

5.30.21

God Teaches us Truth

Psalm 86.11

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

What do you think of when you hear the word, “truth?” Do you hear a parent urging you to “tell the truth?” Do you think of a TV show called To Tell the Truth? For some of us truth reminds us of learning the Ten Commandments from our parents or in Sunday School; specifically, the ninth commandment which says, “*Thou shalt not bear false witness*” which forbids lying, speaking falsely in any matter, equivocating, and in any way seeking to deceive our neighbor, or speaking unjustly against our neighbor in a way that harms his or her reputation. Maybe when you hear the word “truth,” you picture a court room and a witness being asked, “***Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth,***” because truth is the only way justice can be found and administered? When people in respected positions of power or authority such as religious or political leaders, the heads of corporations or police officers lie or are dishonest or deceitful to cover up wrongdoing, to advance their careers, or to enrich themselves financially – sadly, all things we have seen and continue to see – trust is undermined and truth which is the foundation for a fair and just society is weakened and threatened.

Truth matters, to us as individuals and to society. As individuals, being truthful means that we have a healthy and appropriate self-understanding and we can continue to grow and mature, acknowledging and accepting responsibility for our mistakes and learning from them. For society, truthfulness makes social bonds possible, while lying and hypocrisy break them. Consider what happens when you find out that someone has lied to you. You feel less inclined to trust them next time, and often less inclined to trust other people more generally.

Truth is “**the property of being in accord with fact or reality.**” Sadly, we are living in a time when the truth is being undermined by the frequency with which many people lie and share things that are not in accord with fact or reality. The Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year for 2016 was “*Post-truth*” defined as *denoting circumstances in which **objective facts** are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.* Usage of this concept favors the results that come from lying over the importance of telling the truth. The political, financial, and

personal havoc and pain created by lies is immeasurable, yet nothing seems to stop them. I hope that many of us were told from childhood that it's wrong to lie, but every day we see evidence that not telling the truth is the way to achieve power and success which motivates more people to lie and be dishonest. Social media and the 24/7 news cycle on TV, radio, and online also provide a powerful megaphone to the world for people to spread lies in a way Moses could never have imagined as he shared the Ten Commandments with the Israelites. It's disheartening and concerning.

As followers of Christ, we are to be people who value and stand for the truth and who reject lies, deceit, and dishonesty. We do this because our faith in God compels us to be people of truth and not people of lies. **We worship a God who teaches us truth** and commands us to live lives of integrity and truthfulness. Our scripture is the prayer of **Psalm 86:11**: ***“Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.”***

We want to invite the Lord to teach us the right way to live so that we may walk in God's truth in a way that shapes every aspect of our life. We want the Lord to give us an undivided heart so that our first allegiance is to God, and we're not divided by other loyalties or distracted by things of lesser importance.

Truth is a concept for which the Old Testament has no distinct word. The Hebrew word generally used means ***'constant, permanent, faithful, reliable.'*** God above all is **true**, that is, **constant, permanent, faithful, reliable**. God is like gravity. A person may say, "I don't believe in gravity. That's my sincere and strong personal belief and you can't tell me I'm wrong." However, that doesn't change the reality and reliability of gravity and its influence upon you. Gravity still exerts power over that person's life whether he acknowledges it or not. Like gravity and the sun, God is faithful and reliable. **Jeremiah 10:10** states, ***“But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.”*** In the Old Testament, people are told repeatedly to seek God's truth. Like Psalm 86:11, **Psalm 25:5** prays, ***“Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.”***

People are admonished to **judge truly**, and the lack of truth is lamented especially by the prophets in passages such as **Isaiah 59:14–15**, ***“Justice is turned***

back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. 15 Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice."

That is an apt description not only of what was happening in Isaiah's time but in ours as well which tells us that lying, deceit, and corruption have always been a part of human social interaction and we'll never get rid of it. However, the question becomes for us, how do we make sure we're not people in whom truth is lacking? What can we do in choosing the people and sources we listen to, the views we share and amplify, and who we support, to not encourage those in whom truth is lacking or who cause *"truth to stumble in the public square?"*

The Lord gives us guidance in **Zechariah 8:16-17**, ***"These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, 17 do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the LORD."***

For the Hebrews, truth was moral and relational, not intellectual. The Greek word for truth is primarily intellectual: truth is known, not trusted, or relied on. The New Testament draws on both the Greek and Hebrew understandings. The Greek word is found mainly the Gospel and Letters of John and in Paul's writings.

The Gospel of John builds on the Hebrew Bible's understanding that God is true or real (John 3:33; 7:28). Christ reveals God and thus reveals truth (John 8:26, 40; 18:37). Christ is himself **full of grace and truth** (John 1:14, 17). He is ***'the way, and the truth, and the life'*** (John 14:6); he is **the true light and the true vine** (John 1:9; 15:1). Christ sends the Counselor, **the Spirit of truth** (John 15:26). As a believer you are to worship God in spirit and **truth** (John 4:23–24) and you will be guided into truth (John 16:13). Doing Christ's word in your life, not just acknowledging it intellectually, enables you to **know the truth** and to be free (John 8:32). **This Christian freedom is not due to possession of correct knowledge but rather comes from a relationship to God who is true.**

Paul can use the word in the Greek sense (Rom. 1:18), but more often he uses it with the Old Testament meanings: **truth is to be obeyed** (Rom. 2:8; Gal. 5:7); **truth proves reliable** (2 Cor. 7:14; 11:10); and **its opposite is malice and evil** (1 Cor. 5:8).

