

CHRISTIAN HONESTY

(Discourse given at East Los Angeles convention, May 27, 1974 by Norman F. Rice)

Our text is found in Psalms 24, verses 3 and 4: “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.” At first one might be surprised at this choice of a subject for an address to the Lord’s people. To the world, yes, because as we look about us we see a great lack of honesty in the world. This lack of honesty is fundamental in the moral decay so prevalent and is at the very root of some of the world’s most serious difficulties.

But honesty is not our complete subject. No, our complete subject is something quite different, more important, more complex. The full title of our subject is: Christian Honesty. We feel it is a very important topic for us to consider, for a lack of Christian honesty in many cases lies at the very foundation of some of the most perplexing problems among the brethren today.

The Pastor in one of his articles stated that the greatest sin amongst the Lord’s people, that is the most prevalent sin seemed to be the sin of dishonesty. Now, Christian honesty relates to many facets of the Christian’s life. Honesty in the minds of the worldly relates to money matters and being truthful. And while this is most certainly included in the standards of honesty for the Christian, yet Christian honesty means much, much more.

In the account we find in Acts 5:1-10, we are shown how important the Lord considers this matter of honesty. In this case it had to do with being deceitful, swearing to something that was not true, in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. When they sold a parcel of land, they claimed they were giving all the proceeds to the Lord, but they held back some. That cost them their lives. So it shows how important in the eyes of the Lord this strict honesty is.

Not only must the Christian maintain honesty of word, he must also maintain honesty in thought. The Christian must be honest in his confessions of faith; honest in his appraisal of himself; honest in the keeping of the covenant he has made with his God. We believe all these points can be summed up by the admonition of the Apostle, “Let us walk honestly.” Honesty is probably the most valuable trait of character that one possesses, for where there is little honesty, there is very little character. We believe the Lord will be careful not to accept any into kingdom glory and honor who are not absolutely honest.

Not only does the Apostle admonish, “Let us walk honestly,” but he says, “as in the day.” In other words we are told we are children of the day—that means we are children of the new dispensation. The standards that will apply during the reign of righteousness are to

be our standards now. This means then that all of our dealings whether they be in regard to personal affairs, or whether they relate to our businesses must be conducted in such a way that if the world were made aware of the details of our transactions, they would realize we are honest.

In Psa. 51:5 we read, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Thus in a few words the Psalmist describes the condition of us all, members of a fallen race. In the next verse the Psalmist describes the one quality that the fallen creature could possess that would meet with divine approval. “Behold, thou desireth truth in the inward part.” This honesty of heart is a prime essential for the true Christian, for he in honesty must confess his own shortcomings, his own deficiencies. In honesty he must acknowledge that his sufficiency is of God, through Christ, and not of himself. Thus he must fully accept the righteousness provided in Christ Jesus as the covering for his sins.

In the parable of the sower, our Lord indicates that a good and honest heart is a prime essential to receiving the truth. After describing other soil, that which was rocky and that which was choked with weeds and thorns, he says: (Luke 8:15) “But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it and bring forth fruit with patience.” Dear friends, if an honest and good heart was necessary for us to receive the truth, it only figures then that it is necessary if we are going to continue in the truth.

Remember Zacchaeus the publican? The scriptures describe him as a man short of stature, who wanted a good view of the Master. So you remember that he climbed a tree on the route he was sure our Lord would take. Though hidden in the tree, our Lord knew Zacchaeus was there. He called Zacchaeus to come down out of the tree. What was it that our Lord saw in Zacchaeus that caused our Lord to call Zacchaeus to come down out of the tree to be his guest, much to the disgust of the Pharisees? It was the good and honest heart that our Lord saw in Zacchaeus. This is what made Zacchaeus eligible for discipleship.

Concerning Jesus’ love for his disciples we read, (John 13:1) “having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.” Jesus loved them because they were his own, but not in the sense that one would love his home and possessions because he owned them. Jesus did not love his disciples in this sense, for his was an unselfish love and he purposed to do something for them. So why did Jesus love them? What was the quality in them, these unlearned men, that made them lovable to the Master? We believe it was their honesty of heart.

