

## When Being Right is Very, Very Wrong by Pastor Marty

I watch the news a lot. I never used to do anything of the sort. I often would tell people that if anything important happened, I would hear it from other people talking about it. That position served me well enough when there was a modicum of sanity in our world. I only began watching the news with any sort of regularity about 5 years ago, which was just in time to see our society spiraling down into total destruction. The postmodern ideals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has effectively left us with at least 2 generations of people who are virtually unable to distinguish what is really right from what is really wrong. We have become accustomed to thinking of right and wrong as polar opposites, and there is some truth in that. Nobody wants to put the wrong answer on a test, or give the wrong answer in an interview, or take a wrong turn while driving. Some synonyms for “right” are *correct*, *exact*, *factual*, *accurate*, and *true*. However, society now uses this term not in a mathematical context in which an answer has to be either true or false but from an emotional position where opinions are good or bad. In other words, we view right and wrong the same way a dysfunctional couple argues over whose side of the argument is more valid and more important. Right or wrong is still decided based on the strength of an argument, but strength is now decided by volume, emotion, coercion, and personal value instead of by facts. We no longer use “right” to identify correct as much as to describe desirability. To quote a very famous Spaniard, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

***Repeatedly saying the same thing does not automatically make it true or false.***

The first context in which right can be wrong is when winning an argument justifies doing harm to others irrespective of the actual

importance of the subject. I heard a perfect example of this in a biblical studies class in undergrad. The professor was discussing the culture of ancient Rome, pointing out that wine was the common drink of the time—not grape juice—because the total lack of refrigeration available made the latter impossible. He then shared an instance in which a Baptist woman declared to him, “It would destroy my faith if anyone could prove to me that Jesus and the disciples drank wine instead of grape juice!” He finished by saying, “I could have proven it to her, both from the Bible and from history, but I did not want to destroy her faith, so I let it go.” I heard a pastor similarly describe it as, “Being loving is more important than being right.” I have found myself in a similar type of situation a few times, and I knew I needed to proceed with caution. I had to decide on the spot, while trying desperately to hear from the Holy Spirit, whether or not I should let an obvious error go unchallenged. I remember one time when He clearly told me to let it go because the person *needed* to believe it and was not ready to face the truth . . . but that He would take care of it in His own time. Sometimes in our weakness as human beings, we depend on certain tangential beliefs more than we should and are not ready to stand without them. In those situations, arguing to prove we are right is actually more about validating ourselves than helping others.

***Proving we are right can be more about validating ourselves than helping others.***

Of course, it is important to clarify that “being loving is more important than being right” only works as a guiding principle when we are talking about actual real love. Millions of people are trapped in destructive addictions, harmful lifestyles, and abusive relationships in our world today, and it is almost always due to

faulty beliefs about what love is and what love does. Real love never affirms evil as good, or prevents authentic growth, or leads a person away from God. I have stipulated that there can be times when it is more loving to actually let someone continue to believe something that is incorrect because challenging that belief could do more harm than good; however, this is only true when that belief is nonessential. It is never going to be “the loving thing to do” to leave someone believing something that is actually destructive, no matter how much it may make them happy. As Paul explained to the church at Corinth, love never rejoices in unrighteousness.

***As Paul says, it can never be loving to rejoice in or to affirm unrighteousness.***

This first example describes a situation where we can be correct *factually* but wrong *practically*. In other words, we use the truth in a sinful manner. Paul describes this situation when he talks about the stronger and weaker brothers, which (as I have explained in another newsletter) might be better understood as his referring to spiritual sensitivities. Although he knew without a doubt that his freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols was factually correct (objectively), he said he would not do so—and considered it a sin—if it would harm another’s conscience (subjectively). In another example, Jesus explained to Peter precisely why He did not need to pay the temple tax but then told Peter to pay it for the two of them “lest they be offended.” The principle here is that arguing to prove the correctness of a situation isn’t always the desirable course of action. Describing Jesus, Isaiah explained that “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth” to defend Himself. He did not argue to prove He was right. Of course, these situations are not promoting anything wrong but are just showing forbearance for the sake of another. It is never going to be right to do the wrong thing, but it can sometimes be wrong to do the right thing.

***It can be wrong to do the right thing if our only goal is to prove we are right.***

The second way being right can be wrong is when we are more concerned with proving our argument is right than in actually learning whether our position is correct in the first place. If you have watched the news or listened to anything political in the last few years, you know exactly what I mean. As postmodernism, relativism, and progressivism have spread in our country, certain social and political issues have taken on the emotional equivalence of religious doctrine. Of course, there are more than enough theological examples of this to qualify without needing to get into politics at all: the definition of marriage; divorce and remarriage; the place of women in the Church; and the place of the Church in government and society are just a few. However, churches and denominations have often split over issues that are far less significant or important. It would be impossible to even estimate the number of personal relationships—friendships, marriages, and families—destroyed over arguments that had no basis in fact on either side. Because we are human beings, we tend to become passionate about things we believe, and it is easy to let emotional attachment cloud sound judgment.

***It is easy for human beings to let our emotions completely override judgment.***

Although doing so may risk the wrath of my readers, I want to discuss this concept using the highly-polarizing and emotionally-charged example of climate change. Now, I am not going to argue for either position because that would defeat the purpose. Instead, I want to discuss what makes an argument more emotional than factual. The first major signal that an argument is based more on emotions than facts is the use of condemnatory rhetoric against anyone who disagrees. I will be honest

and confess that there have been times I have heard a statement from someone on television and could not resist the temptation to identify the person as an idiot; however, this type of response rarely proves anything substantial in an actual discussion. In the specific case of climate change, believers on both sides of the issue often will resort to inflammatory and derogatory language, grouping all opponents into the same category before any argument has actually been heard. We should remember that Jesus often refused to respond to those who asked loaded questions out of a desire to argue with him; He described those people as not having “ears to hear” and did not take the bait. In the same way, there are times when the most appropriate thing is to refuse to discuss something. As a general principal, the quicker rhetoric enters into an argument, the more the person is being emotional instead of factual.

