



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Being Right and Being Wrong**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

# **Being Right and Being Wrong**

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*Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another (Romans 14:13).*

David Brooks begins his new book, *The Road to Character*, with a story about hearing an old broadcast on NPR from the day after V-J Day in August, 1945. World War II had just ended, and yet, he says, “no one was chest beating.” Bing Crosby hosted the broadcast, saying, “I guess all anybody can do is thank God it’s over.” Someone sang “Ave Maria” and then Crosby came back on the air, noting that “our deep-down feeling is one of humility.” Burgess Meredith read a passage from war correspondent Ernie Pyle, who was killed a few months earlier and had written in anticipation of the war’s end, “We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than proud.”

Brooks listened to the broadcast on his way home from work, and then he went in and turned on a football game. The quarterback threw a short pass and the wide receiver was tackled for just a two-yard gain, and then the defensive player who made the tackle did what so many pro football players do these days: he did a little “self-puffing victory dance.” Brooks says, “It occurred to me that I had just watched more self-celebration after a two-yard gain than I had heard after the United States won World War II.”<sup>1</sup>

Part of Brooks’s point is that we have largely shifted from a culture of self-effacement to a culture of self-promotion. He mentions a narcissism test used by psychologists, which shows that 93 percent of young people today score higher than what the middle score was just

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015).

twenty years ago. In 1950 a Gallup poll asked high school seniors if they considered themselves to be a very important person, and only 12 percent said yes. In 2005 the number was 80 percent. Lots of people today broadcast their every move on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or Snapchat, and it's no coincidence that "selfies" are everywhere—those pictures people take of themselves in every conceivable circumstance and send around for all their friends to see.

A corollary to all this self-promotion is that many people find it hard to listen seriously to anybody else's perspective. Former US Senator John Danforth, a graduate of Yale Divinity School, was quoted in the alumni magazine this month as saying that political parties, including his own, have become almost incapable of compromising, even though compromise is essential to the functioning of a democratic society. Partisans in gerrymandered districts elect more and more intransigent ideologues to public office who never seem to acknowledge that they might be mistaken about some things and the other side might in fact have a point now and then.

The overheated rhetoric of our culture and the breathless passing along of bizarre conspiracy theories sometimes gets completely out of hand. The governor of Texas recently said he would call up the Texas State Guard to keep an eye on US military training exercises because it was widely believed that the federal government was planning to invade and take over Texas. You'd think that after a while a sense of absurdity would kick in, but apparently lots of people view the world through such a narrow lens that they simply can't see how silly some overheated claims have become.

Brooks reflects on the meaning and value of

moderation in his book. Moderation, he says, is not just finding the midpoint between opposites, or some kind of bland equanimity that lacks all conviction. On the contrary, the moderate simply knows that “Great matters cannot be settled by taking into account just one principle or one viewpoint.” There are always tradeoffs: between security and liberty, between equality and achievement, between individualism and community. Brooks has a deep respect for the concept of sin, the notion that we human beings are driven by all sorts of impulses, and not all of them are good. “The best moderate,” he says, “is skeptical of zealotry because he is skeptical of himself.” People who know that our own motives are often mixed keep an eye out for self-interest and self-deception in even the loftiest claims and the most fervent convictions.

The truth is, sometimes we’re right and sometimes we’re wrong, and we’re unlikely to see where we’re wrong unless we are willing to see things from other people’s perspectives, too. If we get all our news and opinions from sources that already agree with us, we’re likely to miss a great deal of the truth, and merely reinforce our own prejudices and self-interest.

There’s a great difference between knowledge and certainty. Knowledge is an awareness of the facts, a clear grasp of the way things really are; certainty is just an attitude of conviction in our own minds. And in fact, people are often certain about things that turn out to be wrong. For nearly two thousand years natural philosophers and common sense convinced most people that the earth stood still and everything else in the universe revolved around us. It seemed self-evident, but it turned out to be mistaken, like so many other things people take for granted.

We're all inclined to believe what we want to believe, and so we're tempted, in our personal lives and in our public life, to be convinced of things that just aren't true—or at least they're not the whole story. Wisdom consists in watching out for that inclination and guarding against it. Sometimes we're right and sometimes we're wrong, and we need to keep the latter possibility ever before us.

