

Becoming a Person of Conviction

Today we're taking a break from a series we started last week because in a few days, we're celebrating the 239th anniversary of America's independence. It is an important occasion and so I thought I'd focus on this event. This day is important not only to Americans but also to freedom-loving people throughout the world. It marks the day when a group of men, 56 to be exact, signed their names on a radical document that would change their nation and the world as well.

These men who signed knew that they were signing their death warrants. What they did was an open defiance of the British government and they knew there was no escaping the might of the British army, considered the best at the time. And so, when the American Revolution started, they were hunted down like animals and persecuted severely. Listen to what happened to most of them.

Of the 56 men, five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons in the Revolutionary Army. Another had two sons captured. Nine of the fifty-six fought and died from wounds or hardships of the war

What motivated these men to suffer long and hard? It was conviction. They were absolutely convinced that freedom was the inalienable right of every human being and was worth dying for.

Conviction means strong belief, being convinced about the certainty or rightness of a matter. In fact, to have conviction about something is to be willing to die for it. Nothing or no one can ever change your mind.

Do you remember the story of the young lady at Columbine High who was asked by the killer while pointing a gun at her, “Do you believe in God?” She said, “Yes,” and was promptly shot and killed.

This raises a very important question: why didn't she just take the easy way out and, for the sake of saving her life, just simply say no? There is really only one reason: she was convinced that the truth of Jesus was more important than saving her life. This girl's conviction was as strong as the conviction of the early Christians who'd rather be eaten by lions in the coliseums of Rome than deny their Savior.

Those liberty-loving 56 men had conviction. So, this afternoon, I'd like to answer the questions: Why is conviction important to a person, most especially to Christians? How can we become people of conviction?

I. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE CONVICTIONS?

Convictions are important because they provide me purpose and direction in life. Convictions are what make us human beings different from animals. If you don't have any convictions about anything, then you're not really living. You're merely existing. You're just going with the flow. In short, you have no purpose in life and you have no direction. And you'll realize that's true when you do things that you yourself don't know why you do those things.

Convictions also prevent me from being easily deceived and fooled. If you're not convinced about anything then you are easy target for charlatans and smooth-talkers. Someone said, “Those who stand for nothing fall for anything.” Isn't that true? Isn't it true that when we don't have firm beliefs, we could easily get fooled by people and by the world?

A story is told of a man who went on a hunting trip with some friends. After a few hours, he was separated from his friends and got lost in the

woods. He sat by a stream when suddenly, an old woman appeared beside him.

“Are you lost?” the old woman asked.

“Yes, can you help me find my way?”

“Sure, on one condition. You have to marry me.”

“What? You’re like my grandma. I can’t do that.”

Then, the old woman said that she was really young and beautiful and she was just put under a curse by a witch who envied her. She can be released from the curse when a young, handsome man asks her hand in marriage. She will turn beautiful again once he gives her a kiss. Then as a reward, she was also going to ask her father who lived in another country to make him the heir of his estate.

At the prospect of becoming rich and the husband of a beautiful woman with no effort at all, he readily agreed.

To make a long story short, they got married. When the minister said, “You may now kiss the bride,” he excitedly pulled the veil from the face of his new wife, closed his eyes and planted a kiss on her lips. He opened his eyes again, expecting to see a beautiful woman. But it was still the old woman, smiling at him.

“I thought you were going to turn into a beautiful woman,” he angrily said.

The old woman replied, “My dear, at your age, do you still believe in fairy tales?”

Some people are just so gullible. Without anything to stand on, they fall for a lie.

The reason why we have a lot of teen pregnancies, drug abuse, abortions, extra-marital affairs and the like is that people have fallen for the

notion that it's ok to satisfy your lustful desires even for a moment. That is what Hollywood has been telling us for decades and people are buying it. That's why we need to be careful about the kind of shows or movies that we see. Most people who become victims of Hollywood are those with no convictions about morality and family values.

So, convictions are important. They give direction to our lives. They help us avoid being deceived.

II. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE THE RIGHT CONVICTIONS?

