

1. Introduction:

It was not a good day for the Roman Governor. It took place in his palace in the obscure and troublesome Roman province of Judea. Being sent to Judea as the governor was not exactly a punishment, but it was not a move that many Roman diplomats sought; the place was a minefield for any career-advancing politician. Its people were Jews and had all sorts of strange religious beliefs, and it was a bit of a primitive backwater. And to make matters worse the Jewish leaders had called upon him early in the morning and asked him to come quickly to pass judgment on some wandering rabbi that they had found guilty on some charges or other. So the governor Pilate sat in front of this man who had been brought before him, and began to question him.

John 18:33-38

Pilate summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

"What is truth?" Pilate asked.

"For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." THE TRUTH! There is truth—truth that comes from outside the world and gives meaning to the world. The world doesn't make this truth. It doesn't shape or change this truth. It is THE TRUTH, not a truth for me and a different truth for you. But THE TRUTH for all of us. Unchanging, absolute.

So in this brief passage from Scripture Pilate asks what is one of the most important questions of our time. What is truth? What does it mean when we say that something is true? In Pilate's case, sadly, he did not stay for an answer, and he did not recognize that He who is the truth was standing before him. Even more sadly he knew instinctively that Jesus was in truth not guilty of death, and yet he went against that truth and condemned him to die a horrible death by crucifixion.

So why is Pilate's question so important? Well to begin with, our faith as Christians rests utterly and completely on the truth of the events and teachings that we believe. As Francis Schaeffer puts it "There is no reason to believe Christianity if it isn't true. After all, if God is there, if it isn't just an answer to an intellectual question, then he's really there. We should love Him, we're called on to adore Him, to be in relationship with Him, and, incidentally, to obey Him."

And yet the very ideas that something or some belief can be objectively true is foreign to the thinking of many people, and especially to many and probably most people on our local university campuses. We face the problem that truth has been taken out of reality. By and large people don't think about absolute truth anymore. They are not looking for THE truth that can give meaning and purpose to all of life and history.

Listen to Alan Bloom in his best selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 25,

"There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that **truth is relative**. If this belief is put to the test, one can

count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That any one should regard [relativism] as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2 + 2 = 4$. These are things you don't think about. The students' backgrounds are as various as America can provide. Some are religious, some atheists; some are to the Left, some to the Right; some intend to be scientists, some humanists or professionals or businessmen; some are poor, some rich. They are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality. And the two are related in a moral intention. The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so they see it."

A Barna Research Group survey on what Americans believe asked the question, "Is there absolute Truth?" ...

- 1) 66% of adults responded that they believe that "there is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct"
- 2) 72% of those aged 18 to 25 expressed this belief

In a series of more than twenty interviews conducted at random at a large university, people were asked if there was such a thing as absolute truth - truth that is true across all times and cultures for all people. All but one respondent answered along these lines:

- 1) "Truth is whatever you believe"
- 2) "There is no absolute truth"
- 3) "If there were such a thing as absolute truth, how could we know what it is?"
- 4) "People who believe in absolute truth are dangerous"

And so we have two major competing world views about the nature of truth. We have what Alan Bloom has just described as the relativistic view, and then there is the view known as the correspondence view or absolute view. In fact there are several other views, but most of these can be seen as variations of the relativistic view. Consensus theory, for example, holds that truth is whatever is agreed upon by some specified group, while pragmatic theory holds that truth is what works; both these theories agree that truth is not absolute.

Since this is a sermon and not a philosophy lecture, we will just look at the two main views, the relativistic theory and the correspondence theory. And since we are talking about truth, I need to acknowledge my debt to several people whose writings have helped me in the preparation of this message and from whom I have borrowed quotations and references:

John Piper Message "Jesus Came into the World to Bear Witness to the Truth" December 25, 1988
What is truth and does it matter? Dick Tripp Publications <http://www.christianity.co.nz/truth1.htm>
What Is Truth? (John 18:37-38) Executable Outlines, Copyright © Mark A. Copeland, 2009
Norman Geisler and Frank Turek "I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist" (Crossway, 2004)

2. The relative theory of truth

This view of truth holds that all truth is relative; there is no such thing as absolute truth. So in this understanding of truth you can believe what you want to believe and I can believe what I want to believe, and we can both be right. Go for what makes you feel good. You choose what you like from what is spread in front of you, and put a meal together that suits your taste.

