

WHY I WOULDN'T WANT TO BE A CHRISTIAN: GTCC SPRING SERIES BY JEREMY BEDENBAUGH
WEEK 5: IS TRUTH ABSOLUTE OR PERSONAL?¹

I. CULTURAL OBJECTION TO TRUTH: DESTROYING FREEDOM

Contemporary people might thoughtfully ask: what makes Christianity true and other, opposing points of view false? Isn't that an oppressive and inauthentic way to view things? Christianity appears to want to put people into an ethical straightjacket. Shouldn't thoughtful people have a right to decide *for themselves* between right and wrong, and to decide *for themselves* how they should think, feel, and live their lives? Isn't it arrogant of Christians to in any way limit the freedom of others by imposing their views? I am much more comfortable with the idea of "personal truth"—that what is right and true for me is right and true for me, and what is right and true for you is right and true for you. We should not judge each other, but rather respect each other's views. Let "my truth" be my truth, and I'll let "your truth" be your truth. Otherwise, you will destroy my freedom and yours. In our culture we tend to believe that all people making truth claims are simply creating a power structure where they're on top and others are on bottom, to keep them controlled and constrained. This is exactly what Jesus says about the Pharisees—they claim to have the truth, but your claims are ways of getting power, justifying yourself, ways of getting power over God and other people. Jesus had this idea long before anyone modern scholars. But we cannot claim that EVERY truth claim is necessarily a power play.

II. TRUTH IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOU THINK

- A. Without Truth, We Lose All Right to Moral Outrage.** Whatever the issue, whether you accept the Christian view or not, your personal worldview will *always and necessarily* impose absolutes not only on you but others, *based on what you believe* is right or wrong. Said differently, if we want to create our own "personal truth," then to be consistent we must relinquish completely the right to ever be upset about the views that *others* hold, especially views with which we disagree. As Tim Keller says, "Aren't there any people in the world who are doing things you believe are *wrong* that they should stop doing no matter what they believe inside about right and wrong? Then you *do* believe that there is some kind of moral obligation that people should abide by and which stands in judgment over their internal choices and convictions." Maybe it's the way someone raises their kids, another person's competitive spirit, the spending habits of a family member, the decorating prowess of a neighbor, or maybe it's slavery and genocide in Africa or sexual abuse against children. All require absolute truth.
- B. Without Truth, Everyday Life Makes no Sense.** John Piper shows us how true this principle must be. Jesus teaches that truth is precious. All of us agree with this when we are being lied about. The most relativistic professor in the university, who scoffs at the concept of truth in the classroom, will be indignant if his electricity bill is false to his disadvantage. He will call the utility company and complain that there is some mistake. He will not think it funny if the voice on the other end says, 'It's a mistake in *your* view, but not in *our* view.' Think of all the times you need to have THE truth, not just a version of it. Is this water drinkable or isn't it? Are you a friend or a spy? Will you keep your marriage vows to love and cherish me, or are you only interested in money and sex? Do we have enough fuel on this airplane to reach our destination or should we turn back? Will this surgery correct my problem or worsen it? Did the desperate 911 caller say 11th Avenue or 11th Street? G.K. Chesterton's comments:

What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert—himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—the Divine Reason...The new skeptic is so humble that he doubts if he can even learn... The old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which makes him stop working altogether...We are on the road to producing a race of man too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.

- C. Without Truth, We are Blind.** C. S. Lewis: "You cannot go on explaining away forever, or you will find that you have explained away your own explanation. You cannot go on seeing through things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something else through it. For example, it's good that you can see

¹ Handout and lecture developed largely from Dr. Tim Keller and Rev. Scott Sauls of Redeemer Church, www.redeemer.com

through a window but that's only b/c the garden behind is opaque. But if you could see through everything, if everything was transparent, a wholly transparent world would be an invisible world. And to see through everything would be the same as not to see." In other words, if you say all truth claims are power plays, so is that (a truth claim), so I don't have to listen to you. Or if you say with Freud that all claims about God and religion are really just projected guilt and insecurity, well so is that (a statement about God and religion). So I don't have to listen to you; you've explained away your explanation. If the evolutionary biologists tell you that everything you believe about God, morality, and truth is really just hard-wired brain chemistry there to allow you to pass along your genetic code, well everything their mind tells them is the same, even about evolutionary biology. To see through everything is not to see. To claim that nobody can make truth claims is itself a truth claim that puts you on top so you can go around and dismiss or disprove everyone else.

