

July 19 What Is Right?

I John 4:1-6

Becky Morgan kept a pastor's page from a former church that meant much to her. It begins with the question, "Not who is right but what is right?" It then goes on to list briefly 11 tests for answering that question. I have made copies of that article if you wish to take it home and reflect on those tests. I agree that they are good things for us to consider.

The question of "What is Right?" has been around as long as the Christian church. In the letter of 1 John the writer talks about testing the spirit to see if it is from God. Even then there were some proclaiming ideas that seemed contrary to the words of Jesus. A commentary about these verses says: "Believers must discern whether prophecies are true or false." So we know there is a problem with understanding what is authoritative that is as old as the church. Often, instead of reflecting on the words and their implications for our lives, we embrace an idea because of who is speaking.

In my reflection study we recently looked at this issue. Brian McLaren talks about moving from a "following the rules" mentality to a wisdom approach if we are to grow and mature. He likens it to the difference between being in grade school to being in high school. We know how important it is to learn the rules when you are just beginning school. Academics take second place to such important learning skills as be quiet when the teacher is talking, wait your turn, and sit still. These skills are enforced by a number of rules with praise when followed, and consequences when ignored. If we never move beyond this mentality school would look pretty silly by the time a student is graduating 12 years later. We would laugh if, instead of a senior project, the teacher wrote, "Sally or Johnny is doing well at sitting and listening." By this time we assume they know the rules and are applying them to life. We want them to be thinking critically, integrating that knowledge and using it. Rules are about who is right. Wisdom, to use McLaren's term, is about what is right.

In these days of extreme polarization, be it in religion or politics, we see these polar opposites in play. More often than not, people are focused on who is sharing an

idea instead of asking what is right. They are more concerned about following the rules than about living in a meaningful and purposeful way. We see politicians, pastors, and individuals align themselves with ideas, proposals and projects based on popularity, intrinsic beliefs, rules or fear. We have quit asking what is right. We defend a position or a person out of some misplaced loyalty that in so doing we will...and you can fill in the blanks with words such as, be faithful to the Bible, defend the country from its foes, defeat the opposition. It is time to step back and ask what is right.

Primary school thinking is all about is it right or wrong, legal or illegal. It is about following the rules, and the rules are always made by those in power. Wisdom challenges us to step back and ask critical questions. Here are McLaren's tests for what is right.

Will this help or hinder my highest goals? Another way of saying this is that when we are making a decision, be it a little one or a big one, we need to step back and see it in the context of the rest of our life. We, as Christians, know that our highest goals are to love God and to love our neighbor. We do this by caring for those in need, by offering gifts of forgiveness, by willingly taking on the role of servant and always striving to do the will of God. Yet, when we are making decisions we sometimes forget these goals. We focus on the moment. We refuse to forgive because all we can think about is our hurt. We get angry when not asked to lead, forgetting about serving. We get into thinking about our rights, our wants and our desires and forget about what is right.

Where will this lead short-, medium-, and long-term? Again, this is asking us to step back and look at the big picture. McLaren believes, and I agree, that basically we are good people. We want to be faithful in our decisions, we want to follow Jesus. But when we get caught up in the heat of the moment, those ideals can disappear. We are back in kindergarten complaining about the rules of life and why what we are doing is correct or another's view is incorrect. We don't look at how these choices might hinder or help our highest goals; we don't ask where they are leading us. To do what is right requires this thinking because sometimes that kind of questioning causes us to ignore the rules, or demand the rules be changed. All social change has happened because enough people have asked these kinds of questions and determined that the

current rules are not in line with our highest goals, and in the long and short run are hurtful to us and others.

I recall visiting with someone who had run for office. They were not elected. Soon after the election their opponent called to see if they would be on a task force. His first response was to say no. He was still nursing his hurt pride and it felt as if the other person was rubbing in his victory. But then he paused. He thought about his campaign and he had run on one issue, I forget now what it was. He was passionate about there being something done. He was being asked to serve on the task force that was going to be looking at this issue. He was being given the opportunity to make a difference in an area he was passionate about. He just wasn't the elected official. He let go of his feelings of pride and said yes because he knew in the long run he could do a lot of good.

What unintended consequences might it entail and who might be hurt by this? This is something we need to always ask. Another term for this is collateral damage. Who might get hurt by our asserting our right? We don't intend to hurt people but we sometimes do by our actions. No one thinks that taking that drink and getting behind the wheel of a car will cause another family's life to be forever changed but we all read the statistics and see this is true. No one thinks that the words spoken in the heat of the moment might end a decade's long friendship or tear the fabric of a family forever, but it sometimes does. To figure out what is right means asking those questions. When we have failed to ask those questions and hurt people or caused unintended consequences we also need to admit this, ask for forgiveness and see if the damage can be repaired. Yes it might cause us to eat a huge slice of humble pie but better that than letting the damage go unfixed

Are there better alternatives? We sometimes call this thinking outside of the box. Too often when presented with a choice we go with what has always worked. Applying some of our earlier tests we don't see that it is contrary to our highest goals, it seems to have no long term implications, and doesn't seem to hurt anyone. It is safe, comfortable and predictable. We don't have to accept mediocrity. Good enough is not always what we want. If we are to do what is right, to grow and mature we need to ask

this question. It can change the conversation, alter the course of events, and cause growth to happen. The Moscow church is directly across the street from the high school. We were asked routinely to provide space for advanced class testing because the school did not have a space that met the rules for testing. They had tried to do it in the auditorium using those little fold up desks but it didn't really work. So we had become their test center. The building use request was again presented at ad council that we host them and we were going to pass it through when someone said, "This is a great opportunity. We have these youth with us all day. How can we let them know we care?" All of a sudden the talk went to having someone there to welcome them, providing snacks and other ideas. Asking what more or better we could do changed things. The students, some of whom had been there for tests before were surprised to find snacks and a greeter. We even got a few notes of thanks at the end of the day. We should always ask this question.

Is now the best time? This is also something to reflect upon. Just because it is the right thing doesn't mean this is the right time. We have to be open to the spirit to see what God is calling us to do. Timing is everything.

So we are challenged to grow up, to move out of primary school and graduate. We are to move from rules and who is right to the more difficult questions of what is right and when it is right. It is challenging but we are given, through the Bible, some guidelines and help. May we follow these examples.