If indeed truth is relative, then several conclusions follow; I will mention just three:

a. Moral values are relative. This means that there is no ultimate difference between Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler. Each one was doing what seemed right for him or her, but who are we to say that one

is right and the other wrong? This belief is of course very attractive to many people, because it permits all sorts of behavior. Norman Geisler and Frank Turek in their book relate the story of a biology professor who attended a lecture by Ron Carlson on the problems of Darwinism. The professor and Carlson had lunch together after the lecture, and the professor said he would continue to teach Darwinism, even though he agreed with Carlson's critique of it, because it was "morally comfortable." He said

"If Darwinism is true – if there is no God and we all evolved from slimy green algae – then I can sleep with whomever I want."

b. Religion is cafeteria style. I am a Christian and someone else may be an atheist or a Buddhist, and we all can be right, since there is no absolute right and wrong. A Christian can say "Jesus is Lord" and an atheist can say "There is no God" and a Moslem can say "Allah is Lord" and they are all right, because there is no absolute truth.

c. Tolerance is a key virtue. One of the distinctives of modern American culture, especially in the universities, is its insistence on tolerance and diversity. And at one level this is a good thing; we all need to accept other people as God's creatures, made in His image, whether they are white or black or male or female or rich or poor or heterosexual or homosexual. As Paul writes to the Galatians "Gal. 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." So Christians should never be guilty of demeaning other people or harassing them because they are different in some way. But this does not mean that we always have to approve of their conduct, but this is what the homosexual movement wants us to do, to take just one example. As Christians we are called on to hate the sin, but to love the sinner.

3. Problems with the relative theory of truth.

a. It is self-contradictory

The relative theory of truth is ultimately self contradictory, because no one can follow it to its logical conclusion. Even those who believe in relative truth turn on a light believing in the reality of electricity, and drive a car believing in the effectiveness of the engine. And I would not want to fly from Roanoke to Seattle Washington with a navigator who believed that it was a city in Northern Virginia, nor would I want to have brain surgery by a surgeon who believed that my brain is located in my stomach. And if any of you happen to be in my Organic Chemistry class next semester, you had better not try to persuade me that your wrong answer is correct because you believe in the relative nature of truth!

b. The relative nature of morals is unlivable.

The relative nature of moral values cannot be lived out in any logically coherent way. This is illustrated by another story from the Geisler/Turek book I just mentioned. A professor at a major university in Indiana was teaching a class in ethics, and he assigned a term paper on any ethical topic of the students' choice. One student wrote eloquently on moral relativism, and argued that all morals are relative, there is no standard of justice or rightness, it's all a matter of opinion; you like chocolate, I like vanilla. The paper was well written, on time, and stylishly presented in a blue folder. The professor read it carefully, and then wrote on it "F; I don't like blue folders"! The student was outraged "That's not fair! That's not right! You didn't grade it on its merits!" The professor responded "Wasn't your paper the one that said there is no such thing as fairness, rightness, and justice?" "Yes" the student answered. "Then what's this about me not being fair, right, and just? Didn't your paper argue that it's all a matter of taste? You like chocolate, I like vanilla? The student replied "Yes, that's my view" "Fine then" said the professor, "I don't like blue. You get an F!" A light bulb went off in the

student's head. He realized that he did believe in moral absolutes; he at least believed in justice, because he was accusing his professor of injustice for giving him an "F" because of the color of his folder.

