

# The Stories We Tell Ourselves

*“He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.”*

*Prov. 18:13*

Communication can seem simple enough, yet in practice it can be quite complex. Whenever we have an interaction with someone, we hear and see a certain amount of factual information. The words that are actually spoken, expressions, actions, and circumstances are all aspects of our interaction which we use to understand what is “going on.” Yet usually these aspects do not give us the complete picture. In the gaps, we can often tell ourselves “stories” in order to assign meaning to the interaction. Assumptions can be made about a person’s statements or look. We can begin to judge another person’s motive or even begin to believe we understand all the reasoning behind certain actions.

Some of our “stories” might actually be close to the truth, but most often, the more we assume and interpret behavior, the further we get from the facts of what is occurring. If we are the type of person prone to pessimism or negativity, this can start a downward spiral of thinking and action. Division and fractured relationships can result. Our awareness and response to the stories we often tell ourselves can go a long way in determining how much we let assumptions, opinions, and hearsay direct our thoughts, emotions, and interactions. It can be the difference between relationship and division, health and hurt. In addition, this “story-telling” can be a favorite tool of our Adversary. Two examples in Scripture bring some light to such scenarios.

At the end of *Joshua* (Ch. 22), the initial conquest of the Promised Land was finished. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh had claimed land on the east side of the Jordan River before this fighting had begun. They had agreed to help their fellow tribes with the conquest but now were returning to their inheritance. When they crossed the Jordan, they built an altar. Once the remaining tribes heard this, it seems the stories began to fly. It was assumed by many that the motive for this altar was rebellion (*Joshua 22:16*), and forces were mobilized to bring these wayward tribes back in line. Only some patient questioning and listening by the leadership was able to keep the tribes from quickly reacting violently to the “stories” they were telling themselves. It is a fascinating study to walk through this passage and see the assumptions that had been made which were far from the truth of the tribes’ actual motivations. As light was shed on these false assumptions, hope, connection, and healing took place.

In another example from *Acts* (Ch. 21), Paul was returning to Jerusalem after years away and met with the elders in the city. Due to the nature of his ministry to the Gentiles, it appears there was much misunderstanding and angst on the part of the Jews in Jerusalem. Despite the best attempts of Paul and the leadership to attempt to dispel these rumors, the suppositions still won the day as Paul was attacked and captured by the mob (*Acts 21:28-30*). They listened to the assumptions of others and believed he had brought Gentiles into the holy portions of the Temple, violating Jewish law. In this scenario, these assumptions were not able to be overruled. As Paul gave his defense to the people and tried to explain the “facts” (*Acts 22*), the people “*lifted up their voices...cried out, and cast off their clothes, and threw dust into the air.*” (*Acts 22:22-23*) Refusing to listen and hear Paul’s perspective had dire consequences.

Three principles from these examples are still powerful for us today:

1. ***Do I value relationship and dialogue over my own assumptions?*** The crux of the matter comes back to our own heart. What do I really want out of my interactions? Do I want to understand and affirm the truth or do I wish to prove myself right, get my own way, or portray others how I think they are? We see what we want to see many times in our interactions, and a deep desire to be proven right or get the upper hand can undermine the beauty of dialogue and relationship. The Jews in *Acts* did not seem to be open to checking their biases and inaccurate ways of thinking. They missed an opportunity for learning and growth. Be willing to examine your motivations honestly and ask yourself “What

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do I really want?” Addressing this heart question can drive our behavior either in a positive or negative trajectory.

2. ***Can I identify the stories I am telling myself?*** When I think about the interactions I have with others, especially the more difficult ones, am I able to separate out the facts from my story? Can I accurately capture what “actually happened” and then catch myself as I begin to fill in the gaps with assumptions and inaccurate perceptions? Sometimes it is extremely helpful to list out what I know to be true vs. what I am assuming to be true. What actually was said vs. what I think was said. This identification is an initial step in understanding my own partiality or flaws in these interactions. For example, your spouse or roommate comes home and is “short” with you in their explanation of how the day went. You begin to put meaning to this short interaction, assuming the worst and convincing yourself that “they must be mad at me.” You then react in kind to them. A downward cycle begins which could have been avoided if assumptions had been separated out from the reality of the situation.
3. ***Am I willing to find out the “rest of the story?”*** What would be necessary in order to fill in the gaps of these interactions accurately? Sometimes it might mean setting up time to listen and clarify details with the other person(s). Usually this means stopping long enough to check my assumptions, give the benefit-of-the-doubt, and be willing to assume the best about someone, instead of the worst. The Israelites benefited as they took counsel and sought to understand others before acting, offering the tribes an opportunity to explain themselves first. If this loving, open dialogue can happen in a calm, unemotional manner, much damage can often be avoided.

“Story-telling” is an art that many of us do very well. And our stories, if we let them, can sometimes spin us into circles away from the truth. As *Proverbs 18:13* tells us, the refusal to listen and hear can turn us into fools. Let’s be wise enough to avoid this foolishness and be willing to dispel the stories we tell ourselves with the truth.

Some concepts adapted from *Crucial Conversations*, Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler (2012).