

“Life’s Greatest Question”

Mark 8:27-30; Hebrews 1:1-3 ¹

If I were to ask you, “What is Truth?” how do you think you might respond? Would you look for a dictionary definition? Would you appeal to philosophy or to science? Would you tell a story? Would you have an answer at all?

Dictionary definitions of “truth” usually include some variation of “corresponding to what is actually the case,” and “*corresponding to what actually is the case*” is a crucial point, because the idea that there is Truth that is true always and everywhere, has fallen upon hard times in our day. Postmodern philosophy has been so successful in destroying the idea of absolute Truth that it’s not at all uncommon these days to hear people talking about “my truth” and “your truth” as if such things actually existed.

In today’s world, it’s considered politically correct to believe whatever “truth” you want . . . so long as your beliefs do not include the premise that Jesus of Nazareth is actually the Son of God. You can believe whatever craziness you want to, and you can worship whatever gods suit your fancy, so long as you don’t affirm that there is such a thing as Truth that is always and everywhere true, revealed by the one God to whom we are all accountable.

In his powerful book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Professor Dallas Willard pointed out that we have turned the whole idea of “truth” upside down. Dr. Willard notes that we “cling to bumper slogans, body graffiti, and gift shop nostrums that in our profound upside-down-ness somehow seem deep but in fact make no sense: ‘Stand up for your rights’ sounds so good. How about ‘All I ever needed to know I learned in kindergarten’? And ‘Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty’? and so forth.

Such sayings contain a tiny element of truth, but if you try to actually plan your life using them you will quickly find yourself in deep trouble. They don’t work because they have very little content, and the content they have is mostly misguided. You might as well pattern your life after a soap opera.

Dr. Willard suggested that we reword these vacuous “feel good” statements something like this: Instead of “stand up for your rights,” how about “stand up for your responsibilities”? Instead of “all I ever needed to know I learned in kindergarten,” how about “I don’t know what I need to know and must now devote my full attention and strength to finding out.”² Instead of “random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty,” how about “practice routinely purposeful kindness and intelligent acts of beauty”?

“Putting *these* into practice immediately begins to bring truth, goodness, strength, and beauty into our lives,” he wrote. “But you will never find them on a greeting card, plaque, or bumper. They aren’t thought to be smart. What is truly profound is thought to be stupid and trivial . . . while what is actually stupid and trivial is thought to be profound. **We are flying upside down.**”³

Some of you know that Dr. Francis Collins, the Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), was also the head of *The Human Genome Project*, which in 2003 gave us the ability,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 1, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

² See Proverbs 3:7 or 4:7.

³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 9-10.

for the very first time, to read the complete genetic blueprint for building a human being.⁴ Originally a confirmed atheist, Dr. Collins came to realize that it takes both greater faith and a considerable amount of arrogance to be an atheist, choosing to reject the considerable evidence that stands against that view.

Just as scientific discoveries tend to occur when we take seriously the evidence that indicates that there is something beyond what we currently know, so we find God by taking seriously the considerable and persistent evidence that there is something—indeed, Someone—beyond the space-and-time realities with which we are most familiar. Dr. Collins chose to believe that evidence, and he became a follower of Jesus.

Speaking about *The Human Genome Project*, Dr. Collins wrote that “We determined all three billion letters of the human genome, our own DNA instruction book, and it’s hard to get your mind around how much information this is. Suppose we decided to read the letters of the human genome aloud, just to express our awe at God’s creation. If we took turns reading, and agreed to stick with it until we were all the way through, that would take us thirty-one years! And you have all that information inside every one of the 100 trillion cells of your body.”⁵

Now those who resist the idea of absolute Truth have no way to explain such incredible things as DNA except by appeal to mindless, purposeless, random sequences of events, sequences that by definition cannot be depended upon to be repeated. And it’s important to note that **persons who take such positions are not foolish enough to try to live in such a fashion in any area of their lives except moral judgment**. We all know that there is indeed Truth that is always and everywhere true, or else our planes would not fly, our medicines would not work, our cars would not run, and our buildings would fall down.

The fact of the matter is that **absolute Truth does exist**, even in—perhaps *especially* in—the sphere of moral judgment. And it is by consulting this Truth—and only here—that we find any workable answers to what marriage should look like, what good science involves, how good parenting is to be evaluated, and that to which the phrase “Christian values” rightly refers.

Sadly, human efforts to deny absolute Truth have a long history—almost to the very first human words ever recorded (Genesis 3:1-10). You and I, too, are amazingly adept at avoiding the obvious. And it’s for that reason that the following conversation took place:

“You are a king, then?”

“You say that I am a king, and you are right,” Jesus said. “I was born for that purpose. And I came to bring truth to the world. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true.”

“What is truth?” Pilate asked (John 18:37-38).