So there are absolute morals; we all have a moral law written on our hearts and minds.

c. The value of toleration has its limits

The odd thing about the value of toleration is that many who hold this view are tolerant of everyone and everything except those who believe in absolute truth. This is illustrated by John Piper in his message; he describes a leaflet produced by some pro-abortion activists in Atlanta several years ago. Near the top it says, "Defend Reproductive Rights." In other words, if the pro-life people want to view the fetus as a person with legal rights to life, they can have that view, but don't put that monkey on the backs of the women of this country. That's a personal, religious viewpoint. It's relative. But then at the bottom of the leaflet in big letters it says: "WE WILL NOT TOLERATE INTOLERANCE!" Do you see what this means? "Tolerance" is the moral equivalent of relativism. If truth is relative and not absolute, there should be total tolerance. But to make this moral truth stick, you have to put an absolute punch behind it. "We will not tolerate intolerance" is the moral equivalent of "We absolutely reject absolutes!" It is self-contradictory. It's a testimony to the fact that we can't live without absolute truth.

d. The view of truth as relative ultimately leads to oppression.

The catholic writer Richard John Neuhaus writes "In the absence of truth, power is the only game in town." And you can couple that with the saying of Mao Tse-Tung "power comes from the barrel of a gun," and realize how essential it is that we hold to an absolute view of truth. There is right and there is wrong, and the barrel of a gun does not make wrong right.

The English poet Steve Turner wrote a parody of this attitude and called it "Creed". In part it reads:

We believe that all religions are basically the same-
at least the one that we read was.
They all believe in love and goodness.
They only differ on matters of creation,
sin, heaven, hell, God, and salvation.

We believe that after death comes the Nothing
Because when you ask the dead what happens
they say nothing.
If death is not the end, if the dead have lied, then its
compulsory heaven for all
excepting perhaps
Hitler, Stalin, and Genghis Khan

We believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him.
Reality will adapt accordingly.
The universe will readjust.
History will alter.
We believe that there is no absolute truth
excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.

4. The absolute view of truth.

In refreshing contrast to relative views of truth is the absolute view, also known as the correspondence view. This view holds that true beliefs and true statements correspond to the actual state of affairs, and it thus agrees with dictionary definitions such as

Truth:

1. the true or actual state of a matter: "He tried to find out the truth."
2. conformity with fact or reality; verity: the truth of a statement.
3. a verified or indisputable fact, proposition, principle, or the like: mathematical truths.

So the truth of a statement can be determined by whether or not it corresponds with the facts. The statement "The earth is flat" is either true or not; it cannot be both true and false. And we can know that it is true because of the many experimental observations, including photographs of earth taken from space

5. The Biblical view of truth

It should come as no surprise to find that the biblical view of truth is that there is such a thing as absolute truth, and that this can be found supremely in God and His Son Jesus Christ. Let us look at the Word. There are over 200 verses in the Bible that speak of truth, and the majority of these refer to the truth of God and of His word and His Son.

a. God is a God of truth

Deut 32:4

He is the Rock, His work is perfect;
For all His ways are justice,
A God of truth and without injustice;
Righteous and upright is He.

(NKJV)

Ps 31:5

Into your hands I commit my spirit;
redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.

Ps 25:5

guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.

b. God will judge the world in righteousness and truth:

Ps 96:13

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his truth.

Rom 2:2

Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.

c. Jesus' teachings are the truth.

Jesus Himself introduced many of His sayings with the words "I tell you the truth" (NIV)

Mark 10:14-16

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Matt 25:45-46

"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Luke 23:43

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

d. Jesus Himself is the truth

John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 8:45-47

Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?

