

## What's What in the World?

In a poll 70% of Americans expressed concern about a “decline in moral values” in society. Corruption's pretty much everywhere: in politics, education, entertainment, business, sports, even in churches. Truth's become a rare commodity. Our culture is eating away at the whole concept of truth.

Jesus said *“You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”* Freedom comes from truth - the more you know the truth the freer you are. The opposite's true too. The less bound to truth you are, the more freedom you lose. If we don't stop the erosion of truth in our society we'll have even greater problems than what we face right now.

Many people today don't seem to see much difference between right and wrong. Some even claim there's no real difference. It's called relativism: what's true or right for you may not be true or right for me. It's a convenient philosophy because it lets you do pretty much whatever you want.

And they redefine the word “tolerance”. Tolerance is a very important thing - particularly in America where we're committed to everyone's freedom. Intolerance is an evil we have to guard against in ourselves and combat in our culture. Tolerance in the right sense means we can disagree but I still treat you with respect because you're a human being, made in the image of God. We may disagree on politics or practice, but still treat each other politely and I'll defend your civil rights.

But in recent years the word is often used to mean all ideas are equally valid. That's nonsense. If someone says, “The sun rotates around the earth,” and someone else says, “The earth rotates around the sun,” those aren't equally valid concepts. Yes, there are some things that are unknown or not well understood, but there are some things that are true and others that are false.

And if it's true, isn't probably not new - it's generally been around forever. We don't create truth - we discover it. We now know DNA determines the way we look and grow and the basics of our make-up. But that's not new, it's just new to us. We've just realized it's true. There's nothing relative about it.

So there is indeed truth. And there are many things about life and being human and dealing with relationships that are true... but the problem is that if you dare to say that something is always true, you can be accused of being intolerant or judgmental.

So let's look at some of the things that happen when you start giving up on truth. First, you get, **1. Juvenile Behaviors** - In many ways our society is getting more and more immature. We're less and less willing to accept responsibility which is a mark of maturity. When there's no right and wrong, I can blame other people for my problems or expect others to take care of me, which is what immature kids expect.

That's not how we're meant to be. Ephesians 4:14 says, *“...we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.”* The ability to know the difference between right and wrong is a mark of maturity. It's what every parent hopes for in their children.

We live in a Peter Pan society - we don't want to grow up. Unfortunately most churches have been infected with this attitude. They want to blame their problems on the times, on the community, on the culture, on certain people - on anything but their own actions or inactions. They don't want responsibility. They want their way, but they don't want to have to take responsibility. They want someone else to make things work for their church, to do the hard work. What has become clear at growing churches is you've got to listen to God and then you have to do what God says. The more you listen, the more you learn, the more you can take responsibility for your spiritual life and your community.

We have to know what's right AND do what's right. Proverbs 14:9 says, *“Fools don't care if they are wrong, but God is pleased when people do right.”*

Another thing that happen when truth goes out the window is you get, **2. Immoral Choices** - When I say “immorality” most people think of sexual immorality. But that's only one kind. Immorality means lacking morals; doing whatever I want. In the time of the Judges there was no ruler in Israel and it says *“...all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.”* Everyone did their own thing.

When there's no objective standard of right or wrong, anything goes. I become mainly concerned about myself, my preferences, my goals, my comfort. Paul talked about people who were doing this. In Ephesians 4:19 he says, *“They do not care anymore about what is right or wrong. They have turned themselves over to the sinful ways of*

*the world and are always wanting to do every kind of sinful act they can think of.*" If there's no right or wrong, I'll just do what I want.

And the way it works is, each time you do you do something wrong, it gets easier. The first time you feel a bit bad. But over time it becomes easier and easier. After a while it just doesn't bother you that much anymore or you rationalize it away.

A third thing you get when you devalue truth is, **3. Distorted Viewpoints** - not being in touch with the realities of life. 2 Thessalonians 2 says about the one who works for the evil one: *"He will use every kind of evil deception to fool those on their way to destruction, because they refuse to love and accept the truth that would save them. Then they will be condemned for enjoying evil rather than believing the truth."*

When people stop believing in truth, they become gullible. I've meet people willing to put faith in a crystal rather than God. It's pretty, but it's just a rock! I meet people who trust tarot cards - pieces of paper. I know people who don't believe in God because they can't see God but they believe in things they have a lot less evidence for.

Even if you're not into the things I just mentioned, there are illusions in our culture you've probably fallen for. Like the illusion that having more makes you more secure or happy. But there are billionaires who aren't all that happy.

We have TV and movie producers who write about living people and just make up some of it and call it a docudrama. The correct term is not docudrama, it's *lies*. A few years ago a Pulitzer prize winning New York Times journalist and writers from USA Today and the Washington Post had to admit they just made up stories because it sounded better.

We have actors who promote all kinds of crazy beliefs. I don't have anything against actors. It's a legitimate profession. But let me ask you. Do they deserve all the adulation they get? They talk up some phony belief and millions follow it.