- D. Without Truth, We are Slaves.** Everyone makes truth claims; therefore it's not making the claim itself that leads to oppression; it's what's in the claim. **Amish School Illustration.** We know that the Amish are fundamentalists, who are always accused of oppressive use of the truth, but truth claims don't lead to oppression in this instance. Why? Because it depends on what the fundamental is! The fundamental is a man dying on a cross for His enemies and spends His last breath blessing and forgiving those who hated Him. So, it depends on what's IN the truth claim. This is why Jesus can say in John 8 that the truth will set you free. **Ex. A Misguided Road Trip.** The truth would have set you free.

III. FREEDOM IS MUCH MORE COMPLEX THAN YOU THINK

- A. Rethinking Freedom.** Consider two paradoxical statements made by Paul: "Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them (1 Cor. 9.19); You were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another (Gal. 5.13). Now, we might think these statements nonsense b/c we think freedom means no constraint, doing what I want at all times, etc. But Paul says that is too simplistic. For instance, let's suppose that you are training for a race. In order to do that, you must restrict yourself from doing everything you want to do in order to do the main thing you need to do. So, you will have to give up certain foods, say no to certain activities, wake up earlier, and get off the couch more often. You must place restrictions on one part of your freedom so you can enjoy a deeper, richer freedom. Similarly, a fish on the grass is not free; his power and life is only present in the restrictive habitat of water. Thus, freedom is the presence of right restrictions. Freedom is the fulfillment of design. What is our design? What are we made for?
- B. Love as the Ultimate Example.** We know the power of this if we simply think about love. The freedom to feel love does not come unless you restrict your individual freedom. In order to experience the freedom love offers, you must be willing to submit yourself to the truth. You probably know that I will argue that in the same way, you must submit to the truth of God. Maybe this thought frightens you more as you think of a time when you submitted to a person, when you gave up your freedom, and got burned. Now, you think, 'I'm afraid of being exposed, duped, and dehumanized again—that's the very reason I'm afraid to give myself to the truth of God.'

IV. JESUS IS MUCH MORE LIBERATING THAN YOU THINK

Christianity changes the face of this debate when the Apostle John writes "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word, was with God, and the Word was God...The Word has become flesh and we have seen His glory." What is John saying? Mainly, that the absolute truth, the Word (*logos*), has become a person. Absolute truth is no longer an abstraction (set of rules) but a person. We believe in a *personal* absolute. And here's what you're made for; here's your design: you are made to behold His glory, to love Him, to know Him, to enjoy Him. What difference does this make? If absolute truth is a principle it's dehumanizing but if it's a person it's liberating. Going back to the love analogy above, we said that if you love, you must surrender your independence. But 2 people must do it together. If both adjust, sacrifice, and surrender, it's heaven, but if only one person does it, it's hell. If it's only 1 way, then it is dehumanizing. If relationship with God is only one way, then it too is the same. If God is throwing down abstractions saying you must do this, you must not do this, you must surrender yourself, adjust yourself, and sacrifice yourself, then that is a hellish one-way relationship. But that does not describe Christianity's God. Our God says God, the absolute truth, became a person and went to the cross. On that cross, Jesus said I'll lose my independence for you, I'll surrender for you, I'll adjust for you, I'll be exploited for you, I'll give up my freedom for you (Phil. 2.1-11). The ultimate free Being was bound and nailed so that you could know that you can trust Him. This is liberation. The one-way relationship is slavery but the personal relationship lives the life I should have lived and saves me by sheer grace.