

Relationships: Truth in Love

I know someone who is highly committed to a belief that I can only call a “cult”. This belief is called “The Original Scriptures” and promotes a translation of the Bible called “The Word of Yah”. It sells on Amazon in paperback for \$30 and in hardcover for over \$40.

There are some serious problems with this particular translation, however. According to Hebrew scholars, the “translator” doesn’t know Hebrew and has made numerous mistakes in trying to understand the text. Second, there is no apparent source of documents for this new translation, despite the claim of the founder that he and a team discovered documents in Iraq in 2002 and smuggled them away to a secret hideout in the Himalayas. Third, the whole story is surrounded by lies and deception, including the front cover of “The Word of Yah” which features, not a picture of one of the newly discovered scrolls, but a picture from the internet of Psalm 45 of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Add to those things the picture of someone who threatens to sue everybody who says he might not be telling the truth, and you end up with the conclusion that this is not a good thing, not something to put your faith in, not something that honors God or pleases Him.

The person that I know who believes these teachings is also a person who would very much like me and Patti to believe in these “original scriptures”. In fact, if we express any doubts at all, her reaction is to become extremely emotional and to feel very much alone. There just aren’t a lot of people around who have been convinced that this is legitimate.

So here’s my question for you today. Is it loving for me to tell her the truth, or is her belief about this really doing any harm and should I just leave her alone? Should I just let her continue to believe what she wants to believe, raise her children that way, carry on with the life she’s been given and the way that she’s chosen? Are there times when telling the truth could be considered an act of cruelty? These are the kinds of questions that some philosophy students find quite interesting and quite important, but, at the end of the day, they don’t have an answer because there’s no standard by which to evaluate their choice, one way or the other. That’s why I love the fact that we do have a standard, His name is Jesus, and He shows us how to deal with situations like this one.

The first thing that strikes me about how Jesus answers this question is the use of the word “truth” in the gospels. Truth appears 31 times in the gospel of Matthew and 30 of those 31 times it appears in the phrase, “I tell you the truth.” And guess who speaks those words - Jesus.

John also uses the word “truth” a lot - and 28 of those times is Jesus saying, “I tell you the truth.” Why did Jesus say that so often? It’s a phrase that had the same meaning as a phrase like, “Listen up” or “pay attention now!” It meant that the words that followed were of special importance to the listeners. And they are also words that

describe how Jesus related to people -- He spoke the truth, with great love, for sure, but He spoke the truth.

Listen to these words that Jesus spoke to Peter on the Mount of Olives on the night He was betrayed: "I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown Me three times." (Matt. 26:34) Peter had just been saying how brave and loyal he was: "Even if all fall away on account of You, I never will!" Was Jesus being kind to Peter when He spoke the truth to him? Peter might have been really offended, he might have gotten depressed or gone through the rest of his life feeling like a failure. Wouldn't the kinder thing to do have been to be a bit evasive: "I appreciate your good intentions, Peter", or "I hope that you're able to live up to that bold promise, my friend!"? No, because Jesus knew that, when Peter failed, he would need to find a way back, to be restored in his relationships with Jesus and with the other disciples. In Luke's version of that same incident, Jesus told Peter that Satan had asked to sift Peter like wheat. And Jesus didn't tell the devil that he couldn't touch Peter, but said this:

But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (22:32)

Jesus prepared Peter, both for his failure and for his restoration and return to a place of leadership.

Pretending about important things just delays the inevitable discovery of truth. And when we feel unprepared for the events that take place, we're more likely to be devastated by our failures than if we have been made aware of our weakness ahead of time.

Let's look at another story, this time from the Gospel of John. In chapter 3 we read about a Pharisee, actually a member of the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin, a man named Nicodemus, who came to Jesus one night and began to express his faith in Jesus as a teacher from God:

Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him. (John 3:2)

What an opening line! If we were in Jesus' place, wouldn't we be telling Nicodemus, "Just sign here. We'd love to have a guy like you in our club. You're a man of influence, one of big guns of our nation. And you're telling me that you believe Jesus has been sent from God? Well come in, brother!"