We get our values wrong. We Idolize things like wealth success, physical beauty, athletic ability or popularity. Romans 1:25 says, *"They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise!"*

A final thing you get when culture becomes truth-challenged is, **4. Corrupted Judgment** - The symptom of this is injustice. When there's no real standard of right and wrong, there's little respect for justice or fairness. Isaiah 59 talks about a similar time in history: *"Our courts oppose the righteous, and justice is nowhere to be found. Truth stumbles in the streets, and honesty has been outlawed."* If you have a lot of money, you're probably not going to go to jail - every study shows that it's the simple truth: given the exact same level of evidence, the less money you have, the higher the chance you'll be convicted. And once convicted, the longer and stronger your sentence will be.

And just look at the banking system - the guys who caused the credit meltdown made record profits while the middle class was badly hurt and the working class devastated. If you think justice is blind, go up against a big corporation.

Because all law is built on the idea that there **are** things that are right and things that are wrong, if you lose standards of right or wrong then all kinds of things can become legal. Proverbs 29:18 says, *"When there is ignorance of God crime runs wild."* Once upon a time gambling was illegal - now the government is the bookie!

I don't know if you saw a few years ago about this guy Nathan Chapman in Maryland. They caught him defrauding the state, stealing money from the state pension plan. They caught him thanks to his three former mistresses. They caught him because the mistresses were getting even. Here's a quote from the US prosecutor. "With white collar criminals we know that if their life is a lie then it's not confined just to their personal life. If they're lying to their wives there's a huge potential that they're also lying to their colleagues, their board of directors and the auditors."

It's all about integrity. Integrity means your entire life is integrated. You don't have integrity if your life is compartmentalized. Integrity is, what you see is what you get. You're authentic; the same with everyone.

So How do we change this and reverse the tide? Not through politics or legislation - they're part of the problem! We change this by being people of the truth - salt and light in this world. Relativism says no one can really know anything is true. Is it possible to know truth? Absolutely! Truth can be discovered. How do we discern it? Here are the four ways - and they're in a particular order: you need all four in this order.

Through **1. Scripture** - The primary, best, most important way you can know truth is through God's commandments. Through what God tells us and the direction God gives us in the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, *"All*

*Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right."*

So, is there any objective evidence that shows that the Bible is true? Yes there is! There's the external evidence of archeology. The cities and places mentioned are there. You can go find them. There's been times when historians have said the Bible's not accurate because the place didn't match up. But then the Bible was proved true and the historians wrong. At one point historians said there was no Hitite people. Someone made them up in the Old Testament. That was before Hugo Winkler discovered the Hitite capital. Now everybody accepts them as a part of history.

Historians used to say that Solomon couldn't have had all the horses the Old Testament mentions. But then they dug up the area and they found thousands of horse stables. Again the Bible was proved true.

There's also the internal evidence in the Bible itself - the eyewitness accounts, particularly in the New Testament. Most of the New Testament was written by the actual people who were there - people we also know existed through other sources. They wrote many of those accounts and letters while many of the people who had been there were still alive. So why would they write letters to people saying things those people would have known was false? It would have been silly.

But let me say this: as true as this book is, if it stays on my shelf it doesn't make much of a difference in my life.

The main way we know the truth is through Christ. God came in human form to personify truth and the Gospels give us an account of that. The Bible says Jesus was full of grace and truth. He personalized truth. Truth is someone you can relate to. Truth is Jesus Christ.

One of the clearest verses is "*Jesus I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.*" He says "I am the truth". Not a religion. Not some rules. And not I might be, I hope to be, I'd like to be. And not one truth, part of the truth, some of the truth. He said, I am *the* truth.

Mohammed said "I teach the truth." Buddha said "I am searching for the truth." Hindu scriptures say truth is very illusive. You've got to look for it but you don't really know if it's here or there. Jesus says, "I'm it. I am the truth."

That is an incredibly divisive statement and it's either right or it's wrong. He's either who he says he is or he's nuts or he's the biggest liar in history. A lot of people say Jesus was just a great teacher. He couldn't be just a great teacher. Because no great teacher would claim to be God if he wasn't.

When Jesus says "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.*" He's either conning 2.3 billion people. Or he was nuts. Or he's who he said he was. It doesn't leave a lot of wiggle room.

So Jesus' words to us are primary, supreme, of first importance, central. John the Baptist said of Jesus: "*Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true.*" Everybody's betting their life on something. I'm betting my life that Jesus is who he said he was.

Through **2. Tradition** - A second place where we can discover God's truth and can be brought to an acceptance of it and an alignment with it, is through the traditions of the church – through the accumulated experiences and the lives of faithful believers who, over the centuries, have contributed to our shared heritage and passed on to us a vision.

