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What Is Truth?

John 18.33-38

Series: Signs of Life

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- I. Introduction
 - A. Signs of Life series (Gospel of John)
 - 1. In Chapter 18 – about to finish
 - a. Betrayal of Jesus by Judas
 - b. Arrest in the garden
 - c. Trials – Jewish and Roman
 - d. Peter’s denial
 - 2. Covered most of it
 - a. Don’t want to leave it just yet
 - b. Reexamine a portion of the Roman trial
 - B. Concerns the interaction between Jesus and Pontius Pilate
 - 1. Pilate – the Procurator of Judea; Governor of that Roman province
 - 2. Responsibility for adjudicating legal matters
 - 3. In particular, the matter of this Jesus of Nazareth
 - 4. Accused by the Jewish leaders
 - C. Accusations have changed from one trial to the next
 - 1. Jewish trial – Jesus found guilty of blasphemy, claiming to be God
 - a. Under Jewish law – condemned to die
 - b. But Jews couldn’t put anyone to death during the Roman occupation
 - c. Only the Romans could do that
 - d. Hence the Roman trial
 - 2. Roman trial – blasphemy was of no interest to Rome
 - a. Jews changed the charge to treason
 - b. Claiming that Jesus was a threat to Rome
 - c. As “King of the Jews” (Jesus claimed), He would threaten a Jewish insurrection against Rome
 - d. So Jesus was brought to Pilate
 - e. Jews were seeking some pretext to have Jesus executed
 - D. We’ve already covered these issues
 - 1. But we return to the Roman trial because of the significance a very important issue
 - a. An issue critical to the person and work of Jesus
 - b. And an issue which is critical to gospel of the kingdom
 - c. And to the way in which our culture and society functions
 - 2. It is the issue of truth

- E. **John 18:33–38** (ESV) —
1. 33 So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”
 2. 34 Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”
 3. 35 Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”
 4. 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”
 5. 37 Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?”
 6. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king.
 7. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.
 8. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”
 9. 38 Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”...

II. **The Kingdom Question**

- A. The interaction focuses on the character of the kingdom of Jesus
1. The charge is treason
 - a. Pilate wants to know if Jesus is the King of the Jews
 - b. And if He is, what are His intentions vis a vis Rome
 - c. So Pilate asks Him, “Are you King of the Jews?”
 2. After responding with a clarifying question for Pilate, Jesus answers the question in two ways
 - a. **Answers by denial**
 - b. **Answers by affirmation**
 3. The most clear way to define the nature of anything is to use both denial and affirmation
 - a. Declare what something is not
 - b. Declare then what that something is
- B. **Not of this World**
1. **John 18:36** (ESV) —
 - a. 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world.
 - b. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.
 - c. But my kingdom is not from the world.”
 2. So Jesus denies that He and His kingdom would be any existential threat to Rome
 - a. [“Existential threat” – hear that thrown around a lot these days by politicians
 - b. When they want to hype something beyond its minimal importance, they will say something like “So and so is an existential threat to our democracy” or some such nonsense
 - c. Whenever I hear some politician use that phrase these days my

- eyes automatically roll into the back of my head]
3. But for Pilate, he's charged with eliminating any kind of existential threats against Rome
 - a. So he's trying to find out if that is in fact the case
 4. Jesus indicates that He's not concerned with worldly power and influence
 - a. He has no intention of supplanting the powers that be
 - b. He wants Pilate to know that Rome has nothing to worry about from Him
 - c. So He tells Pilate that if he had anything to worry about, it would already be evident
 - d. His disciples would be fighting
 - e. And that's certainly not the case
 5. That's what Jesus says by denial; that's what His kingdom is not
- C. The Epistemic Kingdom
1. But Pilate presses the question further
 - a. Since Jesus had said something about having a kingdom, Pilate picks up on that statement
 - b. And cleverly pursues the kingdom issue from another angle
 - c. "So you are a king?" He asks
 2. That's when Jesus defines His kingdom by affirmation
 - a. After having declared what His kingdom is not, now He declares what His kingdom is
 - b. But Jesus' answer is not what we would expect
 - c. He doesn't describe His kingdom in terms of majestic glory, or heavenly rule
 - d. Or of reigning over a spiritual realm
 3. In fact, His description of His kingdom does indicate that His kingdom engages with the world
 4. **John 18:37** (ESV) —
 - a. 37 ... For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—
 - b. So while Jesus' kingdom may not be "of this world," this Jesus has come into this world for a purpose
 5. So I have called Jesus description of His kingdom "**The Epistemic Kingdom**"
 6. "Epistemic" – a curious word to describe a kingdom
 - a. Probably a new word for most of you
 - b. Epistemic has to do with knowledge
 - c. And how knowledge is created and affirmed as valid and reliable
 - d. Indeed, how knowledge is affirmed as truthful
 - e. Epistemology is the science of knowledge
 - f. How do we know anything with any degree of certainty?
 - g. And how do we know we know it?
 - h. And is there such a thing as knowledge that can be described as true?