And this is what Jesus said in response:

I tell you the truth; no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. (3:3)

Should Jesus have carried on the conversation on the level that Nicodemus began with? Should Jesus have promoted the idea that, yes, the miracles do point to His divine origin, they do provide evidence that God is with Him? And then, should Jesus have invited Nicodemus to make a decision to leave behind his role in the council and become His follower? Why this detour into talking about being born again?

Again, it was the truth that Nicodemus needed to hear. He had spent his lifetime learning the law, discussing with other students of Moses the various meanings of different commandments. His whole world revolved around knowledge and obedience. And now Jesus is telling him what he needs to learn next: how to be led by the Spirit. You can't just know things. You can't just do a few things. Nicodemus, to enter into the Kingdom of God, you need to experience a spiritual rebirth, to know the new life of the Spirit within you. And then Jesus went on from there to tell Nicodemus that God had so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. (3:16) It was truth and it was love.

Being committed to speaking truth into people's lives will mean, from time to time, being willing to say hard things. It was hard for Peter to hear that he would deny his Lord and it was hard for Nicodemus to hear that he had to, in a sense, start over with a new birth into eternal life. Jesus specialized in saying things that made people a bit uncomfortable. Here's an example from Luke 18 where Jesus welcomed little children to spend some time with Him:

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. (18:17)

There has to be humble faith, child-like faith, in a God who loves people like us and welcomes us into His presence. It's a prerequisite for the Kingdom, but that's a hard thing to hear for people who are very secure in their own knowledge and abilities. The option of NOT telling people that they have to learn to receive God's love like a little child, is not a loving option. It's the option that will result in their being excluded, left outside, of God's Kingdom.

But just because it is a loving thing to tell people the truth, it is also important that it *seems* loving, that the person we're speaking truth to *feels* loved in the process. John 11 tells the dramatic story of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, being raised back to life by Jesus. When Jesus arrives at the village of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, Lazarus has already been dead for four days. Jesus could have come sooner; He had known about Lazarus' failing health for some time before He and the disciples made the journey to Bethany. When He arrived, the sisters are both quick to point out that, had He come on time, Lazarus would still be alive. Notice that Jesus did not get into an argument with either of them.

To Martha, He said simply, "Your brother will rise again." She came back with, "I know he will rise again at the resurrection at the last day," and Jesus replied, "I am the resurrection and the life." And then He asked her to trust Him, to put her faith in who He is.

With Mary, there was a different kind of interaction. She began with her rebuke, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." And the text tells us that Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and He asked the mourners, "Where have you laid him?" And then he started to cry. Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!" And then they

began to question if this man who had healed blindness could not have rescued Lazarus from death.

Jesus' next words, after John again tells us that He was deeply moved, were, "Take away the stone." This is, of course, a violation of any sense of dignity, of respect for those who were grieving the death of their brother or friend. This was an invasion of privacy in a very vulnerable moment and Martha objected. Jesus' response to Martha's objection is a challenge to her faith: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Jesus is not concerned with the fleeting emotions of the present. He doesn't tippy-toe around Mary and Martha's feelings about their brother's death or about what He might have done to prevent it. What He does do, clearly, is guided by the purposes of the Father and by His love for Lazarus and his sisters. He prays, calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb and, when Lazarus appears, he tells those standing by to remove his grave clothes and set him free. A powerful and loving act that would have been derailed if Jesus had been afraid to offend, been unwilling to call for faith in a time of grief, or stopped short of honoring His Father in the challenges that He encountered at the tomb outside Bethany.

Two more stories from the example of Jesus which I think demonstrate this principle of exercising truth in a loving way. The first of these two doesn't seem to be loving at first, but let's take a look and make our conclusions later.

Jesus left the Galilee and journeyed out to the coast, the region of Tyre and Sidon, which were both coastal towns. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to meet Him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." Jesus didn't respond to her, didn't say a word, and the disciples, who found the whole scene rather awkward, urged Jesus to send the woman away. In response to them, Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." (Matt. 15:24) The woman came boldly now and knelt on the ground in front of Jesus, "Lord, help me!" He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

Was Jesus telling the truth - that He was sent only to the people of Israel and that it's not right to take the provisions needed by your children and give them away to outsiders? Yes, the principle was true, but Jesus had already broken that principle in earlier incidents, such as healing the centurion's servant. Was it loving? Our first impression is that Jesus was not being loving or gracious to this woman. But we can't see His face, can't hear the tone of his voice, can't experience the dynamics of this encounter. One writer says that Jesus had a twinkle in His eye when He spoke to the woman. Another scholar has noted that Jesus uses the word for "dog" that means a family pet, an endearing term, which was not the usual way in which Jews referred to Gentile "dogs".

