

John 17 - #2 – Truth

I. Set Up

A. This morning we continue our three-week focus on John 17 – a conversation between the God the Father and God the Son about several things, not the least of which is: you and me. In John 17 we get a chance to look behind the curtain and see what Jesus wants for us – what He prays for us. In today’s sermon, Mike focuses on John 17:17, Christ’s prayer that our lives would be shaped by truth.

II. Intro

A. About twenty-five years ago, Kelly Monroe – a chaplain at Harvard University - started The Veritas Forums. She had recently written the best-selling book, *Finding God at Harvard*, and was anxious to continue to argue that, although you can find a lot of shallow thinking and shallow people in the church, you can also find lots of the smartest and most successful people there. And she wanted to host discussions on the most important topics at the country’s top secular universities, with some of the speakers being Christ-followers who were also leading scholars and authors.

B. You can Google Veritas Forums and watch and read all kinds of lectures and debates that they have sponsored. They are throwbacks to the days when the University was expected to be a place where students and faculty pursued truth – wherever it led - and engaged with the biggest questions.

C. I’ve chatted with Kelly a few times. She is – not surprisingly – quite thoughtful. Certainly, smart enough to understand that she could not name this ministry “The Truth Forum.” That is what The Veritas Forum means.

1. *Veritas* is Latin for truth. But *Veritas* not only sounds cooler, it’s also much less offensive. Today, discussions about truth are contentious, not just because there is little agreement about what is true, but because there is no agreement on how to define truth or whether there is such a thing as capital T truth. You might have your truth and I have my truth, but my truth is not your truth, and any suggestion that it is, is understood to be a blatant power play.

D. And yet in his prayer, Jesus prays that we will not only engage with truth, but that we will be shaped by it.

III. This is the second of three messages on John 17.

A. Last week we noted that in this prayer – which is the longest prayer we hear Christ pray, and which comes just prior to his betrayal, and which is so rich that many

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have spent years of their life here – we noted that after praying for himself and praying for the apostles, Jesus prays for those who will follow Him later on (that is, you and me).

B. I then noted that we were focused here because prayer is important. And that we were going to take an extended look at two of the four things Christ prayed for us. He prayed: 1) That we would be shaped by truth; 2) That we would be holy; 3) That we would remain mission focused, and 4) that we would be unified. In this series we are focused on the first and last. Today we are focusing on the first. Christ's prayer that we would be shaped and sanctified by truth.

IV. John 17:13 reads:

A. **I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word** (a bit of play on words here – after all, he is the Word).

B. I have given them your word **and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world** (this is one of the reasons I am not a fan of the Benedict Option – the idea that Christians should withdraw from society)

C. **but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.** The word here is *aletheia*. As noted, in Latin the word for truth is Veritas. But the Bible was not written in Latin. The New Testament was written in Greek. In Greek the word for true is *aletheia*.

D. **V18: As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.**

E. OK, so we are to be sanctified – to grow in Christ-likeness.

1. The moment we receive Christ we are justified. Forgiven. We are declared righteous. This is a work fully engineered by Jesus. You need Jesus. Christianity is not this I do, it is this He did. If you heard Ben Dockery's Friday devotional he developed this idea brilliantly from Ephesians 2. You want to sign up with Christ.

2. So, the moment we embrace Christ we are justified. When we die, we are glorified. That is, our sin nature is removed. We are not just declared righteous, we are made righteous.

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F. Between those two – between our second birth (when we come to faith) and our glorification after our death – between these two we are expected to be working out our salvation. We are to be becoming conformed to the image of Christ.

G. The process of that happening – which is called our sanctification – requires effort. Our effort. Our justification is an act of Christ alone. Our sanctification is a partnership with the Holy Spirit. To quote Augustine: we cannot do it alone and God will not do it alone. We partner with God in the process of our growth. Our role is to “discipline ourselves to godliness;” to “work out our salvation;” we are told to seek after God, to press on towards the goal for the prize.

H. What exactly does this look like? How do we grow? Well, there are a variety of ways to answer that question – that is, there are a number of different kinds of things we can do to position ourselves for God to work: prayer, Bible reading, serving, participating in the sacraments of baptism and communion. We will be looking at some of this in the fall. But in this passage, we see that our sanctification is to be driven by truth. In John 17:17, Jesus prays: **Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.** What does He mean? How are we to be sanctified by truth?

I. Well, this is not complicated. Clearly, a big part of what this means is: read the Book. Study and reflect on the Word of God. It is true. Adapt yourself and your thinking to it. Men and women, this isn't rocket science. If you only hear one thing today, hear this: read the Book.

