

Chapter Title: LYING

Book Title: Treatises on Various Subjects (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 16)

Book Author(s): SAINT AUGUSTINE

Book Editor(s): ROY J. DEFERRARI

Published by: Catholic University of America Press. (1952)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32b2mf.5>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Catholic University of America Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Treatises on Various Subjects (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 16)*

LYING

Translated by

SISTER MARY SARAH MULDOWNEY, R.S.M., Ph.D.

Saint Joseph College

INTRODUCTION

THE COMPARATIVELY BRIEF moral thesis, *De mendacio*, is the last work St. Augustine reviews in the first volume of his *Retractationes*. Since the second volume of this work deals with his publications as bishop, it is generally assumed that the *De mendacio* was written in 395, shortly before his consecration as Coadjutor Bishop of Hippo.

The dedication, 'Ad Consentium,' found in the Codex Monacensis, the best of the manuscripts used by Zycha in the preparation of his text for the Vienna Corpus, is evidently an error, due perhaps to the fact that another tract, the *Contra mendacium*, written by St. Augustine some twenty years later, was dedicated to a Consentius who had consulted the saint in regard to methods of combating the Priscillianists.¹

De mendacio deals with the nature of lying, the question as to whether or not a lie is ever to be permitted, the discussion of several Scriptural passages pertaining to the subject, and, finally, a list of various kinds of lies. The presentation of the matter is so involved that St. Augustine himself considered it obscure² and gave directions to have it removed from the collection of his works. However, when he realized, some years later, that his orders had not been carried

¹ St. Augustine, *Contra mendacium*; cf., below, pp. 125-179; also, *Retractationes* 2, PL 32.654.

² St. Augustine, *Retractationes* 1, PL 32.630.

out, he left the work in the corpus because it treated some important points not included in his later tract, *Contra mendacium*, and because he hoped that it might serve to arouse a love of truth in the reader.

The Ciceronian perfection of style which characterizes a large part of St. Augustine's work is not particularly evident in *De mendacio*. In fact, St. Augustine warns the reader in the opening paragraph not to look for striking phraseology, since he had endeavored to bring to completion as quickly as possible a work calculated to improve the moral tone of his day, and had, therefore, paid scant attention to diction. His efforts to weigh carefully the conflicting arguments in regard to lying, as though he 'himself were seeking the truth,'³ accounts in some measure for the lack of clarity in his presentation. That St. Augustine was cognizant of the deficiencies in *De mendacio* is evident from his own criticism of the work as being '*obscurus et anfractuusus et omnino molestus*.'⁴ Nevertheless, he realized that its very complexity would furnish excellent mental stimulation and that its arguments would intensify a love of truthful discourse.

An examination of St. Augustine's literary activity during the last decade of the fourth century makes it appear probable that *De mendacio* is closely connected with the controversy of that period between St. Augustine and St. Jerome in regard to certain views expressed in the latter's preface to his *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (c. 390). St. Jerome seemed to support the theory originating with Origen, and enthusiastically upheld by St. John Chrysostom,⁵ that St. Paul's rebuke to St. Peter mentioned in Galatians 2 were merely a pretence of the two Apostles to em-

³ St. Augustine, *De mendacio*, PL 40.487.

⁴ St. Augustine, *Retractationes* 1, PL 40.630.

⁵ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London 1890), pp. 120ff.

phasize the true attitude of the Church toward Judaizers.⁶ Aroused, possibly by Alypius' verbal communication of St. Jerome's attitude,⁷ St. Augustine dispatched a letter to Bethlehem by his disciple, Profuturus, in which he urged St. Jerome to publish a retraction of views which would undermine the confidence of the faithful in the veracity of the Scriptures. By a peculiar combination of circumstances, neither this letter, written in 394, nor a similar one sent some years later, reached St. Jerome until nine years had elapsed.⁸ Since *De mendacio* was written in 395, it seems quite possible that, irked by the failure of St. Jerome to comply with his request, St. Augustine used this tract not only to publicize his views on lying in general, but also to indicate the heinousness of attributing wilful deception to the two Apostles. The fact that in *De mendacio* St. Augustine develops at length specific points touched upon in his letters to St. Jerome, such as the 'well-meant lie,' the lie uttered in praise of God, the import of Scriptural passages which apparently approve of lying, as well as the fact that he gives a detailed discussion of St. Paul's attitude toward circumcision, seems to corroborate this theory in regard to the circumstances attending the writing of *De mendacio*.

The text used is that of Zycha in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 41. For the outline of the contents, the headings given in Migne, *PL* 40.478-518, have been followed in most instances. Scriptural passages from the Old Testament are quoted from the Vulgate; those from the New Testament are from the Challoner-Rheims Version in the Confraternity Edition.

6 St. Jerome, Preface to *Commentary on Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Ser. 2, Vol. 6.

7 St. Augustine, Letter 28; cf. *Letters of St. Augustine*, translated by Sister Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D., in this series, pp. 93-94; also, text and annotations of Letters 40, 67, and 71, *loc. cit.*, pp. 172-179, 316-317, 324-328.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Texts:

J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 40.487-518.

J. Zycha, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 41, pp. 413-466.

Other Works:

St. Augustine, *Epistulae*, PL 33.

———, *Moral Treatises*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3.

———, *Prolegomena to St. Augustine*, *ibid.*, Ser 2, Vol. 6.

———, *Retractationes*, PL 32.

———, *Vita*, PL 32.

St. Jerome, *Commentarium in Psalmos et in Epistulas Pauli* (Paris 1609).

———, *Epistulae*, PL 22.

Bourke, Vernon J., *Augustine's Quest of Wisdom* (Milwaukee 1945).

Gilson, Etienne, *Introduction à l'étude de S. Augustin* (Paris 1943).

Lightfoot, J. B., *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London 1890).

C O N T E N T S

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
1 It is difficult to give adequate treatment to this subject	53
2 Jocose falsehoods are not lies	54
3 What constitutes a lie	54
4 Is it sometimes advantageous or permissible to lie? .	56
5 There is a difference of opinion as to whether or not a lie should never be told	60
6 Lying is sinful; it brings death to the soul and must not be indulged in for the temporal safety of anyone	66
7 One must not lie for the sake of preserving bodily chastity	68
8 It is not permissible to lie even to secure eternal salvation for others	70
9 There are persons who claim that a lie should be told to prevent a violation which one would suffer from another	71
10 A lie must never be used in the teaching of religion .	77
11 Lies which bring harm to another or to the one who tells them must be discounted. There is a distinction between a liar and a person who lies	78

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
12 Should a lie be told if it does not harm another person and is helpful to someone?	80
13 Is it permitted to lie in order to prevent a murderer from being apprehended or an innocent person from being put to death?	82
14 There are eight kinds of lies	86
15 Passages from Holy Scripture by which lying is forbidden, and other passages which are to be understood according to the actions of holy persons . . .	88
16 The word 'mouth' has a twofold significance in Scripture; namely, the mouth of the voice and the mouth of the heart	92
17 The threefold interpretation of Psalms 5:7: 'Thou wilt destroy all who speak a lie'	96
18 The interpretation of another Scriptural passage: 'The son that keepeth the word shall be free from destruction'	99
19 Three assets calculated to safeguard holiness: chastity of body, chastity of mind, truth of doctrine . . .	104
20 The preservation of chastity of body is not a justification for lying	105
21 Conclusion	107

LYING

Chapter 1

THE QUESTION OF LYING is important since it often disturbs us in our daily actions lest we rashly blame ourselves for what, in reality, is not a lie, or, on the other hand, lest we think that at times we must deviate from the truth by telling a lie through a sense of honor, of duty, or even of mercy. I shall treat this question so carefully as to seem to be seeking truth myself along with my questioners. Whether I shall succeed in this quest the treatise itself will indicate sufficiently to the attentive reader, even though I assert nothing rashly. The problem is involved; because of certain profound and intricate issues, its solution often eludes the comprehension of the one probing it, so that what has been ascertained at one moment escapes one, at another moment reappears and is once more apprehended. In the end, however, it will, like a carefully laid snare, seize upon our mind. If there is error in this presentation, I think that, since truth frees one from all error and lack of truth enmeshes one in all error, it is better to err by an excessive regard for the truth and by an equally emphatic rejection of falsehood. Persons who severely criticize this attitude say that it is carrying things too far; truth, however, would perhaps insist that it is not enough. Now, I ask you, whoever you are who read this, to blame nothing until you have read the

entire work. Then you will find less to censure. Do not look for striking phraseology. In my endeavor to probe into the various points involved and to put into form as quickly as possible a work of such tremendous import for the regulation of daily living, I have paid scant, and, indeed, almost negligible attention to the selection of words.

Chapter 2

(2) In this treatise I am excluding the question of jocose lies, which have never been considered as real lies, since both in the verbal expression and in the attitude of the one joking such lies are accompanied by a very evident lack of intention to deceive, even though the person be not speaking the truth. Whether or not this type of untruthfulness should be indulged in by souls striving for perfection is matter not encompassed within the scope of this work. Therefore, to prescind from jocose lies, the first point to be examined is whether he may be considered as lying who does not actually tell a lie.

Chapter 3

(3) The first problem, then, centers upon the question as to what constitutes a lie, for the person who utters a falsehood does not lie if he believes or, at least, assumes that what he says is true. There is a distinction between believing and assuming. Sometimes, he who believes realizes that he does not understand that which he believes, although if he believes it very firmly he does not doubt at all about the matter which he realizes he does not understand.¹ On the other

¹ E. Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de S. Augustin* (Paris 1943) 36; also, St. Augustine, *Epistulae* 120.2.8, *PL* 33.456.

hand, he who assumes something thinks that he knows what he does not know.² Whoever gives expression to that which he holds either through belief or assumption does not lie even though the statement itself be false. For, he owes this expression of his view to his faith, so that through faith he voices that which he holds in his mind and he expresses it just as he understands it. Nevertheless, even though he does not lie, he is not, on that account, without fault if he believes what should not be believed or if he thinks he knows what he does not know, even if this be the truth, for he considers as known what is not known. He lies, moreover, who holds one opinion in his mind and who gives expression to another through words or any other outward manifestation. For this reason the heart of a liar is said to be double, that is, two-fold in its thinking: one part consisting of that knowledge which he knows or thinks to be true, yet does not so express it; the other part consisting of that knowledge which he knows or thinks to be false, yet expresses as true. As a result, it happens that a person who is lying may tell what is untrue, if he thinks that things are as he says, even though, in actuality, what he says may not be true. Likewise, it happens that a person who is actually lying may say what is true, if he believes that what he says is false, yet offers it as true, even if the actual truth be just what he says. For, a person is to be judged as lying or not lying according to the intention of his own mind, not according to the truth or falsity of the matter itself. He who expresses the false as true because he thinks it to be true may be said to be mistaken or rash, but he cannot, in fairness, be said to be lying, because, when he so expresses himself, he does not have a false heart nor does he wish to deceive; rather, he himself is deceived. In reality, the fault of the person who tells a lie consists in his desire

2 Cf. St. Augustine, *De utilitate credendi*, trans. Sister Luanne Meagher, O.S.B., *Fathers of the Church* 2 (New York 1947) 424.

to deceive in expressing his thought. Whether, as he expresses an untruth, he is believed and does deceive or is not believed and hence does not deceive, or whether he gives expression to the truth with intent to deceive not thinking it the truth, he is at fault. When in this latter case he is believed, he certainly does not deceive even though he desired to do so, unless he practices deception in so far as he is considered as knowing or thinking in accordance with his statement. Nevertheless, a very penetrating investigation may be made as to whether there be any lie at all when the deliberate will to deceive is lacking.

