

Whatever happened to the *truth*?! In our world, the idea of ultimate truth — something that is true at all times in all places and has relevance for our lives — is about as extinct as the dinosaur. In fact, nearly three out of four Americans say there is no such thing as ultimate, or absolute, truth. And the numbers don't look much better among those who claim to follow Jesus.

In a society where ultimate truth is treated like a fairy tale, an outdated idea or even an insult to human intelligence, the motto of the day becomes, "WHATEVER!" Believe whatever you want. Do whatever seems best to you. Live for whatever brings you pleasure, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. And of course, be tolerant. Don't try to tell anyone that their *whatever* is wrong.

But where does that leave us? If we have ultimate truth, it gives us both a way to explain the world around us and a basis for making decisions. Without it, we're alone. We're just 6 billion organisms running around, bumping into each other with nothing unifying to work for or believe in. It's every man for himself. And we're without a purpose; if there's no true story of where we came from and why we're here, then there's nothing that really gives our lives meaning.

Truth has always been in jeopardy because there are always people both within the church and without who can't stand the thought of absolute or universal truth. Peter was aware of these people trying to infiltrate the church and he wrote about them with no uncertainty.

*These people are proud and arrogant, daring even to scoff at supernatural beings<sup>[c]</sup> without so much as trembling. <sup>11</sup> But the angels, who are far greater in power and strength, do not dare to bring from the Lord<sup>[d]</sup> a charge of blasphemy against those supernatural beings.*

<sup>12</sup> *These false teachers are like unthinking animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed. They scoff at things they do not understand, and like animals, they will be destroyed.*

<sup>13</sup> *Their destruction is their reward for the harm they have done. They love to indulge in evil pleasures in broad daylight. They are a disgrace and a stain among you. They delight in deception even as they eat with you in your fellowship meals. <sup>14</sup> They commit adultery with their eyes, and their desire for sin is never satisfied. They lure unstable people into sin, and they are well trained in greed. They live under God's curse. <sup>15</sup> They have wandered off the right road and followed the footsteps of Balaam son of Beor, who loved to earn money by doing wrong. <sup>16</sup> But Balaam was stopped from his mad course when his donkey rebuked him with a human voice.*

<sup>17</sup> *These people are as useless as dried-up springs or as mist blown away by the wind. They are doomed to blackest darkness. <sup>18</sup> They brag about themselves with empty, foolish boasting. With an appeal to twisted sexual desires, they lure back into sin those who have barely escaped from a lifestyle of deception. <sup>19</sup> They promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of sin and corruption. For you are a slave to whatever controls you. <sup>20</sup> And when people escape from the wickedness of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and then get tangled up and enslaved by sin again, they are worse off than before. <sup>21</sup> It would be better if they had never known the way to righteousness than to know it and then reject the command they were given to live a holy life. <sup>22</sup> They prove the truth of this proverb: "A dog returns to its vomit."<sup>[g]</sup> And another says, "A washed pig returns to the mud." 2 Peter 2:10b – 22 NLT*

Now before we unpack these verses let me go back to the notion of truth for a few minutes. Up until the 1700's truth was recognized as being something revealed by God. People who lived during that time also generally believed that the natural world was orderly, that it could be studied and that truth was touchable, based on supernatural rather than natural realities.

Those people gave spiritual explanations for what went on in their physical lives. They also made moral decisions on the basis of the supernatural; things were believed to be right or wrong based on what God thought. Of course, not everyone believed in the God of Israel, but history shows that every civilization developed a way of thinking that looked for truth in the supernatural world. Societies that didn't recognize the one true God were sometimes closer to finding Him and finding truth than people are today because they were actively seeking these things. Truth was based on revelation and people expected God to reveal Himself through words and circumstances.

Scientists made astounding discoveries, and the scope of knowledge seemed limitless. Charles Darwin had given people an excuse for forgetting God with his ideas about evolution and natural selection. People began to think that maybe the world just happened by chance. And Sir Isaac Newton proved that the natural world is a big machine that runs according to a certain set of laws. If we could just discover these laws, then we'd know how to better manage our lives and thus improve the world.

