

Today, we're taking a look at one of most essential tasks to constantly have in play in order to be highly effective at decision making, both in our spiritual lives and our vocations. And to start that off, we're going to the uniquely American author and humorist Mark Twain—you know, that fertile soul who gave us Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and the short story about "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

Twain coined a phrase that's very relevant to the thinking and decision-making that leads to our actions, for better or for worse. Here it is: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." Let me repeat Twain's quote: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." Boy oh boy, is that ever true—and there are lots of opportunities where that's applicable: in businesses, in nonprofits, in families, and in churches!

Here's the key point: one of the most important skills that the best decision-makers strive after is what I call "*the art and practice of unlearning.*" Yep, that's right—*the art and practice of unlearning.* Just what in the world is that? Well, paraphrasing what Twain said: our highest hopes for our organizations—and in our lives of faith—actually depend on some *unlearning* of what we think we know for sure!

A bit unconvinced? In the complex world we live in, we first have to come to grips with the high likelihood that—*right now!*—each of us is in error regarding at least one thing we hold dear and are using to make decisions. That's right, we're actually fallible! But, if you're infallible, you can stop listening right now!

Now, for the rest of us still pondering this, there's one person who proved to be one of the greatest examples in all history of *the art and fruitful practice of unlearning*—and that person was the Apostle Paul. Before his personal encounter with Jesus, here was a man at the top of the learning game, a master of much: of written and spoken languages, of his cultural framework, of his ethnic heritage, of the reigning religious rules, and of the path to career advancement. And, yes, Paul also had been exposed to the truth about Christ, but a lot of that religious and cultural learning in his past worked to defeat his embracing of Jesus—in fact, that religious and cultural learning actually worked to make Paul an *enemy* of Christ.

But then, Paul went through a dramatic transformation that manifested amazing, astounding, incredibly fruitful *unlearning* in his life. See, Paul was knocked off his high horse and given a full revelation of God and His purposes. Then Paul took a fresh, deep look at the Scriptures he knew so well. He became a living sacrifice to Jesus Christ and his mind was renewed in radical truth. Then Paul pursued the fullness of his role as an Apostle of Christ—proclaiming, discipling, and teaching the fullness of God's revelation. And we see significant, specific manifestations of that in Paul's epistles that comprise much of the New Testament.

Now, in this key context of Paul's *art and practice of unlearning*, here are a couple of essential verses: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." (Romans 12:1-3 ESV) Here Paul is writing to *people who are already believers*, and he prescribes that they *first* present themselves as a living sacrifice to God, *then* be transformed by the renewal of their minds, *while* urging them not to think of themselves more highly than they ought. That's a powerful 1...2...3 for the art and fruitful practice of unlearning. In short, this is a core way that wrong learning is eliminated—it's literally the pruning of unfruitful learning out of our thinking!

Further, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes powerfully about his previous life apart from Christ—*a life of living in the flesh!* Note that Paul unashamedly "counts this as loss" when compared to knowing Christ Jesus. "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the

flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection...” (Philippians 3:1-10a) Whoa, talking about lifting up the knowledge of Christ...*all in the context of deeply disregarding fleshly confidence previously embraced!*

Paul’s epistles are simply amazing, unique in their delivering of God’s truth! But that doesn’t mean that, for many centuries, people counting themselves as Christians haven’t either conveniently ignored or blatantly misinterpreted Paul’s writing. And, to be sure, there are always many Christians who are very sincere but simply wrong in their interpretations. Let’s look carefully at some “either-or” statements that inherently challenge some examples of “fleshly confidence” that hold sway for many Christians. In fact, let’s listen with a fresh attitude of a living sacrifice to Christ and with a humble desire to renew our minds.

1. Either God’s Word, the Bible, is God-breathed, designed to be the overarching, ruling authority for humanity...or humanity can legitimately pursue blending in authorities and traditions from churches or philosophies or governments that contradict, dilute, or distort Scripture.
2. Either God’s love through Christ and Him crucified is truly intended for every person in the whole world in pursuit of fulfilling God’s wish that none would perish...or God’s redemptive plan through Jesus’s atoning sacrifice on the Cross is limited by God Himself to a select group.
3. Either God’s eternal justice in response to our sins is satisfied only and fully by Jesus’ death on the Cross...or God’s eternal justice can be satisfied by each person’s lifetime of efforts to be good.
4. Either we who seek to be justified by the law are cut off from Christ...or we can be justified by the law.
5. Either the law increases sin...or the law decreases sin. (Be careful here—many serious Christians are startled that the law increases sin! See Romans 5:20, Romans 7:5, and 1 Corinthians 15:56.)

To be sure, countless people who consider themselves solid Christians fall *strongly* on one side or the other of these key “either-or” statements that address core issues. But, unsurprisingly, every one of these “either-or” statements has significant implications for how we live and serve others—or sometimes even for where we will spend eternity. In fact, ironically—on any given Sunday—one faction of Christianity sincerely says “Thanks be to God” when their preferred belief is stated, even while a competing faction across town is saying “Praise the Lord” when the exact opposite belief is stated. *Either-or*. Wow.

Since God is not the author of confusion, somewhere along the road, there’s some wrong teachin’ and learnin’ that’s been goin’ on. And sometimes that’s been a very long road...from generation to generation!

Just what is it that can all-too-easily prompt “fleshly confidence,” for Paul *and* for us? Powerful influencers early in life? Traditions? Power? Social standing? Career prestige? Fashionable religious views? Paul had *all* of those in his time...and then later counted them as rubbish! Think back on your life. Like Paul, what did you rightly discard after being born-again? Even now, is your embracing of church traditions, fleshly influencers, and popular-but-weak Bible explanations thwarting God’s fullest working in you? “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.” Unlearn.

A&A: Application & Action

1. Are you born again, as Jesus taught Nicodemus (John 3)? If so, did you leave “fleshly confidences” you relied on behind, like Paul did? Give examples.
2. List and discuss three key “religious” props (like law-righteousness or works-salvation or traditions) that some churches teach that work to replace reliance on Christ alone and limit the fullness of God’s plans.
3. Christian influence in America is clearly waning. Is this at least partially because many Christians are essentially proclaiming “fleshly confidences” to their neighbors as the answer to problems... rather than the powerful, personal embracing of Christ and Him crucified? Discuss.