7. Why would I use that term for Jesus' kingdom – the epistemic kingdom?
8. **John 18:37** (ESV) —
 - a. 37 ... For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.
 - b. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”
9. “My kingdom is a kingdom of truth”
 - a. Rome may fashion itself to be a kingdom of power
 - b. But Jesus' kingdom is a kingdom of truth
10. Jesus' kingdom is an epistemic kingdom – a kingdom of truth
 - a. Rome is a kingdom of earthly power
- D. Truth, then, becomes a, if not the, central feature of the kingdom of God
 1. And yet our world has a rather problematic history with truth
 2. It is reflected in Pilate's cynical response to Jesus' affirmation
 3. “For this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth”
 4. Pilate: “What is truth?”
 - a. Whereupon, he turned his back on Jesus and went back outside to talk to the Jews
 5. Where did Pilate's cynicism come from?

III. **A Brief History of Truth**

- A. Let us then take a brief tour through the history of truth
 1. Oversimplified, to be sure; painting with a broad brush
 2. But nevertheless necessary in understanding Pilate's response to Jesus' affirmation
- B. **Plato and the Greeks**
 1. Plato observed that we humans are surrounded by “particulars”
 - a. Thousands, indeed, millions of individual things
 - b. Of many different forms and functions
 2. Think of chairs, for instance
 - a. There are hundreds of types of chairs
 - b. They have similar functions, but come in all kinds of various forms
 - c. Plato would want to know what is the universal concept of chairness from which all chairs derive their meaning
 - d. Is there a universal “chair” from which all particular chairs are derived?
 3. Of course, Plato wasn't just concerned about chairs
 - a. If the issue is true of chairs, it must be true, he thought, for all other particulars – even of human beings
 - b. In fact, is there a universal ideal which gives meaning to all particulars?
 4. Long story short, the Greeks failed to discover just such a universal
 - a. No absolute principle could be discerned which could give meaning to all the individual things
 5. Out of despair, Plato is reported to have wished “It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word (logos) who will reveal all

mysteries and make everything plain.”

a. Plato, the prophet?

6. The Greeks, then began to become more cynical about discovering such universal truth

a. That cynicism grew into some philosophies that would also be intellectual dead ends

b. And they would have their influence in and through the Roman period as well

c. Fueling Roman cynicism

C. Roman Cynicism

1. One of the Greek philosophies that carried over into Rome was Stoicism

a. Kind of a “grin and bear it” philosophy

b. A British “keep a stiff upper lip” kind of philosophy

c. “Whatever will be, will be”

d. Que sera sera – whatever will be, will be

e. I’m sure Doris Day was around in those days to sing it

f. We hear it even today – “It is what it is”

g. If I would boil it down to one word, it might be “whatever”

2. Then there was Epicureanism

a. Rooted in feelings

b. Whatever feels good becomes the valid operating principle

c. “If it feels good, do it”

d. Epicureanism fueled the romantic movement

e. But also led to sensuality in Roman culture – and in our own day!

f. Stoicism – “Whatever”

g. Epicureanism – “Whatever feels good”

3. Then somewhat later, Utilitarianism was a philosophy designed once again to detour around the problem of finding a universal to give meaning to the particulars

a. Utilitarianism – if it works, do it

b. We find it to be very much a part of the American psyche – always has been

c. We are a very practical people

d. We hear it all the time in the political realm – Does it work?

e. If it works, forget the moral implications, just do it

f. Nike’s slogan – “Just do it”

g. Utilitarianism has made huge inroads into the church

h. Much of the church growth movement is about utilitarianism

i. Look at all the McDonald’s restaurants – not just all over America, but all over the world!

j. How did they multiply?

k. Whatever they did, maybe the church should do it so we can have more churches than McDonald’s restaurants

l. Prayer and the ministry of the Word – that’s ok

m. But how do we franchise our brand?

