

INTRODUCTION

This is the final message in the series, “No, that’s NOT in the Bible.” Since I’ve started this series, I’ve encountered several other “sayings” often mistakenly quoted as coming from the Bible. Here are some other sayings that aren’t in the Bible: Charity begins at home; This too shall pass; Good things come to those who wait; All men are created equal (Declaration of Independence); Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust; Whosoever Will May Come (Hymn by Phillip Bliss). Not long ago someone asked me if the phrase “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child” is from the Bible. No, that’s from Shakespeare’s King Lear.

There are hundreds of sayings people think are in the Bible. Also in my study I came across some funny sayings you’ll *never* mistake as coming from the Bible: Time wounds all heels; He who laughs last thinks slowest; The shortest distance between two points is under construction; Love is grand; divorce is fifty grand; A day without sunshine is like, well, night.

If this series has taught us anything, it is that we must study the scriptures and whenever someone flippantly says, “The Bible says…” We need to ask them to find chapter and verse before we accept it as coming from the Bible!

Today we’re going to examine the saying, “To thine own self be true.” No, that’s NOT in the Bible. It comes from William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, in which Polonius is giving some fatherly advice to his 18-year-old son, Laertes, before he departs for Paris. He has just told Laertes, “Neither a lender or borrower be.” (another phrase people think comes from the Bible) In the next lines he comes to the pinnacle of his fatherly wisdom as he says, “This above all; to thine own self be true. And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

I’ve saved this saying for last because I believe this phrase has become the motto of modern America. It combines two concepts that cannot be ignored: self and truth. Americans are involved in a continual love affair with self. Our mantra has become: Take care of #1. Know yourself, love yourself, and be true to your self. Self has become the basic standard for truth. Americans bow down at the altar of Sovereign Self. How far this is from the words of Jesus spoken in Mark 8:34 when He said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Today, we hear, love self; protect self; promote self—and Jesus said, “Deny your *self*.” He wasn’t talking about denying yourself some *thing*—like going without food, or pleasure. He meant to *deny* self’s desire to constantly climb onto the throne of your life. Let’s examine the dangerous implications of taking “To thine own self be true” literally.

I. TRENDS THAT THREATEN OUR CULTURE

In Washington Irving’s classic tale *Rip Van Winkle*, Rip is a hen-pecked husband who wanders off in the Catskill Mountains. There he finds some strange little people with a strange drink. He drinks some of their brew and settles down to take a nap. When he wakes up he thinks someone has played a trick on him because his beard is long and his rifle is rusty—and his trusted dog is nowhere to be found. He doesn’t realize he’s been asleep for 20 years and 2 days. When he went to sleep it was 1766, and America was a British colony and when he woke up it was a young

nation. As he wanders back into town, he is surprised to find that King George’s face on the tavern sign has been replaced by one that says “General Washington.” It’s really a story about how some people sleep through major changes.

I am here to announce that while many of us have been asleep something has happened over the past two decades: America has moved from the “modern” age into the “post-modern” age. Americans have embraced a new set of values. Part of the reason you might have slept through it is because East Texas is a little oasis of biblical morality and solid family values. But while you were sleeping, our nation changed. Welcome to the postmodern world.

The core value of post-modern thought can be summarized with this statement: Tolerance is more important than truth! Like many words, “tolerance” has a definition and it has a different meaning. Words can have original definitions and different usages. For instance, the word “gay” originally meant “happy and carefree.” That’s the definition, but the current usage of the word is totally different, so I seldom say, “I feel so gay today!”

The word “tolerance” has undergone the same change. Tolerance used to mean, “respecting the beliefs and practices of others without agreeing with them.” The new use of the word tolerance means that I must not only allow but I must accept the beliefs and practices of those with whom I disagree. This new tolerance came to be in a postmodern world where objective truth no longer exists. There are only subjective opinions and if someone’s truth differs from your truth you must accept it as being as valid as your truth; if you don’t, you are intolerant.

George Barna has done extensive research into the moral and spiritual beliefs of Americans and he found: (1) 72% of Americans believe: “There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both could still be correct.” (2) 71% of Americans believe: “There are no absolute standards that apply to everybody in all situations.” (3) 64% of Americans believe: “Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and all others pray to the same God, even though they use different names for that God.” (4) 64% of Americans believe: “All religions are equally good.”