Chapter 4

(4) Let us consider a person who says what he believes is false and what is actually false but with the expression of not being believed, so that in this way, by a kind of false faith, he may deter from action the hearer who, he realizes, will not believe him. Now, if a lie consists in representing something as other than you know or think it to be, this person lies, but not with the intention of deceiving. If, then, a lie does not exist unless one make a statement with the desire to deceive, then he does not lie who, because he knows or thinks that his auditor will not believe him, so expresses what he knows or, at least, thinks false that his hearer, not believing him, is not deceived. Wherefore, if it appears that a person may tell what is false without the intention of deceiving his hearer, so a person may tell the truth so that he may deceive. For, he who tells the truth because he realizes that he will not be believed tells that truth in order to deceive, since he knows or, at least, expects it to be considered false simply because he says it. Wherefore, since he tells the truth that it may be considered false, he tells that truth in order

to deceive. Hence, we must consider which of the two persons lies more grievously: he who tells what is false without the intention of deceiving, or he who tells what is true in order to deceive, since the former knows or thinks that what he says is false, and the latter knows or thinks that what he says is true. As we have already stated, then, he who does not know that what he says is false does not lie if he thinks it is true, but he does lie who tells the truth when he thinks it is false, because persons must be judged according to their deliberate intention.

The question concerning these persons whom we have described above is of no small importance. In the first place, we have a person who knows or thinks that he is speaking falsely, yet speaks in this way without the intention of deceiving. Such would be the case of a man who, knowing that a certain road is besieged by bandits and fearing that a friend for whose safety he is concerned will take that road, tells that friend that there are no bandits there. He makes this assertion, realizing that his friend does not trust him, and, because of the statement to the contrary of the person in whom he has no faith, will therefore believe that the bandits are there and will not go by that road. In the second place, there is the case of the person who, knowing or thinking what he says true, nevertheless says it in order to deceive. This would happen if the man mentioned above were to tell his mistrustful acquaintance that there are bandits on that road, knowing that they actually are there and telling it so that his hearer, because of his distrust of the speaker, may proceed to take that road and so fall into the hands of the bandits. Now, which of these two men is lying? Is it he who chooses to tell a falsehood without the intention to deceive, or is it he who chooses to tell the truth with the intention to deceive? Is it he who tells an untruth so that his hearer may

follow the truth, or he who tells the truth in order that his hearer may follow that which is false? Or do both lie: the one, because he wishes to say what is false; the other, because he wishes to deceive? Or, perchance, does neither of them lie; the one, because he does not have the desire to deceive, and the other because he has the desire to speak the truth?

Now, the question is not which of the two persons sins, but which of the two lies, for it is readily seen that he sins who, by telling the truth, so acts that the man may fall among bandits. On the contrary, he who in telling a falsehood acts so that his friend may avoid danger seems not to sin at all, but to do well. These illustrations may be considered from another point of view if we suppose that the first man may wish that some greater evil befall the one whom he does not wish to deceive, for many persons upon learning certain truths have brought ruin upon themselves if those truths were such that others ought to have concealed them. Likewise, the second man may wish that he whom he desires to deceive may gain some advantage, for some people, who would have committed suicide if they had known some actual evil about their relatives, have spared themselves by believing what was false. Thus, it is of benefit to them to be so deceived, as it is a misfortune to the others to know the truth.

The problem with which we are concerned is not the purpose of helping or of harming with which one person tells a falsehood without the intention of deceiving, or another tells the truth with the intention of deceiving. To prescind from the advantages or disadvantages of those to whom they speak, the question is, in regard to truth and falsehood, which of the two persons lies, or do both or neither lie? For, if a lie is an utterance accompanied by the desire to utter an

untruth, he lies who desires to say what is false, and who says what he wishes to say even though it be without the intention to deceive. If, however, a lie is any pronouncement whatsoever if it be accompanied by a desire to deceive, then not the first, but the second, person lies; that is, the one who wishes to deceive even by telling the truth. But, if a lie is an utterance accompanied by the desire of any falsity, then both lie, because the first wishes his statement to be false and the second wishes that a false conclusion be drawn from his true statement. Furthermore, if a lie is the utterance of one who desires to speak untruthfully in order to deceive, then neither one lies, because the former desires to convince a person of the truth by telling what is false and the latter desires to tell the truth so that he may convince a person of what is false. Therefore, all unfounded opinions and lies will be avoided when we say what is true and deserving of belief, if there be need of the disclosure, and when we wish to convince a person of what we express. If, however, thinking what is false is true, or holding as known what is really unknown to us, or believing what is not worthy of credence, or expressing our opinion without need, we attempt to convince people simply of what we say, then there is the mistake of rashness, but there is no lie. No one of those categories is to be feared when the mind is definitely conscious that it is giving forth what it knows, or thinks, or believes to be true and is not desiring to establish anything except what it actually expresses.

(5) A greater and more important question is whether a lie may be useful at times. One may doubt whether a lie is told when someone does not desire to deceive; or when someone acts so that his hearer may not be deceived, although he wishes to make a false statement because in that way he will convince the other of the truth; or, likewise, whether a lie is

told when someone deliberately tells the truth in order to deceive another. However, no one doubts that he lies who deliberately says what is false with the intention of deceiving. It is clear, then, that a lie is a false statement made with the desire to deceive. But, whether this alone is a lie is another question.

Chapter 5

Let us turn, now, from this problem on which all agree to the question as to whether at any time it is useful to say something untrue with the intention of deceiving. Those who answer in the affirmative bring to the support of their argument the fact that Sara, although she had laughed, denied to the angels that she had done so;¹ that Jacob, when questioned by his father, answered that he was Esau, his elder son;² that the Egyptian midwives, lest the Hebrew children should be killed at birth, had lied with the approbation and reward of God.³ Choosing examples of this sort, they recount the lies of persons one would not dare to blame, and thus lead one to admit that, at times, a lie is not only undeserving of reproof but is even worthy of praise. They even add arguments by which they persuade not only men devoted to the sacred Scriptures but all men, since they appeal to fundamental human feelings by such a question as: 'If anyone should flee to you for protection and you were able to free him from death by a single lie, would you not tell the lie? If a sick person should ask you for information which it is not expedient for him to have, and if he will be more grievously afflicted if you do not reply, will you dare either to tell

¹ Cf. Gen. 18.15.

² Cf. Gen. 27.19.

³ Cf. Exod. 1.19,20.

the truth at the risk of his life or to be silent rather than by an honorable and merciful lie to minister to his health?" By these and similar arguments, they think that they are urging us to lie sometimes, if the exigencies of the case demand it.

(6) On the contrary, those who refuse to recognize any need for lying resist much more strongly, using first the divine authority, since in the Decalogue itself it is written: 'Thou shalt not bear false witness,'⁴ in which classification every lie is embraced, for whoever pronounces any statement gives testimony to his own mind. If anyone should argue that not every lie should be called false witness, what will he answer to this statement which is also in the sacred Scriptures: 'The mouth that believeth, killeth the soul'?⁵ If anyone should think that this passage can be interpreted to except certain lies, he may read in another passage: 'Thou wilt destroy all that speak a lie.'⁶ In this connection, our divine Lord said with His own lips: 'Let your speech be "Yes, Yes;" "No, No;" and whatever is more comes from the evil one.'⁷ Hence, the Apostle, too, when he directs that the old man should be put off, under which term all sins are understood, goes on to explain his remark and specifically says: 'Wherefore, put away lying and speak the truth.'⁸

(7) They who take their stand against lying do not admit that they are disturbed by examples of lies cited from the Old Testament. They reply: 'When something has been done, it can be understood figuratively, even though it has actually happened. Moreover, what is said or done figuratively is not a lie. Every pronouncement must be referred to that which it expresses. Everything said or done figuratively expresses what

⁴ Exod. 20.16.

⁵ Wisd. 1.11.

⁶ Ps. 5.7.

⁷ Cf. Matt. 5.37.

⁸ Eph. 4.25.

it signified to those to whom it was related. Wherefore, it must be believed that those men mentioned as worthy of authority in the times of the Prophets did and said in prophetic spirit all that is related of them; in no less prophetic way did all that took place happen to them, so, that by the same prophetic spirit they judged what should be entrusted to tradition and to the Scriptures.' In regard to the midwives, however, because the opponents of lying cannot say that these women announced one thing to the Pharaoh in place of another in prophetic spirit to signify a truth about to be revealed, even though, without their realization, their words signified something accomplished through them, they say that these women were approved and rewarded by God in relation to their own progress. For, he who is accustomed to lies in order to harm people has accomplished much if he now lies only to help others. It is one thing to have an action set forth as praiseworthy in itself, and another to have it extolled in comparison with something worse than itself. We rejoice in one way when a sick man is cured and in another when he improves a little. Even in the sacred Scriptures, Sodom is spoken of as justified in comparison with the crimes of the people of Israel.⁹ All the lies cited from the Old Testament, which are not and cannot be found reprehensible, are examined according to this criterion: Either they are approved in consideration of the nature and hope of those who tell them, or they are not lies at all because they bear some metaphorical significance.

(8) In regard to the books of the New Testament, if, prescindng from the figurative language of our Lord, we consider the life and character, the words and deeds, of the saints, nothing can be adduced which would sanction the telling of a lie. The dissimulation of Peter and Barnabas is not

9 Cf. Ezech. 16.52.

only mentioned, but is reproved and corrected.¹⁰ It is not, as some people think, as a result of a like pretense that the Apostle Paul circumcised Timothy¹¹ or that he himself practiced certain rites according to the Jewish custom, but rather in accordance with that breadth of view by which he preached that circumcision was of no advantage to the Gentiles nor of any disadvantage to the Jews. Wherefore, he decided that the Gentiles should not be bound by the custom of the Jews and that the Jews should not be prevented from following the custom of their ancestors. Hence, his words are to this effect: 'Was one called having been circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was one called being uncircumcised? Let him not become circumcised. Circumcision does not matter, and uncircumcision does not matter; but the keeping of the commandments of God is what matters. Let every man remain in the calling in which he was called.'¹² Now, how can circumcision be reckoned as uncircumcision? But, he has said: 'Let him not become uncircumcised, let him not so live,' as if he were uncircumcised, that is, as if over that part which was uncovered he should again draw a covering of flesh, and, as it were, cease to be a Jew. Elsewhere, he says: 'Thy circumcision has become uncircumcision.'¹³ The Apostle did not say this as if he favored forcing either the Gentiles to remain uncircumcised or the Jews to adhere to the tradition of their fathers; rather, he urged that neither group should be forced into the practice of the other, but that each person should have the right, not the obligation, of adhering to his own custom.

