



## **Lesson 2            *Speak the Whole Truth***

"Do you want to know the truth?" We've heard that question before; sometimes we've said it. What usually follows is a negative comment. Indeed, we have even come to equate truth telling with criticism. The theme of this message is that we are responsible to speak the whole truth, not just our negative perspective.

I received a letter once that began with a compliment. The author expressed his appreciation for my ministry and for a talk I had given. I liked that. I felt good about myself as I read his words. He then went on to admonish me. He felt some phrase I had used might have come across as being insensitive to others. As I thought about it, I agreed with him. Now, was I able to receive his admonition and benefit from it because he first used flattery to soften me up? That's one perspective. Another perspective of what he did is that he took time to speak the whole truth – the positive, along with the negative. Because he made that effort, I was encouraged and enabled to receive correction at the same time.

As I speak to people about the necessity of thinking through how to speak encouragingly, some respond that taking such pains is too much pain to bother with! "I can't worry about how everyone will take my words. It's too much trouble. What matters is that the truth be spoken." I agree that the truth is to be spoken, but they have condemned themselves with their own words. For to speak the truth without speaking it in love is a failure to speak the whole truth. Furthermore, such an attitude reveals that the individual loves neither truth nor his brother in Christ, and that he is indifferent to the heart of Christ. Finally, by making his "truth" harder to be received, he is only working against himself. These are strong words, but let me explain.

Consider the matter of loving truth. If I am really concerned for truth, I will be as eager to spread good news as bad news, to speak encouraging words as deflating words. I will be as quick to spot what someone has gotten right as I am to spot their error. Otherwise, I am not a truth lover but a mere faultfinder.

Furthermore, I actually become guilty of suppressing truth. As the Executive Minister, if I tell a member of my staff only what he does wrong and not what he does right, I am not telling the whole story. I paint a portrait of him only from the vantage



point of his faults (or what I consider faults). For example, it would be easy for me to evaluate my pastoral staff on administrative performance. How good are they at keeping expense records and with time management? Are they punctual? Do they keep me informed of their whereabouts? Now, I do think these are valuable performance qualities, but they do not tell the whole story of the pastoral staff's performance. These things say nothing about their effectiveness at counseling someone regarding a complex personal problem; or about how well they come along side someone experiencing grief; or how well they make a child feel loved or how effectively they teach God's Word.

If I measure my pastoral staff according to their organizational skill, I not only don't tell the whole story, but over value lesser things. I'm not with the pastor who comes in late for a meeting because he got caught up being a good listener to someone who needed him. All I see is someone coming in late for a meeting yet again. I could brood over his offense. "Why won't he respect his commitments? Why won't he respect me?" But then, do you see what is happening? What I am really upset about is not that he fails to perform as he ought, but how his tardiness affects me. Now, if I take him aside and admonish him for his problem of coming in late to meetings, I need to speak the whole truth – that, yes, he needs to work on being on time, but more importantly that I am pleased to have a minister who loves his people.

Jack and Rosemary Miller made it a point that whenever they needed to admonish someone about a negative, they would also speak of a positive. This is not merely buttering up someone before tearing into them. It's simply a matter of being fully honest. This is also a helpful tool which keeps me from getting out of balance with a negative perspective.

Again, what I am getting at here is examining our own hearts about our claim to love the truth. "If the truth be told," I am more motivated in my "truth telling" by what irks me rather than wanting the whole truth to be known. I certainly am not motivated by love for my brother or sister. I remember an experience that happened soon after taking my first term here at Tenth. I had experienced a kidney stone during the week and while giving the announcements the following Sunday before worship, I took time to thank those praying for me and made some comments about my ordeal. After the service, I stood at the church entrance greeting the hundreds of worshippers passing through the



doors. An out of town couple who visited occasionally, stopped, shook my hand, and proceeded to tell me that they had come to hear the minister preach and not to hear my health report which took up needless time. As they left, they let me know they were only speaking the truth out of love. Now, they may well have been correct about my not needing to give a report, but they were not telling the truth about their motivation. What they were doing was getting their disgruntlement off their chests.

Often that is what we are doing when we "speak the truth" to someone else. When we feel compelled to admonish or correct someone, we are often compelled by irritation and by our own need to be heard. If I really want the truth to be known, I will take the time to consider how to make it known in such a way as to be received and have a positive effect. Galatians 6:1 says to restore a brother who is sinning in a "spirit of gentleness." The proverbs speak time and again of speaking cautiously. Chapter 15 refers to giving a "soft answer," having a "gentle tongue," "an apt answer," "a word in season," "ponder[ing] how to answer." All these cases are making the point that merely blurting out words, even truthful words, is not enough. We must speak at the right time in the right way for the truth to be heard and to be beneficial.

"But I need to speak out for the honor of Christ. I can't let heresy or bad witness go unchallenged." If I am truly motivated for the honor of Christ, then I will all the more make effort to let the whole truth be known about this person who is a member of Christ's body. I will all the more desire to build him up into maturity in Christ Jesus. My obedience to truth will give me sincere brotherly love from a pure heart (cf. 1 Peter 1:22). Christ commanded that we love one another. And so we must be as ardent in pursuing love as we are in pursuing truth. Otherwise, we are ignoring the doctrinal truth that the mark of a Christian is love.

Finally, the Christian who does not make it his urgent business to speak the truth in love is working against his own purposes. The teacher tells the lazy student that his failure to study is only hurting himself. His efforts to get out of homework and to cut corners work against him when the tests come. It is the same for the Christian who will not take the time to prepare his listener to hear his truth telling. If he really cares about the truth, he will care that the truth is heard; and he will make the effort to do what is necessary to such an end. When one says that it is too much work to be concerned about



how a fellow believer receives a truthful word, he is really saying that he is too lazy to care about truth or his brother/sister in Christ.

Do you want change to occur? By refuting heresy do you aim to change the heart of the heretic? Do you want the sinner to be reformed? By taking the time to speak the whole truth in love, you are more likely to attain your end. If the person to whom you are speaking sees you as a real lover of truth who loves him and wants the best for him, he is more likely to receive your correction with open ears and, more importantly, with an open heart. I know that the work of conviction and even of hearing is that of the Holy Spirit; all the more then we have a responsibility to speak in such a way that does not grieve the Spirit. God does not grant to us the prerogative to add to the Spirit's work of granting our hearers grace to overlook our unnecessary offensiveness.

Speak the truth, but speak the whole truth in the love of Christ Jesus.