

“The Claims of Truth”

John 8:31-47

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Text Comment

v.31 What is important to realize is that “the Jews who had believed in him”, picking up on the statement in the previous verse that many put their faith in him, will turn out in the following verses to be slaves to sin, children of the devil, and liars. Once again in John, the term “faith” has been used to refer to what would prove to be a very temporary and spurious attachment to Jesus Christ. It appeared to be faith, for a short while, but proved not to be. We encountered this phenomenon at the end of chapter 2 and again in chapter 6 where a large number of his erstwhile disciples turned away from him when they got a clearer picture of what he was requiring of them.

John includes this material because in teaching people to believe in Jesus Christ, it is imperative that they understand the real nature of faith in Christ and do not content themselves with its imitations. He has no interest in flooding the church with spurious believers who have never been born again. Once again, here in v. 31 he teaches us that coming to know the truth is not simply a matter of intellectual agreement or assent but is also a matter of moral commitment. [Carson, 348]

v.33 People always get the point in such cases. If Jesus is promising them freedom, he obviously is implying that they are not now free. This, of course, offends them. Judaism taught that the law of God and the study of the law sets men free. Jesus has already said that the law points to him and it is in union with him that men become free. But this was always the problem. The Jews, we read in the Synoptic Gospels -- Matthew, Mark, and Luke – thought themselves whole, so they didn’t need a doctor. Here they think themselves free and so don’t need a liberator.

v.34 They were thinking of bondage in different terms. For Jesus the ultimate bondage is the bondage to sin, to moral failure before a holy God. These folk had little sense of that or concern for that kind of bondage.

v.36 In 3:35 the Lord has already said that the Father has put authority in the hands of his Son to give life to men.

v.37 This is very much the same point that Paul will later make. “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly: and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit...” [Rom. 2:28-29] These folk are physically Abraham’s seed, but not spiritually and that is what counts.

- v.38 The Lord's words and conduct betray his paternity, the Father in Heaven. And so does the conduct of these people betray their paternity, but their Father is the Devil, a point he is about to make more explicit.
- v.43 Their spiritual darkness renders them blind, their rebellion against God makes them deaf to the Lord's word.
- v.44 This has been his point. There is a kinship of values and behavior between father and children. There is in his own case, there is in theirs. That is why they are children of the Devil; they want to do and are seeking to do what pleases the Evil One. If you would understand the world, it is very important to remember that moral, upstanding, even very religious and devout people can be doing the Devil's work.

He is a liar and the father of lies: "You surely shall not die..."

- v.46 Think of his life, his teaching, his miracles. None of their theologians has been able to catch him out in an error, no one has found him guilty of misbehavior. Perhaps they should think twice. Maybe there is something wrong with them and with their thinking after all. But they will not reconsider their viewpoint, not seriously.

Alfred E. Smith, whom only some of you will remember was a fixture of American politics earlier in the 20th century – the governor of New York and the Democratic nominee for President who was defeated by Herbert Hoover –, told of an occasion when he was a member of a fishing party somewhere in New England. Devotion to their Christian faith led him and a few other members of the party to roll out of bed early on a Sunday morning to take in a church service. As they tiptoed past their serenely slumbering mates one of his friends muttered, "Wouldn't it be awful if it turned out they were right!"

I suppose everyone, at one time or another, wonders about the truth of his or her beliefs. Even Christians, may at one time or another, find a doubt passing through their minds. So many in the world are not Christians. So many do not believe. Could they be right after all?

Here we are in the United States. A great many university professors are not Christians. Those who produce our great newspapers and magazines, our television shows and movies are not Christians either, by and large. Could they be right? They certainly seem to be confident in their disinterest in historic Christianity. Many of our friends and neighbors are not Christians. They live their lives with nary a serious thought about Jesus Christ or heaven or hell. My goodness, a sizeable number of people who claim to be Christians in our culture do not take the truth claims of the Christian faith with any great seriousness. Are they all dead wrong? And in this culture especially, where those who claim to know the truth about God and the future are widely suspected of arrogance and intolerance, can we still believe that we Christians are right and everyone else is wrong?

