

What We Believe: There is Truth!

At several points during this series we have run up against the question, “Is there truth that is true for everyone?” Maybe I haven’t spelled it out that way, but the question is there, in the minds of post-moderns, in the minds of scientific atheists, in the minds of college students or high school students - this question is everywhere. On the surface, it’s a ridiculous question, because of course there are things that are true. When I say that the moon is NOT made of green cheese, I am making a true statement, one that I don’t think would be argued, at least not very strongly. Even when I go out on a limb and make a value judgment by saying that there are things that happen in the world that shouldn’t happen - they are evil things - most people are inclined to agree. So why is there this idea that there can’t be truths that are true for everyone, that your truth is not necessarily my truth, as if truth was just a personal preference, or only my perception of the way things are? Isn’t all of scientific discovery based on the idea that there are things that are true and things that are not true? So why do people question whether or not there is truth that is true for everyone, all the time?

The things we see in the world around us today, the things that trouble us, maybe even make us angry, all have roots. They didn’t just spring out of nothing, but came out of broad movements in society, movements that some refer to as progress, while others would say have invited disaster on our culture. This is true of the debate about whether anything is true or not. Did you catch that?

When Darwin published his “Origin of Species”, there was already a massive cultural shift in Europe away from the authority of the church and towards the authority of reason. The so-called “Age of Enlightenment” had spawned a belief in the power of human reason to explain everything and to solve all problems. It had also produced a bloody revolution in France and the war of independence that resulted in the formation of the United States. By the close of the eighteenth century, there was less optimism about the power of human reason, but the fire, once lit, was not going to be easily extinguished. Human reason was continually brought against the church, both by philosophers such as David Hume from outside the church and by the nineteenth century rise of liberalism within the church. The thought was that, when viewed through the lens of modern scientific knowledge, we moderns could quickly dismiss those elements of ancient religion which seemed to us to be superstitious or at least unfounded.

One of the first things to go was miracles. Scottish philosopher David Hume is famous, or infamous, for saying, “Miracles don’t happen because they can’t happen.” What he should have said was that he didn’t see miracles happening in his study or in his conversations with other academics. They weren’t a part of his world. He would have been better off to talk to people who pray regularly, to people who experience God’s presence, who expect the work of the Holy Spirit to make a difference - then he would have encountered plenty of miracles. I’ve mentioned before Craig Keener’s two-volume accounting of miracles from all around the world - and the evidence for them. But this argument is not a practical one -- it is a philosophical one. People who don’t want to

believe in miracles are unlikely to see the miraculous taking place, even though it happens right around them. That was the philosophical bias of the nineteenth century and it was the environment in which Charles Darwin did his research and wrote about his discoveries. His work did a lot to undermine the authority of the church because it made it look like God would soon be shown to be unnecessary to the origins of our existence on earth.

It seemed for awhile as if “truth” would be found in and through science, but in recent decades that has come under fire as well. There are significant questions that science has not been able to answer and new questions are arising, so that rather than getting fewer and fewer questions that science must grapple with, there are more and more. Scientific discovery itself has helped build momentum for skepticism regarding science. The discovery, for example, of what is being called the “fine-tuning” of the universe, has prompted scientists to write things like Freeman Dyson wrote nearly 40 years ago:

The more I examine the universe, and the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the Universe in some sense must have known we were coming.

Or this from Fred Hoyle, Cambridge University astronomer back in the 1950's:

A commonsense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super-intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature.

Even today, there are strong disagreements among scientists about things like human-caused climate change, or how to interpret the fossil record (or the lack of it, in many cases) or how life could have begun, knowing that Darwin's primitive cell was an extremely complex organism, or why there is such a thing as consciousness. The fact that there are not satisfactory answers to these questions has backed some of the more outspoken scientists into a corner, where, as we saw earlier, they will argue that there is no such thing as free will at the same time as living as if free will is everyone's experience.

It seems that the lack of certainty in some important areas of human understanding has led to an opening for the post-modernists to question whether there is any such thing as truth in the first place. Their bottom line on this issue is that there are things that are true for different groups - the Christians, the First Nations, the urban African-Americans, the illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central America, the single white female parent. It's like everybody is slotted into some group and are told that this is their identity and this is what's true for them. And, in our society, everybody is divided into the two groups: oppressor and oppressed. And if you are a white working married male, you will almost certainly be an oppressor because you will have things that others don't. These things are held as true in our culture whether there is any evidence for them, on a personal level, or not. That's why people are so often labelled - you're a bigot, a homophobe, a racist, a sexist - you're something that isn't politically correct because the politically correct solution is that the only truth that matters is that oppressors need to be brought down and the oppressed raised up. It's Marxism.