So, as Christians, we believe that truth matters to us as individuals and to society. **Truth** is **“the property of being in accord with fact or reality.”** Truth builds trust. Lies and dishonesty erode trust. Truth is so important to God that in giving only Ten Commandments, one is about telling the truth and not speaking falsely. God is true – God is **‘constant, permanent, faithful, reliable.’** The Lord tells us to **“Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace.”**

In 1 Corinthians 13, one of the things Paul says about love is that love *“does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.”* Do you think that’s true? One of the things about being a person who tells the truth is that it’s vital for healthy relationships. You can’t have a good marriage unless you and your spouse are truthful, honest, and open with each other. When you start lying to each other about what you’ve done, where you were, what you were looking at online, the breakdown of trust has begun. Trust that comes from being truthful is built up over time, yet it can be toppled in a moment, and it takes time to rebuild it.

Love rejoices in the truth because in a marriage, with parents and children, in our friendships, truth helps us feel secure and safe. Being truthful is also better for your emotional and physical health; not living with a lie or lies, being able to be truly open and unafraid is a much better way to live, than living in fear of being found out, or being found to be lying or deceiving to one who is important to us. In his work on identity, psychotherapist Erik Erikson discovered that a sense of insecurity, self-doubt, and depression occurs when we cannot trust the people we depend on to tell us the truth.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells us **how to speak the truth.** Ephesians **4:14-15**, *“We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s **trickery**, by their **craftiness in deceitful scheming**. But **speaking the truth in love**,”* Speaking the truth in love. As many of our parents may have said to us, *“It’s not just what you say, it’s how you say it.”* We speak the truth in love, out of desire to help, to heal, to guide, to support and encourage, and when necessary to correct or to admonish, but always in love. We don’t use the truth like a weapon to beat someone into submission. Speaking the truth in love, Paul says, *“we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”* And what was Christ like? He was full of grace and truth. We must be growing in grace and truth as well.

Telling lies and being dishonest are so wrong in the eyes of God that the Lord tells us there will be severe consequences for those who habitually lie and are deceitful. **Psalm 5:5-6** warns, *“The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.”* **Psalm 101** was likely used as part of a coronation ceremony for a king and it says in **verse 7**, *“No one who practices deceit shall remain in my house; no one who utters lies shall continue in my presence.”* Can you imagine if a king or head of state followed that policy? What if you and I did that? I’m not suggesting you kick someone out of your home, but what if you and I were the kind of people that others knew wouldn’t tolerate, share, support, or pass on lies? It would be better for us as far as the judgment of God, I can tell you that.

When it comes to sin, some Christians seem to focus on and speak out about a narrow range of sins they think are bad. Usually these are sins that they personally don’t wrestle with or commit or are tempted by. Isn’t that shocking? I suspect some people would think lying isn’t particularly high on their list compared to other sins. Yet listen to what God says in the next to last chapter of the Bible, **Revelation 21:8**, *“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”* If you need motivation to walk in the truth, to speak the truth in love, and not to lie, not to support those who lie, or to share lies, there you go.

I’m not going to leave you in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur so let me close with some words of encouragement. In Ephesians, the same letter in which Paul tells us to speak the truth in love, he also describes the spiritual armor we are to clothe ourselves with and one of those pieces is *“the belt of truth.”* A belt of truth holds securely, a belt of lies unravels eventually, leaving a person defenseless. Part of what a belt does is enable you to move freely even swiftly without worrying your pants are going to fall and cause you to trip or stumble. The belt of truth enables us to live freely and to move with confidence and freedom without fear.

In **1 John 3:17-20** which we began our service with today, we’re told how the truth and validity of our faith in God is revealed, *“How does God’s love abide in anyone*

*who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need **and yet refuses help?** **Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.** And by this we will know **that we are from the truth** and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”*

It is by loving in truth and action, John says, especially helping those in need, that we know that we are from the truth. I hope the prayer of Psalm 86 will be your prayer. **Psalm 86:11-12**, *“Teach me your way, O LORD, **that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart** to revere your name. I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, **with my whole heart**, and I will glorify your name forever.”*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What are your earliest memories of the importance of telling the truth? Is there a particular incident that comes to mind? What happened?
2. Why is telling the truth important for us as individuals in our relationships? How do you feel and how do you respond if you discover someone has lied to you?
3. Why is telling the truth important for our larger society? What is damaged when the truth is no longer valued or pursued?
4. What is your response to the Lord speaking through prophets as ancient as Isaiah and Zechariah about the importance of truth “in the public square” and in rendering true judgments?
5. Were you surprised to hear how strongly God speaks against lies and liars in the passages from the Psalms and Revelation? Why do you think God has such strong condemnation for liars?
6. Why is “speaking the truth in love” so vitally important for us as Christians?
7. What can you do to make sure you are, as Psalm 86 says, walking or living “in the truth?” Are there any habits or choices (in terms of how you speak, what media you watch, listen to, or share) that you may need to examine for truthfulness?