- n. Dangerous territory
 - o. Stoicism – “Whatever”
 - p. Epicureanism – “Whatever feels good”
 - q. Utilitarianism – “Whatever works”
4. All of those philosophical are cynical systems designed to avoid the search for truth, the search for a universal, to explain and give meaning to all of life’s particulars
- D. **Contested Truth**
1. In the meantime, and over the centuries since Rome, philosophers have continued to pursue Plato’s project – the search for universals
 2. And while the search for universals, from a purely humanistic perspective, has hit roadblock after roadblock
 - a. There have been efforts to come to grips with the notion of truth
 - b. To define what it means when knowledge is true
 - c. To specify the qualities of “justified true belief”
 3. This would be I would call contested truth
 - a. Someone would come up with a system to identify truth
 - b. Someone else would deny that system, and come up with another
 - c. And someone else the same thing
 4. But in all those case, what they all had in common, was that they all believed there was such a thing as truth
 - a. Even though they disagreed how to define it
 - b. And how they would know it when they saw it
 5. But they all affirmed the existence of truth
 - a. Even as Plato affirmed the existence of a universal for all the particulars
- E. **Rejected Truth**
1. That is until Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
 2. Who came along and said, NO!
 - a. “You’re all barking up the wrong tree”
 - b. “You’re on a fool’s errand”
 3. What people thought of as truth, he thought of as a thesis
 - a. Thesis – set of beliefs and values that guide a culture
 - b. Antithesis
 - c. Conflict, struggle
 - d. Synthesis
 - e. Equilibrium
 4. Synthesis becomes the new Thesis
 - a. Until another antithesis comes along
 - b. More conflict, struggle
 - c. New synthesis
 - d. Equilibrium
 5. And on and on
 - a. So what we hold to be true is constantly changing, evolving
 - b. There are no absolutes

- c. All of our beliefs, all of our values are relative
 - d. Change, evolve, from one generation to the next
- F. So this is what academics sit around contemplating in their ivory tower offices?
 - 1. Thanks, Hawkins, for that glimpse into the world of overeducated, pedantic, scholars
 - 2. But that stuff doesn't have anything to do with us, in our world
 - 3. We don't deal with that stuff when we sit around our kitchen table
- G. Not so fast!
- H. Young German man living in exile in London
 - 1. Hanging around the British Museum; biding his time in its reading room
 - a. He came across the works of Hegel
 - b. And he said, "I get it! The conflict of beliefs and values. The struggle between different ideological systems"
 - c. "It's like the struggle between the working classes and the managers"
 - d. "Between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie"
 - 2. His name was Karl Marx
- I. Marx collaborated with Friedrich Engels in developing his ideas
 - 1. Whose ideas were put into practice by Vladimir Lenin, later by Josef Stalin
 - 2. With resulting revolutions in Russia
 - a. Later in China
 - b. And Cambodia
 - 3. Making the 20th Century the bloodiest in human history
 - 4. All because Hegel got fed up with the quest for truth
 - a. And declared, "What is truth?"
 - b. "There is no truth"
 - c. Only the constant power struggle for ideologies
 - d. In which the beliefs and values of societies and cultures are constantly changing
 - 5. So the ideas of an intellectual, sitting in his office in his ivory tower
 - a. Disrupted the functioning of nations and cultures
 - b. All over the world
- J. Then there were other Marxists later in the 20th Century
 - 1. Paul-Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida
 - 2. Applied Hegel's philosophical framework and Marx's ideology to power relationship and knowledge
 - 3. Developed "Critical Theory"
 - a. With specific application to sexual mores
 - 4. If Hegel worked so well with class distinctions, why not with sexual categories and gender struggles
- K. Then there was Derrick Bell, lawyer and professor at NYU
 - 1. Also influenced by Marx and Hegel
 - 2. Took Critical Theory and applied it to race
 - a. "Critical Race Theory"

- L. All because Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
 - 1. Said, “What is truth?”
 - 2. Rejected the possibility of truth
 - 3. And instead planted the intellectual seeds of revolution
- M. Is this all academic mumbo-jumbo?
 - 1. You’re dealing with “What is truth?”
 - a. In Ukraine
 - b. In our cities
 - c. In our classrooms
- N. Pontius Pilate
 - 1. Just the ancestor of modern truth rejectors

