

# Truth

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Life is full of surprises, and sometimes the surprises reveal that the world is actually a very different place than we thought it was. For instance, I've always been interested in the stories that my older relatives tell about my ancestors, and on the basis of those stories, I had constructed in my head what I thought was a fairly accurate picture of my genetic heritage. I knew that I had Bassfords, Dawsons, Tyneses, and Barneses in my family tree, so I figured I was about 3/8 English. Similarly, I knew that among my mother's people were Gieslers, Breuers, and Diestelkamps, so I thought I would be about 30 percent German. Add to that my Polish-immigrant grandmother and a great-great-grandmother who was supposedly half Cherokee, and I thought I had a pretty clear picture of what my DNA looked like.

However, a few months ago, my brother sent a blood sample off to get a genetic profile done, and we learned who we actually were instead. The genetic sampling yielded the following average results: my brother, who is certainly my full brother, is 66 percent Anglo-Scottish, only 7 percent German, 17 percent Polish, 9 percent Irish, and 1 percent Spanish. Now, the margin of error for some of these is pretty impressive, so I can't draw any conclusions about who of my ancestors was up to what, but some things are quite clear. I'm a lot more British Isles than I thought I was, a lot less German, and whoever's Cherokee ancestor Great-Great-Grandma Barnes was, she wasn't any ancestor of mine.

Not just in genetics, but in life generally, what we THINK is doesn't matter. What actually is does matter. When they don't line up, we can end up in serious trouble. Let's consider, then, the subject of truth.

## God and Truth

There are a host of practical reasons why truth is important, but it is particularly significant because of the relationship between God and truth. The Scripture teaches us first of all that He **EMBODIES TRUTH**. Consider the description of our Lord in John 1:14. The very nature of Jesus is that He is full of truth. We often talk about how God is far more complex than we are, far beyond our ability to comprehend. That's true, but there are some ways in which He is much simpler than we are, and this is one of them. Every human being is double-minded to some extent. Every one of us has lied in the past, and we all possess the capacity for deceit. Not so with God. God is what He is, and He has neither the inclination nor the ability to pretend to be anything else. He cannot lie. He cannot say one thing and do another. On earth, all the standards that we see are not absolute. It is possible for a dictionary to have a typo or a ruler to be incorrectly marked. God, on the other hand, is the absolute standard for truth, and there is no lie in Him.

Because of this, God **APPEALS TO TRUTH**. Look at how Jesus presents this idea in John 18:37. As I have already observed, there is a sense in which all men are alike with respect to the truth. Even the best of us fall short of the standard of the perfect truth of God. However, there is another sense in which men differ greatly. On the one hand are people who love the truth. On the other are people who don't.

I was blessed to be raised by two parents who loved truth. I can't remember a single instance in which either my father or my mother lied to or deceived me. When they caught me lying to them, they made quite clear that lying was unacceptable. To this day, integrity is one of the things my family most values.

As a result, I kind of had the impression that people were basically honest, so when I got out in the real world and realized that many, perhaps most, people were basically dishonest, it came as something of a shock to me. As I'm sure all of us have, I've worked with people who would lie at the drop of a hat, not because there was some pressing need to lie, but because it looked like the path of least resistance. Perhaps most bafflingly of all, I've watched parents lie to their children, and I suspect that most parents do this.

Unless people like that change, they will never come to God. First of all, God doesn't want them. They are alien to His nature, but they are congenial to the nature of the devil. Second, people like this won't listen to the truth. They like things easy, so when the Scripture reveals some hard truths to them, they tune it out. Only people who are willing to face an unpleasant reality will hear the whole gospel.

In addition, God **ADOPTS IN TRUTH**. John testifies to this in 1 John 3:1. As we all know, saying doesn't make it so. Even believing doesn't make it so. It doesn't matter very much that we call ourselves the children of God. There are all kinds of people who claim to be God's children who actually

aren't. However, it matters a great deal that God both calls us His children and truly has adopted us as such. That implies a dramatic change in our status. A common plot device, particularly in movies and TV shows aimed at the Disney set, is that a female main character discovers one day that she is a princess, and all sorts of dramatic changes occur to her status as a result. Think Anne Hathaway in *The Princess Diaries* or that cartoon *Sophia the First*. Now the lead lives in a castle, has to go to all of these fancy balls, and so on.