But what if we *are* right after all? What if we do see something clearly and the people around us get it wrong? What if someone we care about does something that we know will be bad for that person? What then? What do we do about that?

Two opposite reactions are tempting because they're both relatively easy. The first option is to fire up the boiler of righteous indignation and come down hard on those we think are wrong. We think that if we care about what's right we ought to stand up for that and show people where they're mistaken. Somebody needs to tell them the truth, or else they will never change.

The opposite reaction is to tell ourselves that what other people do is no concern of ours. We have no right to judge, people say, so we should just be quiet and let others do what they want. It's none of our business what other people do, and we shouldn't get involved. It only leads to conflict, and many of us would just as soon avoid a conflict.

Both of those options are widely chosen because each of them is easier than holding within ourselves the tension between truth and love, or between judgment and grace. It's so much easier to come down on one side or the other, depending on our personality.

## Being Right and Being Wrong

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A remarkable thing about the biblical narrative is that even God seems to struggle with that problem. In the beautiful eleventh chapter of the prophet Hosea, we see the tension in God's own heart over what to do about God's wayward children.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called them, the more they went from me.... Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with bands of love....

God's beloved Israel has turned away from their father. After all God has done for his people, they still do wrong. They worship false gods and treat each other badly, failing to do justice in the land. For a time God considers sending them back to Egypt, back into slavery. If they won't do what's right, and if they're so ungrateful for God's deliverance, then why not send them back into bondage? God is furious with Israel, and he's tempted just to condemn them outright. But God also loves his people, and so God thinks again:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

God decides not to abandon Israel after all. In spite of God's anger, which is altogether justified, God will neither condemn Israel in wrath nor leave them alone to pursue their folly. Instead, God bears the tension between judgment and



mercy within his own heart, and so God continues to love Israel and work for his people's redemption.

We Christians find in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, this same willingness to hold in himself the tension between truth and love, between judgment and grace. Jesus warns us against judging one another because he sees the human temptations to self-righteousness and hypocrisy when we're inclined to condemn other people. There may well be a speck in our neighbor's eye that needs to be removed, but if we're going to do surgery on anybody else, we need to be able to see clearly ourselves, and remove the log that interferes with our own vision.

To put it another way, we can't become truly righteous until we stop being self-righteous. There's always a chance that we might be wrong in our judgments, but even if we're right it's possible to be so right that in another important sense we're still quite wrong. As St. Paul says to the Corinthians, "If I have all knowledge but do not have love, I am nothing."

Sometimes we're right and sometimes we're wrong, and sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. David Brooks talks about the influences that shaped the character of a number of people in his book, and one of them was Dwight Eisenhower.

Eisenhower's mother was an ardent pacifist because of her strong religious convictions, so it broke her heart when one of her five boys boarded a train for the military academy at West Point. She said it was his decision, and she saw him off to the train, then she went and shut herself in her room, and the other boys could hear her sobbing through the door—the first time they ever heard their mother cry.

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Ida Eisenhower's boy turned out, of course, to be the general who organized D-Day and helped to win the Second World War, and then went on to become president of the United States. Was she wrong to oppose his joining the military? In retrospect, many of us would say she was mistaken about that, and her son clearly disagreed with her. But Eisenhower called his mother the finest person he ever knew. He later wrote in his memoir, "Her serenity, her open smile, her gentleness with all and her tolerance of their ways, despite an inflexible religious conviction and her own strict pattern of personal conduct" made her memorable to anyone who met her. Eisenhower loved his mother dearly, and she loved him, and they managed to care for one another in spite of some important differences that had to do with deeply held religious convictions.

Sometimes we're right, and sometimes we're wrong, and sometimes it's hard to know what is true. But as Paul says, knowledge without love is not always worth very much. Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God, and the kingdom of God does not consist in rules alone, or simply in having the right answers, but in righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

To love one another as God loves us is beyond our capability, left to our own devices. That kind of love requires the Spirit of God moving within us. It's the Spirit of that same God who does not deal with us according to our sins, as the psalmist says, but is always merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.



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