

April 24, 2011

## What is Truth?

John 18:28-38

In the passage we just read, Jesus was enduring His final trial before the Roman official in Jerusalem before His crucifixion. And His own testimony concerning His mission was this: *For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.*" And a sceptical Pilate answers Him: *"What is truth?"* In Pilate's reply we see mirrored the philosophy of our own age. We just saw in the video the prevailing thought in our society on truth – it's relative, it is moldable, it changes with the circumstances or situations. Furthermore, no one can really know The Truth – because everyone has a different truth. And there is no one high enough to define what ultimate truth is. And so we say with Pilate, 'What is truth?'

How many of you have heard that same sentiment from friends, relatives, co-workers, or strangers? Perhaps you have even voiced these same thoughts yourself. For two thousand years, men have wrestled with the question of truth. Is there an ultimate truth under which we all must bow? Or is truth something that changes with the seasons, or culture or times. It is a crucial question to which we need to find a definitive answer, because as Jesus said - *'I came to testify to the truth, and everyone who is of the truth hears Me.'* The very fact that Jesus came into the world testifies to the fact that there is truth – ultimate truth – universal truth. Standing before Pilate was Truth incarnate. To know Jesus *is* to know truth. The question is, 'Do you know truth today? Do you know Jesus? The most important question you'll ever answer is *'Who is Jesus?'* Is He truth? Does He have the authority to define what is true? Was He God come in the flesh – or was He just a prophet. Was He merely a good, moral teacher – or was He ultimately a liar? Or can we simply write Him off as a lunatic – as C.S. Lewis remarked, *'a man on the level with someone who claims he is a poached egg?'*

*The debate over Jesus and Christianity ultimately comes down to truth – what is truth?* Can we honestly say, as some do: *What is true for you and what is true for me can be different, and yet both true?* Because that is one of the first objections someone will raise with you. There are many objections but this is one of the first: **Christianity cannot be the only way.** So is there truth that is the same for you as it is for me, all the time, every time – **or** does truth change depending on who is speaking or on the situation –or the culture, or the time? The message we are hearing daily is that there is no absolute truth – truth is relative, ultimate truth does not really exist – it is a matter of opinion. But what about truth? Take an honest look at what you really believe about truth. If you are honest with yourself, you will see that you demand truth – absolute truth – in virtually every area of your life. You don't want competing claims of truth in these areas:

- You demand truth from your doctor – you don't want him to lie even a little
- You demand truth from your employer – you wouldn't stand for being paid less than what he said
- You demand truth from lawyers and politicians – although you may not get it.
- You demand truth from teachers and principals
- You demand truth from your bank – you'd just as soon they didn't define math in new and exciting ways
- We assume road signs, medicine bottles and food labels contain truth
- We expect to be told the truth when we pick up a newspaper, or magazine or reference book.

In fact we demand truth for almost every facet of life that affects our **money, relationships, safety** and **health**. But when it comes to religion and morality we seem to be content to put up with something less than **truth**. Why would we say, *'That's true for you but not for me'* when we are talking about religion or morality, but **not** when we are talking about our money? Or our health? Or our job? So why shouldn't there be a way to God that is **the only way?** And that is what Jesus claims: *'I am the Way...'* 14:6a The **truth** is, when it comes to religion and morality we'd rather not be held accountable for our moral choices or religious beliefs. **We have a sneaking suspicion that the truth might rock us.** To paraphrase Jack Nicolson, when he was confronted to tell the truth by Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men* – it might be that *'We can't handle the truth!'* **Augustine said that we love the truth when it enlightens us, and we hate it when it convicts us.**

**Another objection to Christianity is that it is narrow – but truth tends to be narrow.** The truth about gravity is that everything that goes up must come down – and there are no two ways about it. That is narrow. All truth is narrow. **You cannot have contradictory claims** – both of which are true – say, for instance, that some things that go up don't come down – and have truth.  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Period. Below 32 degrees, water freezes. Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins bet their lives on absolute truth when they flew their spaceship to the moon and back. Truth is black and white – not shades of grey. But we like grey – we like to live in the grey areas – where we can't be pinned down - because we like the idea of wiggle room.