Furthermore, if a Jew should wish to depart from Jewish observances without disturbing anyone, he would not be for-

¹⁰ Cf. Gal. 2.12.

¹¹ Cf. St. Jerome, *Epistulae* 112.9-11, *PL* 22.921-922.

¹² 1 Cor. 7.18-20.

¹³ Rom. 2.25.

bidden to do so by the Apostle, since he gave the advice to remain faithful to those prescriptions for a definite purpose, that is, lest the Jews, disturbed by non-essentials, should not adopt those practices which were necessary for salvation. On the other hand, if a Gentile should desire to be circumcised, Paul would not object, thus indicating that he did not condemn circumcision as something harmful, but rather looked upon it with indifference, as a symbol, the utility of which had ceased with the passage of time. He thus intimated that, since salvation was not to come from it, its omission was not to be feared. Therefore, although Timothy was called without having been circumcised,¹⁴ nevertheless, because he had been born of a Jewish mother and was under an obligation to help her relatives by indicating that in the Christian doctrine he had not learned to despise the rites of the Old Law, he was circumcised by the Apostle. Both Paul and Timothy acted thus that they might prove to Jews that Gentiles refrained from these practices, not as evil in themselves and wrongfully observed by their ancestors, but as no longer necessary for salvation since the institution of the great Sacrament, which, through so many centuries, the Old Testament had prepared for by means of its prophetic symbols. Paul would likewise have circumcised Titus at the request of the Jews,¹⁵ were it not for the introduction into the group of false brethren who desired such action as a basis of accusations against Paul; these men would have interpreted Paul's action as support of those who preached that the hope of salvation lay in circumcision and such observances, and who argued that Christ would avail no one neglecting these observances. Since, on the contrary, Christ would be of no avail to those circumcised solely with the intention of attaining

14 Cf. Acts. 16.1-3.

15 Cf. Gal. 2.3,4.

salvation by this observance, the Apostle declared: 'I, Paul, tell you that if you be circumcised, Christ will be of no advantage to you.'¹⁶ Therefore, through breadth of vision, Paul paid respect to the ancient observances, but at the same time, in preaching, he took every precaution lest his hearers should think there was no Christian salvation without these observances. Peter, however, in his assumption that salvation lay in Judaism, was compelling the Gentiles to adopt Jewish practices, as is evident from the words of Paul: 'How is it that thou dost compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'¹⁷ For, unless they saw that he was observing these practices as if salvation could not be obtained without them, the Gentiles would not be forced. Hence, the assumption of Peter is not to be compared with the liberality of Paul. On that account we ought to admire Peter who willingly submitted to correction, but we ought not justify lying on the authority of Paul who, in the presence of all the brethren, set Peter right, lest through him the Gentiles be forced to adopt practices of Judaism. Furthermore, Paul bore witness to his own teaching, since, when he was considered an enemy to ancestral traditions because he was unwilling to impose them upon the Gentiles, he did not disdain to honor these ancient customs, although he made clear that, with the coming of Christ, these observances were neither prejudicial to the Jews, nor necessary for the Gentiles, nor a means of salvation to any man.¹⁸

(9) Hence, authority for lying cannot be drawn from the books of the Old Testament either because what is accepted as figurative speech or action is not a lie, or because this is

¹⁶ Gal. 5.2.

¹⁷ Gal. 2.14.

¹⁸ Cf. St. Augustine *Letter* 40, in *Letters of St. Augustine* 1, trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D., *Fathers of the Church* 12 (New York 1951) 172-179.

not proposed to the good for imitation which, in the case of the wicked who have begun to improve, is praised in comparison with their more reprehensible conduct. Neither can such authority be deduced from the books of the New Testament because the correction rather than the assumption of Peter is to be imitated just as his tears are to be commended rather than his denial.

Chapter 6

With even greater confidence do the opponents of untruthfulness assert that sanction must not be given by those examples drawn from common life. For, they show that lying is a sin from many documents of sacred writings, and especially from this statement: 'Thou dost hate, O Lord, all who work iniquity; thou shalt destroy all who speak a lie.'¹ Here, either Holy Scripture, as is customary, explains the first verse by the following one, so that, since the term 'iniquity' is more comprehensive, we may understand, by the specific mention of the lie, a species of iniquity; or, if some think that there is a difference between the two, then the lie is so much the worse, inasmuch as it is placed after 'Thou shalt destroy' rather than 'Thou dost hate.' For, perchance, God hates one person somewhat mildly so that He will not destroy him, but the one whom He destroys He hates so much the more vehemently as He punishes him the more severely. He hates all who work iniquity but, in addition, He destroys all who tell lies.

If this truth be granted, who of those who assent will be shaken by such arguments as are given by those who say: 'What if a man should flee to you who, by your lie, can be

¹ Ps. 5.6,7.

saved from death?" That death, feared foolishly by men who do not fear to sin, kills not the soul but the body,² as the Lord teaches in the Gospel when He says, lest bodily death should be feared, that the mouth which lies kills not the body but the soul. This is expressed very definitely in these words: 'The mouth that believeth, killeth the soul.'³ Therefore, does he not speak most perversely who says that one person ought to die spiritually so that another may live corporeally? For, love of one's neighbor receives its limitations from love of one's self. Our Lord says: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'⁴ How, then, does a person love as himself another for whom he preserves temporal life by losing his own eternal life? If a person sacrifices his own temporal life for the temporal life of another, he no longer loves the other as himself, but more than himself, and thus he exceeds the regulation of sound doctrine. Much less, then, may he, by lying, lose his eternal life for the temporal life of another. Certainly, the Christian will not hesitate to lose his temporal life for the eternal life of his neighbor; in this respect, our Lord has set us an example, for He died for us. On this question He says: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends.'⁵ No one is so foolish as to say that the Master sought anything other than the eternal salvation of men, either in doing what He commanded or in commanding what He did.

Since, therefore, eternal life is lost by lying, a lie may never be told for the preservation of the temporal life of another. In very truth, some are indignant and angry if someone is unwilling to lose his soul by telling a lie so that another

² Cf. Matt. 10.28.

³ Wisd. 1.11.

⁴ Luke 10.27; Matt. 22.39.

⁵ John 15.12,13.

may grow a little older in the flesh. Would these people say that we should submit to theft or adultery, if someone could be freed from death by our theft or adultery? Such persons do not realize that they compel themselves to admit that, in order, as they say, to save a life, one must yield to the sinful advances of a man who brings a rope and threatens suicide if his desire is not granted. If this proposition is absurd and wicked, why should anyone defile his soul with a lie so that another person may live corporeally, since, if, for that same purpose, he were to give his body to be defiled, he would be convicted of base wickedness by the judgment of all? There is, then, nothing further to be considered in that question except whether a lie is an iniquity. Although this is claimed in the Scriptural passages cited above, the problem as to whether one ought to lie to secure the salvation of another seems worthy of being investigated as if the question were whether one ought to be unjust to secure the salvation of another. If the salvation of the soul, which cannot be attained except by just means, rejects lying and bids us place justice not only before the temporal safety of another, but also before our own, what reason is there for us to hesitate to say that a lie must never be told? For, it cannot be said that any other temporal advantage is greater or dearer than the safety and life of the body. Now, if not even this advantage is to be preferred to truth, what other argument for lying can be proposed by those persons who think that it is sometimes right to lie?

Chapter 7

(10) To some persons, bodily chastity seems of such honorable character that it may demand the telling of a lie and that the lie should be told without hesitation if, by means of

it, a person attacking one with evil intent may be thwarted. The answer to this problem can be given readily: There is no chastity of the body unless it derives from the integrity of the soul. When the integrity of the soul has been violated, that of the body necessarily collapses even though it may appear intact; on that account, bodily chastity is not to be numbered among temporal things as if it could be taken away against one's wishes. In no way, therefore, should the soul defile itself by a lie for the sake of its body, because of this realization that the body remains incorrupt if innocence does not depart from the soul itself. Whatever violence the body suffers without the individual's consent to lust ought to be termed an ordeal rather than corruption. Or, if every such ordeal is corruption, then all corruption is not base, but only that which lust has procured or to which lust has consented. Moreover, in so far as the soul is more excellent than the body, to that same degree is its corruption the greater crime. Therefore, chastity can be preserved in any case where there is no voluntary corruption. Surely, if defilement which could be avoided neither by opposing violence nor by any other means, not even by a lie, has come to the body, we must necessarily admit that chastity cannot be violated by another's lust. Wherefore, since no one doubts that the soul is to be preferred to the body, the integrity of the soul which can be saved for eternal life must be placed before that of the body. Moreover, who would say that the soul of a liar is unimpaired? Even lust itself is defined as an appetite of the mind by which certain temporal goods are set before eternal goods. No one, then, can prove that at times a lie is necessary unless he can show that some eternal good may be obtained by a lie. But, since every man withdraws from eternity in so far as he withdraws from truth, it is most absurd to say that by so withdrawing one is able to arrive at any good. Or, if there

appears to be an eternal good which truth does not embrace, it will not be true; therefore, because it is false, it will not be good. Besides, as the mind must be preferred to the body, so truth must be preferred by the mind, so that not only does the mind seek truth more than it seeks the body, but even more than it seeks itself. Indeed, it will be more pure and chaste enjoying the unchangeableness of truth rather than its own changeableness. Moreover, if Lot, who was so just that he merited to entertain angels as guests, offered his own daughters to the Sodomites to be violated so that they might defile the bodies of women rather than those of men,¹ how much more diligently and faithfully must the mind preserve its chastity in truth, since the mind is to be preferred to its own body much more than a man's body is to be preferred to a woman's.

Chapter 8

(11) But if anyone thinks that a lie must be told to one person for the sake of another, so that the latter may live longer, or may not be harmed by those things in which he takes great delight by learning how he may attain to eternal truth he does not understand, first of all, that there is no crime to which he may not be forced by the same reasoning, as has been shown above, and, secondly, that the influence of that teaching itself is jeopardized, even utterly ruined, if we persuade by a lie those whom we are attempting to convert to our doctrine that, at times, a lie is necessary. For, since the teachings on salvation depend partly on revelation which must be believed and partly on facts which must be understood, and since one cannot arrive at those truths which must be understood without first believ-

¹ Cf. Gen. 19.8.

ing those which must be accepted on faith, how can he be believed who holds that, at times, lies are necessary, if there is a possibility that he is lying when he directs us to believe? How can one know whether, at that particular time, he considers that he has some justification for a serviceable lie, for example, that a man who has been terrified by a false story may be restrained from an act of lust, and that by lying in this manner he is looking out for the spiritual interests of the individual? If such a lie is accepted and approved, the whole discipline of faith is completely destroyed, and when this is overthrown one cannot attain that understanding, to attain which, faith nourishes little ones. Hence, if an opportunity for entering anywhere be afforded a so-called serviceable lie, all the teaching of truth is lost, as it gives way to most harmful falsehood. For, either the one who lies prefers temporal advantages, his own or another's, to truth—and what can be more perverse—or he cuts off the approach to truth when, by means of a lie, he seeks to promote the acquisition of truth. Wishing to be helpful by lying, he is held unreliable when he speaks the truth. Wherefore, either the good are not to be believed, or they are to be believed who hold that a lie is sometimes necessary, or it is not to be believed that the good ever lie. Of these three possibilities, the first is dangerous and the second is foolish. The conclusion is, then, that the good never lie.

