

New Hope Sermon: What is Truth? John 18:33-38

Pilate's Question

Our text in John's Gospel features Pilate's question, "What is truth?" Pilate's interest is political. He's the Roman governor and he's dealing with the Jewish leaders who are clamoring for Jesus' death.

One commentator makes these observations:

Yet, "when Pilate hears the truth, he disputes it; when he is challenged he makes a mockery, even of the concept of truth. 'What is truth' (John 18:38a) has a sinister and contemporary ring to it and this is how John intends for us to hear it... How often do the Pilate's of our world pursue a course of pragmatism and expediency, protecting their own self-interest, using the rhetoric of righteousness, feigning an interest in truth – but when backed into a corner, when pressed to make a decision with social consequences, they crumble? ...In the end, Pilate is of the world and so represents a system that is filled with darkness. He may intuit the light, as Pilate senses that something is wrong with this verdict, and he may make gestures towards truth, as when Pilate tries to free Jesus. But when the deal makers arrive, when the posters report what it is that will secure the future, all commitments are tossed out like yesterday's newspaper. Pilate killed Jesus. He did not have the resolve to act on what his instincts were telling him ("I find no basis for charge against him," John 18:38) (Larry M. Burge, NIV Application Commentary, Gospel of John, Zondervan, 2000, p. 514).

But although Pilate did not have the moral fiber to really face Jesus' answers and work for justice, there are millions of earnest people who ask this question legitimately in their search for life's meaning.

Li Cheng – a Chinese intellectual scientist

What is truth? For billions of people today truth is bound and limited to what is known through scientific inquiry.

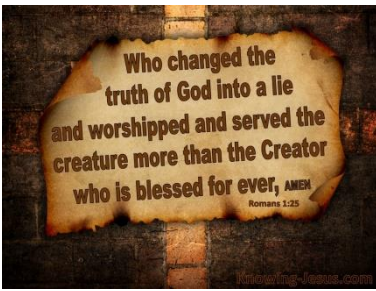
Li Cheng is a Chinese intellectual who epitomized this understanding of truth and described it in his book, *Song of A Wanderer*. Li Cheng's atheistic world view in China is typical of his generation of Chinese scholars and the millennials who are a generation younger than he is. Cheng says, "...it would be ludicrous for someone of my caliber who had received higher education in China and who had also earned a doctoral degree in the United States to believe and worship God. It would be decidedly undignified" (Li Cheng, *Song of a Wanderer*, p. 387).

His explanation helps us understand those who only accept truth through scientific inquiry:

1. "I had regarded science as supreme and the scientific method as infallible. What science could not prove was not believable." (Cheng, *Ibid*, p.393)
2. "Humans are masters of the universe; therefore, God and any other supernatural forces do not exist. Instead they...[recognize] science as the only method of knowing truth... and deny all objective truth beyond the material world... If evolution was the truth, then the Bible must be false" (Cheng, pp.185-186)
3. "Scholars and intellectuals who have been raised with an atheistic worldview, share similar beliefs about the development of our understanding of the universe and its origins. They believe that because our primitive ancestors feared thunder, lightning, floods, earthquakes and other natural phenomena, they began to worship the gods that they believed embodied and controlled these various forces of nature. Subsequently, religions were born. (Li Cheng, p.1)
4. "As their understanding of the world continued to grow, however, our more recent ancestors realized that these phenomena were caused naturally, not by some supernatural spiritual force, thus giving credence to atheism. Therefore, theism is viewed as a product of prehistoric ignorance while atheism is considered the result of modern enlightenment. Given a choice between these two options, many intellectuals think it only logical to espouse atheism" (Cheng, p. 1).

Scientific naturalism is one way millions of people in China define truth today. They dismiss the reality of God and the supernatural world.

Other People suppress the Truth



The Bible says that people also suppress the truth. Romans 1:18-20
"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:18-20, NASB). *"They changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator who is blessed for ever, amen"* (Rom. 1:25, KJV).

When people suppress the truth they change the truth of God into a lie and worship and serve themselves rather than their Creator. They are blind to spiritual truth.

Cheng, himself, admitted: "I had never read the Bible, not even the table of contents, yet I was quick to condemn it as unscientific. This could only point to my rationale prejudice, as I had not applied the scientific approach to the Bible." (Cheng, *ibid*, pp. 389-390)

But God wants people to know Him. So the foundational answer to our question 'What is truth?' is that **Truth comes through relationship and revelation.**

God gave this promise in Jeremiah 29:13: *"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart"* (Jer. 29:13, NIV). Also, Moses prayed to see God's glory, and God revealed Himself to Moses. *"Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory.' And the Lord said, 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion'"* (Exodus 33:18-19, NIV).

Jesus is the incarnation of truth

Still, most religious people, who are open to God's reality, do not receive that kind of revelation about God so Jesus came to incarnate God's truth. Gary Burge, professor at Wheaton, says: "He has come to unveil the truth to the world – not to point out true things as he finds them, but to unveil himself, his voice (which is God's voice), and his words (which are God's words). Therefore "truth" does not refer to a commitment to truthfulness (or honesty)... 'Truth' is what we see when we see God. Jesus is thus 'the truth'" (Burge, *Ibid*, p. 501). He says *"I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6, NIV). He told Pilate: *"And for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice"* (John 18:37b, NKJV).

But people rejected Christ's voice and his claims so they killed him. Now, relationship with God and revelation from God come through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus told the disciples: *"But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned"* (John 16:7-11 NIV). *"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth"* (John 16:13, ESV).

The Spirit also helps us understand the Bible Paul tells the Corinthians “*But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him’— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God*” (1 Corin. 2:9-10, NIV). Notice the word “reveal” – the wonderful things God has prepared for believers “are revealed to us through the Spirit.”

This is why so often non-Christians cannot understand the Bible. “*People who aren’t spiritual can’t receive these truths from God’s Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them and they can’t understand it, for only those who are spiritual can understand what the Spirit means*” (1 Corinthians 2:14, NLT).

For those of us who have become Christians out of a secular, agnostic, atheistic background, this fact of Spirit revelation rings true. Before I was a Christian, I had not studied the Bible. But I had ideas of what God must be like if God existed. I wasn’t sure God did even exist but if God was real, I didn’t think God would judge people who didn’t believe; I didn’t believe in hell; I didn’t believe Jesus was the only way to God. I didn’t believe the Bible and thought those stories of Jonah and the whale and Noah and the ark were simply children’s fairy tales. The portions of the Bible I did read, didn’t make sense either.

It was only once I became a Christian and the Holy Spirit came to live in me, that the Spirit helped me begin to understand the major truths about God. And the Spirit who helped me realize the power of those truths to transform my own life. And thus my spiritual journey of being made like Christ began. But it really was only the Holy Spirit, not human intellect or truth presuppositions from a humanistic perspective that made God real. It was revelation.

This was Li Cheng’s experience as well. He says: “Now I began to understand that science is not omnipotent and that there are limitations to the scientific method. Science is merely the means by which we can understand the material world. It holds no explanation for the non-material spiritual world” (Li Cheng, *Song of a Wanderer*, p. 393).

Knowing God’s truth comes from relationship and revelation.

Application

As we encounter the Pilates and the atheistic Li Chengs of the world, it’s unlikely that we’ll be able to argue them into the faith. We need to demonstrate what knowing God is like. And pray for the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives to open the eyes of their heart. As 2 Cor. 4:3-7 says, “*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*”

The all surpassing power of revelation and the joy of relationship with God is the key to finding God’s truth. This is the major take-away I want to emphasize in the sermon today.

The implications for us are very specific: In our play today (Early One Morning) Mary faced the dilemma of talking about her encounter with the risen Jesus with a skeptic – Salome thought Mary had gone off the deep end, was hallucinogenic, fabricating the myth that Jesus was alive. Luke wasn’t able yet from his scientific background to affirm her experience either. Those are normal responses from the world. And we’ll face them even today. So we shouldn’t be silenced or intimidated by what seems to be superior wisdom or scientific presuppositions that close out any hope of understanding

spiritual things. Satan does *veil people's minds so they cannot see the light of the gospel displayed in Jesus Christ.*" But in Jesus' upcoming arrest, trial and crucifixion, he told the disciples, "*the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me*" (John 14:30, NIV). The power and wisdom of God is stronger than any assumed wisdom and Satan-based deception. Mary's experience was real. She had a relationship with Jesus and revelation after he rose. She was experiencing truth. Although neither Salome or Luke believed her story, she had the power and truth of God on her side. That was her testimony. And that would be the basis of her witness in the future. She had experienced relationship and revelation.

It's the key to finding God's truth. So, Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians that they would have "*...the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better*" (Eph. 1:17, NIV). Wisdom and revelation are gifts from God. They are the basis for our testimony that transcends scientific naturalism and allows the truths of God to be incarnated in our lives. What a privilege that is.

Let's pray.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 3/25/18