

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #66: SOME TRUTHS ABOUT TRUTH

By John Temples

John 8:32--"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

John 8:32 contains an amazing and encouraging promise: we can know the truth, and it sets us free. What is truth? Here are some dictionary definitions:

- "A statement which is in accordance with fact or reality."
- "That which is in agreement with the way things actually are."
- "A proven or verified principle or statement of fact."
- And little Johnny's Sunday School class definition of truth: "What IS, as opposed to what ISN'T."

There are basically two kinds or types of truth: discovered truth and revealed truth.

- *Discovered truth*--truth found by observation, experience, or investigation.
- *Revealed truth*--truth that cannot be found by observation, but must be revealed by the Creator. Revealed truth is found in the Bible. Jesus prayed in John 17:17, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."

In John 8, Jesus was telling some would-be disciples that if they would remain in His teaching they would know the truth, and the truth would set them free (John 8:32). This statement affirms or implies three things about truth:

- Truth is *valuable*.
- Truth is *knowable*.
- Truth is *liberating*--it sets us free.

Truth is valuable. How much would you pay for the truth about the location of a missing loved one? Of how much value is the truth about the COVID-19 virus that has wreaked havoc on our land?

If truth in the natural world is important, Proverbs 23:23 implies that spiritual truth is of inestimable value. It says, "Buy the truth and do not sell it." Would you sell what you know from the Bible for any amount of money? Truth is valuable. In fact, it is priceless.

The second thing we learn from John 8:32 is that truth can be found. John 8:32 says, "You shall know the truth." Many are skeptical of this. Pilate cynically asked Jesus, "What is truth?" He implied that truth was unknowable. Well, he was a politician, and therefore not accustomed to being around people who deal in truth!

Mankind has been blessed by the work of many dedicated researchers seeking the truth about the natural world. Their diligent search for knowledge has blessed us with many useful and labor-saving inventions. Similarly, religious truth can be found by searching Scripture. We find truth about the natural world by investigation; we find spiritual truth through inspiration--God's word.

Third, truth is liberating; it sets us free. Free from what? From ignorance, error, superstition, and uncertainty. God's truth frees us from sin and eternal damnation.

- "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me *free from the law of sin and death*" (Romans 8:2).
- God's word *frees us from the guilt and power of sin*. Romans 6:17-18 says, "But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine [or truth] to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."
- God's word *frees us from fear, doubt, and pessimism*. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).
- Through the word of God we are *freed from hopelessness*. Ephesians 2:12-13--"...you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ."

SOME TRUTHS ABOUT TRUTH

First: truth is narrow. That is, it is strict. In math, $2 + 2 = 4$. Not 3, not 0. Nobody resents this narrowness of truth in numbers; in fact, if your child were to come home from school and tell you the teacher said that $2 + 2$ can be any number you want it to be, you would be upset.

Biblical truth is also narrow and strict. Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount about two ways people travel in life: the wide way and the narrow way. Many people prefer the wide way--smooth, broad, and wide enough to bring along all their worldly baggage. They resent the Bible's affirmation that truth is narrow and restrictive. Many are aghast that Jesus would say, "No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). But real truth--in both the natural and the spiritual realm--is narrow. If baptism is immersion (which it is), then it is not sprinkling or pouring.

Second: truth is discovered, not invented. Certain truths have always been, even before we found them out. Isaac Newton formulated the law of gravity in 1687. But if you fell off a cliff in 1686--one year before his discovery--it would hurt just as much as it did in 1687, when people knew about the law of gravity. Newton didn't invent gravity; he just discovered and described it. The laws of electricity have been operable since the creation, but we didn't realize their existence or usefulness until two or three hundred years ago. God asked Job a challenging question in Job 38:35--"Can you send out lightnings, that they may go and say to you, 'Here we are'?" This was probably written around 2000 BC. Around the turn of the 20th century, we finally got around to being able to answer the riddle of Job 38:35, with the invention of the telephone. When you activate your cell phone, you "send out lightnings"--electrical waves--that say to others, "Here I am." So it only took us 4,000 years to discover principles of electricity that had always been here! We don't make truth. God establishes truth; we discover truth.

Third: Truth is not negated by my beliefs. You can say you don't believe in the law of gravity, but it still works. Truth simply *is*, regardless of how I feel about it. That's valid with regard to both natural truth and spiritual truth.

Fourth: truth is true everywhere and at all times. It is trans-cultural and trans-temporal. “2 + 2 = 4” is true at any time and at any place. Facts may change; truth remains. So what is the difference between a truth and a fact? Answer: a fact may be limited by time; a truth is not limited by time. The statement “Abraham Lincoln is president of the United States” was once a fact; now it is not. But “Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States” is both a truth and a fact.

Fifth: truth is not affected by sincerity or lack of it. No matter how sincere people may be in believing a lie, it is still a lie. There are many people in their graves today who: (1) thought the gun wasn't loaded; or (2) thought they could handle snakes or drink poison and not be harmed.

Sixth: truth is external to us. It exists outside of us and independent from us. The law of gravity was true before we were born, and it will be true after we are gone. One of Satan's master strokes in our age has been his successful campaign to get us to abandon the concept of timeless, external “moral principles (truths)” and to replace them with internal, changeable “moral VALUES.” What is the difference between a principle and a value? A principle is a truth that is outside of us, independent of us. A value is internal to us and therefore subject to change. It is, after all, merely how we FEEL about something. Values may vary from person to person, but principles--laws, truths--are the same for all of us. Values can change from culture to culture or era to era; but principles are fixed.