Chapter 9

(12) Although this question has been considered and discussed from different points of view, yet the decision is not to be made so easily. Now, those must be heard carefully who say that there is no evil so great that it may not be done in order to avoid a greater evil, and that the deeds of men

include not only what is actually performed but also what is willingly suffered. They, therefore, seem to question rightly why one may not tell a lie in order to avoid so great defilement as would occur if a Christian chose to offer sacrifice to idols to avoid agreeing to the violation his persecutor threatened if he refused. They assert that the very consent by which he prefers to suffer violation rather than to sacrifice to idols is not passivity but activity; hence, that, in order to avoid this sin, he should choose to sacrifice. How much more readily, then, should he have chosen to tell a lie, if by a lie he had been able to ward off so great a crime from his holy body.

(13) In this problem there are several points which merit investigation: whether such consent ought to be considered as an action; whether what one does not approve may be considered as consented to; whether it is approval to say that it is better to suffer this than to do that; whether an individual does right to sacrifice rather than suffer violation; finally, whether one should prefer to lie, if that condition were proposed, than to offer sacrifice. If such consent must be considered as an action, then they are murderers who prefer to be put to death rather than to give false witness and, what is a more serious wrong, they kill themselves. For, according to this reasoning, may it not be said that they kill themselves, since they chose to be put to death to avoid doing what is forced upon them? If, however, it is considered more grievous to kill another than to kill oneself, consider this second proposition. Suppose it should be proposed as a condition of martyrdom that, if a man were unwilling to give false witness concerning Christ and to sacrifice to demons, before his eyes another man would be put to death, and this other not one taken at random, but his own father; and suppose, further, that the father should implore his son not to

permit his own father's death because of obstinacy, would it not be clear that, even though the son remained firm in his adherence to his belief, the only murderers were those who killed the father and that the son was not a parricide? As, therefore, he was not a participant in so great a crime, although he had permitted his father to be killed rather than violate his faith by false testimony, even if his father, a sinful man, might thus be brought to eternal punishment, so, such consent could not make him guilty of so great a crime if he himself did not wish to do wrong, no matter what the others might have done because he refused to comply. What do such persecutors say except: 'Do this evil, lest we do it'? If, as a result of our wrong-doing, they would have refrained from wrong, we ought not to assist them by our wrong-doing. In truth, since they are doing wrong when they make these statements, why should they be base and harmful in association with us rather than alone? Our attitude must not be called consent because we do not approve of what they are doing. Rather, we desire to prevent and we do prevent them from doing it so far as lies within our power; not only do we refrain from joining them in their evil doing, but we condemn it as vigorously as we can.

(14) Since wrongdoers would not perform one evil if an individual did another, how, you say, does he not share in their act? According to this line of reasoning, we break down the door with the house-breakers because they would not break down the door if we had not closed it; and if we happen to know that robbers intend to kill certain men, we share the guilt along with the robbers because, if we came first and killed the robbers, they would not kill the others. Again, if someone tells us that he is about to kill his father, we are guilty along with him if we do not kill him, when we are able, before he murders his father, since otherwise we are not able

to restrain or hinder him. The argument can be expressed in the same form: 'You shared his deed, since he would not have done it if you had done that other action.' But, I should not wish either evil to happen; I could take measures only against that evil which it was in my power to avoid; I was not obliged by wrong-doing to impede the evil of another which I could not prevent by my advice. He who does not sin for the sake of another does not, on that account, approve of the sinner. Neither crime is pleasing to him, since he wished neither wrong to be committed; he, by his own power, does not do the wrong in so far as it pertains to him; so far as it concerns the other party, he condemns it by his will alone. Therefore, to those who propose this problem by saying: 'If you will not offer sacrifice, you will suffer this fate,' if the person thus challenged had answered: 'I choose neither course; I detest both alternatives; I consent to none of these proposals of yours'—with such words as these, which certainly would be true, there would be no consent, no approbation. As regards what he may be called upon to suffer, the endurance of wrong will be considered as his; the commission of sin will be theirs. Someone may say: 'Should one endure defilement rather than offer incense?' If the question pertains to what ought to be endured, then the answer is: 'Neither.' For, if I shall say that one of these two alternatives ought to have been endured, I shall approve of one; whereas I disapprove of both. But, if the question be as to which of the two courses he should have avoided, who could not avoid both, but could have avoided one, I shall answer that he should avoid his own sin even if it be the lesser sin rather than that of somebody else, though that were the greater sin. For, although, after sound and diligent investigation, I concede that defilement is a greater sin than idolatry, the latter would be his own sin, the former, another's even

though he should suffer it. The sin belongs to the person who does the deed. Although murder is more grievous than theft, it is worse to commit a theft than to suffer murder. Therefore, if this proposition were set before a man that, if he were unwilling to commit a theft, he would be killed—that is, he would be murdered, since he could not avoid both alternatives—he should avoid that which would constitute a sin for him rather than that which would be another's sin. The guilt of the murder would not rest upon his soul, because it was committed against him and because he was able to avoid it only if he had wished to commit sin himself.

(15) The crux of this problem is the question as to whether no sin of another, even though committed against you, is to be imputed to you if you can prevent it by a less serious sin on your part and fail to do so, or whether every sin involving bodily defilement is an exception to this principle. No one declares that defilement is incurred if one is killed, or cast into prison, or bound in chains, or scourged and afflicted with other torments and sufferings, or proscribed and subjected to very serious losses, even to absolute destitution, or deprived of honors and insulted with every species of abuse. No one is so demented as to say that anyone who has unjustly suffered any of these misfortunes has been defiled. But, if he be drenched with filth, or if anything in a foul manner be forced upon him, through the mouth, or if he be forced to submit like a woman, then the feelings of all are offended and he is called defiled and unclean. Therefore, it is concluded that no one should prevent by his own sin, for his own sake or for the sake of another, any sins whatsoever of another person except those sins which bring defilement to the person upon whom violence is perpetrated. On the contrary, he should suffer and courageously endure those things which he is not permitted to prevent by his own sins or by

a lie. However, we should deter, even by our own sins, those assaults which are perpetrated upon an individual so that he is defiled, and whatever is done for this purpose, namely, to prevent uncleanness, should not be called sin. For, that is not a sin which happens in such a way that one would be justly blamed if it were not done. Likewise, the term uncleanness should not be used when there is no chance of avoiding defilement, for then the fact remains that he who suffers the defilement acts rightly in bearing patiently what he is not able to avoid. No one, indeed, who acts according to the moral law can become defiled by any physical taint whatever. But the unjust person is unclean in the eyes of God. Therefore, every just person is clean, if not in the eyes of men, at least before God who judges without possibility of error. Furthermore, when a person suffers defilement, although an opportunity of avoiding it was presented, he becomes unclean not by reason of the contact itself but by reason of the sin which he committed by not wishing to avoid the danger when it was possible to do so. There would be no sin if action were taken to avoid the defilement. Therefore, whoever has lied in order to avoid such situations does not sin.

(16) Are some types of lies to be excluded, so that it is better to suffer defilement rather than utter them? If that is so, then not everything which is done so that defilement may be avoided is without sin, since there are certain lies which it is more seriously sinful to utter than it is to suffer defilement. If anyone who can be concealed by a lie is sought for violation, who dares to say that such a lie should not be uttered? But, if he can be hidden only by such a lie as may injure the reputation of another by the false charge of that uncleanness for the endurance of which the first person is being sought—as if one should say to the seeker, naming a certain chaste man unblemished by crimes of this sort: ‘Go to

him. He will manage so that you may get your pleasures more easily, for he knows and loves these things,' even though the wicked person should be thus turned away from the one whom he was seeking—I am inclined to think that the reputation of one person must not be injured by a lie even to prevent the body of another from being violated. In general, a lie must not be told for the sake of another person when by that lie a third person may be injured, even though a slighter injury may come upon him than would happen to the second party if the lie were not told; one man's bread may not be taken from him against his wishes, even though he is comparatively strong, so that a weaker person may be nourished, nor may an innocent person be scourged against his wishes so that another may not die. If the man in question is willing, however, let such action be taken, because he is not wronged who so accedes.

Chapter 10

But, whether the reputation, even of one who is willing, should be injured by a false charge of licentiousness so that defilement may be averted from the person of another is an important problem. I do not know whether a decision can be reached easily as to the justice of staining by a false charge of lust the reputation of one person even with his consent rather than permit the body of another who does not wish it to be defiled by an act of lust.

(17) Moreover, if this choice were set before one who preferred to offer incense to idols rather than be abused like a woman, that, if he wished to avoid the former course, he should, instead, injure the good reputation of Christ by a lie, he would be very foolish to do so. Furthermore, I say

that he would be foolish if, to avoid the lust of another and lest that should be done to him which he would unwillingly endure, he should falsify the Gospel of Christ by untrue praise of Christ. For, in this action he would be avoiding the defilement inflicted upon his body by another rather than his own corruption [inflicted upon his soul by falsification] in the doctrine of the sanctification of souls and bodies. Wherefore, all falsehood should be completely removed from religious doctrine and from all discourses uttered for the purpose of teaching religion, both when it is taught and when it is learned. Let it not be supposed that for any reason whatsoever a lie ought to be told in such matters, since not even to bring anyone more readily to a knowledge of the truth may falsehood be introduced into that teaching. When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful, and unless these are believed to be true, they cannot be considered as certain.¹ Therefore, one who is presenting, discussing, or preaching on eternal matters, or even one who is narrating or explaining temporal affairs pertaining to the establishment of religion and piety, may, on occasion, conceal such items as seem worthy of concealment, but he may never lie about them and, hence, may never conceal them by a falsehood.

