



Give This Some Thought

What Is Truth?

The other day I was looking out the window of my office and a collection of middle school students were walking past, having just gotten off the bus. One boy was clearly walking home accompanied by his mom. He was eleven or twelve years old and was carrying his backpack, but his mom was lugging the boy's musical instrument. I wondered why he wasn't carrying his own viola. It seemed completely inappropriate for him to let his mom carry it. She on the other hand, I would assume, thought it the right thing to do. Who in this instance was right? Was it an act of love on her part, something she had to do to be a good mom or was it as I saw it, her treating her son like a little child and not letting him grow up? Now, most of us would say this is a matter of opinion; there isn't a right or wrong to the question. Some however would contend that there is a right or a wrong answer to this, that something is true and something false. If we had all the facts in place, we could come up with a conclusion that settles the matter, a true conclusion that is right. Do you think that is possible here?

It is contended by many that truth is relative. Often we now hear in articles and news stories someone insisting that something is "my reality" or "my truth". It could be anything from what is the best flavor of ice cream to who first punched who in a fight. Perhaps like me, you have closely followed Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the attempts of the Ukrainian people to win back their country. Recently the Minister of Defense for Russia stated that the Russian army has suffered just less than 1,600 casualties. However, the Ukrainian government insists that Russia since the war began has lost 54,000 soldiers. That is a rather stark contrast. What is more, U.S. government figures insist that Russia has endured more than 78,000 casualties. So which truth is truth? Who is counting correctly? Is it possible all three reports are true, none of them are right, or one is mostly accurate and the rest false? Is truth a matter of perception or something that is absolute and in some way certain?

For five years, it was assumed that Sherri Papini had been kidnapped by two Hispanic women who tortured her, cut off her hair and held her captive for three weeks. She was found alone on the side of a road 140 miles from her home. For five years, Papini testified to the world of the terrible things done to her and she was most believable. It turned out that she had been staying with her ex-boyfriend and Papini got him to use a wood burning tool to produce the wounds she claimed were the work of her kidnappers. For five years there was one truth and then it turned out there was another one. What if Papini continued to insist that she had in fact been kidnapped by two masked women despite the fact that her ex-boyfriend had confessed to their tryst and cover-up? Would that have been her truth versus the truth of the ex-boyfriend and the police? Or was there actually true truth?

James, Jesus' brother makes this declaration and to some it may not seem very pertinent to them, but I think you will see how it is applicable to you and to the rest of us. He wrote, **Above all, my brothers, do not swear — not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.** (James 5: 12 NIV) At first, it might seem that this is about telling the truth. This is of course important, truth telling is certainly Christian. And yet there are instances when those who

lied are celebrated in the Bible. When Israel sent two spies into Jericho to report on what they found, the king of Jericho found out the spies were in his city and sent soldiers to Rahab's home who was hiding them there. Rahab lied to the soldiers, insisting they had come to her, but she didn't know who they were and besides, they already left. In fact, Rahab was hiding them on her roof. **(But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.)** (Joshua 2: 6 NIV) The spies waited until the soldiers left and she helped them escape. Clearly Rahab lied and yet she is celebrated as a woman of great faith for what she did. James argues that she was acting righteously. **In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?** (James 2: 25 NIV) Consider the response of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who were ordered to kill any Hebrew boys they helped deliver. When the king called them in to account for so many surviving Hebrew infants, they came up with a creative response. **The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."** (Exodus 1: 19 NIV) Clearly the women were lying. In fact, Exodus tells us that it was because they feared God that they let the boys live. And yet they are commended for their actions, the Bible saying the Lord blessed them as a result.

Lying is not the issue here for James as there are cases when lying seems not only permissible but even commended by God. What is at stake in James's warning is a ban on oath-taking. Not many of us now take oaths, at least not the sort described. At the time James wrote this, Jewish people were known for using oaths, whether it was to heaven or Jerusalem or upon their father's grave to insist they were telling the truth. They may not have had an ounce of truth to what they were insisting but the oaths were a way of covering up their lying. Today, when our integrity is questioned, we raise our voices, as if volume proves our honesty. Or we use "evidence" to establish our trustworthiness. Mark Twain famously noted, and I paraphrase, "there are lies, there are worse lies, and there are statistics." I once made the joke that a way to document your weight loss is to record your weight in the evening and then in the morning. Usually we lose three pounds or so overnight. Then each day, write down that weight loss. Even though you may not have lost a single pound over the course of the month, you could make it seem as if each day you dropped three pounds, totaling ninety pounds in all by the time the thirty days are up. Advertisers are famous for using "data" to prove the benefits of their products. We call it the manipulation of the truth, but it is more a manipulation of those targeted. People are seen as points of sale, sources of income rather than souls with eternal value. Now we get to the heart of James's injunction.

People are never to be manipulated or used for selfish gain. Often it is those who are genuinely respected and loved and have the ability to win the hearts of others who are most tempted to use people. Love your neighbor as yourself is more than a cool saying, it is a way of living with every person in your world. Sometimes we say we love others but what we really are doing is using them. There are clues this is the case. If we get upset because they don't agree with us or do what we want. If we argue with them rather than giving them the freedom to go their own way. If we criticize them behind their backs rather than just bring our issues to God. Jesus showed us the way to treat people with love and the honor they deserve as God's children. He washed the feet of the disciples. He did not expect anything back in return. Jesus did not wait for them to thank Him. He just got on His knees and with a bowl of water and a towel did what was kind. Jesus said something deeply profound that is generally misunderstood by those who read the passage in John 13. When Peter protested, contending that Jesus was not to wash His feet, Jesus made His point clear. **Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."** (John 13: 8b NIV) Others have their place with us only when we serve them with love and a genuine desire to bless without having to receive anything in return. This week make it your goal to love every person you can by serving them just as Jesus has loved you. Expect nothing for your service; give the love Christ has poured into you as a gift wherever you are this week.