You can quickly see that one of the first casualties in a culture like ours will be truth. Truth would tell you that some people work very hard and are careful about spending money on frivolous things and that those people tend to get ahead. Truth would tell you that some people are lazy and avoid responsibility and that they tend not to get ahead - but they still want all the things that those who work hard and are frugal have gained. Truth would tell you that we're not created equal, but we are all the same in at least one way: we have all sinned and fallen short of God's standards and are in need of a Savior. But that truth is not accepted in Canadian culture because it implies that there's something wrong with us, rather than with the structures of society.

In "The Truth Project", I think it was the third video in the series, we encountered this head on. We heard about Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which peaks with "self-actualization" at the top, and about Carl Rogers theories of the self. Both Maslow and Rogers claim that they can't find any evidence of sin in humans that could be described as original or native to the person. They believe that all evil comes from the structures of society rather than from the individual - which is interesting when you consider that humans are the ones responsible for creating the structures. There is a powerful push to blame something other than ourselves for the problems that we humans create. How many times have we heard that all we need is more money spent on education in order to solve the problems of drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence or other social ills? Instead of sin, we have problem behavior and the source of the problem is something other than personal responsibility: social structures, poverty, or lack of education.

That's the background for a look at Jesus' conversation with a group of Jews who, as the passage begins, are taking Jesus seriously, have even come to some degree to believe in Him, but, as the conversation broadens, it includes some who are trying to take Jesus' life. Let's read John 8, starting at verse 31:

Jesus said to the people who believed in Him: "You are truly My disciples if you keep obeying My teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

"But we are descendants of Abraham," they said. "We have never been slaves to anyone on earth. What do you mean, 'set free'?" (31-33)

Notice that Jesus assumes that they don't know what is true, especially about Him, and therefore are not free. The people take offense at Jesus' suggestion that they are not really free and, even though they are under the heel of the Roman Empire, they declare that they have never been slaves to anyone on earth!

How do you think that conversation would go if Jesus were visiting your place of work, your neighborhood, your family gatherings? People might be interested, might be partly convinced by His revelations of the truth about the issues of our day, but when He challenged our friends, neighbors and relatives by saying, "You're not really free, you know, but if you follow My teachings you will come to know the truth and through that you'll find freedom," Jesus would get some push-back. I'm sure people in our day

would say, "But we're not slaves; we are among the most free people in the world!" And Jesus might reply as He did then:

I realize that you are descendants of Abraham. And yet, some of you are trying to kill Me because My message does not find a place in your hearts. I am telling you what I saw when I was with My Father. But you are following the advice of your father.

"Our father is Abraham," they declared. (37-39)

At this point Jesus told them that if Abraham truly was their father, that they would act like him, but their intention to do away with Jesus showed that they were not like Abraham at all, that they had a different father. Then the crowds, getting more stirred up, retort that God is their true Father and Jesus comes back with, "No, the Devil is your true father."

You love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning and has always hated the truth. There is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies. (44)

So when I tell you the truth, you just naturally don't believe Me. Which of you can truthfully accuse Me of sin? And since I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe Me? Anyone whose Father is God listens gladly to the words of God. Since you don't, it proves you aren't God's children. (45-47)

What have we learned from Jesus here? That there is such a thing as truth, that it comes from God, and that it is represented perfectly to us by the words of Jesus. We also learn that there are those who don't receive the words of Jesus - it doesn't find a place in their hearts - and so, in rejecting Him, they will also reject the truth and will justify that rejection through lies that are inspired by the devil, who is the initiator, the father of lies. And in the middle of all of this is the issue of freedom, which Jesus tells us can only be based in truth. Why is that?

If I tell you that you have no responsibility for the bad choices you make, that they are the natural, justified response to the circumstances you have faced in life, you are more likely to do what? What would that statement encourage you towards?

- acting irresponsibly or more responsibly?
- blaming others for your failures or owning them?
- solving the problems in the world or increasing them?

Which side leads to a freedom that you would want?

