stolen. A thesis style specifies what information is to be presented in this regard and maintains a consistent form for its presentation.
 - b. Ideas, as well as words, should be footnoted if obtained from another source. If an author’s position is summarized instead of quoted exactly, it should be footnoted, even if restated by the student.
 - c. A footnote is also an appropriate place for the student to interact with related materials. “By definition, a research paper involves the assimilation of prior scholarship and entails the responsibility to give proper acknowledgment whenever one is indebted to another for either words or ideas. . . . **Failure to give credit is plagiarism.**”⁸³ Plagiarism is not only academically irresponsible, it is a violation of Christian moral standards. As such, it is treated very seriously at BBS.

⁸³ Turabian, § 5.2, emphasis added.

Appendix Two

Carnegie Mellon University Policy on Cheating and Plagiarism⁸⁴

Students at Carnegie Mellon are engaged in preparation for professional activity of the highest standards. Each profession constrains its members with both ethical responsibilities and disciplinary limits. To assure the validity of the learning experience a university establishes clear standards for student work.

In any presentation, creative, artistic, or research, it is the ethical responsibility of each student to identify the conceptual sources of the work submitted. Failure to do so is dishonest and is the basis for a charge of cheating or plagiarism, which is subject to disciplinary action.

Cheating includes but is not necessarily limited to:

1. Plagiarism, explained below.
2. Submission of work that is not the student's own for papers, assignments or exams.
3. Submission or use of falsified data.
4. Theft of or unauthorized access to an exam.
5. Use of an alternate, stand-in or proxy during an examination.
6. Use of unauthorized material including textbooks, notes or computer programs in the preparation of an assignment or during an examination.
7. Supplying or communicating in any way unauthorized information to another student for the preparation of an assignment or during an examination.
8. Collaboration in the preparation of an assignment. Unless specifically permitted or required by the instructor, collaboration will usually be viewed by the university as cheating. Each student, therefore, is responsible for understanding the policies of the department offering any course as they refer to the amount of help and collaboration permitted in preparation of assignments.
9. Submission of the same work for credit in two courses without obtaining the permission of the instructors beforehand.

Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, failure to indicate the source with quotation marks or footnotes where appropriate if any of the following are reproduced in the work submitted by a student:

1. A phrase, written or musical.
2. A graphic element.
3. A proof.
4. Specific language.
5. An idea derived from the work, published or unpublished, of another person.

⁸⁴ On the Web at http://gollum.mac.cc.cmu.edu/univ_policy/documents/Cheating.html.