Chapter 11

(18) When this problem has been definitely solved, then we proceed with greater ease to the investigation of other lies. It must be seen that all lies which injure another unjustly must be discountenanced, because a wrong, even if comparatively insignificant, must not be inflicted upon one

¹ Cf. St. Augustine, *Letter 40*, *loc. cit.*

person so that a more serious evil may be warded off from another. Nor are those lies to be admitted which, although they do not harm another, benefit no one and actually do harm to those very persons who utter them gratuitously. Such persons must properly be termed 'liars.' There is a distinction between a person who tells a lie and a liar. The former is one who tells a lie unwillingly, while the liar loves to lie and passes his time in the joy of lying. In the former category we ought to place those who, by means of lies, wish to please men, not to inflict injury or bring disgrace upon anyone—for we removed that class from our discussion—but to be agreeable in their conversations. These persons do not belong in that group in which we place liars, because the latter take delight in lying, rejoicing in the falsehood itself; the former merely wish to please by agreeable speech. They prefer to please by telling what is true, but, when it is not easy to find true statements pleasing to their auditors, they choose to lie rather than remain silent. Since it is difficult to sustain a completely false narrative, they often interweave falsehood with truth when their customary attractiveness fails. These two types of lies, however, do not injure those believing them, because the hearers are in no way deceived in matters pertaining to religion or truth, or related to their own advantage or utility. It suffices for them to consider that what is narrated might have happened and to maintain their faith in the speaker whom they should not rashly judge as guilty of lying. For, what harm is done if I believe that somebody's father or grandfather was a good man, even if he was not, or that he went to Persia on a military expedition, when, in reality, he never departed from Rome? These falsehoods, however, are harmful to those who tell them: to those of the one group, because they abandon the truth in order to rejoice in falsehood; to the others, because they prefer to please their auditors rather than to reverence truth.

Chapter 12

(19) From types of lies condemned without any hesitation, the classification gradually proceeds to the lies of persons aspiring to higher ideals. This type of lie, which is commonly attributed to the kindly disposed and to the good, is indulged in when he who lies, not only does no harm to another, but actually helps him. Now, about this type of lies there is considerable controversy, centering on the problem as to whether this violation of truth harms him who, by means of the lie, brings help to another. If that alone is to be called truth which illumines the mind by a piercing and constant light, he certainly acts contrary to the truth, because, even though he deceives the bodily senses [of his auditor], he violates truth when he affirms that something is or is not such as his own mind, senses, opinion, or faith report it to be. Whether such a procedure is not at all harmful to the one who by this means helps another, or whether it is not harmful in proportion as it is beneficial to the other, is a serious question. If this is so, then the individual ought to benefit himself by a lie which brings harm to no one. But there are inevitable consequences of this action, and, when these are granted, other troublesome points arise of necessity. For, if it be debatable what harm can come to a man of abundant resources if he lose one measure of grain out of the countless thousands he possesses, when this one measure can furnish necessary sustenance to the thief, the inevitable result will be that thefts can be made without censure and that false testimony can be given without sin. What conclusion could be more perverse than this? Or, in truth, if another person stole that measure of grain and if you saw him and were then questioned, would you lie justifiably for the sake of the poor person? If, then, you, too, do this deed because of your own poverty, are you

to be blamed, as if you ought to love another more than yourself? Each alternative is base and ought, therefore, to be avoided.

(20) Someone may think, perhaps, that an exception should be sanctioned whereby certain lies which not only injure nobody but are even helpful to some might be considered honorable. This provision would exclude those lies by which crimes are concealed and defended, as, for instance, the base lie mentioned above, which, although it harms no one and is beneficial to the poor person, conceals a theft. If, however, a lie were of such a nature that it injured no one and benefited someone, yet neither concealed nor defended any sin, then [they ask that] such a lie should not be considered reprehensible. This would be the case, for instance, if, in your presence, someone should hide his money, lest he lose it through theft or violence, and if you, being questioned, should lie in such a way that you injure no one, help him who needs to hide the money, yet, at the same time, conceal nobody's sin by telling the lie. No one sins by hiding his own property which he fears to lose. But, if we do not sin by lying, because we hide no one's sin, harm no one, and help someone, what must we consider about the sin of lying, looked at in itself? In the place where we find the prohibition, 'Thou shalt not steal,' we also find 'Thou shalt not bear false witness.'¹ Since the specific sins are thus forbidden, why is false testimony blameworthy if it conceals a theft or any other sin, and not blameworthy when it is committed without the accessory notion of defending another sin, although theft and other sins are reprehensible in themselves? Is it permissible to tell a lie but not permissible to conceal a theft by telling a lie?

(21) If this conclusion is absurd, what shall we say about

¹ Exod. 20.15,16.

our problem? Is it not to be termed 'false witness' unless one so lies as to fix a charge upon someone, or to hide the crime of someone, or in some way or other to disparage a person in a trial? For, a witness seems necessary for the judge in order that he may understand the case. If the Scripture used the term 'witness' only in this sense, however, then the Apostle would not have said: 'Yes, and we are found false witnesses as to God, in that we have borne witness against God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise.'² Thus, he shows that false testimony is a lie, even though it be given in false praise of some individual.

Chapter 13

Is it possible that he alone gives false testimony who either invents or conceals the sin of another, or injures another in some way? If a lie directed against the temporal life of another is detestable, how much more so is one prejudicial to his eternal life, such as is every lie voiced in the teaching of religion. On that account, the Apostle terms it false witness if anyone lies about Christ, even in what seems to pertain to His praise. If, moreover, that be a lie which neither invents nor conceals the sin of another, nor is given in answer to a judge, and which, furthermore, is of harm to no one and of benefit to someone, then is not false testimony a reprehensible lie?

(22) What then? If a murderer flee to a Christian, or if the Christian see where he has fled, and be questioned about this matter by one who seeks the murderer to bring him to punishment, should the Christian tell a lie? How does he not conceal a sin by his lie, since he for whom he lies has committed a wicked deed. Or does it make a difference that he

2 1 Cor. 15.15.

is questioned not about the crime but about the place where the criminal is hiding? Therefore, is it evil to lie to conceal the sin of some one and not evil to lie to protect the sinner. 'Yes, certainly,' someone answers, 'for a person does not sin when he avoids punishment, but when he does that which merits punishment. Moreover, it belongs to Christian practice never to despair of the conversion of anyone and never to deprive a sinner of an opportunity for repentance.' What! if you be brought to the judge and questioned about the place where the murderer is hiding, are you going to say that he is not where you know that he is, or that you do not know, and have not seen what you do know and have seen? Then, are you going to give false witness and kill your own soul so that a murderer may not be put to death? Or will you lie until you come into the presence of the judge, but when he questions you will you tell the truth, lest you be a false witness? Therefore, you yourself will kill the man by your betrayal. Even the sacred Scriptures detest a betrayer. Or, perhaps, is it that he is not a betrayer who tells the truth at the request of a judge, but he is a betrayer who, of his own accord, brings anyone to destruction? Again, if you, knowing where a just and innocent man lies hid, are questioned by a judge who has been bidden by a higher authority to bring that man to death, so that the one who questions you is the executor not the originator of the law, will the lie that you tell for the sake of an innocent man not be false witness because it is not the judge but the executor who questions you? What will you do if the originator of the law or any unjust judge seeking to punish an innocent man question you? Will you be a false witness or a betrayer? Or will he be a betrayer who has willingly accused to a just judge a murderer seeking to hide, and will he not be a betrayer who reveals the man who had entrusted himself to his confidence to an unjust judge, inquiring about the hiding

place of an innocent man whom he seeks to put to death? Will you remain hesitant and uncertain between the charge of false testimony and of betrayal, or, by keeping silent or by asserting that you will not answer, will you avoid both charges? Why, then, should you not do this before you come to the judge, so that you may avoid the lie, too? For, by eliminating falsehoods you will avoid false testimony whether or not every lie is false testimony, although by avoiding false testimony, as you well know, you will not eliminate every falsehood. How much more courageously and how much more excellently, therefore, will you say: 'I will neither betray nor lie!'

(23) Once, the Bishop of the Church in Tagaste, Firmus by name, firmer in will-power, acted in this fashion. When, by an order of the emperor delivered to him by messengers sent for that purpose, a man was sought who had fled to him and whom, to the best of his ability, he was hiding, he answered the messengers that he could neither lie nor betray the man. After many physical torments—for the emperors were not yet Christians—he persisted in the same sentiments. Then, when brought into the presence of the emperor, he appeared so worthy of admiration that, without any difficulty, he gained pardon for that man whom he was protecting. What could be done with greater courage or constancy than this? To this a somewhat timid person may say: 'I am ready to bear any torments whatsoever, even to face death itself, rather than commit sin; but, since it is not a sin to lie in such a way that you neither harm anyone nor give false testimony, but that you rather help someone, it is foolish and gravely sinful to endure voluntary sufferings needlessly and perhaps to cast away a useful life and health to those cruel tormentors.' In reply, I ask this person why he fears the

prohibition: 'Thou shalt not bear false witness,'¹ yet does not fear what was said about God: 'Thou shalt destroy all who speak a lie.'² He answers: 'It does not say "every lie." I understand this passage as if it were expressed in this way: "Thou shalt destroy all who bear false witness."' When I assert that the passage does not say 'all false witness,' he answers that the statement occurs in a passage where other deeds are mentioned, which are evil in every way, and asks: 'What about the prohibition, "Thou shalt not kill,"³ which is also there? If killing is evil in every respect, how will the just who, in obedience to a law, have killed many, be excused from this charge?' The answer to this question is that he does not kill who is the executor of a just command. Therefore, although I understand the timidity of such people, I consider as praiseworthy that man who was unwilling to tell a lie or to betray another man, and I hold that he understood the Scriptures better and fulfilled their commands more courageously.

(24) At times, we come upon a problem of this sort where we are not asked where the person is who is being sought, nor are we forced to betray him if he has been hidden in such a way that he cannot easily be found except by betrayal, but we are asked whether or not he is in a certain place. If we know that he is there, we betray him by keeping silence or even by saying that we will not tell whether he is there or not. For in this way, the one who is searching realizes that he is there, because, if he were not there, the person who did not wish either to lie or to betray the man would make no answer other than that he was not there. Thus, through our silence or through such words as were

¹ Exod. 20.16.

² Ps. 5.7.

³ Exod. 20.13.

mentioned, the man is betrayed; he who is searching enters the place, if he has the power, and finds him, yet this discovery might have been averted by the telling of a lie. If, then, you do not know where the man is, there is no need of concealing the truth, but you must acknowledge that you do not know. If, however, you do know where he is, whether he is actually where he is being sought or elsewhere, when you are asked whether he is there or not, you must not say: 'I will not answer your question'; you must rather say: 'I know where he is but I will never disclose it.' For, if you do not answer in regard to one place and say that you will not betray him, it is as though you were indicating that place with your finger, since a definite suspicion is aroused. If, however, you acknowledge at the very outset that you know where he is but that you are not going to tell, then it is possible that the investigator will turn his attention from that place to you, in an effort to induce you to betray where he is. Whatever you suffer for this act of fidelity and kindness, then, is not only judged as unmerited but even as praiseworthy, with the exception of those pains which are said to be suffered not courageously but basely and shamefully. This is the last type of lie which must be discussed with considerable care.