But there was one huge problem with these ideas — science can discover truth only in the natural realm. In other words, it works only on things that can be tested. Rather than admitting that *our ability* to discover truth is limited, we decided to say that *reality* is limited. People began to believe that the physical world is all there is — no supernatural world and no God (or if there is a God, He doesn't have much to do with us).

If there is no basis for moral decisions, then *whatever* you choose to do is fine. Of course, most people like to believe that they have *some* basis for the decisions they make. So we've constructed our own standards:

- *Science and reason*  
Even though most people have thrown out reason as the source of ultimate truth, some still cling to it. "If I can't see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, touch it and test it, it can't be true," they say.
- *Popular opinion*  
You only have to look as far as your TV to know that society thinks popular opinion is a good basis for making decisions. Otherwise, why would our advertisements tell us to "catch the wave" or make the "choice of a new generation"? All these ads appeal to the idea that "everyone is doing it" and that you should, too.
- *Feelings*  
Emotions are perhaps the most popular basis for making choices today. After all, how can anyone argue with how you feel? If feelings are a good standard for decision-making, then you'll never have to come up with a better defense than, "I did it because I felt like it."

None of these standards will lead you into truth. Truth comes by knowing as much as is possible from the Word of God and from knowing God. It takes as much faith to believe in the incomplete evidence of the scientific world as it does in a God you cannot see.

So in a world where there are men and women teaching even within the context of church things that are not truth or things not based on God's word how are you and I ever going to know what is true and what is false? Peter gives us some help.

Let's look at the practical and then in the end I want to come back and talk some more about truth.

## **1. Know the person**

Who are you getting your truth from? You and I really need to know the people that we take teaching from. Peter gives us a few ways to test the truth.

### **a. What do they say?**

*These people are proud and arrogant, daring even to scoff at supernatural beings<sup>[c]</sup> without so much as trembling. <sup>11</sup> But the angels, who are far greater in power and strength, do not dare to bring from the Lord<sup>[d]</sup> a charge of blasphemy against those supernatural beings.*

<sup>12</sup> *These false teachers are like unthinking animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed. They scoff at things they do not understand, and like animals, they will be destroyed.*

<sup>13</sup> *Their destruction is their reward for the harm they have done.* 2 Peter 2:10b-13a NLT

Three times in this scripture Peter uses some form of the word blasphemy. The word means to speak with irreverence, especially about God or other holy things. It is hard from this context to know exactly who or what Peter is referring to but it is clearly inferred that you can learn a lot about the person by listening to what they say.

To be able to judge this you need to have a strong basis for truth in yourself. You and I must be self-feeders and learn the truth of God on our knees and in private times of opening the Bible on a daily basis.

I can listen to people who are teachers and discern in a few moments if this is someone I am going to follow. While watching a Joel Osteen interview on 60 minutes a few years ago, I about fell out of my chair when he was asked about his concern about theology and doctrine. His answer was that doctrine was not his concern. There are others who can teach that. His concern was to help people "have the right thoughts today." Of course there are thousands of people that like his weekly pep talks and you know what positivity is awesome but without doctrinal truth from the Bible it is nothing but a placebo of feel good teaching.

Byron Pitts, the correspondent for CBS News who interviewed Osteen, was relentless in pointing out where Osteen's teaching diverges from Scripture and historic orthodoxy. At one point Pitts

read for Osteen an extended excerpt from Osteen's book, *Become a Better You*, after which Pitts noted, "[There's] not one mention of God in that. Not one mention of Jesus Christ in that." To which Osteen responded, "There is Scripture in there that backs it all up," a response which betrays the dangerous way in which Osteen handles Holy Scripture.

He doesn't seem to understand that we don't bring our conclusions about life and living to the Bible and seek Scripture to support them. We start with the Bible, allowing the Holy Spirit, the author of the text, to give us His conclusions about life and living. The Bible isn't supporting documentation for principles you've dreamed up to produce "your best life now."