They were ready to confess that they were nothing of themselves. They knew they could not keep the law and they were honest enough to confess it. And because they were

honest in confessing that they were not able to do right, they were able to accept God's message telling them that they might have forgiveness of sins through the Master. Because they were of this attitude of mind, Jesus received them as his disciples.

How different from the scribes and Pharisees who were full of hypocrisies—who professed to keep the law but were not keeping it. When Jesus pointed this out to them, instead of humbly accepting his criticism and in honesty of heart confessing their shortcomings, they were sorely vexed and sought to kill the Master. Thus we find they were an abomination in the eyes of the Lord and their wrong condition of heart cut them off from receiving the blessings reserved for that nation.

Sincerity of heart is a basic necessity for receiving the truth. The message of truth was never designed for the dishonest mind. Those of a dishonest, insincere, self-sufficient temperament cannot be led by God's spirit and would certainly take the wrong course. Therefore, God does not entrust the treasure of his truth to any of such disposition. Rather he seeks those of a childlike disposition.

There are indications that there were at times petty rivalries among the disciples with each of them desiring a favored position in the kingdom. You remember that on the occasion of the last supper the Master gave them a lesson in humility when he girded himself and washed their feet, setting them an example of how they should be willing to serve one another. On another occasion, recorded in Matt. 18:1, the disciples apparently were also concerned about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and they came to Jesus saying, "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" From his reply, it is apparent that Jesus detected some wrong attitude of heart, for the account continues, "And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." In other words, Jesus is saying this: unless ye turn from the spirit of self-seeking which your question implies, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

What is there about a little child that so beautifully pictures the qualities the Lord seeks in those who would be his people and to whom he will extend kingdom honor and glory? Yes, Jesus loved little children, and what we love about them is: (1) A little child is unsophisticated and is ready to acknowledge its own lack of wisdom; (2) A little child seeks instruction—isn't too proud to ask questions and seek advice and counsel; (3) A little child is candid and truthful and doesn't profess or boast of wisdom and knowledge.

Thus the purpose of the Master in this lesson is very clear. He wanted to impress upon the minds of his disciples and upon all who would become his followers that whoever would become a child of God, and be taught of God, for the purpose of being developed for the glorious positions in the kingdom to which we are called, must become of this

childlike disposition. Thus we are instructed, dear friends, to turn away from all pride, selfish ambition, pretensions and hypocrisies. We must confess our own littleness, our own lack of wisdom, and accept instead the wisdom of God, humbly going to the Lord for the necessary instruction. And to do this, dear friends, requires honesty of heart.

In his lesson to the disciples, which certainly must have sunk deep into their hearts, Jesus indicates that any who refuse to adopt this childlike spirit will be refused the opportunities of the kingdom. God will have none others, for none others can be taught of God and be developed for the future glorious work. Yes, dear friends, we are dependent upon our heavenly Father for instructions. The scripture says, “Now we know in part.” We have much to learn. For the purpose of learning we have been enrolled in the school of Christ. We are being taught of God by the most able of instructors—our Lord Jesus. Yes, he is our instructor, and we are told that we must learn of him, and to learn of Him we must be in this childlike attitude of heart and mind which is especially characterized by this quality of honesty.

Another word for it would be guilelessness... to be without guile. We are reminded then of the occasion when Jesus, probably for the first time, looked upon Nathanael. And as He was able to look into the heart of Nathanael, Jesus said, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” What a beautiful tribute to Nathanael for our Lord to say thus of him, and what a striking way for the Lord to point out to us the prime requisite for discipleship.

This purity of heart, this honesty, this complete absence of guile, must be and will be true of all who make the kingdom. The Lord is seeking mature men and women, who are child-like at heart, guileless, who are ready to receive his message and instruction, and who will accept it with gladness and simplicity of heart. To those who meet the conditions of heart he has established, namely, a pure heart, an honest heart, clean hands, and righteous living to the best of their ability, God extends the privilege to ascend his holy hill, his holy kingdom; and to be established in his holy place, in the spiritual nature.

The Master continues in Matt. 18:6 to impress upon our minds the great responsibility all have toward the truth and toward his children. He says: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” Now that’s a pretty strong statement by our Lord, isn’t it? Surely this must indicate how serious the Lord considers this matter of stumbling, ensnaring his little ones and how severely those who do so will be dealt with by the Lord. What does the Lord mean here by “offend”? The Diaglott says it means to ensnare; according to Strong’s Concordance it means to entrap, to trip up or stumble.