***The quicker rhetoric enters an argument, the more it has become emotionally-based.***

Of course, just being emotional or passionate about a topic does not invalidate facts about the topic. However, there are three clear dangers involved. The first clear pitfall is that the more emotional people are about a position, the less they are able to clearly and accurately here opposing arguments. They may not intend to misunderstand or misinterpret, but their ability to hear what is being said has been compromised. They will automatically tend to interpret statements in extremes—and any statement taken to an extreme is likely to be problematic. The second big danger is that when people feel emotionally threatened in an argument, they have a very strong tendency to defend themselves . . . and emotional defenses are almost always exaggerated. In order to defeat the threat, either the actual facts themselves or the significance of the facts will become distorted and inflated. In that type of situation, it is easy for a person to remember a

statistic of 51% as “the vast and overwhelming majority.” The third major peril of an emotional argument is that people may be so certain of their position that objective facts become only a means to an end. The problem here is that if facts are one means to an end, there are likely other means as well. In other words, the end justifies the means. When I was in college, I would sometimes jokingly tell people, “I only take Scripture out of context when I need to in order to prove a point.” For some, convincing others of their position can be so important that facts and honesty become optional. (See Congress). Emotional arguments can rarely be discussed factually, honestly, and objectively.

***Emotional arguments usually cannot be discussed in a factual and objective way.***

At this point, it is important to point out that emotional arguments are not necessarily sinful in their motivation. If someone we love expresses an intention to actually do something significantly destructive, and we are concerned for their imminent safety, we are likely going to present a very emotional argument. Facts and statistics become largely immaterial when we see a 2-year-old run out into the street after a ball. It may well be a dead-end street that only sees one car every 5 minutes, but those facts become secondary to safety. In a situation like that, we are likely to exaggerate the danger as much as needed to convince the child to look both ways forevermore. However, there are other times when emotional arguments are motivated out of a desperate need for personal affirmation. In those cases, the person may feel so threatened by disagreement that opposing viewpoints are considered immoral, offensive, and evil. This is the time when being “right” has actually very little to do with being correct. This is largely the place we have arrived at in our society today. More and more, the *rightness* of an issue, whether it is theological or political, is now being based on emotional investment and

personal worldview. Whether or not a position is correct and true, the motivation has become the need to prove their argument at all costs.

***For many in our culture, any argument must be proven true at any and all costs.***

When I began this newsletter, I made a reference to the postmodern worldview of the last century. However, it is important for us to recognize that almost all of us have a tendency to argue from an emotional position. Ever since Adam chose to defend himself by blaming “the woman You gave me,” the human race has had a habit of being more Klingon and less Vulcan in their arguments. It is never an easy thing to be told that something we believe is wrong; even when we want something to be wrong, we are still likely to doubt the truth that sets us free! In Acts, it states that the Jews at Berea were more “noble minded” than the ones in Thessalonica because they studied the Scriptures every day to see if Paul was telling the truth. This was in stark contrast to many of those in other towns who felt a desperate need to stop Paul. It even says that when the Jews in Thessalonica heard that Paul had preached in Berea, they traveled there to stop him. Of course, we can’t be sure if their motivation was from a real belief that Paul was teaching error or from a personal need to be affirmed in their own position; however, we do know that many in Berea didn’t turn to God immediately when they heard the gospel but only after they took time to study and to check the “facts” of what he was saying. The very fact that we believe something means we have, in some way, made a commitment to it. However, if we really want to know who God is, we must desire truth more than we want to be right.

***If we truly want to know who God is, we must desire truth more than being right.***

In the book of Isaiah, God speaks to the people of Israel about their sin, and He uses 2 very different words to describe this concept. In

Isaiah 1:18, He says, “Come now, let us reason together . . . though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like snow.” The word “reason” here describes a fact-based argument. God is calling His people to have the humility to accept an invitation to learn the truth, and in return, He forgives their sins. In contrast, Isaiah 43:26-27 says, “Let us argue our case together; state your cause that you may be proved right. Your first forefather (Adam) sinned. And your spokesmen have transgressed against me.” The word “argue” here describes a more emotional argument, based on the idea of judging against someone from a position of superiority. God is letting His people know that if they approach Him in pride, convinced they already know the truth and only concerned with proving they are right, He will leave them in their condition.

***If we argue our case to simply prove we are right, our condition will never change.***

The Church in our country, as well as in many parts of the world, is now living in a time when there is a great drive to redefine reality. The first step in redefining anything is changing the meaning of the words associated with it. As the words change, our concepts tend to change as well. We are now facing a culture and society where being right no longer means being either correct or factual; the facts have now become whatever is necessary to win the argument. If we attempt to operate from this same context, we will not be successful, for even if we win the battle, we will lose the war. If we are serious in our desire to know the truth that sets us free—and if we want others to know that same truth as well—then we must fight for truth instead of fighting to prove we are right. This means not only wanting to know if we are wrong in some of what we believe but also refusing to get into arguments that are not based in truth. Perhaps this is exactly what Jesus meant when He told His disciples, “the meek will inherit the earth.”