

Christ Community Covenant Church
Vision Series – 5 Smooth Stones – John 1:17
Stone 3 – A Teaching Church (Part 2) - Abounding in Grace
Pastor Mike Brown - July 15, 2012

Introduction

We are working our way through a series on the vision of 4Cs. Following the lead of the ECC denomination, we are talking about our vision within the context of five stones, the five stones that young David gathered when facing Goliath. So far, we have talked about the stones of family and celebration. Last week we began to talk about the value of being a teaching church, and we were talking about it in the sense of being bold in truth and abounding in grace, which comes from the Apostle John:

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17)

Here is the problem as I see it: Each of us is surrounded by family members, friends, the world...people in our lives who desperately need God's truth and grace. We typically respond in one of three ways: because of the seeming contradiction of Jesus' commands (e.g., don't judge; don't get angry; don't commit adultery...) we become paralyzed; or, we lavish grace upon each other and truth is muted; or, we slash each other with the truth. It is in to this that I want to speak this week.

Review

Last week we began to look at truth. I made the claim that we have a truth problem that stretches back to before the time of Jesus. We looked at the scripture in John (John 18:33-38) when Jesus was standing before Pilate. Jesus said, "I have come to testify to the truth." Pilate responded, "What is truth?"

Then, we looked at a few statements of truth or falsity; some were easy to answer, on some you got pretty quiet. Many of the statements I showed were the source of division within the church over the past 2000 years. We discovered that the world around us isn't the only place that we have a truth problem; the Church has had a truth problem over the centuries. Recall that I said it was because of heresy and the battle for truth that the early church hammered out our great credal statements, the Apostle's, Nicene, Athanasian, and Chalcedonian creeds.

To try and understand the problem, we looked at the definition of truth:

That which corresponds to reality

Any statement that agrees with reality is deemed true. It is indeed that simple...and indeed that difficult. I went further last week and posited two causes of the truth problem based on this definition. First, we want to define reality. As with Adam and Eve, we want to be like God and define our own reality. So, we might go so far as to define a reality where there is no god other than us. We call those people atheists. Or, we might define reality as one in which God wants us to be happy as we define it. You see the problem here, and we don't have to think too long about it before we find areas in our own lives where we are trying to define our own reality.

The second cause of the truth problem is that we want to reduce truth to a set of statements that are right or wrong. This brings to mind for me a song recorded in 1971 from that well known group, the Five Man Electrical Band. Here is some of the lyric:

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?
Now, hey you, mister, can't you read?
You've got to have a shirt and tie to get a seat
You can't even watch, no you can't eat
You ain't supposed to be here
The sign said you got to have a membership card to get inside.¹

Doesn't it seem that everywhere we turn someone is trying to control us with another rule, policy, or law. And the Church has been guilty of the same thing over the centuries. It seems that despite the words of Christ and the repeated pleading of the Apostle Paul that we are no longer slaves to the Law, even we Christians fall into the temptation of reducing truth to a set of rules to be imposed on others and wielded indiscriminately like a sword.

¹ "Signs."

TRUTH AS A PERSON

Truth as a Set of Propositions

God did give us rules. For example, He gave us the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17). So, please don't hear me say that rules are wrong. What is wrong is how we often apply them. Here is one example, the fourth commandment, "Keep the Sabbath." By the time Jesus was born that simple command had been expanded into over 1400 Jewish laws defining exactly what the religious leaders thought it meant to keep the Sabbath. Then of course there is the other extreme...how many of us keep a Sabbath today?

Here is another example that has hurt many people in the Church: divorce. God says divorce is wrong. Jesus says so explicitly (Mark 10:2-12). By defining reality as we want and creating our own set of rules around divorce we have hurt many. We say, "God says you cannot divorce," and people stay in very difficult and abusive marriages or they divorce anyway and are ostracized by the church. At the other extreme we say, "I know your marriage is hard, God would not want that for you," and people divorce when more effort was needed to save the marriage. Neither is a good witness for God. So, what do we do?