However, all of those changes are nothing to the changes that occur in our lives once we become children of the King of heaven. We were alienated from God. Now we are His sons and daughters. We were destined for eternal destruction. Now, we can look forward to an eternal inheritance in heaven. We don't have to doubt those things or fear that someone will take them from us, because God has adopted us.

Finally, though, God **EXPECTS TRUTH**. This is evident from David's anguished expression in Psalm 51:6. As I alluded to above, every family has a culture and expectations for conduct. This is true of God's family too. Once He adopts us, He expects us to be as committed to truth as He is. Conversely, when we sin and lie to ourselves about the wickedness of our behavior, we're betraying those standards. That's what David did. He slept with another man's wife, had him killed, married her himself, and refused to be honest with himself about what he had done. I get the impression that he was determined not to think about it, that he swept the whole nasty business under his mental rug until the prophet Nathan confronted him about it. Even though David repented, as we see in Psalm 51, he suffered for his sin all his life.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's reflect on these last two points in particular. First of all, let's remember what a blessing it is that we have been made a part of God's household. God sent His only begotten Son to die to bring us in, and that changed who we are forever. However, if it's God's house, it's God's rules, and God does not tolerate dishonesty or self-deception from us. Let's examine ourselves this morning and be honest about what we are actually doing and what that says about our relationship with God.

### **Perception and Truth.**

In the second part of our time together, let's explore the topic of perception and truth. Simply because we perceive something as true doesn't mean that it actually is. Even with the uncertainties involved in genetic profiling, I learned enough from my brother's genetic test to realize that what I thought about my ancestry couldn't possibly be true. So too, friends, we may be mistaken in the most important area of all. We may believe one thing about ourselves while the Bible says another.

Logically speaking, this first becomes relevant when we consider the subject of **SIN**. James makes no bones about the seriousness of sin in James 1:15. Here and everywhere in the Bible, sin is unequivocally presented as leading to death. To say the least, this is not a popular notion. If we believe the Bible, we acknowledge that sin in the abstract is a serious problem. We may even expect God to condemn sinners. However, surely that doesn't apply to us! Surely my favorite sin isn't on that list! Surely it's going to lead not to death, but to a stern talking-to!

It's hard to imagine a deadlier form of self-deception than that. Lying to ourselves about sin is like pretending that we haven't had a stroke or a heart attack. That pain in my left arm is just indigestion! I'm having trouble talking because I didn't sleep well! If we don't face the truth about our medical condition, the lie may well kill us. We can't fool around with a heart attack. We can't fool around with a stroke. If we don't face truth about our spiritual condition, that lie will kill us too, because fooling around with sin is worse.

We also need to be honest with what the Bible says about **SALVATION**. Jesus could not put this more clearly than He does in John 14:6. There is no way to heaven except through Jesus. If we think that we're going to be blessed by God because we're good people, we are as wrong as we can be. If we think that we can find our way to God by following the rules of some other religion, we are sadly mistaken. Jesus is the way, and there is no other. This doesn't mean that we invent a god in our heads, apply the label "Jesus" to that god, and think that the god we have invented will save us just because we named him "Jesus". If we lie to ourselves about the Lord and about His expectations, that's every bit as deadly as lying to ourselves about our sin. If Jesus says that we need to be baptized in order to be saved, it's not a good idea for us to convince ourselves that He didn't really mean it. Instead, we must honor His authority through obeying the gospel.

Similarly, we cannot afford to deceive ourselves about **GODLY LIVING**. Consider John's words in 1 John 2:4. Maybe we've done everything right so far. Maybe we have acknowledged that our sin is a deadly problem. Maybe we have turned to Jesus as the only One who can save us. However, that's not enough. We

have no basis for claiming that we have a relationship with Jesus unless we keep His commandments. There are preachers out there who claim that once you're saved, you're always saved, that you can be shotgunned to death while robbing a convenience store and still pass straight into heaven. Clearly, this is absurd. In the words of the apostle Paul, light can have no communion with darkness.