In Zech. 2:8 the Lord declares his faithful ones are the apple of His eye, indicating that they are very precious to Him. We know that all the interests of His people are subject to divine supervision; that nothing can happen to them, no trouble can come upon them except that which is overruled to be for their ultimate good in their preparation for the kingdom.

But what of those who are permitted to bring trials and difficulties upon the Lord's people? What of those who introduce seducing errors and false doctrines among the Lord's true sheep? Our Lord's statement "it were better for him that millstone were hanged about his neck," would seem to imply that the Lord's judgment upon them will be very severe and their responsibility is very grave. We believe their responsibility and resulting judgment will be in proportion to their knowledge, for knowledge brings responsibility.

The admonition, "Let us walk honestly" also has an application as it relates then to our responsibility to the truth. In relation to the truth, this means we have the responsibility to take a proper stand for the truth. We should always speak the truth in love, dear friends, whether to our enemies or to our friends, but speak the truth we must, and while being considerate of others' opinions, yet we should take our stand firmly. Failure to do so can indicate a measure of dishonesty of heart. Have we ever considered that possibility?

How, you may ask, could a failure to take a stand for the truth ever be related to a taint of dishonesty? We believe in this way, dear friends: it may indicate a willingness to be a party to a deception in that we might in this way be encouraging others to feel we believe in, or disbelieve in certain points of truth. Sometimes for reasons of personal gain, some may not desire to have it known just where they stand on doctrinal and/or organizational issues. And dear friends, if we are aware that brethren attribute to us a position we do not hold concerning the truth, we have a responsibility to properly inform them where we stand. To not do so, in our opinion, would be to practice a measure of deceit.

Let us examine ourselves, not one another, and let each one ask himself the question; could the Lord say of me as he did of Nathanael, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile"? Can the Lord truthfully say that of you, can he say it of me—this is the question before us. Is my course, my conduct such that this statement can be made by the Lord who can read the thoughts and intents of the heart? That poses a searching question, doesn't it? This is why we think this subject of honesty is so very important to us this late date in the harvest.

Dear brethren, there have been cases where brethren have been credited with being sound in the truth when this has not actually been the case. Remaining silent, it appears they have allowed others to accredit them with an understanding they do not share. Now

perhaps this can account for a statement we hear, not infrequently, “I haven’t changed my views, I’ve always believed this way.” Now in some cases this may be true, but if so, it hasn’t always been apparent. In some way then we haven’t been informed of the doctrinal position. It would seem then that some have chosen to conceal their true doctrinal position until what they considered to be the opportune moment. As a result there have been many surprises sprung upon the Lord’s people as errors they had long felt to be extinct suddenly resurface.

Some dear brethren find it difficult to take a stand for the truth even when they recognize the error because they misunderstand the proper application of Christian love. We find the Lord has established priorities in the application of Christian love. In Luke 10:27, summing up the Law, the Master said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.” This is summation, the spirit of the Law. Now we notice the order, that is the purpose of reading it—“The Lord thy God”—this is who we should love first.

Turning to Luke 9:26 we read, “For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed.” The thing we want to notice is the phrase “me and my words.” We find this also in Mark 8:38. Commenting upon this the Pastor points out that here the Lord places his word on a par with himself. And therefore we believe the Lord has established the priorities for Christian love in this order: (1) Our love for the Father and the Son; (2) Our love for the truth; and (3) Our love for the brethren. This dear friends is the proper order. Now our point is this, dear friends: we are not justified, we feel, in giving love for the brethren as a reason for failure to take a stand for the truth. If we do, this would seem to indicate that our love and loyalty to our brethren is greater than our love and loyalty for our Lord and His word.