In 1987 Allan Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind*. He was a college professor, and he wasn’t writing from a Christian perspective. His thesis is that Americans replaced objective truth with the European ideas of nihilism and despair. We have embraced moral relativism and disguised it as tolerance. He writes: “Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. They have been taught that the danger of ‘absolutes’ is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness—and openness has become the ‘great insight’ of our times.” (*The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 25)

“To thine own self be true” has become the “life verse” for millions of young people who not only are ignorant of what the Bible says, but they don’t think it’s true anyway. These trends can be seen in three different areas:

(1) Civic individualism

For years, Americans were willing to sacrifice the rights of the one, for the good of the many. But today the value of corporate accountability has been replaced with the cry for “personal liberty!” The essence of individualism is: What’s true for you may not be true for me. Instead of asking questions like, “is this right or wrong?” the new question has become, “Is this right for ME or not?”

A few years ago, the senior at West End High School in Salt Lake City were rehearsing for their graduation exercise. The high school choir was going to sing two traditional songs. But one student in the choir objected because the songs contained the words “God” and “Lord.” So instead of opting not to participate, she and her parents sued the school. And of course, you know what happened. The Federal Court of Appeals ruled that the songs couldn’t be sung.

Chuck Colson calls this “the tyranny of the individual—in which one person can obstruct the rights of the majority.” Colson goes on to write: “If the student had been requesting the right not to participate, that is something we can all agree upon. She could be excused, opt out as Christians often do in sex-education classes. But she was demanding something more: that the majority be prevented from singing songs she didn’t agree with.” (Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance*, p. 61)

(2) Moral relativism

In this postmodern age, there are no longer any moral absolutes. The main question is no longer “Is this wrong or right?” The pertinent question has become, “Is this wrong for ME or right for ME?” For instance, if you think having an abortion is wrong, then it is wrong for you, but if I think it’s right for me, then it’s okay. After all, “To thine own self, be true.”

One youth pastor was speaking to teenagers about premarital sex. One of the girls spoke up and said, “If you feel it’s okay, then there’s nothing wrong with it. Didn’t Jesus say that what matters most is what you feel in your heart?” The youth pastor went on to say that Jesus agreed with what Jeremiah wrote about the human heart, “It is deceitful above all things, desperately wicked, who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

Moral relativism says something is right if it *feels* right for you. Once, our nation was guided by good moral standards based on the Bible—today anything goes. The bizarre is even paraded before our eyes on daytime talk shows. When we see enough people on television who have kissed their best friends’ sisters’ boyfriend’s pet, we tend to become hardened. It’s easy to say, “Well, I’d never do anything like that, but if they want to, that’s their own business.” Harry Blarney wrote: “Ours is an age in which ‘conclusions’ are arrived at by distributing questionnaires to a cross-section of the population or by holding a microphone before the lips of casually selected passers-by in the street...In the sphere of religious and moral thinking we are rapidly heading for a state of intellectual anarchy in which the difference between truth and falsehood will no longer be recognized. Indeed, it would seem possible that the words true and false will eventually (and logically) be replaced by the words likable and dislikable.” (*The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think*, p. 107).

Young people, if a professor or a teacher tells you there are no moral absolutes, but right for you is what you think and feel is right, walk up and stomp on their big toe. When they are getting ready to go berserk hold up your hand and say, "I thought that was the *right* thing to do, and it sure *felt* like the *right* thing to do!" Don't really do that. Instead, when they insist there are no moral absolutes, ask them, "Are you absolutely certain about that?"

(3) Spiritual pluralism

The theological platform of the postmodern mind is, "All spiritual beliefs are equally true and equally valid." If anyone claims their belief is superior or that someone else is teaching error, they are labeled as intolerant. In this postmodern age, religion is like a cafeteria line. You can choose the Christian way, the Jewish way, the Muslim way, the New Age way, or you can choose your own way. Or, if you want, pick and choose, and combine some of the major religions—it's okay because they are all equal.