Seventh: spiritual truth may sometimes be difficult to find, but that does not relieve us from responsibility to discover it. We are responsible to God not only for what we know, but for what we can find out. Jesus said of the truth that makes us free, “You shall know the truth” (John 8:32). If I do not find it, that is my fault, not God's.

In Romans 1, Paul spoke of the pagan idol worshippers of prior generations. Did he say, “Well, God can't really hold them accountable, because they lived in an age of ignorance”? No! He said the wrath of God is upon them, because they could have discerned God's eternal power and divinity from nature; but they willfully rejected even that basic truth (Romans 1:19-21). In fact, Paul said they “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (verse 23), and therefore God gave them up to unrighteousness and judgment.

Am I saying that we can know all religious truth? No. Who can say he or she understands everything about God, the Holy Spirit, heaven, angels, etc.? So how much truth can I know? Jesus answers that in John 8:32--"the truth that makes you free." We can be assured that we have the truth we must know to be made right with God and to go to heaven. The nature of the Holy Spirit is debatable, but the plan of salvation is crystal clear.

TRUTH IS UNDER ATTACK TODAY AS NEVER BEFORE

It is in Satan's best interest to keep you from learning the truth, and he seems to be especially active in that regard at present. Here are some "isms" that are part of the assault on truth today:

Relativism. This is the concept that truth is uncertain and relative; that is, it depends on your point of view. Nothing is certain; what is true for you may not be true for me. People will say, "You cannot know anything for sure--there is no such thing as absolute truth." My answer to that assertion is: *Are you absolutely sure about that?* Relativism is self-contradictory, because it claims that it is absolutely true that there is no absolute truth.

Agnosticism. This word means literally "not to know." An agnostic says, "well, there might be a God; but I'm not sure." I guess some people think it is cool and sophisticated to question God's existence; or they don't want to espouse a belief that will make them unpopular with the in crowd. I've always wondered, though--if I were not sure about the most important basic fact in the universe, might I want to make some effort to find out?

Skepticism. Related to agnosticism, this is simply an attitude of distrust, doubt, or uncertainty. An agnostic says "I don't know"; a skeptic says "I cannot know." Pilate epitomized skepticism in his famous query, "What is truth?" Paul described some people who were "always learning, yet never able to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). But that incredulity was their fault, not God's. God is pleased with folks who "search the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things are so" (Acts 17:11).

Pluralism. This doctrine says that all viewpoints and truth claims are equally valid. It basically says that everybody is right, even if they directly contradict each other. Pluralism confuses the idea of every person having equal value with every truth claim being equally valid. To put it more simply, all people may be equal, but not all truth claims are. Pluralism fails to acknowledge the difference.

Pragmatism. This is the idea that truth is simply “whatever works.” The end justifies the means. But a belief may “work”--produce effective results--and not be true. A pragmatist may observe that having entertainment-centered worship services with a live band and lots of excitement brings in more people than a simple, Bible-based, non-instrumental service; therefore, the live-wire approach must be the true way for church growth and has God’s approval. Pragmatism may be valid in some realms (if my faucet drips and replacing the washer stops the drip, then the “truth” is that the washer was defective); but spiritual and biblical truth is not determined by observing what "works" and what doesn't.

Another assault on truth is non-judgmentalism. This viewpoint says, “My neighbor is a good person, and I am a good person; therefore, I have no right to tell him he is ‘wrong’ about some religious concept.” I once heard a man on TV talking about having developed some new educational software. Was his software’s main strength that it helped students learn? No; rather, he said its greatest strength is that it is “non-judgmental” (whatever that means). In an article in the *Gospel Advocate*, February 1984 edition, a writer said: “Recently a man was heard to say that a certain gospel preacher was guilty of the sin of having a ‘bad attitude.’ When asked to explain the ‘bad attitude’ in terms of some objective, Biblically- defined sin, he replied, ‘It’s a sin to claim that you know what the Bible teaches.’” How sad!

Let me be clear: I am not denying that mistakes have been made by well-meaning Christians. Some church members have been guilty of usurping God’s right to judge--“I’m right and everybody else is going to hell.” But a growing number of church members have swung all the way to the other extreme. They say, “My neighbor is a sincere person, and I am a sincere person; we differ in religion; therefore I have no right to criticize his beliefs.” Some of us, I believe, have gotten to the point that *we are ashamed to be right* with regard to Scripture truths. I, for

one, am glad that many years ago, a kind, soft-spoken old gospel preacher in Atlanta, Georgia had the courage to point out to me the truths of the Bible regarding the New Testament church so that I could see the difference between that church and man-made ones.

The solution for all these “isms” is to follow Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 4:15: “speak the TRUTH in LOVE....” Many today (even some Christians) emphasize the “love” part of Ephesians 4:15, but ignore the “truth” part. To say “I know” some things in religion is not being sectarian, or narrow-minded, or arrogant, or unkind, if we have the Bible to back up our knowledge. Even a little child can sing, “Jesus loves me, this I KNOW; for the Bible tells me so.”

CONCLUSION

Here are the main points we have made:

Truth is valuable...it is discoverable...and it is liberating. It sets us free.

There are two types of truth: discovered truth and revealed truth.

Truth is worth whatever it takes to find it, and God’s word is the sole source of spiritual truth.

Truth does not depend on prevailing opinion, or sincerity, or feelings.

There is a difference between a principle/truth and a value. A principle is external and objective; a value is internal and subjective to feelings.

We are responsible for finding God’s truth and obeying it.

Let us “buy the truth and sell it not,” and “speak the truth in love” to a lost and dying world. --John Temples