Worldview Thinking

Let's go back to the definition of truth: *that which corresponds to reality*. I want us to think of reality from a worldview perspective. The term *worldview* means a set of presumptions we each hold about the basic makeup of the world.² Whether you know it or not, you have a worldview that guides your response to life. A worldview consists of our individual answers to such questions as:

- What does it mean to be human?
- What happens to a person after death?
- How do we know right and wrong?
- What is the meaning of human history?

However, before answering any of these questions, you must answer a more fundamental question:

- What is reality?

What then is reality? There is only one answer and we find it in Exodus 313-14:

Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

"I AM." No other reply is possible. God is the basis for all things; from Him all things come (Romans 11:36). He cannot define Himself in terms of anything else that exists. He is the great I AM, the First Cause, the Prime Mover, the Uncaused Cause.

For Christians, defining God as reality then allows us to then answer the other worldview questions well.

Truth as a Person

So, back to our question, What is truth? By now you ought to be jumping up and down in your seat with the answer. You may have realized that I gave you the answer as homework last week: John 14:6—I [Jesus] am the way and the truth and the life. Recall the definition of truth: *that which corresponds to reality*. If God Himself, the great I AM, is reality itself and if truth corresponds to reality, then we see how Jesus, as God, can say, "*I am* the truth." Not, "I know the truth," or "I have the truth." No, Jesus says, "*I am the truth*."

Recall earlier that I said there were two causes to our truth problem: first, we want to define reality, and second, we want to reduce truth to a set of rules. Let's go back to these causes.

Regarding defining our own reality, Pastor Dave often quotes A.W. Tozer who says, "What we think about God is the most important thing about us," and now we begin to see why Tozer says that. I may think God doesn't exist at all, there is no supernatural realm; therefore, I define reality in purely material terms. I can think that Buddha is god, or Mother Nature is god, or Allah is god; each answer will shape

² Worldview discussion is from Sire, James W. (2004). *Naming the Elephant*. IVP. 19ff.

the answers to those other worldview questions. But, even Christians who know that God is reality are not immune to this. Perhaps the most important question asked by Jesus was this question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15) If you say that God is a strict disciplinarian set on enforcing His rules, it drives how you live. If you believe God is a doting grandfather who winks at indiscretion, then it drives how you live. How you answer Jesus' question shapes your reality and forms how you view truth.

The other cause was reducing truth to a set of statements. Let's go back to Jesus' exchange with Pilate (John 18:33-38). Jesus said, "...for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice." Then Pilate replies, "What is truth?" So, here is the crux of the truth problem. For Pilate, truth is a "what." In reality, and Christians must know this, truth is not a "what," truth is a "Who." Truth is a person, not an impersonal set of do's and don'ts.

If you want to know truth you must know God. It is that simple.

Knowing God Sets Us Free

There are three classic ways to know God, and each is necessary:

- General revelation—noticing God through His creation (Psalm 19:1-2)
- Special revelation—God's word to us (Deuteronomy 8:3)
- Personal relationship—mutual abiding (John 14:23; 15:4)

So, nature around us, including what is written on our hearts because we are made in God's image; God's revealed Word to us; and the Holy Spirit in us; this is how we know God fully.

Sadly, we often act as if all we know of truth is what we find in nature and God's Word applied as a rule book. We act as slaves to law. Jesus said, "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32), then He goes on to say, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

How does this fact that truth is the person of Jesus set us free? Life is simply not a set of black and white occurrences to which we plug in to a formula and come out with an answer; life is messy. Jesus understands that. Watch Him work in the messiness of life. To the woman caught in adultery He did not pronounce the legal sentence of stoning; rather, he said to her bluntly, "I do not condemn you, go and sin no more" (John 8:1-11). To the Samaritan woman at the well who was living with a guy, He did not wag His finger and chastise her; rather, He offered her Living Water, Himself (John 4:7-28). To the Pharisees, who should have known better, He shouted, "Woe to you..." again and again (Matthew 23:13-36). To the rich young ruler, "Give away all you have and follow me," says Jesus (Luke 18:18-23). To the man cured of demon possession who wants to follow Jesus, He says, "Go home and spread the news" (Luke 8:26-39).