After the 9/11 attack there was a service held in Yankee Stadium called "A Prayer for America." That service was a postmodern model because it had every imaginable religious persuasion present. The roster included leaders of local Muslim, Hindu and Sikh temples, black and white protestant pastors, Armenian and Greek orthodox archbishops, and male and female Jewish Rabbis. The perfect postmodern poster girl was the master of ceremonies—Oprah Winfrey. She slipped in her new age doctrine by saying, "When you lose a loved one you gain an angel whose name you know. On Sept. 11, 6,000 angels were added to the roster." Ahh, that's nice, but is it true? The postmodern mind says, "It's true for her, so it's true."

It can best be summarized by New Age guru Shirley MacLaine. She holds a typical postmodern perspective. In her book, *Out on a Limb* she asks David, her spiritual guide, if he believes in reincarnation. He replies, "It's true if you believe it and that goes for anything." As followers of Jesus Christ, we are commanded to share the good news with every person in the world—that's where we meet opposition. If we dare to insist we are right, then we violate the spirit of the postmodern age: tolerance.

A few years ago, Dear Abby wrote some remarks about discussing religious differences. She received a letter from a reader who disagreed with her approach. The letter said: Dear Abby: "Your answer to the woman who complained that her relatives were always arguing with her about religion was ridiculous. You advised her to simply declare the subject off-limits. Are you suggesting that people talk about only trivial, meaningless subjects so as to avoid a potential controversy?...It is arrogant to tell people there are subjects they may not mention in your presence. You could have suggested she learn enough about her relatives' cult to show them the errors contained in its teaching." Now, I tend to agree with the author of that letter. I think we should always be able to discuss our differences. But Dear Abby didn't agree. Her reply was: "In my view, the height of arrogance is to attempt to show people the 'errors' in the religion of their choice." (September 19, 1989)

The best definition of tolerance I've found was spoken way back during the age of reason in the last century. President John F. Kennedy said, "Tolerance implies no lack of commitment to one's own beliefs. Rather it condemns the oppression or persecution of others." I don't think people

who disagree with me should be oppressed or persecuted. But I do want to have the chance to dialogue with them and to lovingly show them what I believe to be the truth. That leads to our next main point:

II. THE REQUIRED RESPONSE TO OUR CULTURE

I believe these trends are dangerous. G. K. Chesterton, the English author who strongly influenced the life and writing of C.S. Lewis, once said, “Tolerance is a virtue of a man without convictions.” This statement alludes to one of the dire consequence of the new tolerance: the loss of conviction. So what are we going to do? The Psalmist asked the same question in Psalm 11:3: “When the FOUNDATIONS are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” When our moral and spiritual foundations are being destroyed, what can we do? Like Rip Van Winkle, the church has got to wake up. We can’t do church the way we did it way back in the 1990s! The problem is that some of you want to do church the way we did it back in the 1950s! So the first thing, I challenge you to do to is Wake up! Wake up! The world is different than it was when you went to sleep! Let me mention a couple of responses that are required:

(1) We must speak the truth even when it’s unpopular

We’ve got to start by answering the question: Is there any objective truth? Or it is enough to say, “To thine own self be true?” Dr. Frances Shaeffer addressed that question: “If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies [to all people], that which provides a final or ultimate standard. If there is no absolute beyond man’s ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.”

The founders of our country believed there were some objective human truths that have always been true and will always be true. They wrote in our Declaration of Independence: We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) Jesus didn’t say He was *one* of the ways, or *one* of the truths, and part of a life. The definite article in the original language denotes a one-and-only kind of claim. Jesus didn’t claim to be one of the ways to come to God the Father; He clearly said there is no other way. Now, as Christians, we risk the danger of being labeled as intolerant, narrow-minded and bigoted because we believe Jesus is the only way to heaven.

Sometimes people try to dismiss Jesus by saying He was simply a good teacher. C.S. Lewis wrote some strong words about the exclusivity of Jesus: If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, “Are you the son of Brahma?” he would have said, “My son, you are still in the veil of illusion.” If you had gone to Socrates and asked, “Are you the son of Zeus?” he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, “Are you the son of Allah?” he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, “Are you Heaven?” I think he would have probably replied, “Remarks which are not in accordance with

nature are in bad taste.” The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man. (“What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970). pp. 157-158.)

