

Subjectivism vs. Objectivism

"Gospel truth is objective and delivers us from the demise of subjectivism." I made this statement in the opening sermon of our series on 1 and 2 Timothy, Passing On the Faith. Several members reached out to me asking for more details about what I meant regarding objectivity and subjectivity in the Christian disciple's life. Here is a portion of the manuscript with an added reference to Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' comments on the subject written in his book *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*. While it is important to understand our feelings, it is also important not to be trapped, enslaved, or misled by our feelings. Today's modern culture has made feelings premier in understanding "how we are doing in life", and while feelings tell us something about ourselves, feelings often mislead us.

Gospel truth is objective and delivers us from the demise of subjectivism.

The Bible always claims to be the eternal, universal, and objective truth of God. The gospel is not "a truth". This means that God's authority is expressed through the eternal, universal, and objective truth of what God says is true about the world, about our problems, and the solution he offers to change us and the world by the gospel of truth.

This also means that the body of gospel truth from God is objective to shape, inform, and form our biblical worldview and our lifestyles as his disciples. God's truth informs how we see and understand the created and fallen world around us, and how we are to engage others in God's world that is in need of reconciliation and redemption.

Yet, in our pluralistic culture, the claim of objective truth is not welcomed. Today, each person has his or her own subjective truth according to the modern "gospel". You have yours, and I have mine, and life is a pursuit to determine and discover your own truth, your own healing, and your own salvation. Believers in Christ must reject subjectivism.

What do I mean by "subjectivism"?

Subjectivism is rooted in the current modern therapeutic movement that generally defines all of your problems as what happens outside of you, and all of life's solutions for happiness (and personal salvation) are discovered in your ability to find happiness inside you. Life then becomes a quest for happiness by both naming the harm others have caused you (trauma and/or abuse) and choosing liberation and freedom to seek your own happiness without restraint. Not only is this unsustainable and dishonest, subjectivism is the exact opposite of what the Bible says about our relationship to our problems, to the world around us and to Him.

The Bible states that the origin of all our problems resides within us due to our rebellion against the creator. (Romans 3:23, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21) In our rebellion, each of us and the whole world fell into a distorted view of reality where the creation and the creature are elevated as the only "truth reality" and God is reduced to myth or to a powerless, invisible, and distant force. The Bible teaches that we cannot save ourselves or make ourselves ultimately happy. Our help and hope in the gospel comes from outside of us. It is not in what we have done or could do, but in what Jesus did for us to reconcile us to God and in what the Holy Spirit is doing in us now as believers to remind us that we belong to God. When you place your trust in Christ, you are trusting that the objective (outside yourself help) has found you and brought you the hope of forgiveness for your sins, the healing power to grow and change, and the promise of eternal life with God. This is the objective truth of the gospel that delivers us from being destroyed by guilt, shame, and fear. In fact, 1 Timothy 1:5 says this is the aim of the pastoral ministry of the church, to nourish and nurture followers of Christ in this pathway toward living in the love of Christ. "For the aim of our instruction is love, from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith."

What if you are a disciple of Jesus but still battle with unwelcomed intrusive thoughts and feelings about your worth or hope in this life or the future? This is where our position in Christ strengthens us to live objectively, even if we or our circumstances subjectively tell us we have no hope. How do you do this? I recommend reading a book that has been helpful to me called *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*, by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Living an objective Christian life means, as Lloyd-Jones has said, that we must learn to "talk to ourselves now that we belong to Christ, rather than listening to ourselves". He elaborates:

"This is the very essence of wisdom in this matter. Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problem of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment [in Psalms 42] was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself, 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' he asks. His soul had been repressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: 'Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you'. Do you know what I mean? If you do not, you have but little experience.

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down'—what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God'—instead of muttering in this depressed,

unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is, and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God'.

Lloyd-Jones elaborates further in a sermon entitled Feelings:

"That brings me to the practical point which is that the great thing in this respect is to know how to stir ourselves up. That is the whole essence of this matter. As I have been reminding you, the whole danger is that when the mood comes upon us, we allow it to dominate us, and we are defeated and depressed. We say that we would like to be delivered, and yet we do nothing about it. The Apostle says to Timothy: 'Stir up the gift'—we must away with 'dull sloth and melancholy'. You have to speak to yourself. I have said this many times before and I shall go on saying it, for there is a sense in which what the Scriptures do is to teach us how to speak to ourselves. I have reminded you that you must speak to yourself, this horrible self. Speak to it and then 'stir up the gift'. Remind yourself of certain things. Remind yourself of who you are and what you are. You must talk to yourself and say: 'I am not going to be dominated by you, these moods shall not control me. I am going out, I am breaking through'. So get up and walk, and do something. 'Stir up the gift'. This is the constant exhortation of the Scriptures. If you allow these moods to control you, you will remain miserable, but you must not allow it. Shake them off. Do not recognize them. Say again, 'Away dull sloth'. But how do you do that? In this way—your business and mine is not to stir up our feelings, it is to believe. We are never told anywhere in Scripture that we are saved by our feelings; we are told that we are saved by believing. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' Never once are feelings put into the primary position. Now this is something we can do. I cannot make myself happy, but I can remind myself of my belief. I can exhort myself to believe, I can address my soul as the Psalmist did in Psalm 42: 'Why art thou cast down O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou' . . . believe thou, trust thou. That is the way. And then our feelings will look after themselves. Do not worry about them. Talk to yourself, and though the devil will suggest that because you do not feel, you are not a Christian, say: 'No, I do not feel anything, but whether I feel or not, I believe the Scriptures. I believe God's Word is true and I will stay my soul on it, I will believe in it come what may'. Put belief in the first place, hold on to it. Yes, J. C. Philpot was right at that point, the child of the light is sometimes found walking in darkness but he goes on walking. He does not sit down and commiserate with himself—that is the thing—the child of light walking in darkness. He does not see the face of the Lord at this point, but he knows that He is there; so he goes on."

Feelings, Depression, It's Causes and Cures.

If you would like to explore this more, I encourage you to read Lloyd-Jones' entire book, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*.

