

“You Have to be True to Yourself”

Half-Truth #5

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“To thine own self be true.” No, that is not a quote from the bible. It is Shakespeare, words from Act 1, scene 3 of “Hamlet.” The King’s advisor, Polonius, gives this advice to his son as he headed for the University. “To thine own self be true.” In today’s vernacular we say, “Be true to yourself.” Now, the phrase seems to be understood in a few different ways. One thought is that this means one needs to always look out for his/her best interests. The logic is that you cannot really care for others unless you take care of yourself. That is a half-truth. Certainly, if you are completely exhausted, physically or emotionally, you are very limited in your ability to serve other people. A number of biblical Proverbs point to the wisdom of establishing boundaries and saying “no” sometimes, so certain individuals don’t consume all of our time, energy or money. However... the bible does not focus on encouraging us to look out for our best interests. **Philippians 2:4** for example, says **Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others.** In practical terms, I would suspect that for every one person out there who needs to focus on caring more for him/herself, there are probably nine who should be caring less about themselves and more about others.

“To thine own self be true” has a second meaning, however. Many think being true to yourself means that an individual is the best and most important judge of his/her own beliefs and actions. In other words, you should strive to believe and act in the way you think is appropriate. Whether other people think you made the right decision is not important. What matters is whether or not you believe you made the right choice. A good maxim is “Let your conscience be your guide.” You need to follow your conscience and your convictions in the decisions you make, because, at the end of the day, you are the one who has to live with yourself. “Well, that’s true, isn’t it, Pastor Dan?” Well, yes, that thinking does reflect some important truth, but it also can lead to some very subtle and dangerous errors. Let’s pause and pray the Lord would enable us to hear and heed His word today.

As Americans, we have freedom of liberty of conscience. We often call this religious freedom.

We have the right to worship or not worship God however we choose. Each person also has the right, within certain boundaries, to choose how to act according to His/her conscience. For example, when our nation has been at war we have had conscientious objectors.” These usually have been people, like Mennonites or Quakers, who believe it is wrong to kill anyone, even enemy soldiers. Thus, because of their religious beliefs, they have been exempt from servicing in combat. This is all part of what is guaranteed in the 1st Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and often called our 1st freedom. Protecting and preserving our 1st Amendment rights is, I believe, one of the most important political issues of our day.

And over the years, no one has been bigger promoters of this idea of freedom of conscience than Baptists. A few year ago Edward Gaustad wrote a book entitled, “*Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America.*” Okay, how many of your (besides Dave Arndt) know who Roger Williams was? No, I am not talking about the guy who played wide receiver for the L.A. Rams in the 70’s. Roger Williams was the first Baptist Pastor in America. When the Puritans in Massachusetts Bay colony said God needed to be worshipped in a certain way, Williams said, “No, my conscience tells me I need to worship differently” and he headed South, founding the colony of Rhode Island (It wasn’t too far south) and started the First Baptist Church of Providence Rhode Island. Roger was a rather eccentric fellow, but I have a photo of myself standing next to his statue in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda of which I am proud. Liberty of conscience is something all of us should value and cherish. No government, no other institution, no other human being, has the right to dictate what we believe or what choices we make. We should follow our conscience and be true to ourselves.

But... Even though no government or other human being has a right to dictate what we believe or what choices we make, there is someone who does. You should not need three guesses to figure out who that is. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The true God, the God described in the bible. By virtue of being the creator and Sovereign of the universes He has the right to tell us how we should

believe and behave. Thus, even though from a limited, human standpoint every person is accountable to his/her own conscience, from the perspective of the big picture, the complete picture, everyone is accountable to God. When it comes to rights, rights from a political standpoint, Muslims have the right to worship Allah and Atheists have the right to worship no one except themselves. Yet, that doesn't make what they do morally right. It is wrong to worship Allah. It is wrong to claim there is no God and worship yourself. That is the case not because I say so, but because God says so. The Lord Jesus says, **John 4:24 God is spirit, and those who worship him much worship in spirit and truth.** That is an exclamation point to the entire Old Testament which put a great emphasis not only on who we are to worship, but on how we are to worship.

So Friends, being true to yourself should not be your ultimate goal. Being true to the Lord, that should be the goal. Our conscience is not the ultimate guide that we need to follow. Rather we should look to God's word, the bible, to enable us to discern what is right and what is wrong and determine what choices we should make. And ultimately, whether we are happy with our choices is not nearly as important as whether God is pleased with those choices.