John 14:5-7

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Notice that Jesus here is not just claiming to speak the truth (which he often did claim), but to *be* the truth. Stephen Neil, in *Crises of Belief*, says of this claim:

"[This] does not mean that Jesus was stating a number of good and true ideas. It means that in him the total structure, the inmost reality, of the universe was for the first time and forever disclosed."

e. God's word is truth

John 17:16-17

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

5. Application

So what are the take-home lessons for us? What difference does it make (or should it make) that God is a God of truth?

a. It assures us that there is such a thing as absolute truth. Truth is what is real, and God is real and God is truth, and Jesus Christ is the way and the truth and the life. This is both comforting and disturbing.

b. It is comforting because it means that our lives have meaning; we are not just the result of slime plus time, but we are the creation of a loving and gracious God. Are you hurting today in some way? Perhaps you have just lost your job, or perhaps the girl of your dreams has found someone else, or maybe the doctor has just told you that you have a serious illness. You can rest today in the truth of God's love for you; whatever else happens He has promised

Heb 13:5-6

God has said,

"Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you."

So we say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

What can man do to me?"

c. It is also comforting because it tells us that this God not only created us but He also loves us, and that He sent His Son Jesus Christ into this world to be our Savior, and to pay the price that we could not pay.

John 3:16-18

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

d. It is disturbing for believers because it demands a response from us.

The prominent Chinese Christian, Watchman Nee, spelled out more fully the kind of attitudes we must have if we are to know the truth:

"Lies have no price upon them. They are cheap and they abound everywhere. But for the truth there is always a price to pay. First there is the price of humility, for it is to the meek that light is given from God. If we are not prepared to buy the truth at the cost of our own humbling we shall not receive it. Then there is the price of patience. Quick verdicts and impatient decisions have little to do with the divine light which is given to those who will wait upon God and wait for God. And supremely, there is the price of obedience. "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know." Unquestioning obedience is essential if we would know God's will and God's ways. Is our faith the cheap, easy kind that pays no price? Or are we prepared to have it founded on the truth of God, however great to us the cost of coming by that truth?"

e. It is disturbing to non-believers because it spells out the consequences of unbelief.

Rom 2:7-8

To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

2 Thess 2:10-12

They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.... all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

John Piper asks:

"You may be non-committal about Jesus not because you think he is untrue but just because you don't know. ... Let me ask you a question to see if you are really being honest with yourself. Do you suspend judgment and plead ignorance on the issues that really matter to you and where your personal interest is at stake? Or do you just suspend judgment only in those areas that seem unimportant or troublesome to you?"

I have never met or heard of a person who has any trouble believing in moral absolutes when he is punched in the nose. He immediately believes that the aggressor is absolutely guilty. And if a judge said, "Not guilty because truth is relative and for him it was a good thing to punch you in the nose and you can't put the monkey of your absolutes onto his back," then you would say that this judge is a bad judge.

The point is this, you may say "I don't know what absolute truth is, and I don't think I can find out." But the truth is, when your own personal interest is at stake, you won't act as though you don't know what truth is. We have very strong convictions when our life and property are at stake, don't we? Strange how agnosticism and relativism are blown away when our rights and our life are on the line! So I plead with you.. that you realize how much is at stake in Jesus' claim to bring the truth. It is a matter of eternal life and death. Your life is on the line. And Jesus says in another place (John 7:17), "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God."

f. Truth alone is not enough.

Sadly there are some Christians who are strong on truth but who are harsh and unforgiving and just not good witnesses and examples for our Lord. As Sandy reminded us last week, Jesus gave us two great commandments:

Mark 12:29-31

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

We are indeed commanded to love God and His truth with all our being, but we are also commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. So we need to stand up for the truth, but to do so in love:

"Yes, if truth is not undergirded by love, it makes the possessor of that truth obnoxious and the truth repulsive."

Ravi Zacharias

So as we leave today, let us remember that Jesus Christ is the way and the truth and the life. And because He is the truth, we are comforted by the assurance of His presence, we can rejoice in the assurance of His love, and we are challenged to walk in obedience to Him and in love to our neighbors. And for any here who have not yet acknowledged Jesus Christ as your own Lord and Savior, He is not only the truth but He is also the judge. As John Piper says "I plead with you, that you realize how much is at stake in Jesus' claim to bring the truth. It is a matter of eternal life and death. Your life is on the line." And I invite you to meet with me or a Christian friend after the service to discuss your search for truth.

Amen