Well, then, listen carefully to the Son of God this morning. What does *he* say?

I. Well, in the first place, the Lord says, there is such a thing as the truth, truth as opposed to falsehood, and this truth can be known.

“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” And he said that in the context of people who violently disagreed with him. He said that they were wrong, so wrong, indeed, that he was willing to characterize them as children of the devil and liars. Those are hard words. Nobody likes to be called a liar and no one likes being told that he has got everything wrong. C.S. Lewis once quipped that accusing a journalist of lying was like accusing a dog of being bad at arithmetic. But journalists don’t smile at that remark. They take offense.

Already in the prologue John told us that “the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” The Jews were wrong. They were wrong in their interpretation of the law of Moses, for it pointed to Jesus and was designed to lead men to faith in him. Moses, Jesus said in 5:45, “wrote about me.” The Jews had convictions, deeply held religious convictions. But they were wrong. They thought that their being Jews, their having descended from Abraham, their having the law of Moses made them the children of God. But in that they were wrong. They lacked a living faith by which alone men come to be right with God. They said they were the true children of Abraham and Jesus said they weren’t.

Whatever else you say about this argument that we have read here in John 8, it is most certainly a contention about what is true and what is real. Jesus said that he was the truth and taught the truth and that what the generality of Jews believed was false.

Nowadays there are many in our culture, especially among our cultural elite, who would think that this argument between Jesus and the Jews in John 8 is absurdly old fashioned. The idea that there is but *one* religious truth and that all other religions are false, in their minds, has been thoroughly discredited. Indeed, claims by one religion to be *the Truth* are more and more greeted nowadays as the intellectual equivalent of fascism. [A. McGrath, JETS 35,3, 362]

Either they doubt that religious ideas are serious enough to be described as true or false or that it is possible to use terms such as true and false meaningfully about religious ideas. They wouldn’t deny that science, for example, can find out certain things that are true, but they don’t think the same way about religion or philosophy. Who can know about religion, after all? The real question is not whether a religious claim is true, but whether it makes you feel better or helps you be a better person. Carl Rogers, in his book, *A Way of Being*, has a chapter entitled, “Do we need a Reality?” The answer, as you might have expected, is “No.” According to Rogers there are as many realities as there are people and what is real for me today may not be real for me tomorrow. The vital question is not what is real, but what is meaningful and helpful for me.

A few will take the more extreme ground and say that we now know that it is impossible to say that *anything* is the truth or that anything is false. It all depends upon the perspective of the individual. They deny that there is an independently existing reality – a reality that exists whether we know it or not or see it or not or represent it correctly or not – a reality, that is, to which true, but only true, statements correspond.

But, Jesus was no Rogerian nor was he a postmodernist. Actually hardly anyone is *really* a postmodernist. Those who make a show of denying the very idea of truth don't want their air traffic controller to take that view and usually they don't accept it either except in class lectures. Postmodernists tend to have very definite moral convictions and can be very hard on people who disagree with them, as if they were right and others were wrong. Go figure! But Jesus was a man who proclaimed his message and himself as the truth. He was perfectly willing to say that those who disagreed with him were wrong and their views were false. They did not correspond to what is real. There is a reality and it can be known. Statements must be judged true or false as they correspond to or differ from this reality. It is here that some modern thinkers find anti-Semitism in Jesus, because he was clearly saying that the Judaism of his day was a false faith, a perversion of what is true. This you see is the modern reason for denying the possibility of truth claims. You cannot claim to know the truth without implicating other views, other religions, in falsehood and so belittling them and that is impolite, unacceptable in a pluralistic culture. That was not Jesus' view. He thought it of the most supreme importance to distinguish the truth from error, because only by the truth could men be set free.

