

Have you ever been asked to write a letter of recommendation...for someone you didn't want to recommend? If so, you know how dicey that can be! Tell the truth, and you could get sued. Don't tell the truth, and you have to live with a guilty conscience. So what do you do? Dr. Robert Thornton has come up with a third option: **ambiguity**. In his *Lexicon of Intentionally Ambiguous Recommendations* – or L.I.A.R., for short – he offers "litigation-proof" phrases for any situation. Here are some examples:

- If the person is incompetent, you can say, *"I enthusiastically recommend this candidate with no qualifications whatsoever."*
- If the person is lazy: *"You will be lucky to get this person to work for you."*
- And if the person is just a loser, you can say, *"I urge you to waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment."*

You see? Isn't ambiguity wonderful? Well, maybe not. We can laugh at it – and fantasize! – but in the long run, we all know it can come back to bite you. When someone figures out you haven't quite told the truth, think what does to your reputation. When someone figures out you've played this clever little game at their expense, think what that does to your relationship. And for that matter, think what it does to your character when you get in the habit of making ambiguous comments, ambiguous promises, ambiguous commitments. Not a pretty picture!

So in the long-run ambiguity isn't usually the best policy. Honesty is. It doesn't have to be brutal honesty. Preferably not. And we don't have to go on and on sharing all the gory details. But in the sense of "**speaking the truth in love**," in the sense of letting "**your yes be yes and your no be no**," in the sense of showing integrity, standing up for what's right and against what is wrong – then yes, honesty is the best policy.

And nowhere is this more important than when it comes to religion – or better yet, our loyalty to God and His Word. Here there is no room for ambiguity. Honesty is definitely the best policy. After all, didn't Jesus say that those who are not for Him are against Him? That He will be ashamed of those who are ashamed to confess Him? In fact, that He'd rather we be hot or cold than that we be lukewarm? This leaves no room for ambiguity! We are called to be witnesses, aren't we? And what are witness? People who are open and honest about *what* we believe and *Who* we believe in. People who can say, like Joshua did in our text: "**As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.**"

In fact, speaking of Joshua – there's a good example of what witness can and should look like. For starters, did you notice how positive he was? As he talked to friends and neighbors who weren't necessarily on the same wave-length, he felt no need to be brutally honest. To the contrary! He was clear but kind. No doubt he realized, as we do, that brutal honesty is counter-productive. No matter how good our intentions, harsh statements rarely draw people closer to God;

more likely, they push them away. And judgmental statements? Far from helping, they just confirm prejudice against religion. So Joshua took a positive tack. **“Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

And did you notice he didn't go on and on, either, sharing all the gory details? No doubt he realized, as we do, that this would also be counter-productive. Again, no matter how good our intentions, going on and on usually feels coercive. Far from convincing folks, it just annoys them and makes them want to escape! So Joshua kept his message short and sweet: **“Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

Yes, Joshua kept it short and sweet and positive, but he did take a stand, didn't he? He did take an open, honest, unambiguous stand. And that's worth noticing, too! These days, some Christians are so afraid of going overboard that they go to the opposite extreme. They take no stand at all. They hide their light under a bushel. In fact, they think it's a virtue to keep their faith private. *“That's personal,”* they say. And, of course, it is. But personal doesn't mean it's to be kept private. Not one word in Scripture supports that idea. And when you think about it, how could one even *be* a *“private witness”*? That's a contradiction in terms! By definition, a witness is one who's open and honest about letting people know: *This is what I believe, and this is Who I believe in.* Open! Honest!

And as for that old dodge, *“I just witness with my actions”* – that won't fly, either. Actions alone don't automatically carry a message. At best, they're ambiguous. We may be kind and pure and generous and forgiving and turn the other cheek and all the rest. But the question remains: *Why? Why do we do this? For whose sake do we do this? What's gotten into us that inspires us to do this?* Surely that matters! It must! For witness to be witness, words must explain our actions, and actions must validate our words. The two go together. With both, we take our stand *for* God, *for* His Word, *for* **“the faith once delivered to the saints.”** With both, we demonstrate this is what we believe, this Who we believe in. That's what it means to be witnesses. And as Christians, we are called to be witnesses. Open, honest, unambiguous witnesses, who are willing to take a stand like Joshua did: **“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

Now, some may object: *But what's the point of taking a stand like that? What good does it do? These days, people just tune you out. Why, even in the church we don't agree on things all Christians used to agree on, and God help you if you suggest that might be wrong! These days, people prefer to believe what they prefer to be true. Period. So what good does do taking a stand like Joshua did?*