This point, though, isn't about some denominational false doctrine or some believer who has turned to a life of crime. It's about us. If we have indeed repented of a life of sin, we are responsible for bringing forth fruits in keeping with repentance. Once we've been baptized into Christ, He expects us to do our best to walk as He walked. If we live a life of sin instead, our latter state is worse than the first.

At this point, a lot of Christians want to know where the line is. How much sin do we have to have in our lives before we have lapsed into willful sin and fallen from grace? Friends, that's the wrong question to ask! It's like a bridge builder asking how much he can skimp on the safety margins before the bridge will collapse. It's like a baker asking how much poison he can put in his bread before he starts killing customers. If the bridge builder is truly concerned about safety, he will make the bridge as safe as he can. If the baker is concerned about his customers, he will bake bread that is as wholesome as possible.

Similarly, if we are truly concerned about God, we will live lives that are as God-pleasing as we can make them. We won't ask how often we have to assemble with the saints. We will ask when we can be here. We won't ask how close we can get to a particular sin. We will ask how close we can get to Jesus instead.

Sure; sometimes we'll mess up. John tells us that even people who walk in the light will still sin, and that if we claim sinlessness, we are liars. However, that sin will always be an aberration, not who we truly are, not what we truly want. Instead, our eyes must be fixed on Jesus, and the aim of our lives, to glorify Him.

Finally, we must acknowledge what the Scripture tells us about **JUDGMENT**. Look at 2 Corinthians 5:10. It's funny that in the world around us, the Bible verse that is on everybody's lips is, "Judge not, lest you be judged." Their implication, I think, is that we can somehow hope to escape judgment if we aren't judgmental about others. Not so. I hear a lot these days too about inclusiveness; well, the Day of Judgment is going to be the most inclusive event in human history! We are all invited, we are all going to be there, and we are all going to have to give an account. God is going to examine even the tiniest detail of untold billions of human lives, and He is going to pronounce sentence on every one of us then and there.

That's an intimidating thought, and it should be intimidating! I can maybe keep up a front for other people, but I can't fool God. He knows every evil thing I've done, every evil thing I've said, and every evil thing I've thought. Even a single unforgiven sin will be enough to keep me from His side forever. Who can stand up before that kind of scrutiny? Who of us can face the terrifying perfection of our Creator and not hang our heads in shame? God promises justice to us all, but the last thing that I want from Him is justice! If I get what I have coming, I know where I'm going. Instead, I need His mercy. We all do. If we're going to heaven at all, we're going in spite of what we've done, not because of it, and mercy only comes from Jesus.

## Seeking Truth.

In the last sermon segment, we saw that knowing the truth about the things of the spirit, versus allowing ourselves to be deceived, can make a literal heaven-and-hell difference in our lives. It's critically important, then, for us to seek the truth. First, we must seek the truth **IN OUR HEARTS**. Look at Psalm 15:1-2. In this world, we recognize that lying does terrible damage. Wars have been fought because of lies. Lives have been lost. However, the most damaging lies of all are the lies we tell ourselves, for the lies that we tell ourselves are the lies that can cost us our souls. Most people are not going to heaven. After all, wide is the way that leads to destruction. However, I suspect that very few people on their deathbeds acknowledge to themselves that they are headed for an eternity apart from God. If they truly believed that, they would do whatever they could to change. Instead, most lose their souls because they have deceived themselves.

The list of self-deceptions is nearly infinite, but here are a few favorites: "I'm a good person on my own; I don't need Jesus to save me." "The Bible is a book of guidelines, not laws." "My favorite sin isn't really a bad sin." "God is a God of love, not a God of judgment." "As long as I come to church, God will be pleased with whatever else I do." "I can put other things ahead of God, and He won't mind."

Brethren, we may have been baptized for the forgiveness of sins, but we can still lie ourselves straight to hell. There is only one cure for this disease. We have to steel ourselves to love the truth and obey the truth, no matter how unpleasant it is, no matter how much it costs us. Otherwise, we cannot be saved.