What if I tell you that the claim of Jesus to speak truth makes Him intolerant and bigoted and that those who follow Him are narrow-minded and disrespectful to other world views? What am I assuming and what actions are likely to result from accepting those assumptions?

- I'm assuming that all views are equally valid because there is no such thing as absolute truth
- I'm assuming that Jesus was just another person with no special insight or authority
- I'm assuming, probably, that Christianity has been bad for the world and that it's Jesus' fault.

You can quickly see that people have to choose between a world view where nothing is true and one in which truth is real and knowable. And, if there is such a thing as truth, which truth are we going to accept; which one are we going to live by? Are we going to accept the claim that there is no absolute truth - which is a claim to be absolutely true, by the way - or are we going to accept the claim of the Man who said, "Which of you can truthfully accuse Me of sin?"

Of course, we are those who have chosen the words of Jesus, the words of life, over the empty words of the postmodern cynic. But I want you to see just how far that puts us from the current cultural trends. In claiming that Jesus spoke the truth, we are claiming something that separates us, makes us very distinct, from the world views that dominate the landscape of today. In Jesus' day, He separated Himself, not by claiming that there was such a thing as truth, but by claiming that He was it! In our day, the implications of truth are so frightening to those who have rejected God that they can't even admit that truth is a possibility.

For applications, let's go back over the words of Jesus in John 8 and see what they will mean in the context where we live.

1. The first thing Jesus says is to people who are starting to believe in Him and it's this: "You are truly My disciples if you keep obeying My teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." He is saying that knowledge of the truth comes from obedience to the truth. If you try to analyze it from afar, try to philosophize about whether Jesus could be telling the truth, you won't get it, you won't KNOW it. Another way of saying this is that freedom is not just an intellectual, abstract idea. Freedom is something that you can experience in your life, and you will experience it through obedience to Jesus' teachings. If you accept them as being true, start living by what He says and you will find that they are true and that through obedience you have discovered how to live freely and fully.
2. That leads right into the next principle, which is that freedom is not doing whatever you want. "Whatever you want" can lead into the kind of bondage that we see all around us, without even looking hard. "Whatever you want" is not freedom from the sinful, self-centered nature that we have had from birth, but encourages and supports that self-centeredness and makes it difficult for us to learn how to act in love and grace towards others. So, to live as Jesus teaches here, to live in true freedom, we have to acknowledge that our own ideas about what might be the best for us are subject to error and need the correction of the wisdom and truth that Jesus brings.
3. There is a strong teaching in Jesus' words that we have to guard our hearts. In verse 44 we read that Jesus confronted the crowds with these words: "You love to do the evil things he (the devil) does." If we fall in love with words and actions that Jesus says are not good, that don't line up with the Father's will for us, we will start to hate the truth because the truth will confront our behaviors. Have you ever heard a sermon preached that made you mad because it was somehow confronting the choices you had made in your life? Did you want the preacher to shut up and go away because the message was uncomfortable and you wanted to be comforted?

That's what can happen when we start to love the things that Satan loves, things like speaking hateful words about other people or acting in ways that are mean or spiteful. So we have to watch out, both for what we love, if it's evil, and what we hate.

4. The fourth application comes from Jesus' words in John 8:45,46: "When I tell you the truth, you just naturally don't believe Me. Which of you can truthfully accuse Me of sin? And since I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe Me?" I think there's a way of talking to people about Jesus in which these verses can help us communicate well. We can ask people what they don't like about Jesus. If they say that they don't like His followers, we can counter the pervasively negative picture of Christians that is offered in the media by telling the countless stories of love and sacrifice by Christians all over the world. If they say they don't like His claim to be "the way, the truth and the life", you can open a conversation about whether truth exists or not, whether they could actually live in a world where nothing could be known to be true, and then how Jesus' claims might be the most loving way to approach human beings. You might even talk about whether they, or anyone they know, can truthfully accuse Jesus of sin.
5. The final application is simply to have compassion on this very confused world in which we find ourselves. This world is confused because it has denied the truth that is evident to them - as we saw earlier in Romans 1. This world is confused because, in order to deny that truth they have had to deny the possibility of truth and it shatters any hope for meaning and purpose in the years ahead of each one who follows down that road. So pray for them - and I would encourage you to pray for specific people who you know who might be caught up in this big lie, rather than praying for the whole world in general - and love them, and pursue peace with them, and speak truth to them, and then continue to love them, no matter how they respond.