Did you get that? When asked about the reason He came to earth, Jesus didn’t say anything about sacrifice, or love, or forgiveness. While such dynamics were certainly at work, and they are certainly important, what Jesus *said* was, “**I have come to bring truth to the world.**” Earlier that same evening, Jesus had told His disciples, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Any honest examination of the concept of “truth” must deal with Jesus’ claim that not only does Truth exist, but that He IS Truth . . . and so we turn to another crucial conversation, this time in Mark 8

⁴ <https://www.genome.gov/10001772/all-about-the--human-genome-project-hgp/>

⁵ Cal Thomas, “President Obama’s excellent choice troubles secularists,” *Bristol Herald-Courier*, July 18, 2009, A14.

Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and went up to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, he asked them, “Who do people say that I am?”

“Well,” they replied, “some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets.”

Then Jesus asked, “**Who do you say I am?**” (Mark 8:27-29; also Matthew 16:13-20; Luke 9:18-20).

I hope that by now you can sense that this is no idle theological question, but is in fact the greatest question in all of life. And when Peter replied with “**You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God**” (Matthew 16:16), he said far more than he knew.⁶

And we, too, do well to consider that when we affirm that “*Jesus Christ is Lord,*”⁷ **we’re making the outrageous claim that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly central to all that humans can know or experience.** We’re saying that there is nothing imaginable that is irrelevant to Him or to which He is irrelevant. We are saying that there is no area of human learning in which Jesus is not the central figure.⁸

Christian faith begins with the claim that Jesus of Nazareth stands at the very core of all we can know, and insists that nothing can be rightly and truly understood apart from Him.⁹ When we say that “*Jesus Christ is Lord,*” we affirm that He is the **Creator** of all things, the **Sustainer** of all things, the **Redeemer** of all things, the **Goal** of all things, and the **Judge** of all things. We are affirming that the entire created order is contingent upon Him at every point and in every moment.¹⁰

To say that “*Jesus Christ is Lord*” is to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is Truth in every conceivable way. The affirmation that “*Jesus is Lord*” means that God is at work, right now, right here, creating a new kind of person, persons who are allowing God to so shape their character that they are willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him; persons who are choosing to join themselves together in a new kind of spiritual community that only God can build; persons who have been granted the ability to understand where God is at work and who have discovered the glad truth that nothing else in life really matters except to be a part of that work.

Have you ever wondered why it is that the glories of nature stir us all, Christians and non-Christians alike? Have you ever wondered why even the most hardened atheist finds that a forest dawn prompts tears, or laughter, or joy? Nature moves us because in its glory we sense creation’s Song of praise to its Creator, a glorious fulfillment of its God-given nature.

Christians are moved by such beauty as our own spirits join the Song of Creation. Unbelievers are moved because they wish to join the Song, but cannot. They are cut off from a joy they’ve never really known, but that they somehow seem to remember.¹¹

Oh, my friends, there is nothing more awesome, nothing more exciting, nothing more rewarding than the awareness that the Lord of the Universe is at work pushing back the Darkness and bringing in the Kingdom of Light, *in real time*, through our lives. We have to

⁶ As did Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence*. See *Jefferson Said More Than He Knew* at the conclusion of this manuscript.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 2:11

⁸ Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 44.

⁹ Litfin, p. 66.

¹⁰ Litfin, p. 39. See Colossians 1:15-17; Psalm 33:6.

¹¹ Tim Stafford, “How Tim Keller found Manhattan,” *Christianity Today*, June 2009, 22.

experience it to even begin to understand it, and the most wonderful parts of the Story still lie ahead.

It was of these wonders that my friend, Roger Stanley, spoke as he ended his life in this world and was carried to the Life Beyond. Unavailable to us, and apparently unconscious, Roger said several times, “I believe, I believe. Things are clearer to me now. Now I understand.”

To those worldviews that reject absolute Truth, affirming only endless cycles of meaningless activity descending slowly into nothing, the affirmation, “**Jesus is Lord,**” responds with the Good News that what Jesus has done for us has rewritten the end of all of our stories, and what we do now—*today*—makes a real difference, both in time and in eternity.

My friend, if you’re still trying to say to yourself that Jesus was “a good example” or “a wise teacher,” then no matter what else you may say, you’re still left in the end with a life that is the result of the random fluctuations of chance atoms. And those random atoms have left you morally adrift, with no anchor, compass, guide, or rule by which to evaluate trustworthy science, successful parenting, academic excellence, candidates for President, or moral virtue.

If you’re still living in the fantasy world of “your truth” and “my truth,” then you’re flying your life upside down, and when you finally realize that you’re in a nosedive and try to pull out, you’re going to fly straight into the ground. There IS a Truth that is always and everywhere TRUE, and His Name is Jesus.

And **Jesus’ question, “Who do *you* say I am?” is the greatest, most central, most fundamental question in all of life.** The answer you give to this question affects every aspect of your life, and it will determine your destiny.

The Bible tells us that “*Long ago, God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. But now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he made the universe and everything in it. The Son reflects God’s own glory, and everything about him reflects God exactly. He sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command. After he died to cleanse us from the stain of sin, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God of heaven*” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

That’s what the Bible says. **So who do you say Jesus is?**