Chapter 14

(25) The first type of lie is a deadly one which should be avoided and shunned from afar, namely, that which is uttered in the teaching of religion, and to the telling of which no one should be led under any condition. The second is that which injures somebody unjustly: such a lie as helps no one and harms someone. The third type is that which is beneficial to one person while it harms another, although

the harm does not produce physical defilement. The fourth is the lie which is told solely for the pleasure of lying and deceiving, that is, the real lie. The fifth type is that which is told from a desire to please others in smooth discourse. When these have been avoided and rejected, a sixth kind of lie follows which harms no one and benefits some person, as, for instance, when a person, knowing that another's money is to be taken away unjustly, answers the questioner untruthfully and says that he does not know where the money is. The seventh type is that which is harmful to no one and beneficial to some person, with the exception of the case where a judge is questioning, as happens when a person lies because he is unwilling to betray a man sought for capital punishment, that is, not only a just and innocent person but even a criminal, because it belongs to Christian discipline never to despair of the conversion of anybody and never to block the opportunity for repentance. Now, I have spoken at length concerning these last two types, which are wont to evoke considerable discussion, and I have presented my opinion, namely, that by the acceptance of sufferings which are borne honorably and courageously, these lies, too, may be avoided by strong, faithful, and truthful men and women. The eighth is that type of lie which is harmful to no one and beneficial to the extent that it protects someone from physical defilement, at least, from that defilement which we have mentioned above. Now, the Jews considered it defilement to eat with unwashed hands.¹ If anyone considers that as defilement, then a lie must not be told in order to avoid it. However, we are confronted with a new problem if a lie is such that it brings injury to any person, even though it protects another person from that defilement which all men detest and abhor. Should such a lie be told if the injury resulting

1 Cf. Matt. 15.2-20.

from it is not in the nature of the defilement of which we have been treating? The question here does not concern lying; rather, it is whether harm should be done to any person, not necessarily through a lie, so that such defilement may be warded off from another person. I am definitely inclined to oppose such license. Even though the most trivial injuries are proposed, such as that one which I mentioned above in regard to the one lost measure of grain, they disturb me greatly in this problem as to whether we ought to do injury to one person if, by that wrong, another person may be defended, or protected against defilement. But, as I have said, that is another question.

Chapter 15

Now, let us continue that discussion which we started, that is, whether, although by lying we should harm no other person, a lie should be told if some unavoidable condition be proposed, so that either we do what is requested or suffer defilement or some other accursed foulness.

(26) Some opportunity for consideration of this matter will be provided if we first examine carefully those passages in Holy Scripture which forbid lying. We seek a solution in vain if the Scriptures do not present one, for the commandment of God must be maintained in every issue and the will of God must be followed with peace of mind in the midst of those sufferings which we shall endure as a result of holding fast to His precept. If, however, some solution is discovered, the lie in such a case must not be repudiated, for the sacred Scriptures contain not only the commands of God but also information about the lives and customs of the just, so that if, by chance, there is doubt as to how a command is to be

interpreted, a correct understanding of the precept may be obtained from the deeds of the just. We exclude those incidents which can be given an allegorical interpretation, although no one doubts that they actually happened. Of this nature are almost all the incidents related in the books of the Old Testament. Who would dare to assert that anything in those books does not lend itself to figurative interpretation? Certainly, when the Apostle declares that the two Testaments were typified by the sons of Abraham,¹ who were said to have been born and to have lived as a result of the natural plan for propagating the race (for monsters and prodigies are not produced in order to turn the mind to a definite signification), and when he says that the marvelous blessing God gave to the people of Israel to release them from the bondage by which they were oppressed in Egypt and the punishment of His vengeance when they had sinned on the journey both happened figuratively,² what assurance will you discover by means of which you can weaken that rule and presume to declare that these incidents are not to be interpreted figuratively? Therefore, if these incidents of the Old Testament are excluded, the deeds of holy people related in the New Testament, where there is indubitable evidence of traits worthy of imitation, are of considerable help in understanding what has been set forth in the form of precepts in Scripture.

(27) Of this fact we have an example, when we read in the Gospel: 'You received a blow on the cheek, turn the other cheek also.'³ Moreover, we find no more powerful or more excellent illustration of patience than that of our Lord Himself. Nevertheless, when He was struck with a blow, He did not say: 'Behold the other cheek,' but, rather: 'If I have

1 Cf. Gal. 4.22-24.

2 Cf. 1 Cor. 10.1-11; also, *De utilitate credendi*, loc cit. 400.

3 Cf. Matt. 5.39.

spoken ill, bear witness to the evil; but if well, why dost thou strike me?"⁴ By such words He shows that the presentation of the other cheek ought to be made in the heart. The Apostle Paul, too, recognized this fact, for when he had been struck in the presence of the high priest, he did not say: 'Strike the other cheek'; he did say: 'God will strike thee, thou white-washed wall. Dost thou sit there to try me by the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?'⁵ Since he was perfectly cognizant, when he said that, of the fact that the priesthood of the Jews had been brought to such a state that, while it was exteriorly and nominally illustrious, interiorly it was stained with filthy desires, he saw in spirit what was destined to come as a punishment of the Lord. His heart, however, was ready not only to receive other blows, but also, for the sake of truth, to suffer with charity any torments whatsoever for those at whose hands he was to suffer.

(28) Furthermore, it is written: 'But I say to you not to swear at all.'⁶ The Apostle, however, swore in his Epistles⁷ and thus indicated how the command, 'I say to you not to swear at all,' is to be understood; that is, as a precaution, lest by swearing one should acquire facility in so doing, then from this facility he should acquire a habit, and, finally, as a result of the habit, he should fall into perjury. We find that the Apostle swore only when writing, where more prudent consideration does not countenance unrestrained language. Even such an oath is the result of the evil one, as it is written: 'Whatever is more is from the evil one.'⁸ The evil, however, is not St. Paul's, but the evil of the weakness of those to whom he was endeavoring to present the faith. I do not know any

4 John 18.23.

5 Acts 23.2.

6 Matt. 5.34.

7 Cf. Rom. 9.1; Gal. 1.20; Phil. 1.8;

8 Cf. Matt. 5.37.

Scriptural text which shows that he swore when he was merely speaking and not writing. Nevertheless, the Lord says 'not to swear at all.' He has not granted that this privilege be given to persons who are engaged in writing. Because it is wrong to say that St. Paul was guilty of violating the Lord's command, especially since his Epistles were written and circulated for the spiritual life and salvation of the people, then it must be understood that the 'at all' found in the precept was set there for this purpose, that, as far as lies in one's power, he may not desire, love, and seek, with some degree of satisfaction, an oath as being something good.

(29) A similar interpretation may be given to that other precept: 'Do not be anxious about tomorrow,'⁹ and: 'Do not be anxious about what you shall eat or what you shall drink, or what you shall put on.'¹⁰ When we realize that our Lord Himself had a purse wherein was placed that given to Him so that it might be kept for current needs,¹¹ and that the Apostles had procured many things for the help of the brethren not only for the morrow but in greater abundance for the time of imminent famine, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles,¹² then it becomes quite clear that those precepts are to be understood in such a way that we are to do no work merely from the love of gaining temporal possessions or from the fear of want, as it were, from necessity.

(30) In like manner, the direction was given to the Apostles that they should carry nothing with them on their journeys, but should subsist by preaching the Gospel.¹³ In one passage, our Lord Himself showed why He said this when he

⁹ Matt. 6.34.

¹⁰ Matt. 6.25.

¹¹ Cf. John 12.6.

¹² Cf. Acts. 11.28-30.

¹³ Cf. Luke 10.4-7.

added: 'For the laborer deserves his hire.'¹⁴ In these words He showed that this practice was permitted, though not commanded, lest, perhaps, a disciple who took some recompense for his personal needs from those to whom he was preaching the Gospel might think he was doing wrong. That it was more commendable to omit this practice is shown clearly in the life of the Apostle Paul. Although he said: 'And let him who is instructed in the word share all good things with his teacher,'¹⁵ and although he showed in many passages that this was done meritoriously by those to whom the Gospel was preached, he declared: 'But nevertheless, I have not used this right.'¹⁶ Therefore, when the Lord made the statement quoted above, He gave the right but He did not bind His followers by a command. Since we are, then, unable to comprehend many passages, we gather from the deeds of the saints how to understand those passages which may easily be misinterpreted if reference is not made to the example set by the saints.

Chapter 16

(31) Therefore, in regard to the passage: 'The mouth that beliieth, killeth the soul,'¹ the question arises as to what mouth is signified. When Holy Scripture uses the term 'mouth,' it often signifies that inner chamber of the heart where whatever is uttered by the voice when we speak truthfully pleases us and is determined upon. Hence it is that he lies in his heart who takes pleasure in lying; but he cannot lie in his heart who through his speech so expresses something other than what is in his mind that he knows he is doing evil sole-

¹⁴ Cf. Matt. 10.10.

¹⁵ Gal. 6.6.

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 9.15.

¹ Wisd. 1.11.

ly for the sake of avoiding a greater evil and knows that both evils are repugnant to him. Supporters of this view say that the passage which reads: 'He that speaketh truth in his heart,'² must be so interpreted because truth must always be spoken in the heart, but not always be the exterior mouth if need of avoiding a greater evil demand that the voice express something otherwise than it is in the mind. Now, the existence of a mouth of the heart can readily be understood from the fact that, where there is speech, there the term 'mouth' is used correctly. The words, 'who speaks in his heart,' would not be used correctly if a mouth in the heart were not rightly understood, And that very passage where we read: 'The mouth that beliieth killeth the soul,'³ may be taken as referring to the mouth of the heart if the setting of the passage be taken into consideration. For, the answer is obscure and escapes men who are not able to hear the voice of the heart unless the voice of the body expresses it. But the Scripture says in that same place that this voice [of the heart] comes to the hearing of the spirit of the Lord, who filled the whole earth, so that it mentions even the lips and voice and tongue in this place; yet the interpretation does not grant that all things are understood except by the heart, because it says that what is expressed does not escape the Lord, but what is said with a good sound reaching our ears does not escape men. Thus, the Scripture says: 'For the spirit of wisdom is benevolent, and will not acquit the evil speaker from his lips; for God is witness of his reins, and He is a true searcher of his heart and a hearer of his tongue. For the spirit of the Lord hath filled the whole world: and that, which contained all things, hath knowledge of the voice. Therefore, he that speaketh unjust things cannot be hid, neither shall the chastising judgment pass him by. For inquisition

² Ps. 14.3.

³ Wisd. 1.11.

shall be made into the thoughts of the ungodly: and the hearing of his words shall come from the Lord, to the chastising of his iniquities. For the ear of jealously heareth all things, and the tumult of murmuring shall not be hid. Keep yourselves therefore from murmuring, which profiteth nothing, and refrain your tongue from detraction, for an obscure speech shall not go for nought; and the mouth that believeth, killeth the soul.⁴ Therefore, the Scripture seems to threaten those who believe that what they consider and plan in their heart is obscure and hidden. It even terms such planning a 'tumult' in order to show how clearly perceptible it is to the ears of God.