There is no formulaic WWJD at work here. There is only Truth as a person confronting fallen people, engaging people in the mess of their lives and bringing them the uncompromising Good News of truth and grace into their individual circumstances.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Knowing God

We've been talking a lot about philosophy and theology; it is time to turn the corner and practically answer the question, "What is truth?" and even more so, the question of living a life of truth and grace and speaking into the lives of others.

Jesus said that He is truth; therefore, to know truth we must know God. What does that mean, to know God? To understand what it means to *know* God intimately, let's look at a human relationship.

Linda and I have been married almost 25 years. Early in our relationship I learned many things *about* her: family history, education, work history, movies she likes, etc. Yet we all know that in any relationship knowing the facts about someone only takes us so far. So, in the 25 years of living with her I have come to know more about her than her particulars; I am on at least a lifelong journey to know *her* as a person. Scripture tells us that in marriage our mutual love is making us one flesh (Genesis 2:24). Therefore, as we increasingly become one I am better able to intuit her heart—to know what pleases her and what she would like without having to ask all of the time. I *know her* because I am becoming one with her.

So it is with God. Early on in our relationship with God we learn *about* Him: facts and figures, His commands, His story (last 9 months). However, just as in a human relationship, at some point I must move beyond that and begin to *know* God Himself, as a person. Marriage is God's preferred metaphor for our relationship with Him. So, just as with a healthy human marriage, as I journey with Jesus I increasingly *know* Him, I become one spirit with Him (1 Corinthians 6:17) and I become better at intuiting His heart because I become like Him; His heart becomes my heart. As I know Him I know truth. Knowing truth comes from relationship with Jesus, not the rigid application of rules.

Knowing Self

There is more. It is not enough to know God, I must also know myself. So often when we talk about speaking boldly in truth the first thought that crosses our mind is to point out to "those people" what they are doing wrong. Before we point out the speck in the eye of another we must confront the log in our own eye (Matthew 7:3). We must be willing to let God and other trusted friends speak truth into our lives. Here's why.

I must let God show me who I am so that I more fully realize His gift of grace. In Psalm 139, David prays for God to examine his heart and show him his iniquities. That must be our prayer. Whenever I see a Christian (including myself) wielding God's truth indiscriminately and without grace, slashing at others, I know that they (me) has forgotten God's grace toward them (me). Only by beginning to see our own faults and woundings can we begin to grasp the magnitude of God's grace for us.

Luke records a great story from Jesus' ministry (Luke 7:40-50). One of *those* women crashes a dinner party thrown for Jesus by Simon the Pharisee. She is washing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. Simon has failed to offer Jesus the simple courtesy of allowing Him to wash His feet. Jesus notes that it is because the woman realizes just how much she has been forgiven that allows her to love; "Simon," Jesus says, "you don't love much because you do not realize the extent to which you need forgiveness." So it is with us. The deeper our understanding of how much we have been forgiven, how deep God's love is for us moment-by-moment, the easier we will find it to give what we have been freely given (Matthew 10:8): truth and grace together in the messiness of life.

Peter says that we are to be ready to give a defense for the hope that we have (1Peter 3:15); do you know the hope you have in Christ? For the woman who crashed the party it was forgiveness of her sins, what is it for you? Mark begins his gospel with these words:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

He continues for sixteen chapters. All of it is Good News; what, at this point in your life is Jesus' Good News for you? In other words, at this moment in your life, how is God extending you grace? If you can't answer that question it is impossible for you to extend God's grace to another in the messiness of their life. It has been said of the great saints that they are not more holy than us; rather, they have learned to live by consuming God's grace.