Tolerance says, “Jesus is only one of the ways to God. It’s your way, and it’s true for you, but it may not be true for me.” Dorothy Sayers wrote: “In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair, the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.”

In a postmodern age, we must stand up for Jesus while we still have a place to stand. We must speak the truth. But as Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:15, “We must speak the truth in love.”

(2) Choose to obey God rather than man

In the Book of Acts, Peter and John were arrested and the Supreme Court of Israel, the Sanhedrin, officially ordered them *not* to speak publicly about Jesus anymore. It was fine if they wanted to believe it for themselves, but they were forbidden from trying to persuade anyone else to believe. Peter and John decided to obey God and to suffer the consequences. We read in Acts 4:19, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

That’s exactly where we find ourselves today. The postmodern world tells us, “Keep your beliefs to yourself. It’s fine if you want to believe that, but don’t you tell me I’m wrong.” The time may soon come when there is a law passed that will prevent me from saying publicly that homosexual behavior is wrong. There is already a law to that effect in Canada. There are some who would say that such a statement constitutes a hate crime. We are fast approaching a time when the only “bad people” are those who try to impose their moral standards on others.

For instance, Ron Brown is an Assistant Football Coach at the University of Nebraska. He has impeccable academic and athletic credentials. He was one of the leading candidates for the head coaching job at Stanford University. But he was rejected because as an evangelical Christian he shared that in his candid opinion, homosexual behavior was wrong. Brown, who is African-American, never identified the school, but it is common knowledge that he was being interviewed by Stanford. “If they had a problem with my skin color they never would have come out and said it,” Brown says. “They had a problem with my faith, and they had no problem saying that.” The school later issued an explanation that said that his beliefs “had to be considered in the final evaluation.”

We’re in the postmodern world and there’s no going back. But if you think this is an “ain’t it awful” message, think again. I am tremendously excited about the opportunity we have to share the gospel to a postmodern world. People are going to find that they have a need for truth, and we can humbly say, “We know the truth—His name is Jesus.” For the postmodernists, they are more interested in relationships than beliefs. And that’s what we’ve got to offer: A relationship

with God and a relationship with people who will love them. The future is bright for the church that wakes up and realizes things have changed. Our message will never change, but the way we package the message has got to change.

CONCLUSION

In "Fiddler on the Roof," Tevye is listening as some villagers debate a business transaction. The issue at stake is whether an animal is a horse or a mule. One villager asks Tevye to support his side of the argument, so Tevye says, "You're right!" At which, the other villager emphatically stresses his opposing argument to Tevye. Tevye shrugs his shoulders and says, "You're right." A third villager confronts Tevye and says, "But Tevye, they both cannot be right." Tevye thought for another moment and said, "You're right, also!" That's the spirit of this age. I'm right, you're right, we're all right, alright?

Islam claims Jesus was simply a great prophet who never was crucified or resurrected. And the Bible claims Jesus died on the cross for our sins and was buried and on the third day rose again. They both cannot be right. Only one is truth, and there is no way to say both Islam and Christianity are truth. If Islam is true, then Christianity is a false religion and we should turn this building into a mosque. If Christianity is truth; Islam is a false religion, and we should be lovingly sharing the good news with the one billion Muslims on this planet.

It's a new world. "To thine own self be true?" Is that truth? What you your "self" thinks? That's a pretty scary standard of truth! Should we say, "To thine own God be true?" No, we should hear the words of Jesus when He said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free!" (John 8:31-32)

OUTLINE

I. TRENDS THAT THREATEN OUR CULTURE

Summary: Tolerance is more important than truth!

- (1) Civic individualism
- (2) Moral relativism
- (3) Spiritual pluralism

II. THE REQUIRED RESPONSE TO OUR CULTURE

"When the FOUNDATIONS are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" *Psalm 11:3*

- (1) Speak the truth even when it's unpopular

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." *John 14:6*

- (2) Choose to obey God rather than man

Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." *Acts 4:19*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes