Book 32

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 in the afternoons when I'm driving from my office in the church to an appointment somewhere else, I listen on my car radio to a call-in program where individuals discuss their problems with Dr. Laura Schlessinger. In the conversations it almost always becomes clear that the person who has called for advice knows what's the right thing to do in his or her situation, but is having trouble doing it.

Here's one example. A man we'll call Al, age 42, told Laura, that he has been divorced for three and a half years and has three children eleven, fourteen, and sixteen. His wife divorced him because he was an absentee member of the family, choosing to travel a lot "for business."

After the divorce, he stopped the traveling in order to make his new live-in woman friend, twenty-eight, happy. Laura asked the obvious question. "Why did you choose after the divorce to change your schedule?" "Hindsight is 20/20," he said. "The problem now is, my live-in friend wants to leave town and wants me to go with her. I want to be real involved with my children. I even tried to get physical custody of them."

"You were trying 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, "but she was the hands-on parent all the time. You've already lost points with me, let's see what we can salvage."

"I'm being honest," said Al. "Just because you're honest doesn't mean that what you've done is right." Laura answered.

"I understand that." said Al, "My live-in friend 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 there physically on a consistent basis," replied Laura. "Your first responsibility when you make children is to be a parent to them. That means everything else comes second. Why don't you tell your new honey that she can have visitation with you every other weekend when she flies into town to see you. Give her some sense of what that's like. Do you think that she'll think you can be there for her when you're not physically there as well as when you are?"

"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 to behave even though the mood in which you made the promise has changed. Commitment is there is protect 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 syndicated comic strip, FRANK AND ER-

NEST, 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 now we 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 action or inaction. By making ourselves a victim we avoid personal responsibility.

The worst excuse is when someone says as an attempt to excuse their wrong action or lack of action, "After all I'm only human." Jesus taught that being human and created in God's image

gives each one of us the unique opportunity to use our mind and will to act in ways that elevate us above the animal kingdom.

Jesus told a story, a parable which illustrates God's preference for what we do rather than what we know or say we're going to do and then not do it. It also illustrates that we have to power to do what is right in addition to knowing what is right.

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

story 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 who had been critical of him and his disciples because of their association with sinners and unbelievers--the outcasts of society. Such people did not have the correct theology. Thus they could not possibly know the will of God, or do it. 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 knowlege? Did they know all the rules and

laws of religion? Did they know what was right?

So it was that Jesus told this story as a way of replying to the complaints and criticisms against him.

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

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

In terms of our religious faith, God is not much

interested in how many solemn promises we make, or whether we say the right words in our prayers, or we 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 the right thing to do. One did it and the other did not. Why?

Why are we so often like the second son, we know what the right thing is to do, sometimes we even say we are going to do the right thing and yet we don't.

One reason we don't always do what is right even though 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 that 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, supportive healthy relationships, self-respect and a quality life starts with the usual-

ly painful decision to do the right thing.

Furthermore Jesus taught that we human beings can actually derive the deepest happiness in our lives in the very act of resisting temptations, from not getting something, someone, or someplace the easy way. And he taught that an even deeper satisfaction can be obtained by helping someone at the expense of oneself and 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 and 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 so that we do the right thing even when at first we were 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 enough 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 are able to 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 in spite of difficulty and pain.

In the first chapter of his new 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, so 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 "right" in spite of the reaction from

others or the fact that it is many times difficult. In so doing, God gives us the power to attain mastery over our weaker selves and we are then what God intends us to be. Amen.