(32) Even in the Gospel we find definite mention of the mouth of the heart, since in one passage our Lord specifically refers to the mouth of the body and of the heart, where He says: 'Are you also even yet without understanding? Do you not realize that whatever enters the mouth passes into the belly and is cast out into the drain? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and it is they that defile a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, immorality, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things that defile a man.'⁵ If you understand this passage as referring only to the mouth of the body, how are you going to interpret 'the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart,' since both the spittle and vomit proceed from the mouth, unless, perhaps, a person is not defiled when he eats something vile but is defiled when he vomits it? If this is most absurd, then the only alternative left to us is to understand that the mouth of the heart is meant when our Lord says: 'the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart.' For, since theft

⁴ Cf. Wisd. 1.6-11.

⁵ Matt. 15.16-20.

can be and often actually is perpetrated without the sound of human voice, it is madness itself to understand the passage referred to above in such a way as to consider that a person is defiled by the sin of theft only when he acknowledges and confesses it, and that he is undefiled when he commits the theft in silence. But, if we refer that statement to the mouth of the heart, then no sin can be committed in silence, for it is not committed unless it proceed from that interior mouth of the heart.

(33) Just as we have investigated what mouth is referred to in the quotation: 'The mouth that believeth, killeth the soul,'⁶ so we may ask what type of lie is indicated. The passage seems to speak in particular of that lie which is a detraction. For it says: 'Keep yourselves therefore from murmuring, which profiteth nothing, and refrain your tongue from detraction.'⁷ The sin of detraction caused by ill will is committed not only when one gives oral expression to the evil which he invents concerning another, but also when he wishes such a charge to be believed, though he keeps silence about it. This unexpressed desire constitutes detraction with the mouth of the heart and the Scripture says that it cannot be hidden or concealed from God.

(34) Some people are unwilling to interpret that other Scriptural passage which says: 'Be not willing to make any kind of lie,' as directing that a person should not deceive by any kind of a lie. Hence, one person says that, according to this passage of the Scripture, every lie, generally speaking, ought to be detested, so that if one should wish to lie, even though he does not do so, the desire itself is to be condemned; that the passage in question does not say: 'Do not make any kind of lie,' but: 'Be not willing to make any kind of lie';⁸

6 Wisd. 1.11.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Cf. Eccli. 7.14.

hence, not only should no one dare to tell a lie but not even should he dare to wish to lie.

Chapter 17

A second interpretation is that the quotation: 'Be not willing to make any kind of lie,' signifies that lying should be eliminated entirely from the mouth of the heart, and also from the mouth of the body as far as certain lies are concerned—in particular, those which are connected with the teaching of religion—but that from the exterior mouth certain other lies need not be eliminated if the avoidance of a greater evil demand them. Such an interpretation grants that we ought to refrain completely from lying with the mouth of the heart. In answer to how the words, 'Be not willing,' are to be understood, the reply is that the will itself is considered as the mouth of the heart, so that, when we lie against our wishes and in an endeavor to avoid a greater evil, the mouth of the heart is not involved. There is also a third interpretation of the passage, according to which one is permitted to lie provided that certain lies be excepted, as if one should say that the words, 'Be not willing to trust every man,' should be interpreted, not as advising to trust no man but as advising to trust not all, but some men. Furthermore, the words which follow the passage under discussion, namely, 'for the custom thereof will not lead to good,'¹ sound as if the passage seems to forbid not lying, but constant lying, that is, a habit and love of lying. To such a state the person who thinks he may use any and every kind of falsification certainly descends—for he will not exercise caution in what is said in the teaching of piety and religion, and what is more detest-

1 Cf. Eccli. 7.14.

able than this, not only among all kinds of lies but even among all kinds of sins? He will adapt his will to any kind of a lie, however easy or harmless it may be; hence, he lies, not against his wishes and to avoid a greater evil, but willingly and gladly.

Therefore, we see that there are three interpretations which may be given to this passage: first, 'Not only do not lie, but do not even wish to lie'; then, 'Be unwilling to lie, but do so against your wishes when some more serious evil is to be avoided'; and, finally: 'When certain lies have been excluded, others are permitted.' One of these interpretations finds favor with those who think that lying should never be countenanced; the other two are approved by those who consider that lying is permitted under certain circumstances. However, I do not know whether the passage which follows the one in question, namely, 'for the custom thereof will not lead to good,' can support the first of these three interpretations, unless, perchance, the precept never to lie at all and not even to wish to lie is intended for the perfect, while the custom of lying is not permitted to those striving for perfection. This would be the case if, although the precept was given never to lie at all and not even to have the desire to lie, actual instances of lies sanctioned by great authority should contradict the precept, and if, in such cases, an explanation should be given to the effect that these were the lies of persons striving for perfection and that such lies, so far as this life goes, constitute a duty of mercy. Furthermore, the explanation would emphasize the fact that every lie is an evil to be so avoided in every way by perfect, spiritual persons that the custom of lying must not be condoned even in souls striving for perfection. It is said that the Egyptian midwives, even after they lied, were approved because of the nature of their advance to a better state and because, when

a person lies through mercy and for the sake of the welfare of another, even though it be the temporal welfare, there is some progress made toward loving truth and eternal salvation.

(35) Likewise, the passage: 'Thou wilt destroy all that speak a lie,'² admits of various interpretations. One says that no lie is excepted, but that every lie is condemned. Another says that this interpretation is true, but that it refers to those who speak untruthfully from the heart, as stated above, for he speaks the truth in his heart who hates the necessity of lying, looking upon it as a punishment of this mortal life. A third interpretation is that God will destroy all who speak a lie, but that this interpretation does not refer to every lie; there is a certain kind of lie which the Prophet had in mind, in regard to which no one is spared. Such a sin is involved when one, refusing to confess his sins, justifies them and is unwilling to do penance; hence, his wrong-doing seems small in comparison with the fact that, wishing to appear just, he refuses to submit to the medicine of confession. Hence, the distinction in words which the preceding verse indicates: 'Thou hatest all the workers of iniquity'³—but thou shalt not destroy them if penitently they speak the truth in confession, so that acknowledging the truth they come to the light, as is stated in the Gospel according to St. John: 'But he who does the truth comes to the light';⁴ but thou shalt destroy all who not only do what thou dost hate but who also 'speak a lie' by simulating a false justice and by not confessing their sins penitently.

(36) As to false testimony which is forbidden by the Ten Commandments, there can be no argument that love of truth can be preserved in the heart while falsehood is ex-

² Ps. 5.7.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John 3.21.

pressed to him before whom the testimony is given. For, when a statement is made to God alone, then only in the heart is truth involved; but, when the testimony is given to man, then truth must be expressed by the mouth of the body, because man cannot see the heart. In this matter of false witness it is proper to investigate the question as to whom we are considered as giving witness. We are not witnesses to whomever we happen to speak, but we are witnesses to those who have a right and who ought to know or to receive the truth through us. A judge has such a right to safeguard him from making a mistake in a judgment. A person who is being instructed in religious doctrine, also, has such a right so that he may not err in his faith or waver in regard to the reliability of his teacher. When, however, a person who seeks knowledge which does not concern him, or which it is not expedient for him to have, questions you or wishes to learn something from you, he seeks not a witness but a betrayer. Hence, if you lie to him, you will, perhaps, be exonerated from false witness but certainly not from telling a lie.

Chapter 18

When it has been definitely established that it is never permitted to give false witness, then the problem is posed as to whether it is, at any time, permissible to lie; or, if every lie is false witness, whether the possibility of a lie told for the sake of avoiding a greater evil may be considered. Such a situation exists when the command, 'Honor thy father and thy mother'¹ is set aside in favor of a more important duty as, for example, when he who is called by the Lord Himself

¹ Exod. 20.12.

to preach the kingdom of God is forbidden to discharge the final duty of burying his father.²

(37) Likewise, there is difference of opinion in regard to the passage: 'The son that keepeth the word, shall be far removed from destruction; for, hearing the word, he takes it to himself and no falsehood proceeds from his mouth.'³ One person says that the words, 'The son hearing the word,' must be understood as referring to the word of God, which is truth. Therefore, the passage, 'The son that receives the truth shall be free from destruction' is referred to that other passage: 'Thou wilt destroy all that speak a lie.'⁴ Then, what does the following verse, 'But hearing the word he takes it to himself,' imply except what the Apostle says: 'But let every-one test his own work, and so he will have glory in himself only, and not in comparison with another'?⁵ For, he who receives the word, that is, truth, not for himself but so that he may please men, does not guard it when he sees that it is possible to please men with a lie. However, nothing false proceeds from the mouth of him who receives truth for himself, because, even when a lie is pleasing to men, he who has taken truth to himself does not lie so that he may please God, not that he may please men. Therefore, there is no authority for saying that God will certainly destroy all that speak a lie but that this does not include every lie, since lies in general have been repudiated in that passage which says: 'And nothing false proceeds from his mouth.'⁶ Another person, however, says that the passage must be interpreted as St. Paul the Apostle understood the words of our Lord: 'But I say to you not to swear at all.'⁷ Here, all swearing is condemned,

² Cf. Matt. 8.21.

³ Cf. Prov. 29.27.

⁴ Ps. 5.7.

⁵ Gal. 6.4.

⁶ Prov. 29.27.

⁷ Matt. 5.34.

but it is the so-called swearing from the mouth of the heart; that is, swearing should never be done with the approval of the will, but may be done in consideration of the weakness of another, that is, from the evil of another, in a case where it seems impossible to convince unless confidence be gained by an oath. Another circumstance calling for an oath would be the difficulty caused by the fact that we, who are wrapped about with the trappings of our mortality, are not able to show our heart. If we were able to do so, there would be no need of an oath. Yet, if the passage, 'The son keepeth the word will be far removed from destruction,'⁸ has been said of truth, through which all things have been done⁹ and which always remains unchangeable, since the teaching of religion strives to lead one to the contemplation of truth, it is possible that, in this discussion, the words, 'And nothing false proceeds from his mouth,' signify that he says nothing false in regard to religious teaching. This type of lie must not be uttered under any consideration and must be completely and definitely avoided. Or, if the words 'nothing false' be understood foolishly, if they do not refer to every lie, then he who thinks that it is right to lie at times argues that the words 'from his mouth' are to be understood as referring to the mouth of the heart.

(38) This lengthy discussion is carried on, on the one hand, by those who declare that a lie should never be told and who cite divine testimony to this effect, and, on the other hand, by those who, among these very quotations of divine testimony, seek support for lying. Nevertheless, no one can say that he finds either in the deeds or words of Scripture justification for favoring any falsehood instead of condemning it, though sometimes a result must be accomplished by a lie, which one detests, in order that something more detestable

⁸ Cf. Prov. 29:27.