IV. **The Truth About Truth**

- A. But along comes Jesus
 - 1. **John 18:37** (ESV) — 37 “... For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”
- B. **Truth is Definite**
 - 1. I use the word “definite” because of the way Jesus speaks of truth
 - a. He uses the definite article
 - 2. He does not say, “I have come... to bear witness to truth”
 - a. Or “... to bear witness to a truth”
 - b. Or “... to bear witness to truths”
 - c. Or even “... to bear witness to My truth”
 - 3. He says, “ I have come to bear witness to the truth”
 - 4. Truth exists; it is real
 - a. It is singular and all encompassing
 - b. It is not fragmentary and particular
 - c. It is universal and absolute
 - 5. Everything we know about anything is ultimately related to the truth
 - a. If you are talking about the stars in the sky
 - b. The microscopic elements in the human cell
 - c. The unseen creatures in the deepest parts of the oceans
 - d. The multiplication tables or differential calculus
 - e. Or human behavior
 - f. Or moral values
 - 6. All of it has relation to the truth
 - a. And it is Jesus who testifies to the truth
- C. **Truth is Objective**
 - 1. If there is “the truth” it is objective truth
 - a. There is truth whether you or I believe it or not
 - 2. There is truth that can be described in propositional terms
 - a. And human beings have the intellectual and linguistic capacities to observe and describe and discuss the relationships involved
 - 3. The truth to which Jesus refers, and for which He is a witness, is truth that

- can be presented as one would present facts in a court of law
- 4. If the issue has to do with moral or religious values – there is the truth which is not dependent on “the social construction of reality” as the neo-Marxists would say
 - a. The truth is not socially constructed
- 5. If the issue has to do with science, the truth of science can be analyzed, described, debated dispassionately and objectively
- 6. Neither beauty nor truth reside “in the mind of the beholder”
 - a. Unless that mind is the mind of God

D. **Truth is From Above**

- 1. “... for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth...”
- 2. Come into the world – from where?
 - a. From there! From heaven!
 - b. “I came from heaven to earth, to show the way; from the earth to the cross, thy debt to pay; from the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky”
 - c. Jesus came from above to testify to the truth
- 3. Indeed, all truth ultimately comes from God
 - a. Certainly all spiritual truth
 - b. The Bible is the Word of God
 - c. The truth of who God is and who we are is discoverable from the Scriptures
 - d. Because all such truth comes from above
- 4. Even scientific truth comes from above
 - a. **Psalm 19:1** (ESV) — 1 The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
 - b. **Romans 1:19–20** (ESV) — 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.
- 5. Whether scientists believe it or not, their sole purpose is to think God’s thoughts after Him
 - a. All truth comes from above

E. **Truth is Personal**

- 1. Not only did Jesus come to testify to the truth
 - a. He is the truth
- 2. **John 14:6** (ESV) — 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”
- 3. We may talk in terms of propositions and figures and equations
 - a. Or even in terms of metaphors and similes
- 4. But God is a person
 - a. And His truth – the truth – is personal
 - b. And He sent His Son to us as a person

- c. And His Son is the truth – incarnate
- 5. That is the most ironic thing about Pilate’s encounter with Jesus
 - a. “What is truth?”
 - b. And here was Truth looking at him in the eye
 - c. And Pilate had no clue!

F. **Truth is Binding**

- 1. “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice”
- 2. Hebrew mind – “listen” is not really about auditory acuity
 - a. It’s not talking about Chris adjusting volume levels
 - b. Listening is about obeying
- 3. Everyone who is of the truth obeys the voice of the One who is the Truth
 - a. Truth binds the conscience
- 4. If you find truth proclaimed in this church – you can’t just take it or leave it!
 - a. You are obligated by its proclamation
- 5. Why are we spending so much time in the Gospel of John?
 - a. Because in this Gospel, on every page, in every line
 - b. We find Jesus – who is the truth
- 6. If you’re a scientist – the truth obligates you!
 - a. You can’t take or leave what you discover
 - b. Now you have to do your due diligence to consider all the possible explanations
 - c. And not go beyond the data
 - d. And understand your own biases and assumptions
 - e. But the truth obligates even the scientist
- 7. Truth is binding
 - a. We are morally responsible creatures
 - b. And our moral responsibility is to the Truth
 - c. Jesus came to testify to the truth
 - d. Jesus Himself is the truth
 - e. And everyone who is of the truth listens to His voice

V. **Responding to the Truth**

- A. Are you like Pilate?
 - 1. Cynical of the truth?
 - 2. Dismissing the very idea of truth out of your mind?
- B. Are you like Hegel and Marx?
 - 1. Reducing truth to a power struggle of incompatible ideologies?
- C. Are you simply pretending to be ignorant of the truth?
 - 1. Even though the truth is staring you in the face?
- D. The Bible doesn’t give you the option to be ambivalent about the truth
 - 1. Jesus came for this purpose
 - 2. To bear witness to the truth