I would say that most people have convictions about at least one thing. Something that they hold dear and would fight nail and tooth for. Now, it is one thing to acknowledge that people have the right to their own beliefs or convictions but it is another to admit that those convictions may not be right or proper. It doesn't require a lot of explanation to say that the convictions of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Osama Bin Ladin, Saddam Hussein and the rest of people like them are not right. In fact, any right-thinking person would find their convictions to be repulsive and clearly inhumane.

Some convictions may not be as gruesome as theirs but the result is the same – the destruction of lives. Some people, for example, hold the conviction that a woman has the right to abort her child. Some also believe in same-sex marriages. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that same-sex marriages are not the way marriages should be. No way that such a union could produce a child. As someone said, "Put them all in one island and I guarantee you that in 100 years, there'll be no more people in that island." Agree? If you don't, I respect that. And I still love you.

Having convictions are important, but having the right conviction is more important. Why are they important?

A. Because They Define Right Character

“Tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are.” We can change that to “Tell me what your convictions are and I’ll tell you who you are.” The first one, about friends, I don’t think that’s true. The Bible says that Jesus was a friend of drunkards, prostitutes, tax collectors, etc. but was he one of those? Did he have the same character as these wayward people that he befriended? Similarly, General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was known to be around alcoholics. No one would dare say that he had a character like theirs.

But look at what Jesus believed in. He was convinced that he came to preach the Good News, to heal the sick, to set the oppressed free. In fact, his life motto can be found in Mark 10:45, “*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.*” He lived by his convictions. Because this is the thing he strongly believed in, he was humble, helpful, compassionate, faithful, loving, to name just a few. And if you look at the second part of that verse, Jesus says, “*To give his life as a ransom for many.*” It was Jesus’ conviction that we are worth dying for and so he went to the cross to be crucified. He saved us from our sins. And that’s why we can trust him. That’s why we can put our faith in him. As the Bible says, his character never changes, “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*” (Hebrews 13:8 NIV) His love and faithfulness will never change. Amen?

If you have the right convictions like Jesus, then you’ll have the right character. So, convictions define right character. They also help me to

B. Determine the Right Course of Action

Convictions are like a guiding light. It is like a lighthouse. A lighthouse helps a ship in the dark of the night to find its way in the murky

waters. It helps it to take the right course of action, to maneuver correctly in the waters.

In the same way, if my convictions are right, then they help me to take courses of action that are right. As an example, if you are convinced that marriage is for life, then you will avoid sexual temptations at all cost. If you are convinced that good health makes for long life, then you'll eat healthy food. The problem is some people are convinced that the cake looks so good. They will die for it, I mean, they are dying to have it.

The long and the short of it is that with right convictions, you can say 'no' to a lot of things that will just bring trouble later on. And say 'yes' to things that will help develop your character.

Now, the question is, how do we develop right convictions?

III. HOW DO I DEVELOP RIGHT CONVICTIONS?

I Must Believe in Absolute Truth

The world and the times in which the 56 signers on the Declaration of Independence lived are so different from the world and the times in which we live. Back then, they recognized absolute truth. They recognized that the Bible is the Word of God, they recognized that the God of the Bible is the only God. They based their ideas of freedom, justice, and equality, on these truths. They were guided and inspired by God and His Word.

It's so different today. The Bible is no longer held in high regard. It's no longer respected as it once was. We live in a post-modern society where people say that truth is relative. "What is true for you may not be true for me but that's ok. You can do whatever you want because for you that is the truth. And I won't interfere with your kind of truth." That's why many are now encouraged to marry their homosexual partner. Or to abort an unwanted child. Or to live in with someone before marriage.

Do you see the problem we have today in this society? It is a society that's out of control. It is a society that has virtually allowed each individual to make moral decisions themselves, guided by their own notions and ideas. In this state of affairs, there's no accountability. If there's no accountability there's no sense of responsibility. Everyone does what he thinks is right.

Paul predicted / that in the last days, this is exactly what's going to happen. In 2 Timothy 3:3-9, he says, and listen as I read:

¹But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. ²People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God-- ⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. ⁶They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, ⁷always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. ⁸Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth--men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. ⁹But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.

Paul knew what the problem was going to be. It is because people are going to turn away from the truth. They would even oppose it as verse 8 says. Of course, we know that today, students are no longer taught that the Bible is the Word of God. It is treated just like any other literature. So, where do students get their truth? From their textbooks, the movies, the TV, the internet, magazines, etc.