Osteen readily admits that he is ill-equipped to handle Scripture properly, telling Pitts, "...there's a lot better people qualified to say, 'Here's a book that's going to explain the Scriptures to you.' I don't think that's my gifting." He spends Wednesday through Saturday in his study at home preparing his weekly message. One might imagine that he is diligently studying the Scriptures. Not so. He told Byron Pitts, "...when I think about it, Sunday's in a few days and I gotta get back up here and feed everybody and be my best and inspire them and have some good stories, keep them listening...."

Nowhere in Scripture is the man of God commanded to "be my best" and "inspire them" and "have some good stories" or even to "keep them listening." On the contrary, the Word of God makes it clear that we are not sufficient in ourselves to proclaim God's Word (2 Cor. 3:5,6); it isn't our goal to inspire but rather to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort"; and we accomplish that goal, not with "some good stories," but with "all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:1-6).

This sermon is not about one person or the other but I use this as just one example of a very subtle yet dangerous teaching that has drawn in hundreds of thousands of people. You may feel defensive about that and I understand.

Paul Edwards of [religiontoday.com](http://religiontoday.com) summed it up this way.

In twelve short minutes Osteen managed to admit that his ministry is more about show than substance, that he has an aversion to doctrine and theology, that he has little gifting as a teacher of God's Word, that he would rather inspire and motivate people than fulfill the Biblical mandate given to pastors to reprove and rebuke, and that what he teaches is closer to Dr. Phil and Oprah than it is to Jesus or St. Paul. In other words, Joel Osteen, by his own admission, may be well-qualified as a motivational speaker, but lacks many of the qualifications to be considered a pastor of God's people.

You and I must be discerning in our walk and who we allow to lead us spiritually. Listen to me very carefully . . . we can be fooled and deceived by the best of people if we don't practice discernment. I was never a big Oprah fan but again she taught millions of people daily that all roads lead to God and that really in the long run there are no absolute truths. Great interviewer, wonderful giving and loving personality, awesome and entertaining show but horrible theology.

It is important to know what teachers are saying.

**b. What do they see?**

*They love to indulge in evil pleasures in broad daylight. They are a disgrace and a stain among you. They delight in deception even as they eat with you in your fellowship meals.<sup>14</sup> They commit adultery with their eyes, and their desire for sin is never satisfied.* 2 Peter 2:13b-14a

In the days of Alexander's ancient republic, the human eye was often the metaphor of choice to speak of inner desires of a person. Follow a man's eyes, and they will lead you to the hidden desires of his heart. Peter says these false teachers had eyes full of adultery.

We don't know exactly the context of Peter's story but it is an old, old story. Again men and women from within the church and even some pretty big name Christian TV personalities have fallen prey to this very kind of thing. Christian artists have sometimes done things that send messages to the rest of the Christian world that really it doesn't matter what the Bible says do what is best for you.

When popular singer Amy Grant was interviewed about her divorce and subsequent marriage to her neighbor Vince Gill again I was floored by her words and even more astounded by the fact that she never missed a beat in her career with much of the church world. Again I am not trying to be mean spirited or even sensational but where is the discernment. I've talked to Vince Gill. He's a really nice guy but he was married and she was married and if you read the interview given on ABC's Primetime you will see with a little discernment that this was an unfortunate and tragic ending to a tough marriage and that it was based on feelings that should not have been indulged.

She admitted that she was going against everything she was taught about marriage and her faith. Within a year, I was in a Christian bookstore in Columbus and there was a gigantic signed picture of her on the wall and I thought to myself, as a Pastor, I don't stand a chance of teaching truth.

Understand this. . . please the devil is out to destroy as much of you and me as he possibly can. He wants to destroy our lives and he doesn't care how he does it and the more destruction the better. I'm not judging her because I understand how one can get sidetracked and derailed but we have to be aware of what messages our lives send when we are representing Christ in a fallen world.