1. It is – Hebrews 4 - **living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.**

2. It is – 2 Tim 3 – inspired, **“God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

3. It is one of the greatest gifts we have been given, but it only works if – 2 Timothy 2 – we **“do our best to present ourselves to God as those approved, workers who do not need to be ashamed and who correctly handle the word of truth.”**

V. However, I think it would be helpful for you to understand that at the moment things are a bit more vexing and confusing than normal because of the ways we are collectively thinking about and talking about truth.

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A. If you are paying attention, you were not surprised when a few years ago, *The Oxford English Dictionary* selected “post truth” as their Word of the Year. Of course, if you were paying attention, you wanted to ask someone, “Is that a true statement?” You are telling me that we have moved past truth. Is the statement that we have moved past truth true?

1. I do not mean to demean *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Their specific claim is that we live at a time when, “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” And that is true. And important. And so, I want to spend a bit of time helping you understand what is going on out there. (Ushers, now it the time to lock the doors so no one can get out. I’m kidding.

2. Well, not really. I do want to try to explain what is going on out there. And then, assure you that, God has given us the light unto our path and the lamp unto our feet that we need. The Bible is the guide for life that we need, and it is so much more stable than our ever-morphing societal guidance.

VI. Let me make five points. Because this topic is weighty and because there is a lot of confusion out there, I want to be as clear as I can be.

A. One: When I am talking about truth, I am talking about “that which corresponds with reality.” I am suggesting that truth is the way things really are and the way things actually work.”¹

1. If you had philosophy in college, you might recognize this as – the correspondence theory of truth, as opposed to the coherence theory or the pragmatic theory. I do not want to get sidetracked there – if you do, you can go online and look at my sermon manuscript, which has footnotes in which I tease some of this out.

2. My goal today is not to prepare you for a philosophy midterm. I just want to help you see through the fog that surrounds truth, and really, always has.

a) This is not a recent problem. We are in John 17. In John 18, the religious leaders drag Jesus before Pontius Pilate hoping he will condemn Jesus to death. And they have a brief interaction. Pilate asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews. Jesus asks Pilate if he came up with that idea on his own or did others talk to him about Jesus. Pilate says, “I’m not a Jew” – i.e., I’m not in your conversations.” They go round and round. Then, at one point, Jesus says he has come to testify to truth, and that everyone on

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the side of truth listens to him. And Pilate scoffs at that. “Truth? You are here to testify to truth. What is truth?”

b) This passage is so famous some refer to it in Latin: *Quid est veritas?*

c) Clearly, he has been in these conversations before.

B. Two, one of the reasons we disagree with each other is because we do not trust each other’s sources. It’s not the only one – there is a lot going on in terms of identity and confirmation bias and our tribe. But, one of the things we end up talking about – and disagreeing over – is our sources.

1. I assume you’ve noticed that there are a lot of disagreements going on out there – that we are spending a lot of time fighting over things, and that we now hear charges of lies and fake news and conspiracy theories.

2. And so people start to debate sources - *The New York Times* versus *The Wall Street Journal*. Fox or CNN. The CDC or the Cleveland Clinic. Appeals are made to sources.

3. But, this generally doesn’t settle things.

C. Which leads to point three – one of the reasons we disagree is because we value different kinds of sources. I am not talking *The New York Times* versus Fox News, nor am I talking print versus TV, I am going beneath that.

1. We have talked about this before but it’s worth a 90 second review. There are different categories of knowing – four different sources of authority:

a) Reason – this is what science and math and logic relies on. This is what was elevated during the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution;

b) Tradition – we believe something based on the wisdom and insights of people we trust who lived before us, starting with our parents, but not limited to them;

c) Experience – insights we gain from life, from the school of hard knocks, sometimes experienced as what we feel in our gut.

d) Or the fourth category, Revelation. The belief that God has revealed truth to us – either in a general way (something theologians call

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Natural Revelation) or in a special way (something referred to called Supernatural Revelation) – such as the Bible.

2. And when we have been here, I have always noted that as Christians we see value in all four of these “sources of authority,” but we are to be most profoundly shaped by Revelation. I am going to come back to that in a minute.

D. Point Four – and this is a big one – another reason there is so much confusion and contention going on out there (it’s not just that there are different definitions of truth and different sources we trust and different categories of sources). At the moment, we are seeing very new understandings of truth. And I think the best way to illustrate this is to give you a history of truth.