Whatever the case, Jesus' response to the woman didn't put her off, didn't offend her so much that she walked away in a huff, and also didn't keep her from getting the gift she so badly wanted; her daughter was healed in that moment. And notice that the thing

Jesus pushed Martha for in the previous story was the same thing He rewarded the woman for in this one: faith. He was asking, "Do you trust Me?" And the answer, despite the original off-putting response was, "Yes!"

The second story is one I've referred to twice already this month, but let's look at it one more time. I'm reading Mark's version, from chapter 10, starting at verse 17:

As Jesus started on His way, a man ran up to Him and fell on his knees before Him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus reminds the man of the ten commandments from the Law of Moses, mentioning the last 6 commands, and the man replies that he has kept them all since his youth.

Then verse 21:

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," He said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. (21,22)

Jesus loved him and then told him what he was missing. "One thing you lack. There's just one thing that keeps you from inheriting eternal life. You've done perfectly so far, but you're missing out because of just one thing. If you would place the Kingdom of God above everything else; if you would come and join those who have left everything behind in order to follow Me, you would have everything your heart desires." But the young man thought he knew better; he thought that what his heart really desired was to hang on to the money he had, the prestige and influence that it brought him, and he couldn't let it go.

Now, how can you say that Jesus loved this man and yet made it so hard for him to become a follower? Well, it helps that Mark tells us He loved him, but don't you think Jesus knows that money or power can't satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart? This scene reminds me of "Fiddler on the Roof" where Perchik tells Tevye that money is the world's curse. Tevye's response was, "May the Lord smite me with it and may I never recover!" This wealthy young man walked away from the opportunity to be one of Jesus' followers, to learn from the Son of God, to have his life shaped by the presence of God on earth, to know that he would be granted life forever in the presence of the Father, just so he could hang on to his money. It doesn't seem like a good exchange. Instead it seems that he walked away both sad and hopeless - but rich.

Jesus loved Peter enough to tell him the truth that he would deny his Lord three times. But He also loved him enough to prepare him to be restored to his brothers and to become a leader in the church. He loved Nicodemus enough to tell him that he needed a spiritual rebirth in order to enter God's kingdom. He pushed a Canaanite woman to express faith in order to find healing for her daughter. He pressed hard on the values of a rich young man so that he would choose what was truly best for him. Love is like that, because it cares more for the person who is being loved than it does for the person who is extending that love. In other words, Jesus cared more about what would happen to these people than He cared about hurting their feelings or making them angry with Him.

He allowed the rich young man to walk away, even though He cared about him, because the truth was more important than anything else he could say. Jesus could have said things that made each of those people feel better about themselves, more fully accepted, even more loved, but Jesus actually loved them enough to tell them the truth. He loved Mary and Martha when they were grieving and vulnerable, even using those moments to draw them to a deeper place of faith. And it's my conviction that each of these people knew that they were loved by Jesus. He wasn't deceptive about that, and He didn't try to keep His compassion or care or affection a secret. He just loved them, communicated His love in a way they could both understand and appreciate, and gave them the freedom to respond as they chose.

What can we learn from loving people like Jesus did?

1. Jesus doesn't seem to have used manipulation or coerced people into believing; He just spoke the truth and let them decide. We can do that.
2. We have to find ways of communicating love just as surely as we have to find ways of communicating truth. Jesus didn't do one without the other and we should follow His example.
3. And third, we learn that we can influence a lot of people by loving them and speaking the truth. Jesus wasn't always successful - witness the rich young man who went away sad - but He was consistent in his approach to people. He loved them and He told them what they really needed to hear.

Loving people without telling them the truth is mere sentimentality; it supports and affirms, but ultimately does nothing to help them move past areas of weakness, or potentially dangerous beliefs. Telling people the truth without demonstrating love is harsh and does nothing to help them hear what they need to hear. We can all grow in doing both things well - let's talk about it.