The Bible is uncompromising in its stand for the reality of truth. It was perfectly willing to suspend the entire edifice of the Christian faith on the claim that certain things were true and that certain events had actually happened. As the Apostle Paul argued, "If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."

Jesus' view is that memorably summarized by C.S. Lewis. "If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be; if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all." [*God in the Dock*, 108-109]

He would have nothing to do with the modern notion that you could deny the foundations of this faith or the reality lying behind its message, but still claim in good conscience to be a Christian and a believer.

Suppose someone should say that he believed that Napoleon was a real historical figure who actually lived, but that he rejected the legendary additions that said he put an end to the French revolution, became emperor, fought Spain, Italy, Austria, invaded Russia, lost the battle of Waterloo, and was exiled on the island of St. Helena. But, of course, he firmly believed in Napoleon! Is that any different from saying that one believes in Jesus Christ, but, of course, evolution is how the world came to be, miracles are impossible, it would be intolerant to say that one had to believe in him to be saved, and it is repugnant to believe that he had to die on the cross to take away our sins. [Adapted from Gordon Clark, *What Presbyterians Believe*, 34]

For Jesus there is one truth and he is its teacher and its representation. He brought this truth from heaven, from the Maker of heaven and earth. Anyone who rejects it, for whatever reason, is walking in darkness, not in light.

Let us all be absolutely clear about this. Jesus Christ, all through the Gospels, and all through his Bible, claims to tell you what is true, what is real, and what must be known and believed if one is to please God and be saved in the world to come. But, at the same time, let us not take too

seriously the modern skepticism about truth and reality. No one really believes that – not enough to take it seriously in one’s own life. Everyone knows that there is that which is real and true and that which is fantasy and false.

II. Then, in the second place, the Lord says that whether anyone grasps the truth, embraces it, and believes it is a moral question rather than an intellectual one.

He makes that point twice in this argument with the Jews. He begins by telling them that if they are his disciples then they will know the truth and be set free by it. In other words, a person comes to know the truth not by intellectual assessment, by the rigorous debating techniques that were common in the rabbinical schools of that time, but rather by a moral commitment to Jesus himself. He said the same thing in 7:17: “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.”

And then he concludes the argument by saying the same thing but now in a negative form. In v. 45 we read: “Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.” These men, under the influence of sin and Satan as they are do not accept the truth *precisely because it is the truth*.

Paul will say in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans that this is God’s punishment for man’s rebellion: “although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, *but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools...*” [1:21-22]

Man’s inability to recognize the truth and love the truth is a moral failure, not an intellectual one. It is not that the truth is too hard to understand or too complicated or too deeply hidden. It can be grasped by the simplest minds. The problem is that the truth is unwelcome to the sinful mind. Men and women do not believe it not because the evidence for it is weak but because they do not want to believe it and will not believe it. It has nothing to do with arguments.

In the early 1900s, G.K. Chesterton conducted a lengthy debate in the British papers with Robert Blatchford, a prominent British rationalist and anti-Christian. Blatchford would offer his arguments as to why Christianity was not true and Chesterton would reply. Early on in the exchange Blatchford, before Chesterton had stated his beliefs publicly and before the public knew that he was in fact a Christian, had challenged Chesterton to tell his readers what he was.

“Are you a Christian?”

“Certainly,” Chesterton replied. “If I gave each of my reasons for being a Christian,” he said, “a vast number of them would be Mr. Blatchford’s reasons for not being one.” And that was true and has always been true. What the unbeliever offers as a reason not to believe, the Christian sees as a demonstration of his faith.