VII. The History of Truth

A. It turns out that discussions about truth started at least as far back as the ancient philosophers. I’m talking about Socrates, Plato, Aristotle - and earlier (Heraclitus and Parmenides) - whose insights helped launch Western Culture. They wanted to know what was – to understand reality and the most important things. And to that end they used reason. (It’s more complicated than I am making it, but go with me).

1. As it turned out, it was not enough. Reason alone turns out to not be enough to know ultimate truth. You do not hear this much, but philosophy is a failed project. The ancient philosophers could not agree on things. They kept hoping to figure things out – to get to the root of all things. For instance, they wanted to know why we were here – what is our purpose?

a) They believed that you could tell what something was for by studying its design – which they called “the logos” – its logical basis. But they couldn’t get anywhere and gave up.

b) This is what was behind the famous opening of John’s Gospel – written to philosophers.

2. They couldn’t agree on much of anything. They had been in search of - logos.

B. Next up in the unfolding of the West were the Jews – who make a whole series of big, game changing claims about truth based on revelation from God.

1. As I have noted before, there are four different ways we “know what we know:” reason, tradition, experience and revelation.

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2. The Jews did not reject reason, but they elevated revelation.

3. Over and over and over again in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) – we hear the claim, “And God said,” and the Word of the Lord came through this prophet or that one. With the implication being, what God says is not just his opinion, and you are entitled to yours). The claim is, it’s true.

C. Next up is the unfolding of Western Culture was Jesus, and when He arrives, He walks in lock-step with the Jewish Bible:

1. John announces him as the Logos. He speaks to the philosophers. It was an announcement to them that Jesus was who they were looking for.

2. Then, Jesus himself affirms the Old Testament – in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5) he says, “Do not think that I came to overturn the Law, I have come to fulfill it. Every jot and tittle.” In other words, every period and comma.

3. He is also not dismissing reason, but He also clearly claims that the Old Testament is true.

4. And then later, in addition to his little dust-up with Pilate in which he says he is going to testify to truth, Jesus also claims to be truth incarnate. In John 14 we read him saying, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

D. After Christ’s resurrection and ascension, the church he launches not only soldiers on, it grows and spreads quite quickly.

1. We read about the thirty years following the resurrection of Jesus in the Book of Acts. And in that book, we see that the Apostles assume that Christ’s followers will follow the Old Testament and also the things they (the Apostles) write (the New Testament). The 27 books that make up the New Testament are those written by the apostles, or by those they commissioned.

E. From there we leave the Bible, and we continue our search for truth via history. Europe moves into the Middle Ages – sometimes called the Dark Ages, sometimes called Christendom, sometimes called the Medieval era. It runs for about 1,000 years, from 400 to 1400. I’m not going to say much about any of this because I have been doing a podcast on all of this.

1. During much of this time, people associated truth pretty exclusively with the Bible. If there was a second place, it would have been tradition.

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2. At some point – I am clearly speaking here as a Protestant - but at some point during the Late Middle Ages things go wrong related to the church and truth. We get a bit too much tradition in the mix. That leads into the Reformation, when Luther (and others) pull us back.

3. The battle cry of the Reformation is the five solas: We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, on the basis of the Scriptures alone to the glory of God alone.

a) Sola scriptura – a Latin phrase – is not solo Scriptura (it is not that the Bible alone is our source of truth, but it is the most important source of truth.

F. The Enlightenment comes next. This is a term coined by those dismissive of the claims of Biblical truth.

1. It was a time when how we thought about truth shifted. Faith was challenged. Reason was elevated. We had all manner of people trying to figure out what we know for sure – like Descartes, “I think therefore I am.” All of that.

2. God is pushed aside. Man becomes the measure of all things. Scripture is challenged.

3. As noted before, reason is great but not enough.

a) Many do not agree with me on this. They argue that we can know all we need to know about reality based on science and the scientific method.

b) One of the first to point out the problems with this was Immanuel Kant back in the 18th century. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* he argued that we are limited in what we can know by our senses alone.

c) But he asks, “Are these five modes really adequate for capturing all reality?” His conclusion is that there is no reason to think that. Therefore, reality as a whole – certainly much spiritual reality – is inaccessible to human beings on the basis of reason alone. We need revelation.

4. Let me note, not all scientist get that. You have a lot of scientists – the easy one to pick on here is Carl Sagan, who said, “the cosmos is all there is and

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all there was and all there ever shall be.” That is not a scientific statement. It is a statement of faith.

G. Things did not stop there. The Enlightenment – which rose up along side the Scientific Revolution - gave way to Modernity, which some thought meant all of our problems were over.