The story goes that W.C. Fields, a notorious atheist, near the end of his life, was discovered by one of his friends, actor Thomas Mitchell, in his hospital bed reading the Bible. *'What are you doing W.C.?' Mitchell enquired – knowing that W.C. had never picked it up before. 'Looking for loopholes, Tom, - looking for loopholes.' W.C. Replied. But truth is narrow.* There are no loopholes. It doesn't have space for wiggle room. That is why when Jesus says, *'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'* John 14:6a it comes hard against our desire for wiggle room – it chases us out of the grey areas. Jesus did not say, 'I am **a** Way – or I am **part** of the Truth – or I am **one kind** of Life.' **He laid claim to the exclusivity of Truth.** And that is narrow. You cannot know truth without knowing Jesus. You cannot find the way to heaven apart from Jesus. You will not know real life without Jesus. He was not pointing out a path or a truth – He was pointing to Himself – **HE** is the way, **HE** is the truth – **HE** is the life.

**Another objection to Christ is that Christianity is intolerant.** The truth tends to be intolerant – **it is intolerant of non-truth.** Either a thing is true or it is not. You cannot have it both ways. Jesus said, *'No one comes to the Father but through Me.'* John 14:6b That is intolerant of the claim that there are many ways to be saved, or go to heaven. But our society today demands tolerance. **Tolerance today is defined as the ability to accept opposing and contradictory viewpoints and validate both.** While most **religions** have some beliefs that are true, not all religious **beliefs** can be true because they teach mutually exclusive ideas. For instance, it cannot both be true that there is **and** isn't a heaven, or that there is **and** isn't a hell; and it cannot be true that we are essentially good, **and** that we are essentially depraved and in need of a Savior. Some religious beliefs must therefore be wrong. But today, you are not supposed to say that. You are supposed to say that you just have a **different truth.** Tolerance today does not mean that you just put up with something you don't agree with – **tolerance today means that you are supposed to accept every belief as true.** But if you try to accept every belief as true – you get conflicted beliefs and eventually nothing makes any sense.

**So intolerance in and of itself is not a bad thing.** For example, I am extremely intolerant of anyone who felt that traffic laws were too narrow and intolerant and they should be able to drive anywhere they pleased and drove 85 mph on the wrong side of the road, and refused to stop at stop signs. It is good to be intolerant of some things. **And that is no more important than when it concerns your eternal destiny.** So we should be very skeptical of anyone who objects by saying that **there are many ways to God** – many roads to the same destination. We should be intolerant.

While on the surface, the objection that **there are many roads to the same destination or all religions teach the same thing** sounds good – we realize that it is nonsense by looking at just a few of the truth claims of some religions

- Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in different versions of a theistic God, while New Agers believe that everything that exists is part of an impersonal pantheistic force they call God.
- Moses taught that there was only one God; Hindus believe in many gods; and Buddha was agnostic.
- Most Hindus believe that evil is a complete illusion, while Christian, Muslims and Jews believe that evil is real.
- Christians believe that people are saved by grace through faith, while all other religions, if they believe in salvation at all, base salvation on good works.

**Competing claims cannot all be true.** Logically only one is true and the rest are false – or they are all false. All roads do not lead to heaven. Jesus said *"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it."* Matthew 7:13-14 The broad way would have us believe that there are many ways we can go about this thing – there are many paths to heaven – that all religions teach basically the same thing. But Jesus does not agree with that assessment – His way is narrow – His way is intolerant of false ways – He says that His way is the only way. So why should we believe that **His** way is **the** way?

**Dr. Seamands tells of a Muslim who became a Christian in Africa. “Some of his friends asked him, ‘Why have you become a Christian?’ He answered, ‘Well, it’s like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly the road forked in two directions, and you didn’t know which way to go, and there at the fork in the road were two men, one dead and one alive—which one would you ask for directions?’”** Jesus Christ is the only founder of a religion that was resurrected. **His resurrection validates His claim to Truth.** Mohammed never got resurrected – his bones are now dust. Buddha never got resurrected – he was sort of absorbed into the whole, according to his theory. Jesus’ resurrection means that **His way is the way.** In the Gospel of John, Jesus told Mary, when He came to the tomb of her brother Lazarus: **“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,”** John 11:25 The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our faith. Romans 10:9 tells us that **‘If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord; and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.’**

In addition to the objections that Christianity cannot be the only way, or that it is narrow, intolerant and there are many other ways to God – we run into the objection that **If God is such a loving God how can He keep good people out of heaven? Don’t we all deserve to be there? After all, there is a little good in everyone.** To that I would ask you a question: How good is good enough? I mean is there a standard of goodness that qualifies each person for heaven? Or are we graded on the curve? Or is it enough to have good intentions but never really reach the goal of goodness? The question really is: **What is the essence of goodness?** Everyone in the world has an idea of goodness and badness – and we all have an innate sense of fairness. And I think we could all say that for God to keep a good person out of heaven would not be fair. But how do you define good? Jesus agrees with those who think that goodness qualifies you for heaven. No one really believes that we will meet Hitler in heaven. This is what Jesus said: **‘For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.’** Matthew 5:20