Second, we must seek the truth **IN OUR TEACHERS**. Many will not, as Paul reveals in 2 Timothy 4:3-4. When Lauren and I go on vacation, we often end up visiting her aunt and uncle in Tennessee, Chuck and Betty Waller. Chuck and Betty are very hospitable people; indeed, when they built their dream home, they devoted the top floor to guest quarters. In the guest bathroom up there, in addition to all of the necessities, there is the most hospitable scale you will ever meet. No matter who you are, no matter how much you weigh, when you step on it, you will be pleasantly surprised by the number it reports.

Of course, I've been visiting that house for years, so I know the truth about that scale. It lies. It consistently reports my weight, at least, about five pounds light. Sure, it's a good feeling when I step on the lying scale, and it tells me that despite having lived off of Extra Value Meals for the past week, I have actually lost weight. However, if I take that lie to heart, in a few days, I'll be splitting the seat of my blue jeans.

False teachers are like that scale. They'll always tell us what we want to hear about ourselves. They'll tell us that God is happy with us just the way we are. They'll tell us that following Christ is the road to riches. They'll tell us that we will go to heaven if only our names are on the membership roll of the church. Whatever lie we want to hear, we can find a false teacher who will tell it to us.

In the end, though, what good does that do us? The false teacher is no better than the doctor who tells us that we don't have cancer when we actually do, or the swindler who promises us that if we invest with him, we'll beat the market every year, guaranteed. It sounds good, and it'll make us feel good for a little while if we believe it, but in the end, we will be far worse off than if we had been willing simply to hear the truth.

Third, we must seek the truth **IN OUR SPEECH**. We see this exemplified in Paul and his companions in 1 Thessalonians 2:3-4. Lying, sad to say, is a trick that most of us don't have any trouble picking up. My children are now 4 and 2, and yet, we have already reached the age at which contraband items leap from tables and trails of food appear around the house without human intervention. Apparently, our home is inhabited either by poltergeists or small liars, and I'm guessing it's the liars.

Hopefully, I'll be able to teach Zoë and Marky better as they grow older, but even when we have grown older, lying remains a temptation for most of us. First, it seems to be the invariable companion of secret sin. As William Raspberry once observed, adultery and lying about it are two halves of the same act, and the same can be said of a double handful of other sins as well. Indeed, that's something to remember when we are tempted to engage in secret sin. The devil gets us to sin by telling us that nobody is ever going to find out, but he doesn't tell us that if we don't want anybody to find out, we're going to have to deceive our friends, our brethren, and our loved ones. Secret sin always comes with a side order of hypocrisy.

Of course, that's not the only reason why we are tempted to lie. Sometimes, we lie simply because lying looks like an easier road than telling the truth. This is never accurate. The truth may exact a stiff price, especially if we've lied our way into a corner, but the price we pay for lying goes on and on. Deceit has a momentum of its own, and the longer it continues, the more it snowballs. No matter what the devil tells us, he is never a kind master. We can only escape his clutches when we are forthright and honest in all things.

Finally, we must seek truth **IN OUR ACTIONS**. John indicates this in 1 John 2:6. Following Jesus isn't about the saying. It's about the doing. If we're going to say, then we'd better do. If we don't, the saying will accomplish nothing. Of all the lies we've talked about this morning, this is perhaps the most pointless. Why bother laying claim to discipleship if we aren't actually going to live like disciples? The people we spend time with are quickly going to see through that claim, and even if it brings discredit to Christ, it will bring no credit to us. Even worldly types appreciate integrity, and if we say one thing but do another, we don't have it.

Walking like Jesus is no easy task. It doesn't merely mean avoiding the thou-shalt-not's, although those are certainly included. It doesn't mean showing up here for three and a half-ish hours a week, although that's included too. Walking like Jesus means loving like He loved. It means surrendering our lives entirely to the Father like He surrendered His. It means standing out from the people around us the way that He stood out. It means being merciful as He is merciful, so that we can receive mercy from Him. This is not a life for everybody, but it is the only life that can lead to eternal life.