Now, I want to be clear: Being true to the Lord, seeking to do what pleases Him is not contrary to our self-interest. In fact, it is quite the opposite. What pleases God is when He is glorified. Yet, the glory of God *always includes* the ultimate good of His people. **Romans 8:28 In all things, God works for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.** Those who focus their lives on being true to the Lord will find **Psalm 16:11 Lord, make known to me the path of life; in your presences there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.** Those who choose to be true to the Lord will ultimately have zero regrets. The path God calls us to take will not always be easy, but those trusting and following the Lord Jesus will reach an eternal home (Hebrews 11:10) designed and built by God. Friends, to focus on being true to ourselves, rather than being true to the Lord, is a mistake we do not want to make.

Okay, that is our main point today, and it is an important one. The theme of being true to yourself and following your conscience also raises

a couple of questions that we as Christians need to be thinking about.

Number 1 – How do we know that we are being true to God, pleasing Him, doing His will? I have already talked about how we need to rely on what the Lord has said to us in His word, rather than on what our conscience might dictate. Yet, doesn't our conscience play a significant role in helping us understand how we apply what God has said to our individual lives? A very interesting bible passage is 1 Corinthians 4 where the apostle Paul reflects on the limitations of his conscience.

1 Corinthians 4:3a But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. The evaluation of Paul and his ministry by any human being or institution is not important. He is not trying to impress other people. This is kind of "being true to yourself," don't let other people dictate your beliefs and behaviors. But, the Paul adds, **4:3b In fact, I do not even judge myself.** He doesn't even try to make a self-evaluation because **4:4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.** In other words, my conscience is clear...but so what? My conscience doesn't determine whether I have made the right decisions or not. Only God does that. Friends, what was true for the apostle Paul is certainly true for us.

The conscience is a gift the Lord has given to every human being to help us know what is right or wrong, and to help us live in a way that pleases the Lord. Paul talks about how the conscience is a moral guide for people who have never seen a bible. **Romans 2:15 They** (people with no knowledge of the scripture) **show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.** Yet, in this fallen world, sin has messed up our consciences so it is not always a reliable moral or spiritual guide. In **1 Timothy 4:2b** Paul speaks of **liars whose consciences are seared,** meaning their consciences have been deadened to the point they experience no guilt or shame and really cannot discern right and wrong. When you become a Christian, however, the Lord enables your conscience to function more accurately. A biblically informed and spirit guided conscience enables us to know what is right and wrong, what is pleasing to the Lord, *most of the time.* Yet, our sin nature with which we struggle until we arrive

in heaven, keeps it from being infallible. That is why Paul, who I suspect was more spiritually mature than anyone I know, says that even though his conscience is clear, *God is the final judge*. He realizes that though he may think he is doing and believe the right thing, he may be wrong.

Now, I don't think Paul lost sleep over that reality. He knew he was a sinner saved by grace. He was confident that when Jesus died on the cross He paid the penalty for all the sins Paul didn't even realize he was committing. And we can have that confidence as well. However, the fallibility of my conscience, the fact it can sometimes be wrong, should lead to a bit of humility on my part. Even when I sincerely think I am right, I may still be wrong. Now, as often is the case, there are ditches on both sides of the road. We should not be moral agnostics, claiming there is no way to really know if something is right or wrong. Though my conscience is fallible, the bible is not. God's word cannot be mistaken. When it teaches something is wrong, it is wrong. No one should ever be prayerfully pondering whether it is okay to have an adulterous affair. The bible clearly says that is wrong. Someone may not feel guilty about filling a false claim with the insurance company, because "I have been paying premiums for years," but "thou shall not steal" is a pretty clear biblical command. When the bible clearly says something is right or wrong, we should clearly affirm that, yes, this is right or this is wrong, *because God has said so*. This is true whether it involves a decision we are making, or one someone else is making. God's word reveals timeless, universal, absolute truth, truth that is applicable to all people, in all places, at all times.