So what did their righteousness look like? I mean, if we need to go **beyond** that level of goodness – we need to have some idea of where to start. We can start with God’s law that He gave us called the Ten Commandments. God’s Law is the essence of goodness. The scribes and the Pharisees actually tried to keep those laws. They were professional do-gooders. Their lives were spent trying to keep the law of God. They even came up with more rules so that they didn’t accidentally break the major ones. And you can imagine their irritation when Jesus came along and pointed them out to the crowd and said **‘Unless you do better than these guys, you won’t make it to heaven.’** So if the guys who made a living out of being good, weren’t good enough – what about you?

How would you rate your goodness? I think a couple of questions ought to settle it: Have you ever told a lie? Have you ever stolen something? Even something little? Have you ever taken the Lord’s name in vain? Used His name to convey some filthy, vile thought? If so, we have proven that we’re not good enough to go to heaven. Listen to what the Bible says: **Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals – now before some of you cramp up from patting yourself on the back, read on: nor thieves,[have you ever stolen something?] nor the covetous,[have you ever wanted more of what someone else had and been happy to see them deprived of it?] nor drunkards,[is it normal for you to be intoxicated?] nor revilers,[have you ever attacked someone with abusive speech?] nor swindlers,[have you ever cheated someone, or gotten something dishonestly?] (none of these) will inherit the kingdom of God.** [1 Corinthians 6:9-11]

The point is, **there is none righteous, no not one.** That is what the Bible tells us – we are not good people. **‘...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’** – which is why we need a Savior. **No one will reach God by being good.** The only way we will reach God is through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. No amount of meditation will do it – no number of good works will be adequate – no self-sacrifice will ever be enough to get into heaven. You must come to Jesus – **He is the Way – He is the Truth – He is the Life.**

And what about the objection that **it is unloving of God to keep people out of heaven?** Terry Bowland in his book *Make Disciples – Reaching The Postmodern World for Christ* writes this: **“Many today balk at the teaching of the church. ‘Do you mean to say,’ they ask, ‘that all those outside the church have no hope whatsoever? What about all the sincere folks who never come to Christ? What of the billions in the worlds of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism? ... What of my neighbors and friends who are good-hearted people, but who have never made Christ their Lord and Savior? Are you saying that they are lost? Why, if that’s true, then this ‘gospel’ has made you Christians the most narrow-minded, bigoted people on the face of the earth.”**

I would ask – Is it unloving and selfish and narrow and intolerant when your doctor, who has diagnosed you with a deadly disease, tells you that you must take a regimen of several painful shots a week for the rest of your life in order to live? Is it bigoted and narrow-minded when he says that no other course of treatment will work? Would we say to the doctor, ***'I believe you are the most hateful, narrow-minded, and bigoted physician I have ever met because you insist on having it your way.'***? No, we wouldn't say that because that is the most loving thing he could do – ***because that treatment will save your life.*** It would be supremely unloving to do anything else.

But the real question is not ***how can a loving God keep good people out of heaven but rather how can a righteous God let any of us in?*** People are not condemned to hell for not believing in Jesus, rather they are ***already*** condemned because of their sin. ***'He who believes in Him is not condemned; he who does not believe has been condemned already because he has not believed in the only begotten Son of God.'*** John 3:18 The ultimate sin is to ***not*** believe in the Son of God. In utter rebellion we reject the only way there is to heaven. But our loving, heavenly Father was not content to just let us rush headlong into hell. Instead He gave us His only Son as a sacrifice for our sin and rebellion and rejection of Him so that we might be reconciled to Him and live with Him forever.