1. With science and technology we’d fix everything. Now that we had moved on from silly superstitious beliefs to reason. With a bit more time and education all would be perfect. Heaven on earth and all that.

2. Nietzsche was the one who laughed and said, “not a chance.” He was an atheist, but he thought that Christianity

3. By the way, he was also the one who championed the idea of values. We talk about values all the time today. Companies celebrate their values. Well, what he was anxious to do was push aside virtues – like faith, hope and love.

4. As we continue to move through modernity, the critiques begin to pile up. Not philosophical critiques like those offered by Kant, Nietzsche or Bloom, but critiques offered by people who find the idea that life is wholly material not enough. It does not resonate with what they feel. And we begin to get people who view themselves as “spiritual though not religious” and who begin to define truth as being something that they find inside themselves. You have your truth and I have mind.

a) My first experience with this was at Lake Forest College in 1984.

b) Then as a college pastor.

H. But, honestly, that was all very twenty years ago. Things have kept changing. And more recently. There is a nihilism out there that says nothing matters. And there is an Animal Farm like effort to change the meaning of all the words, and there is a cancel culture that has emerged making big claims about what is true.

1. 10 years ago, there was no truth and any claims to have truth was considered an ugly power grab.

2. Now there is a new – and rapidly changing – set of dogmas everyone is expected to affirm as true.

VIII. Now, I can hear you. “Woodruff, please. It’s August.” Yes. Yes. Let me land the plane.

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- A. Here is where I am going: you need to base your life on something. You have options.
 - 1. Jesus is praying that you will decide to be guided by the Word of God and to conform yourself – to sanctify yourself – according to it.
 - B. Society is telling you to follow it's lead. And they are loud and non-stop. Increasingly we are being shaped by culture and talk radio and secular relativism and all manner of ideological movements.
 - C. Jesus claims to be the truth and he says, if you are following me, base your life on the book.
 - D. In the words of Paul - Colossians 2:8 - "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."
- IX. Let me put it this way: if you are paying attention to what is going on out there and you are not confused, then you are either not thinking clearly or you are deceived. Because, what is going on out there right now is a mess.
- A. We are moving away from the foundational assumptions of Western Culture. Some of which we are right to move past. We need to critique Western Civ., and today's culture, and our lives and our thoughts, by the Word of God.
 - B. In John 17, verse 14, Jesus says, "I have given them your word." In verse 17 we are told that we are to be sanctified by the truth. Our lives are to be shaped by reality – by the way things really are.

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If you had philosophy and remember your discussion about truth, you may remember that there are three views of truth: 1) the pragmatic view – that is, truth is what works; 2) the second is the coherence theory – that is, truth is logical consistency;¹ and finally, there is the correspondence theory – that is, truth is when an idea, belief, or statement matches (or corresponds with) the way the world actually is (reality).

As Aaron Brake develops in *Stand To Reason*, there are three major problems with the pragmatic view:

Problem #1: The view seems counterintuitive. For example, there are some true beliefs which are not very useful (e.g., the belief that my cat has grey and white fur), and some false beliefs which may turn out to be very useful (e.g., my false belief that people actually read my articles is useful motivation to continue writing them). *Problem #2:* The view is self-defeating. If truth is what works, then the pragmatic theory itself must not be true, since most philosophers throughout the ages have not held to the pragmatic theory (i.e., it didn't "work" for them) but rather have found the correspondence theory to be much more useful! And *Problem #3:* The view implies relativism. Imagine two individuals who hold contradictory beliefs. On the pragmatic view, as long as these contradictory beliefs are useful for the respective individuals who hold them, we would have to conclude they are both true. But if that is the case, then truth is relative, a view which itself is untenable and self-refuting. There are also three major problems with the coherence view: *Problem #1:* This view implies that contradictory propositions can be true. On this view, it is possible for two different people to hold contradictory beliefs yet for both beliefs to be "true" as long as these beliefs cohere with each individual's web of belief respectively. This leads to the absurd notion that contradictory propositions can both be true. *Problem #2:* For the same reasons as problem #1, and like the pragmatic view, this view implies relativism. On the coherence view, what is true is relative to each individual's belief system. Two contradictory beliefs may both be "true" as long as they cohere with their respective systems. But relativism is false; therefore, like the pragmatic view, the coherence theory must be rejected. *Problem #3:* This view, like the pragmatic view, seems counterintuitive. The reason is that the coherence theory cuts the knower off from the real world. What is true is not what matches reality but rather what coheres within a given system of belief. But most people intuitively understand that truth has something to do with the way the world really is.