One answer, of course, is that there's no *telling* what good it can do. People *can* change and sometimes *do* – especially if they're given the chance at the right time, in a positive way. When the Israelites responded positively to Joshua, that was no foregone conclusion. Anything but! In fact, Joshua was up against some

tough spiritual challenges very much like those we face today. You see, as the Israelites took over Palestine, some also took over local customs – started mixing pagan ideas into their religion. Possibly, they didn't realize they were doing it – or that what they were doing was wrong. Maybe they just thought they were embracing diversity. But it created problems. Some started worshipping idols alongside the true and living God. That, of course, meant embracing the immoral practices of their pagan neighbors. And most troubling of all, some had no problem with this. Some condoned attitudes and behaviors no true Israelite should ever condone, yet they still considered themselves perfectly faithful. It seems they, too, preferred to believe what they preferred to be true. So Joshua was up against some tough spiritual challenges. And he didn't ignore them or try to dance around them. But he also didn't go after them with a sledge hammer. Joshua simply laid out the facts. He told the Israelites: You can't have it both ways, so **“if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served...or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living.”** He simply laid out the facts. No fire and brimstone. No threats and name-calling. Just the facts. This was about as kind and clear a way of calling them to task as I can imagine! But equally clear was his refusal to go along the crowd. Equally clear was his stand *for* God, *for* God's Word, *for* the faith once delivered to the saints. And even if the Israelites had tuned him out, Joshua's stand would have remained: **“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

...Which brings us to another reason why there's a point to taking such a stand. Because it does us good. Even if everyone else tunes us out, it does us good to affirm this is what I believe, and this is Who I believe in. Taking a stand strengthens our faith, deepens our commitment, intensifies our resolve: *Regardless of what others choose, regardless of how others react, this is what we will do.* **“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

When Joshua said this, he was speaking first of all for himself, and as a single person, I know how important it is for each of us individually to take such a stand. But Joshua also said this on behalf of his family, and now more than ever, each Christian family needs to do the same, needs to make its motto and its motivation: **“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

Why, even when I was growing up, I remember seeing and hearing things that didn't exactly fit the values my parents were teaching me. For instance, we had very clear rules about words we could not say, yet our next-door neighbor cussed like nobody's business! And I remember asking my parents about that – or just in general, why so-and-so can do such-and-such, but we can't. The answer was simple and always the same: *Because we are a Christian family. This is a Christian home.* **“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

Well, those were the days of “Beaver Cleaver”. Today, the challenges are ten times worse! But that's just all the more reason for each Christian family to take

a clear stand based firmly on God's Word: this we believe, this we don't, this is right, this is wrong, this is Christian, this is not, and **"as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."**

Let's face it: kids are going to see and hear things they see that don't fit what we're trying to teach them. This is no time for ambiguity. They may not be ready for all the gory details about why something is wrong, but they need to know there's a difference between that and the way we live. We are a Christian family. This is a Christian home. **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."**

The same goes for distinctive Christian practices. Kids may well point out: "The so-and-so family never prays before they eat. The so-and-so family never goes to church or Sunday School. The so-and-so family doesn't follow those rules. The so-and-so family let's their kids watch that movie...or play that game...or participate in that activity. Why can't we be like the so-and-so family." Answer? Because we are a Christian family. This is a Christian home. **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."**

These days, we can't count on society to back up Christian values, or the government, or sadly, even some religious institutions. But that's all the more reason for us to take responsibility; all the more reason for us take a clear stand as individuals, as families, as a congregation. This is what we believe. This is Who we believe in. **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."**

In taking our stand, let us never underestimate how much good our witness can do. There's no telling when and how the Spirit will work. My own family first came to church because neighbors simply invited us. I'll bet others here could tell similar stories. The Spirit is **"able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine!"** But even if people tune us out, there's still a point in taking our stand. At the very least, it does us good. It helps us be good stewards of the faith entrusted to us – helps us protect it in ourselves, nurture it in our families, uphold it in our congregation. It helps us be **"steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord our labor is not in vain."** And let's never underestimate the importance of that, either!

For both reasons, we are called to open, honest, unambiguous witness. Like Joshua, we face great spiritual challenges in our day. Like Joshua, we are called to address them in a way that is kind but clear. Like Joshua, we have no guarantee as to how people will respond. But like Joshua, we can choose how we will respond. So like Joshua, let us be clear in our stand for God, for His Word, for the faith once delivered to the saints: **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."** Amen.