And there is more truth of which you need to remind yourself. John puts it this way:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God... (John 1:12)

As a believer you are a child of the most high God. It is easier to offer grace if we remember who we are.

Truth One-on-One

I have said that to know God's truth you must know God. To know God's grace you must know yourself in light of God's truth and be aware of His continual grace poured out upon you. But to be a truth-telling, grace-extending teaching church, to be the light on the hill, to be salt and light in a darkening world we need more. We need to be able to listen (James 1:19).

The world is a noisy place. There is busyness and distraction 24/7/365. The world is deafening and we are growing deaf. We cannot hear each other above the din. Or, more correctly, we won't stop to hear each other. One author says this: "Not to be heard is not to be alive." When is the last time you were in a conversation where you felt heard and took the time to hear the other? It is so very rare anymore.

Why take the time to listen? How else will we hear the Spirit speaking in us? (John 10:4) How else will we be able to say to another what the Spirit gives us to say...to give the other soul the Good News they need in their circumstances rather than what we want to tell them as a matter of expediency. Eugene Peterson, a long-time pastor and prolific author says this: "I stopped talking to people *about Christ* and began listening to them *in Christ*."³

By listening to another soul we hear their story. Some part of our story will connect with theirs and we will recall God's truth and grace in our lives; we freely offer the same back to them. Sometimes it is in the form of tough love; other times we simply weep with them. Unless we slow down and listen to the Holy Spirit and to the other soul we will never speak God's truth and grace.

Truth in the Public Square

Speaking the truth occurs in places other than one-on-one. There are also times when we must simply speak truth into the public square. In addition to the interpersonal encounters we have seen with

³ Paraphrased. Peterson, Eugene H. (1989). *The Contemplative Pastor*. Eerdmans. 21.

Jesus, sometimes He simply spoke truth to the crowd (e.g., Matthew 5-7). So must we. We can take advantage of letters to the editor, blogs and responses to blogs, article to magazines, debates...by whatever means you may be called by God to speak His truth in His grace in the public square.

CONCLUSION

Let me close with this. I used to teach instructors how to teach. I would tell them that they must strive to give feedback to the other person with the best of motives—to speak truth with grace. However, I also told them that they had to realize that sometimes even telling someone their shoelace is untied can be taken wrong. You can't be responsible for how one responds to truth spoken by you in grace. However, you are responsible for ensuring to the best of your ability, and you will never be 100% certain, you are speaking truth out of love for the other and offering God's grace to them. Here is a test: when speaking truth is it to win an argument or to win or comfort a soul?

But even when a situation is approached with the best of human motives we can find trouble. Look at two quick stories. Abel and Cain are the first recorded offspring of Adam and Eve (Genesis 4). Cain's offering to God was inadequate. God spoke truth with grace to Cain, "Come back with another offering, Cain, and all will be well." Cain responded in anger by killing Abel. Jesus came speaking truth in grace to ancient Israel. They killed Him. We can expect to do no better than God. Many who have spoken God's truth in God's grace have been scorned or killed for it (see the parable of the landowner, Matthew 21:33-46). We are not responsible for the actions of the hearers, we are only responsible to speak truth and grace as God gives it to us to speak.

1. Slow down, draw close to God; know Him so you will know His truth;
2. Know yourself so you will realize His grace for you;
3. Out of relationship with God and in relationship with others--
 - a. Offer freely His truth and His grace to another as He directs you.

All else is folly.

OFFERING

BENEDICTION

Jude 3

Colossians 4:5-6

Go into the world boldly speaking truth and be abounding in grace. You can only do this in Christ and with Christ in you. Slow down, get to know God. Let Him reveal you to yourself. Live freely in His truth and grace and offer it freely to the dark world in which we live.