⁹ Cf. John 14:6; 1:3.

may be avoided. In regard to this concession, however, men make a mistake, because they substitute things that are worthless for those which are precious. For, when it has been granted that a certain evil may be done in order to avoid a greater evil, then each one proceeds to measure evil, not according to the norm of truth, but according to his own desire and habit. Hence, he considers that evil greater which he himself dreads more, not that which actually should be avoided more. This vicious situation arises from the perversity of love. Since our lives have two aspects, the one eternal, guaranteed by divine promise, and the other temporal, which we now enjoy, as each one begins to love the temporal more than the eternal he thinks that all things must be done for the sake of that temporal life which he loves; nor does he consider any sins greater than those which do injury to this life, or which, through injustice or illegality, take away from it any convenience, or which take it away completely by causing death. Hence, they hate thieves, robbers, abusive persons, torturers, and murderers more than libertines, drunkards, and profligates, if the latter are not annoying to anyone. They do not understand, or they do not care at all, that they are doing an injury to God; not, indeed, that they act to His disadvantage, but that they precipitate their own destruction by perverting His gifts in themselves, even though these gifts be temporal, and by rejecting eternal gifts through such corruption. This warning is particularly directed to those who have become the temple of God, because the Apostle says to all Christians: 'Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? Whoever destroys the temple of God, him will God destroy; for holy is the temple of God, and this temple you are.'¹⁰

(39) And, indeed, all such sins, both those inflicting in-

10 1 Cor. 3.16,17.

jury upon other men in regard to the advantages of this life and those harming the sinners themselves though injuring no one against his wishes, hinder in every way those ensnared by them from reaching that life which is eternal. They do this even though they seem to be directed toward the attainment of some joy or advantage for the temporal life, for no one ever commits a sin of this nature without having a definite end in view. Certain of these sins, moreover, bring harm only to those who commit them, while others harm those against whom they are committed. For, when objects clung to for the sake of some advantage in this life are taken away by unjust persons, they alone sin and lose eternal life who do these deeds, not those against whom the theft has been committed. Furthermore, if one consent to be despoiled of these goods lest he do wrong or suffer some greater misfortune because of them, not only is he not guilty of sin, but he has acted in a courageous and praiseworthy fashion, usefully, and certainly without blame. Again, if unjust persons attempt to violate objects set aside for holy and religious purposes, these objects must be bought back, if the opportunity be offered, even by lesser sins, though not by bringing injury to another. Under such circumstances, those deeds cease to be sinful which are undertaken in order to avoid greater wrongs. Just as in regard to useful commodities—money or some such material advantage—that is not considered a loss which is abandoned for a greater gain, so, in spiritual matters, that is not called a sin which is committed in order to avoid some greater offense. Or, if that is called a loss which one lets go, lest he should lose more, then let this be called a sin, provided that no one doubts that it should be committed so that greater harm may be avoided, just as no one doubts that what entails a smaller loss ought to be endured for the purpose of avoiding a greater loss.

Chapter 19

(40) There are, moreover, blessings which must be preserved for the sake of holiness; namely, chastity of body, purity of soul, and truth of doctrine. There is no violation of chastity of body without the consent and permission of the soul. Whatever happens to our bodies as a result of a greater force, when we are unwilling and when we give no authority for such an act, is not unchaste. A reason for permitting such an act can exist; no reason for consenting to it can be given. When we approve and desire, then we consent; but we permit when, unwillingly, we allow something for the sake of avoiding greater disgrace. Consent to bodily unchastity certainly violates chastity of the soul. This chastity of the soul consists in good will and pure love, which is not corrupted unless we love and seek that which truth teaches should not be loved and sought. Therefore, this purity of love of God and of our neighbor, by which the chastity of the soul is sanctified, must be safeguarded, and every effort must be made with all our physical powers and with pious supplication that, when the chastity of our body is threatened, the soul which is so intimately linked with the body may be touched by no feeling of pleasure. Even if this is not possible, chastity of the mind may be preserved by not consenting. Moreover, in chastity of the soul, as far as pertains to the love of one's neighbor, innocence and kindliness must be preserved and, as far as pertains to the love of God, filial devotion. Innocence is that quality by which we harm no one; kindliness, that by which we do good to whomever we can; filial devotion, that by which we love God. Moreover, truth of doctrine, of religion, and of filial devotion is violated only by a lie, although that highest and most profound Truth, to which that doctrine belongs, can be violated in no way.

To reach this highest Truth, and to remain in it in every way, and to cleave to it completely will not be permitted unless 'this corruptible body has put on incorruption and this mortal body has put on immortality.'¹ But, because in this life all piety is a training by which progress is made toward perfect Truth and because that teaching which introduces and establishes truth by human speech and outward signs furnishes a guide for this training, on this account that truth which can be corrupted by a lie must especially be preserved intact, so that, if anything has been violated in that chastity of the soul, there may be a means of repairing the harm. Once the authority of teaching has been corrupted, no advance or return to chastity of the soul is possible.

Chapter 20

(41) The conclusion which is drawn from all these considerations is that a lie which does not violate the teaching of filial piety, or piety itself, or innocence, or kindliness, must be permitted for the preservation of bodily chastity. Nevertheless, if a man were to propose that he should so love truthfulness, not only that which exists in contemplation of truth, but also in the expression of truth, because truth exists in its own kind of things as well and that he should give oral expression to his ideas as conceived and formed in his mind, so that he would place the truthful beauty of faith not only before gold, silver, gems, and pleasant estates, but also before the entire temporal life and every bodily good—then I know not whether anyone could wisely say that he was making a mistake. Furthermore, if he were right in placing this devotion to truth before all his own possessions and in considering it

¹ Cf. 1. Cor. 15.53.

of greater value, then rightly might he use the temporal means of other men to relieve and assist those whom he was already helping by his own integrity and kindliness. Thus he would cherish faith in its perfection not only by believing those things which seemed to him characterized by an outstanding authority, worthy of belief, but also by giving faithful expression to those things which he considered and declared worthy of being expressed. For, faith has received its Latin form from the fact that what is said is done. Hence, it is evident that a person who is lying does not show faith. Even though this faith be violated in a smaller degree, when a person lies under such circumstances that, without bringing inconvenience or damage to another, he is believed and that he even has the intention of protecting the health or the bodily chastity of another, nevertheless, faith is violated, and this is likewise done even in preserving the chastity and holiness of the soul. Therefore, we are obliged to place perfect faith before bodily chastity, not by the opinion of men, which very often is in error, but by that Truth which surpasses all human verdicts and is invincible. Chastity of the soul is a disciplined love which does not subordinate things of greater importance to those which are inferior. Moreover, that defilement which can be perpetrated against the body is less than that which defiles the soul. Certainly, when anyone lies in order to protect bodily chastity, he realizes that it is another's lust and not his own which threatens to defile his body. Nevertheless, he is on his guard lest, even by permitting it, he should become responsible. In truth, where is that permission but in the soul? Therefore, even bodily chastity cannot be defiled except in the soul, and when this gives neither permission nor consent, then in no way can bodily chastity rightly be said to be violated, regardless of what harm has been wrought upon the body by the lust of another. Whence,

the conclusion is reached that chastity of the soul must be preserved much more assiduously in the soul, since there the protection of bodily chastity is provided. Wherefore, both must be protected and guarded, as far as is in our power, by holy practices and conversation, lest either be violated. But, when both cannot be so protected, who does not realize which one should be guarded at the expense of the other, since he realizes full well which should be preferred to the other: the soul to the body, or the body to the soul; the chastity of the soul to that of the body, or the chastity of the body to that of the soul? He also realizes which alternative should be avoided more in the case of sins: the permission for the sin of another, or the commission of one's own sin.

Chapter 21

(42) When all aspects of the problem of lying have been considered, it is clear that the testimony of the Holy Scriptures advises that one should never lie at all, since no examples of lies, deserving of imitation, are found in the habits and deeds of the saints. This applies to the Scriptures which are not to be taken in a figurative sense, such as the accounts given in the Acts of the Apostles. For, all things in the Gospel of the Lord which, to the ignorant, seem to be lies are figurative in signification. Likewise, the words of the Apostle: 'I became all things to all men, that I might save all,'¹ are correctly interpreted to mean that he, not by lying but by sympathy, brought it about that he wrought their conversion by his own great charity which made it seem as if he himself were afflicted with that evil of which he wished to heal them. Therefore, one must never lie in the teaching of

1 1 Cor. 9.22.

devotion; that is a great crime and the first type of a detestable lie. Neither must one tell a lie of the second type, because injury must not be done to another. The third type of lie must not be countenanced, because one must not further the interest of one person, by harming another. The fourth type of lie must be avoided, because it is told from the sheer joy of lying and this is vicious in itself. One must not indulge in the fifth type of lie, because, if truth itself is not to be told merely for the sake of pleasing men, how much less is a lie to be told which in itself is base, inasmuch as it is a lie. We are forbidden to use the sixth type of lie, because truth of testimony is not lawfully corrupted even for the temporal advantage and safety of another. Indeed, no one is to be brought to eternal salvation by the help of a lie. A person should not be converted to good morals by means of the evil ways of the one converting him, because, if that evil should be done for him, then he himself, when converted, ought to do the same for others. Thus, he would be converted, not to good morals, but to evil, since what was offered to him in the process of his conversion is presented to him for imitation after his conversion. Neither must one lie in the seventh way, for no one's temporal advantage and safety are to be preferred to the perfecting of faith. Even if someone be so adversely affected by our good deeds as to become more wicked in soul and further removed from devotion, our good deeds must not be given up, since we must hold to that code of morality by which we ought to draw and invite those whom we love as ourselves. Hence, we ought to courageously embrace the sentiment of the Apostle: 'to these we are an odor that leads to life; to those an odor that leads to death. And for such offices, who is sufficient?'² The eighth type of lie is forbidden,

2 2 Cor. 2.16.

because, both in good deeds, such as are chastity of soul and purity of body, and in evil deeds what we ourselves do is of greater import than what we permit to be done. Now, in these eight types, one sins less seriously as he tends toward the eighth and more seriously as he turns toward the first. Whoever thinks, moreover, that there is any kind of lie which is not a sin deceives himself sadly when he considers that he, a deceiver of others, is an honest man.

(43) Such great blindness has taken hold of the minds of men so that it is of small matter to them if we grant that certain lies are not sins. They even claim that, in certain instances, it is a sin not to tell a lie. So far do they go in their defense of lying that they say that the Apostle Paul used the first type of lie, which is the most harmful of all. For they say that in his Epistle to the Galatians, which, like all the others, was written for instruction in religion and piety, he lied when he said of Peter and Barnabas: 'When I saw that they were not walking uprightly according to the truth of the gospel.'³ While they try to defend Peter from error and from that divergence from the right path into which he had strayed, they attempt, by breaking down and lessening the authority of the Scriptures, to overturn that path of religion in which is salvation for all. In thus defending Peter they do not realize that they are casting upon the Apostle Paul not only the charge of lying but also that of perjury in the teaching of religion, that is, in the Epistle wherein he preaches the Word of God. There, before he begins his narration, St. Paul says: 'Now in what I am writing to you, behold, before God, I do not lie.'⁴

Let this be the limit of this discourse, in the entire consideration and discussion of which we should stress and pray

³ Gal. 2.14; cf. Augustine, *Letter 40, loc. cit.*

⁴ Gal. 1.20.

for nothing more than the promise contained in the words of the same Apostle: 'God is faithful and will not permit you to be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also give you a way out that you may be able to bear it.'⁵

⁵ 1 Cor. 10.13.