Tradition **MUST** always be secondary to Scripture and especially secondary to the words and actions of Jesus. You can take traditions that were once meaningful and elevate them to the point where they take the place of what they were meant to demonstrate or celebrate. That was Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees and other leaders. In Mark 7:13 he said to them, "*...you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition.*"

So by tradition I'm not talking about some customs continued just because they're familiar or comfortable, or doing things because we've always done them that way. I'm talking about the living, growing tradition of the entire Christian community. Tradition helps us see ways in which the Christian life might be lived and expressed. It helps us avoid things that steered people wrong in the past or led the whole church in a wrong direction. We don't have to make EVERY mistake in EVERY generation - we can avoid some of them!

It's important that we pass on what God has taught us to others. 2 Timothy 2:2 says, "*You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.*" Paul learned things that were confirmed by other and passed them on to Timothy - someone in the next generation - in a letter full of Paul's own experience which he includes to provide

some wisdom. Then he says that Timothy is to pass this on to other trustworthy people. And here we are many centuries later continuing to pass these teachings on with the wisdom God has given to us!

One of the most important things tradition does is help us to decide what way to go - both in a positive sense and a negative one. You know the saying, "Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it"? Well, you could also say, "Those who consider the past are blessed to repeat it!" God has blessed us with many wonderful examples of right choices and with a wide variety of meaningful experiences.

Through **3. Experience** - Our human experience, in the light of the Scriptures and guided by what we have learned as the Body of Christ through the centuries, can provide us with wonderful cues to what is true. We can discern some of what's true through creation; by looking around at the world. We learn a lot about God, about truth, by looking at nature. This is why science is so important. It helps us understand how things work; understand God's universe.

Romans 1:20 says, *"For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God."* When I look at creation I can learn a lot about God.

I can figure out that God likes variety and diversity. You can easily see that in nature. I can see that God is powerful. The power of volcanoes, tides, wind, the power of stars - whoever created all of them has to be incredibly powerful!

I know God is organized; that God likes there to be a consistent order to things. The whole earth is an interrelated ecosystem, all delicately balanced. Things that we didn't even know related to each other we now know are highly organized. The whole universe is organized - there are rules and we've managed to discover some of them. God designed the laws of physics before any researcher knew about them.

We can also know something of truth through the experience of having a conscience. Some things are hard wired in us by God that, unless we're ill or damaged, give us a sense of right or wrong. Romans 2 says, *"Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right."* That's how God wired us.

There was a report about a criminal who had been on the run and they caught him. He actually seemed relieved. He said, "I'm actually glad I got caught. The guilt was killing me."

We can also learn a lot about the truth through our experiences of friendship and caring in relationships. God designed us to live in community with other people.

But the problem with experience is, of all the sources of truth, it's the least reliable. Our conscious can be weakened, hardened or perverted. In fact, it can be killed. The more I violate my conscious, the more out of whack it gets. It gets easier and easier to do the wrong thing.

The final way of discerning the truth is through **4. Reason** - We discover more about what's true through reasoning. We can think things through. You observe and think about it. Truth is knowable. You can test it; experiment with it. Truth is rational. It's testable; verifiable. You can examine the evidence. God gave you a brain and expects you to use it.

But most people never take the time for much of this. Most people just move through life and don't think about it that much. We need to think it through; know where you're headed. Spend some time thinking through what you have seen and read and what people have told you.

Proverbs 14 says, *"Only simpletons believe everything they're told! The prudent carefully consider their steps."* Examine the evidence. It's ok to check things out. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it's dumb not to check.

Proverbs 13:16 says, *"Wise people think before they act; fools don't—and even brag about their foolishness."* God expects for us to be wise in the way we do things.

For example, I don't believe in fear-evangelism - trying to scare people - because it only lasts as long as the fear. I don't want them just reacting without thinking - they need to think it through or what they believe won't last. Don't accept Jesus just because you might die tonight. You might, but probably not. Accept Jesus because might live tomorrow and you need to know and understand his purpose.

But be careful about reason and who you listen to. People use reason to try to prove all kinds of false things. Before you except the claim, look at the life. Romans 8:5 says, *"Those who are dominated by the sinful nature*

*think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit."*

Are they trying to please God's Spirit?

Jesus said, *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth."* So when you're reasoning about something, don't just follow that path - get confirmation. Listen for the Spirit's confirmation.

So what do I do with the truth once I've discovered it? I have to live it. **We Live the Truth When We...**

**1. Believe it.** The Bible tells us continue to believe this truth. Stand in it firmly. Believe it.

**2. Practice it.** Truth is not just an intellectual exercise. It's something you do. Apply it; obey it. Learning truth is good but while you're learning be sure you start doing what you've already learned!

**3. Champion it.** Don't be ashamed in a relativistic, postmodern world that says it doesn't really matter to stand for truth. We need to be people of the truth in this time.

**4. Share it.** Spread the truth around. The Bible says we must take this truth out into the world. If we don't spread the truth we're condemning people to live in falsehood.

The Bible tells us, *"Let everything you do reflect your love of the truth and the fact that you were in dead earnest about it."* Our lives need to reflect God's truth as clearly as we can. People should see the truth in us - the loving, sacrificial, forgiving truth of Christ. May that be all that they see in you and in me. Let's pray.