### **c. What do they seek?**

*They lure unstable people into sin, and they are well trained in greed. They live under God's curse.* 2 Peter 2:14b NLT

Again we are judging those that we submit to for learning from God's Word. One translation of these verses says these false teachers have "hearts trained in unbridled ambition for the things they have no right to have." In other words they are so out there that while teaching about God on the one hand they have slipped into a world of personal desires that focuses on the forbidden

fruit. Sound familiar? God gave Adam and Eve everything but they wanted the one thing He withheld from them. IF we are not very careful we will fall right in line with that thinking ourselves. It happens to people who are teaching and preaching and Peter is saying be careful who you follow. It is one thing to delude and only deceive yourself but when you delude and deceive others faith it is far worse.

What do they seek? Do these teachers spend all their time seeking personal pleasure? Do they spend their resources on helping others or on themselves? It is a fine line and one that we will all give an account for someday.

One very popular female teacher followed again by hundreds of thousands according to a 2004 issue of Christianity Today lives in a 2 million dollar home, flies on a 10 million dollar jet purchased for her by her ministry. Her kids who all work at ministry were also given homes worth another 2 million and she maintains a half million dollar vacation home. Now for me, when I look at that I am going to say, I don't think so. Something is out of whack. It is a battle at all levels and the bottom line is we have to continually ask where our heart is. Where are we headed and what are we doing to change the world. Do we do it with just our words or are we giving back and making a difference for others instead of just ourselves?

Do you remember the cartoon with Wiley Coyote and Ralph the sheep dog? I used to love that cartoon. Every morning Ralph and Wiley would meet at the time clock, which was mounted on a tree. As they clocked in they would greet each other and then they would go to their respective departments.

Ralph the sheep dog went to his post on the cliff and took his position as head of the sheep protection department. Wiley, true to his nature, would slink away in to the forest to plan his strategy as head of the sheep acquisition and consumption department.

As the day wore on Ralph sat patiently at his post with a protective eye looking over the flock as Wiley tried one scheme after another in hopes of making his quota of sheep for the day. However, no matter how hard he tried it seemed that poor Wiley's plan was always thwarted by Ralph at the last moment. Inevitably as the day drew to a close just before the whistle blew, Wiley would pull out all the stops and slip into his sheep costume and meander into the fold with the hope of finally catching his prey only to realize after his pray was in fact none other than Ralph the sheep dog who had dressed himself up as a sheep in anticipation of Wiley's scheme. Poor Wiley never caught a break.

Wiley's sheep costume illustrates a tactic that is used by our enemy the devil. In fact in Matthew 7:15 Jesus warns us that in similar fashion Satan will send ravenous wolves into the fold dressed in sheep's clothing to catch the sheep unaware and snatch them away by false teaching. As we learned last week Satan will do what ever he can to destroy the flock. Therefore, it is imperative that we have discerning spirits so that we can discern the motives of those who are among us.

However, our generation, as I'm sure it has been in generations past, I believe the greatest danger to the work of the Kingdom of God is not as much when wolves come in dressed as sheep, but it is when the sheep go in to the world dressed in wolves clothing. The greater problem in modern American Christianity is when "so called" Christians wear their sheep's clothing on Sunday only to put on their wolves clothing on Monday.

Let me go back to this notion of truth again.

Where can we find revelation today? And what do we learn from it? The best source of revelation is God's Word — that's right, the Bible! In the Bible, God gives us history lessons as well as guidelines for how to live our lives. What does the Bible have to say about truth? Check this out:

- "Do not withhold your mercy from me, O Lord; may your love and your truth always protect me." (Psalm 40:11)
- "Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name." (Psalm 86:11)
- "These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts." (Zechariah 8:16)
- "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)
- "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" (John 14:6)
- "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come." (John 16:13)
- "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." (Romans 1:18)
- "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." (1 Corinthians 13:6)
- "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place." (Ephesians 6:14)

Prayer: God will you give us the ability to discern and know the truth? Will you grant us the courage to rely on You for knowing what is truth and what is false? Give us today the desire to

consume Your Word that we might not be led astray. Give us the ability to live clean lives based on Your Word and not our feelings or personal desires.

For those of us who are teachers, Lord give us the power to overcome distractions and temptations that would not only destroy us but our families and those around us in our community.

Thanks so much for being willing to send your Holy Spirit to teach us Your truth. Let us walk in it today. I pray all of this in Your Name. Amen