For example, Blatchford argued that the biblical account of the incarnation, of God coming in the flesh, was obviously a myth because there are so many similar stories in other religions and the mythologies of other cultures. It is an old argument and, to be sure, the claim isn’t accurate. The resemblances are superficial. There are no other stories like the biblical story in its main features. But, Chesterton responded rather this way:

“If the Christian God really made the human race, would not the human race tend to rumours and perversions of the Christian God? If the center of our life is a certain fact, would not people far from the center have a muddled version of that fact? If we are so made that a Son of God must deliver us, is it odd that Patagonians should dream of the Son of God?” [In Ffinch, 117-118]

The point is, coming to convictions about the truth is not a matter of an accurate survey of the evidence. There is an antipathy for the truth in the sinful human heart, a hatred for it. It is not unlike the situation in which an angry husband, who knows full well that he has missed the highway exit, will refuse to accept the fact or admit it because his wife, as they were speeding by, told him he had missed it and he cannot bring himself to admit that she was right and he was wrong. Spread that over an entire life and raise the stakes much higher by substituting God for the wife and heaven for the exit and you have some idea of the situation Jesus is describing here. The politeness, the apparent sincerity, the sophistication or rising forms of unbelief must not blind us to its true nature as rebellion against God.

Whether we are actually talking about an angry man who will not embrace the truth of Jesus Christ because he will not admit his sins or his bondage to them – the very obstacle the Lord drew attention to in v. 34 – or about some university professor with an elaborate philosophy of relativism and pluralism, the issue is always finally the rebellion in the human heart and its refusal to submit to the Lord God. When God overcomes that rebellion and softens that heart, the truth is seen as clearly as the noonday sun!

Nowadays we often hear the story of blind men and the elephant. You know the story. The king sets several blind men to inspecting an elephant and then asks them to tell him what an elephant is. Each man, of course, having touched a different part of the animal, has a different story to tell. Some describe the hide, some the stout legs, some the long trunk, some the tiny tail, and so on. But not one of the men has grasped the full reality of the elephant. They have an image of only a small part. The story is constantly told today as an illustration of the religious situation. Each of the great religions of the world see only a part of the whole, only one aspect of God and his relation to the world. The religions should, therefore, learn humility and recognize that each one has some part of the truth to contribute and none can claim to know it all.

But, of course, the real point of the story has been completely missed. It is exactly the opposite of what it is usually said to be. If the king were also blind, there would be no story, no one to tell us how fragmentary is the understanding of the blind men. But the story is told *by* the king, someone who knows what an elephant *really* looks like! And it is precisely the story of someone who does know the entire truth, who sees the whole elephant and so can correct the misunderstandings of those who see but a tiny part and imagine that part to be the whole.

Jesus Christ is the king. He came from God and from the Father in heaven. That is precisely his claim. He knows what is real. He knows all the truth. And all of it that we too must know, he has revealed to us both in his life and in his teaching and that of his apostles.

What our Lord came to reveal was not a set of inspirational themes. He came to reveal a transcendent reality, a reality unseen by men but nevertheless real, fixed, and solid.

As one perceptive man has written,

“The crucial religious question that cut like a knife through antiquity, through the Middle Ages, and up to the dawn of the twentieth century was ‘Is it true?’ For that question, empires rose and fell, wars were launched, martyrs spilled their blood, and – less dramatically but perhaps more characteristically – feast-makers spilled their wine and danced in the streets through a calendar year illuminated by holidays which were really holy days – holy because they memorialized certain immense facts.

This is a very difficult thing for the modern mind, soaked in psychology, to grasp. It has a different criterion of belief. The question people ask now, whether of a religion or anything else, is ‘Is it healthy for you?’ By which they mean, ‘Will it contribute to your self-concept?’ ‘Does it make you feel better about yourself?’ Not ‘Is it true?’ but ‘Does it meet my needs?’ But let’s not allow psychology’s success at substituting a therapeutic criterion for a factual one prevent us from calling a spade a spade. It’s a question of honesty.

There are many things that will make us feel good about ourselves: a glass of wine, a hot bath, a pleasant daydream. But a philosophy or a faith should not be chosen on the basis of its ability to warm us up. And it certainly should be more than a daydream.”

[Kirlpatrick, *Psychological Seduction*, 51-52]

That was Jesus’ outlook and his controversial challenge. And then he backed it all up by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. If you are or will be *his* disciple, you will find the truth and it will set you free.