But we are certain some of our brethren sincerely believe, and we are not doubting their sincerity of heart, their more liberal position is truly a manifestation of brotherly love. We would urge such to step back, so to speak, and take a careful look at their position, and this is the reason why we are dealing with this subject of honesty. Let us be honest with ourselves. Let us determine, if our stand is really prompted by love for the brethren, as we might claim, if so, how is our love being manifested to the Lord’s little ones, the novices, the immature, who are being misled and ensnared as they are being bombarded with false teachings? How is our love manifested toward these when we would encourage them to try to gain spiritual strength and nourishment in such an atmosphere? Let us be honest in our assessment of the situation. How much do we love these little ones. Can any under the cover of love be a party and an accomplice in the stumbling of one of the Lord’s people? We have seen how serious a matter the Lord considers this to be.

In 1 Tim. 5:22, the Apostle Paul admonishes, “Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men’s sins.” Dear friends, we believe the lesson the Apostle has in mind for us here is that we should be careful who we support as elders, teachers and speakers. We have a certain responsibility then with regard to whom we support. If we support those who introduce errors among the Lord’s people, we are partakers of their sin. This matter of honesty comes into play in every facet of the Christian’s walk. We must in honesty of heart ask ourselves the question: “What is my true motive? What is the real reason that I am pursuing the course I am pursuing?” In the case at point, we might suggest the question: Is it really my love for the brethren that prevents my taking a stand for the truth? Could it possibly be that I am fearful of cutting off some of the earthly ties and friendships that have become so important to me? Am I fearful that I might receive some unpleasant experiences, possibly some persecutions? Walking honestly, dear brethren, signifies a great deal to the Christian. It means to walk contrary to the world; to walk in His—that is, the Master’s footsteps. To walk even as He walked.

Another facet of Christian honesty, is honesty as it relates to our relationship with our Heavenly Father. The Prophet Malachi in Mal. 3:8 asks the question: “Will a man rob God?” Then he makes the charge: “Yet ye have robbed me.” Then he follows up with this point: “But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee?” Where have we robbed God—that is the point. And he answers it: “In tithes and offerings.” Thus we are told: Any holding back of what we have dedicated to God is robbing Him of what we have dedicated to do, and dear brethren, this is dishonest. This violates this principle of honesty which is so important to the Christian, so important to glorification. What does it mean then to be honest with God? To be honest with God means to love Him, with all our hearts, mind, strength and being, and not to rob Him from the standpoint of holding back that which we have dedicated, that which we have consecrated to Him.

Dear brethren, to be honest, means to be honest with ourselves. We are told many places the mind, the will, can be very deceitful, and we can cause ourselves to believe things that are not even so by thinking the wrong way over a period of time. We have to be honest with ourselves. It is essential that we are honest in our professions of faith. We must be honest with our brethren—not try to trip them up, or mislead them, or use guile to slip some new thought over. And we must be honest with all with whom we come in contact. We must honestly strive for the standard set before us in the Gospel.

From Reprint 2793, Par. 4, we quote: “God’s promise is the foundation upon which all that we hope for, either of character or coming glory, is built. Let us prize this truth so that we will not compromise it in any sense or in any degree let us not only hold the truth in the letter but in the spirit;—in the love of it, because it is true, as well as because it is beautiful and grand. Holding it thus we will be careful that no one shall twist it for us or pervert it, and equally careful that we do not handle the Word of God deceitfully ourselves, to the blinding of our own eyes of understanding, and thus to our own

hindrance.” Yes, dear brethren, love for the truth lies at the very foundation of saint-ship. Those who will be rejected and stumbled in this harvest time are such as “receive not the truth in the love of it.” (2 Thes. 2:10)

As stated before, honesty must be applied to every aspect of the Christian’s walk. For instance honesty in thought—“whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest”. This must be the first screening process that our thoughts receive. Of course it goes on with “pure” and “of good report,” etc., but the first screening is “true” and “honest”; if they do not pass that test we are not to think about them, are we? Honesty in word or conversation; we must be honest in stating the position of others who might disagree with us; we must not embellish it or exaggerate it—that is dishonesty. We must not color it to make our position look better—it must be without guile—it must be honest. Sometimes, dear friends, even a question can be asked in such a way as to give the wrong impression. If this is done with intent, it is dishonest. It doesn’t meet the standard that the Christian must hold. Any deliberate misrepresentation is dishonest. Now the Lord knows, the Lord is our judge. I am not judging anybody. I am just bringing these things to your attention and you be the judge. I am asking you to ask yourself the questions that I have to ask myself.