What is Paul's advice? He says a few verses later to Timothy, "*Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.*" (2 Tim. 3:14 NIV) The Message version says, "*Stick with what you learned and believed.*"

Then two verses later, he says, "*Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another--showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way.*" (MSG) Paul is saying, "Hey, never forget what you were taught. The Bible shows you the truth."

As Christians, we must believe in the absolute truth of the Word of God. Do you know that there are Christians who no longer consider the Word of God as absolute truth? Some liberal denominations like the Episcopalians, for example, now ordain gays as ministers. And the Anglicans as well. In 2004, Presbyterian leaders narrowly defeated a vote that would let them do the same. These so-called Christian groups are going the way of the world. They're doing what is politically correct rather than what is biblically correct.

Christians must uphold the Bible as the absolute standard for doctrines and conduct.

When it comes to doctrines or teachings, we must stick fast to what we have learned like Timothy did. The doctrine of salvation, for example, is essential. We must continue to believe that we cannot save ourselves. We are saved by the grace of God through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. For the Bible says in Ephesians 2:8-9, "*Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! ⁹We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing!*" (MSG)

There are other fundamental teachings that we must uphold. Like the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the person of the Holy Spirit, to name just a few.

Now, when it comes to conduct, the Bible tells us how we should behave as Christians. First of all, it tells us that we must put God first in everything, *“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.”* (Matt. 22:37 NLT) It tells us too that we must love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (Matt. 22:39) We must be forgiving as Colossians 3:13 says, *“Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”*

Folks, our being convinced in all this truth, both in teachings and conduct, will strengthen our faith and help us to become stable in a topsy-turvy world.

Many years ago in a Moscow theater, matinee idol Alexander Rostovzev was converted while playing the role of Jesus in a sacrilegious play entitled Christ in a Tuxedo. He was supposed to read two verses from the Sermon on the Mount, remove his gown, and cry out, "Give me my tuxedo and top hat!" But as he read the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted," he began to tremble.

Instead of following the script, he kept reading from Matthew 5, ignoring the cat-calls and foot-stomping of his fellow actors. Finally, recalling a verse he had learned in his childhood in a Russian Orthodox Church, he cried, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom!" (Luke 23:42). Before the curtain could be lowered, Rostovzev had trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior.

Folks, the truth of God’s Word exposed the bareness in the life of this actor. The truth of God’s Word led him to accept Jesus as his Lord.

The truth, according to the world, is relative and changes lives for the worse. But the truth, according to the Word of God, is absolute and changes lives for the better. If you believe this, then the Bible can help you to develop right convictions about morality and other issues in life.

My friends, we live in a world of compromise. Many people find it easier to compromise because it is more convenient, less painful. But the world is waiting for people who will stand up for their convictions. People who will fight for the cause of Christ in this world.

It's my conviction that the Church of Jesus Christ needs to be filled with people of conviction, not just belief. You see, the world wants people who are more concerned with accepting all kinds of "truths." But what the world really NEEDS is for men and women of conviction to take a stand for truth. The world needs men and women of conviction to stand up and say, "There is only one way to heaven, and that is Jesus Christ. He invites all who will come to Him." The world needs men and women of conviction to take a stand on issues that reflect Biblical values and standards.

But mind you, your convictions must be YOUR convictions, not your spouse's, or your friends, or your pastor's. They need to be YOURS. No one dies for someone else's convictions. They die for their own.

Be prepared. The world doesn't like it when people of conviction are active, because it puts a cramp in their agenda. You may be persecuted for your convictions, but remember that Jesus will honor you before the angels in heaven, just as He promised. Because he was convinced that you were dying for. He sacrificed himself so that you may live.

The Bible says we are all sinners and in need of salvation. Jesus came to save us. He shed his own blood because the Bible says without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

This afternoon, if you don't know Jesus, I want you to be convinced that he is the only one who can give you direction in life. He is the only one who can right the wrong course you're taking. Whatever sin you have committed or are committing, all you need to do is to ask forgiveness for those sins and Jesus will wipe away, never to be remembered. He will make you a new creation. And it gets better, because he will give you eternal life. You will be with him in heaven forever. That's the reason he rose again from the dead. He resurrected so that you may resurrect as well. I hope you'll be convicted to make that decision today.