***'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.'*** John 3:16 It was the supreme act of love that sent Jesus to the cross, to bear our sins in His body on the cross so that we might be saved from the wrath of God which is coming upon all unrighteousness – and grant us entrance into His eternal kingdom. ***That is love*** – it would be supremely unloving to sit idly by while your neighbor goes to hell – it would be the height of selfishness to keep silent when a word from you might have opened the heart of your friend or co-worker or a complete stranger to the saving love of God. ***At the risk of being branded intolerant, narrow and unloving, I will testify to the grace of God as long as I have breath.***

***Because God is not affirming everyone's belief system – He is only interested in His belief system.*** And He's given us His beliefs spelled out in the Bible. ***It is not enough to be sincere.*** What if your science professor announces that your first experiment will involve studying the properties of acids. He places a 500 ML Pyrex beaker containing clear liquid on the lab table and says, ***"This is sulfuric acid."*** In response to his explanation, imagine your lab partner blurts out, ***"I don't believe this is sulfuric acid. It looks like water to me."*** He is so sincere in his belief that he decides to drink it. ***He is now your ex-lab partner.*** Despite his sincerity, his belief that the beaker contained water could not change the nature of its contents. He may have believed with all of his heart that the beaker only contained water but the acid still killed him. ***You may be sincere and yet sincerely wrong.*** – ***if you don't know Jesus, if you've never invited Him to be Lord of your life – you are sincerely lost.*** And you ***will*** one day discover the truth when you die – it's just that it's too late then.

Finally, some object by saying, ***don't we all deserve to be happy? That's what God wants, isn't it?*** And the surprising answer to the second half of that is an emphatic 'Yes!' God does want us to be happy. But we don't ***deserve*** to be happy. Contrary to what you may believe – there is no fundamental right to be happy. Even the Declaration of Independence says only that we have the right to ***pursue*** happiness. Catching it is another matter altogether. ***What we do deserve is death.*** The Bible says that death is what we have earned – ***'For the wages of sin is death...'*** Romans 6:23a and we've been sinfully employed long enough to have a lot of wages coming.

But the last part of that verse talks about unearned happiness – free, eternal, unending joy. ***'...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'*** Romans 6:23b ***God wants to fill you with joy.*** In fact, everything God has purposed in saving us points us toward unlimited joy. The Bible teaches that God intends for men to be happy, He made us with the capacity for happiness; in fact nearly everything we do springs from the desire to be happy. ***No one sins out of duty. We sin because we think it will make us happy.*** But eventually we find out that sin does not make us happy. Money doesn't make us happy. Friendships don't make us happy. Power, fame and status don't make us happy. But God made us to be happy - only He doesn't call it ***happiness***, He calls it ***joy***. And joy, real joy and lasting happiness, is all wrapped up in God:

- ***'In Your presence is fullness of joy; and at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.'*** Psalm 16:11
- ***Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy;*** Psalm 43:4
- ***All my springs {of joy} are in you.*** Psalm 87:7

The truth is, apart from God, you and I cannot be truly happy. We have moments of exhilaration – we even have little fits of happiness – but we cannot have true joy – joy that lasts – joy in spite of our circumstances – joy unspeakable and full of glory – apart from God. **Happiness depends on what is happening to you. Joy is different; joy goes deeper. Joy is when your whole being sings because you have caught a glimpse of God and your desire and delight are in Him.** To paraphrase the prayer of Augustine ‘**Lord, You made us for Yourself, and our hearts find no joy until they find their joy in You.**’

God sent His only begotten Son to earth, to live 33 ½ years, to be railroaded by a kangaroo court, and be crucified on a cross for your sin and mine, buried in a borrowed tomb, and resurrected to life so that we might have **joy and eternal life. What is Truth? Jesus Christ is Truth.** The resurrection of Jesus from the dead that we celebrate today means that He is **the Way**, the only way to joy, the only way to heaven. It means that He is **the Truth**, the only truth in a world fixated on whatever truth conforms to their ideal. And He is **the Life** – the real life, resurrection life that guarantees that everyone who believes in Him will be raised with Him to life when He comes in glory to judge the living and the dead.

If you are here today, and you have been wrestling with the question of what is truth? – if you are looking for truth, if you are looking for the way to God, if you are looking for real joy and eternal life – I would invite you to surrender your heart to the truth of Jesus, put your trust in Him and believe in Him who is Truth, and ask Him to be Your Lord and Savior.

*Heavenly Father,*

*We confess that we are sinners and we deserve Your righteous judgment. We have not loved You as we ought; we have chosen to go our own way; and in a thousand other ways we have sinned against heaven and against You. By the sacrifice of Jesus and by the power of His resurrection, forgive us our sins we pray and give us a new heart and cause us to walk in Your will. Grant Oh Lord, that we would serve you with the passion that we once served ourselves and that our highest joy would be to do what You want. May all our springs of joy be in You. Fill us, Holy Spirit, with new life and a fresh desire to glorify God in our lives, we pray in the precious and powerful name of our resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.*