However, even though the bible is infallible, never mistaken, our interpretation of the bible and application of the bible can very well be mistaken. For example, my friend, Joe, remember him? He refuses to eat ham sandwiches because "the bible says you should not eat pork." Well, Joe is right. In the book of Leviticus, it does say, "do not eat pork." But that is not *what the bible teaches*. In the New Testament it is clear that the prohibition against eating pork was a *temporary regulation* under the mosaic law, but does not apply for Christians today. That is made clear in **Mark 7:18b, 19 Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart by his stomach, and is expelled?** The mark adds (thus he declared

all food clean.) So even though Joe thinks he is really honoring the Lord by not eating ham sandwiches, even though he thinks this is what the bible says he should do, he is mistaken. Friends, sincere beliefs that are not true, that do not correspond to reality, are not healthy, helpful or honoring to the Lord.

"But Pastor Dan, if I sincerely think my beliefs are right, I am certainly not going to change them." No you should not. Yet, we all should be humble enough to admit that maybe, just maybe, we are wrong. So, for example, if we discover that a lot of other Christians believe the bible teaches something different that we think, we ought to be like the Bereans of Acts 17:11 and search the scriptures to see if what other folks are saying is true. We need to prayerfully ponder what the bible says and make sure we are being true to God and to His word. Sometimes it is not what the bible teaches that shapes our belief, but what we were taught by our parents, or by a Pastor, or by the community of which we were a part. For years, I thought it was wrong to drink even a drop of alcohol. My conscience and my understanding of the bible both told me it was a sin for anyone to consume a glass of wine or can of beer. I was sincere in my belief, but I was wrong. As I studied the bible more, I realized that though drunkenness is clearly a sin, a glass of wine is not, if you are 21 or older. Now, for a variety of reasons I still choose not to drink alcoholic beverages, but the reasons are not what the bible says or what my conscience says.

So what do we do if our consciences don't agree? What if my conscience is telling me something different than your conscience tells you? For example, a guy may say, "I believe it is God's will that we get married," even as the gal is thinking, "No way in the world am I marrying him." Or a wife may tell her husband, "I have been praying about this and I know God wants us to sell our house and move into an apartment," even though her husband has zero interest in doing that. Or a Deacon at the church board meeting may say, "God has told me we need to cut our pastors' salaries and use that money to support more missionaries."

A basic rule is that our conscience is not binding on other people. When we are making decisions like who to marry, where we should live and how many missionaries a church should support, it is

important to ask God to guide us, and we have every reason to think He will do that. However exactly how that happens can be a little more complicated. Unless we have clear instructions from the bible, or maybe hear an audible voice from the Lord, we have to rely on our own conscience, conviction or belief. Yet, the most we can say is, "I think this is what the Lord wants us to do. But, I cannot be sure. I might be mistaken. I need you to help me discern God's will for us." And we ask questions: I think the Lord wants us to get married, what do you think? I think it is God's will that we sell the house and move to an apartment. What do you think? Or, I think the Lord wants us to cut the pastors' salaries just a tiny bit, so we can give more money to missionaries. What do you think?" Friends, you cannot expect other people to simply treat your beliefs, as the voice of God. When, the bible does not address a specific issue or question, I am free to follow my conscience, as long as my choice of what to believe or do doesn't impact other people. Then there is a bit more work to be done.

And one thing the bible makes clear is that we need to respect the conscience and convictions of other believers in Jesus. When the bible does not specifically address an issue, it is not surprise that Christian believers might have different opinions and reach different conclusions.

In the mid first century, Christians in the city of Rome were having a dispute over what foods were appropriate to eat. For different reasons than today, there were some who thought it was important to stick to a vegetarian diet, while others felt free to enjoy beef, chicken and maybe even pork. Inspired by God's spirit, the apostle Paul wrote these words. **Romans 14:1-2 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person only eats vegetables.** It is pretty clear which side of the dispute Paul would be on, but his point is there doesn't need to be a dispute. **14:3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats. For God has welcomed him.** The he provides the reason for this. **14:4a Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls.** Wow, that is a good verse to remember.

In other words, when the bible doesn't clearly tell you what you should believe or how you should behave, you then ought to rely on your conscience to make those decisions. And the more your conscience is informed by the bible and shaped by God's spirit, the better it will be. Because ultimately, these matters are between you and God, and the rest of us need to respect that. Because as I like to say.... And it would be good if you remember this,... if God is pleased with your decision, it doesn't really matter what other people think. And if God is not pleased with your decision, it doesn't really matter what other people think. May the Lord help us strive to be true to Him each and every day.