Sunday, September 29, 1996
KNOWING AND DOING
Matthew 21:23-32

There's a huge difference between knowing what's right and doing what's right. Most of us, I believe, know what's right; the problem comes in doing what's right.

Frequently, when I'm driving in the afternoons from my office at the church to an appointment, I listen to a call-in program where individuals discuss their problems with Dr. Laura Schlessinger. In these conversations, it almost always becomes clear that the person calling for advice knows what the right thing to do is but struggles to do it.

Here's one example. A man we'll call Al, age 42, told Laura that he had been divorced for three and a half years and had three children, ages eleven, fourteen, and sixteen. His wife divorced him because he was an absentee father, traveling a lot for business.

After the divorce, he stopped traveling in order to make his new live-in girlfriend, who was twenty-eight, happy. Laura asked the obvious question: "Why did you choose to change your schedule after the divorce?"

"Hindsight is 20/20," he said. "The problem now is my live-in girlfriend wants to leave town, and she wants me to go with her. I want to be involved with my children. I even tried to get physical custody of them."

"You tried to take the children away from their mom, who was there day in and day out while you were on the road all the time? What nerve!" Laura said.

"I was always there when I was in town," Al replied.

"Oh, we're all happy for that," said Laura sarcastically, "but she was the hands-on parent all the time. You've already lost points with me, but let's see what we can salvage."

"I'm being honest," said Al.

"Just because you're honest doesn't mean what you've done is right," Laura answered.

"I understand that," said Al. "My girlfriend wants me to move with her to another state so she can finish up her advanced degree."

"Isn't the answer 'no'?" asked Laura.

"I would always be there for my children regardless," said Al.

"No, you can't be there for them when you aren't physically there consistently," replied Laura. "Your first responsibility when you have children is to be a parent to them. That means everything else comes second. Why don't you tell your new girlfriend she can have visitation with you every other weekend when she flies into town to see you? Give her a sense of what that's like. Do you think she'll feel like you're there for her when you're not physically present?"

"I see what you mean," said Al. "I know what's right, but doing it is the problem."

Isn't that true for most of us? We usually know what's right but have trouble doing it. We even make promises that we're going to do what's right and then don't follow through. That's where character and courage come in. Commitment is about behaving in the way you promised, even when the mood in which you made the promise has changed. Commitment protects us from our changing moods, feelings, and desires.

What Jesus taught is that one's character is based not on what we know or say, but on what we do. I am what I choose to do. To make it easier on ourselves, when we don't do what we know is right, we usually find reasons to excuse ourselves.

In the comic strip Frank and Ernest, two bums are sitting along a wall conversing. One says to the other, "Do you believe in fate?" The other replies, "Sure. I'd hate to think I turned out like this because of something I had control over."

The big problem in today's world is that we now have all sorts of political, psychological, social, and medical theories to justify what we do or don't do. We have so many things to blame instead of taking personal responsibility for our actions or inaction. By making ourselves victims, we avoid personal responsibility.

The worst excuse is when someone says, "After all, I'm only human," as an attempt to excuse their wrong action or lack of action. Jesus taught that being human and created in God's image gives each of us the unique opportunity to use our minds and wills to act in ways that elevate us above the animal kingdom.

Jesus told a story — a parable — that illustrates God's preference for what we do rather than what we know or say we're going to do and then fail to do. It also illustrates that we have the power to do what's right, in addition to knowing what's right.

A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Go and work in the vineyard today." The son said, "No," but afterward, he repented and went. The father then said to the second son, "Go and work in the vineyard." The second son said, "Yes," but did not go. Jesus asked, "Which of these two did the will of his father?" The people answered, "The first."

To better understand the parable, here's the context in which it was told.

Jesus had been talking and arguing with some of the religious leaders of his time. They were critical of him and his disciples because of their association with sinners and unbelievers — the outcasts of society. Such people, they argued, did not have the correct theology and, therefore, could not possibly know or do the will of God. They believed God certainly wouldn't accept such people.

To make matters worse, some of these undesirable people had become followers and close associates of Jesus. Did they have enough Biblical knowledge? Did they know all the rules and laws of religion? Did they know what was right?

So Jesus told this story as a way of responding to the complaints and criticisms against him.

The parable tells us that God is more interested in our actions, our behavior, and what we do than in our promises, our words, or what we say we are going to do.

Remember, the first son in the parable said he would not work in the vineyard but later repented and did what was right. The second son promised he would work in the vineyard but didn't do it.

In terms of our religious faith, God is not as interested in how many solemn promises we make or whether we say the right words in our prayers, or use the most precise theological language, or how pious we appear to be. God wants to know how we are living our faith in our day-to-day decisions and actions.

Both sons in the story knew what was right. One did it, and the other did not. Why?

Why are we so often like the second son? We know what's right, sometimes we even say we're going to do what's right, but then we don't.

One reason we don't always do what's right, even when we know what's right, is that doing the right thing is difficult and even painful. So we take the easy way out. For example, it's difficult to do the right thing when it means going against our peer group. The easy way out is to go along with the crowd, even though we know it's wrong. Sometimes doing the right thing involves confrontation, conflict, bad feelings, uncomfortable moments, and the possibility of not being liked, so we take the easy way out. Sometimes, instead of deferring gratification, we give in to immediate gratification. That's the easy way out. But immediate gratification is just that — it has no lasting value. It gives us no long-term joy.

On the other hand, Jesus lived and taught that the path to solid, healthy relationships, self-respect, and a quality life begins with the painful decision to do the right thing.

Furthermore, Jesus taught that we human beings can derive the deepest happiness in our lives from the very act of resisting temptations — not getting something, someone, or somewhere the easy way. He taught that an even deeper satisfaction can be obtained by helping someone at the expense of oneself, doing it in secret, so that no one else knows you've done it.

In other words, we human beings, because we are made in the image of God, can derive joy from having good character. The best definition of good character, or what we sometimes call integrity, is "what you are when no one else is looking."

How, then, can we be more like the first son in the parable, doing the right thing even when we were initially going in the wrong direction?

In studying this parable again this past week in preparation for this sermon, two words jumped out at me. They are the two most important words in the story: he repented. The first son repented. He had the courage and conscience to admit to himself and to God that he had made a mistake — that even though he knew the right thing to do, he at first said he wasn't going to do it.

Repentance is never easy. It's painful to own up to the truth about yourself — but that's what people of integrity can do. Repent, change the direction of their living, and when we do this, God's power gives us the strength to do the right thing, despite the difficulty and pain.

In his book Timeless Healing, Dr. Herbert Benson describes his father as a man who did the right things. "My father tried to impress upon me and my siblings the importance of doing

things right. He told us about the time a shopkeeper had had to let him go from his job sweeping up. To finish the job well, my dad was especially thorough cleaning up that night. The next day, the shopkeeper called to tell my father that if he was willing to return, the shopkeeper would find the financial means to keep him on."

I believe that God teaches us that joy comes from doing what's right, in spite of others' reactions or the difficulty involved. In so doing, God gives us the power to attain mastery over our weaker selves, becoming what God intends us to be. Amen.