We must also be honest in our appraisal of the noble traits of character of our brethren. This is essential if we are to heed the Apostle’s instructions: “in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” Now this takes honesty of heart—to look at somebody else and say: “they have a quality of heart I would love to emulate—I see I am deficient in that”—this requires an honest appraisal of ourselves. So in order to have a proper appreciation of the noble qualities we see in our brethren, we have to have honesty of heart. And as we are able to see these noble qualities in one another it nourishes our love for one another. This is pleasing to our Lord.

Another important aspect of Christian honesty is how it relates to our study. Honesty in study is very important if we are to continue in the truth. What is the real motive when we go to study? What is the real motive when we get up on the platform to give a talk? Is it to impress the brethren with how much we have studied and our knowledge, etc.; to be thought of as a real guiding light among the brethren? We have to honestly analyze ourselves. What is the purpose? Are we seeking to build them up; to “feed my sheep”, the Lord says; or are we trying to build ourselves up in the minds of the Brethren? Each person that is on the platform has to face this directly in honesty of heart. And in honesty of heart if we find our motives are not pure and honest, then we had best do something about it and not waste time. Am I studying to discover some mysterious facet of truth so I can impress my brethren with how deep a student I am? This could be a motivating influence.

Or are we prayerfully going to the Word of God seeking to be led by His Spirit to a deeper appreciation of His plans and His purposes? This question of Christian honesty is a very sobering thing. I am going to make a very sobering statement—I have given this a lot of thought, and it is true: Doctrinal deviation is usually preceded by some aspect of dishonesty.

Again concerning our honesty in study: are we studying to a conclusion? Have we conjured up in our minds some thought that we dearly love, that is a little different from anything we have ever heard before, or a little different than is generally accepted among the brethren? The more we think about it really thrills us. We go to the scriptures and we go to the references, secular or otherwise, the Reprints—not to learn what the Lord has today, not to be guided by His truth or His Spirit, but with a preconceived idea. This is what we term “studying to a conclusion” and dear friends, we do not think this is honest. This is very dangerous because one’s enthusiasm for one’s pet idea usually overrides one’s spiritual perception.

So as we said, studying to a conclusion, in our opinion, is not honesty in study, because it leads to gleaning bits and pieces of information from secular writings, the search for translations that seemingly support our idea that is so dearly loved. Very often it entails the skilful compiling of Reprint citations, usually without regard to their context—all that seem to support our theory. Any references which would seem to contradict the thought being propounded, are either ignored or declared to be incorrect. It is insidious. Dear brethren, we believe this practice is at the seat of the doctrinal problems among the Lord’s people today. This is a sin of dishonesty in study. This is a sin of attempting to use the Pastor’s writings to disprove the Pastor. Now if we have a Reprint citation that seems to support a thought we have, and we know another citation that seems to completely contradict the thought we have, if we give a presentation, giving only the citations that seem to support our thought, dear brethren, that is dishonest. We know we are not to handle the Word of God deceitfully, but dear brethren, we believe we are not to handle any reference works deceitfully.

Sometimes we may say we have all the scriptures on the subject, and then we may find a scripture that upsets our idea—so we say, “we will not worry about that one—don’t mention it.” We have seen that happen, dear friends. We do not think the Lord is pleased with this—we cannot fool Him. This is basic. If we go to the Scriptures with a sincere desire to be led and guided by His Spirit into all truth, we will have no misconceptions. The Scripture says, “If ye are my disciples indeed [that means, I believe, to be guileless, to be honest—sincere, following the Master to the best of our ability] ye shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free.” If we were to study to a conclusion, dear friends, in an aggravated condition it could cause us to present thoughts that are in direct conflict with scripture. We do not want to do that.

So, dear friends, we hope that our comments here will be of an assistance to you to walk honestly, to be honest and truthful among one another; to realize that there is no such thing as a “white lie”—all of them are “black” and out of harmony with the principles of truth and righteousness. Let us seek to be honest. “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in His holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.” May that be true of each and every one of us as we seek to make our calling and election sure. This is my prayer for you and my prayer for myself.

[Brother Rice’s talk typed by Sister Rachel Rice.]