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Sermon Series: *We are for...*, No. 1

Absolute Truth

October 23, 2022

Psalm 119:155-168 (NIV)

Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek out your decrees. ¹⁵⁶ Your compassion, Lord, is great; preserve my life according to your laws. ¹⁵⁷ Many are the foes who persecute me, but I have not turned from your statutes. ¹⁵⁸ I look on the faithless with loathing, for they do not obey your word. ¹⁵⁹ See how I love your precepts; preserve my life, Lord, in accordance with your love. ¹⁶⁰ All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.

¹⁶¹ Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at your word. ¹⁶² I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil. ¹⁶³ I hate and detest falsehood but I love your law. ¹⁶⁴ Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws. ¹⁶⁵ Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.

¹⁶⁶ I wait for your salvation, Lord, and I follow your commands. ¹⁶⁷ I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly. ¹⁶⁸ I obey your precepts and your statutes, for all my ways are known to you.

Would you take a Bible and turn back with me to Psalm 119? Psalm 119.

I want to say a quick, but sincere “thank you” to our World Mission Team for organizing a great Mission Week. Thank you to Adam and Art and Brent and Colleen, and to all of last Sunday’s seminar presenters for sharing, so well, how God is working in our world. On behalf of our church here, we really appreciate all your efforts.

I’ve mentioned before how I tend to be something of a news junkie, especially news about ethics, economics, and politics. This can be dangerous because the news can get you down, especially in these days when it seems like, more and more, our society is standing for things with which Jesus does not agree.

Between the news of the day and all the rhetoric surrounding the upcoming elections, the phrase, “at odds” has come to mind quite a lot recently as I think about the Church’s relationship with our American culture. In an increasing number of ways these days, Jesus’ people and the world seem to be “at odds” with each other.

So, I almost titled these next few messages, “At Odds.”

But then I thought better, because that’s not exactly true.

To be at odds with someone usually means you’re fighting with them, in some fashion – either passively or actively.

But we are *not* fighting *with* our *culture*, you see? Jesus is *not* fighting with our *culture*.

We, the Church – the body of Christ, along with Jesus, our head – we are, together, working to try to *redeem* our culture, our people.

So, we are not, really, at odds with our *society*.

We *are* at odds with – we *are* fighting *against* – the *spirit* who has *deceived* our society and who has taken our *neighbors* *captive* in so many ways.

To say it a different way: we are at odds with the devil, not with our neighbors, and we, along with Jesus, are fighting against *him* for the sake of *their* souls.

That’s an important distinction to keep in mind. Our neighbors are *not* our *enemies*.

Those people around us who do not share our convictions – even those who think we’re totally loony for following Jesus – they are *not* our *enemies*.

They are the *victims* of the deceptions of the devil, and whether or not they realize it – whether or not they will ever receive it – they need our positive, winsome witness in their lives.

They need to know, not that we are *against* *them*, but that we are actually *for* *them*. They need to know that Jesus is for them: that Jesus and His Church are *for* their *success*, *for* their *peace*, and *for* their *redemption* and *healing* and *transformation*.

And they need to know where they can find all those good things.

Our neighbors need to see, not so much of what we’re *against*, but what Jesus’ people are *for*.

I think of our own denomination’s holiness movement heritage and how, in my grandparents’ day, churches like ours were far more known for what they were *against* than for what they were *for*.

They were known for what they *didn’t* do far more than for what they *did* do.

And often that was where it was left: “We don’t do this or that,” with no positive reason given for why – no reason given for what was actually *good* or *redemptive* about *not* *doing* this or that.

And you see, if you neglect to address the benefits – if what we’re *for* is never mentioned, then all that’s left is a list of rules that make very little sense to the unredeemed world.

So, what are followers of Jesus *for*?

What is important and valuable to us?

What do we have that is positive and hopeful and helpful to offer to our neighbors and our broader culture?

That’s what I want to study a bit these next few weeks, starting with, as you might have guessed from the title on the worship folder here, the idea of *truth*.

Followers of Jesus embrace the fact that there *is* – there *does exist* – *truth*. And not some weak-kneed, relativistic truth either: not “my truth” or “your truth” or “their truth” or “today’s truth,” but instead, *just plain truth*.

Unqualified truth. Objective, immovable, enduring truth.

Some might call it “absolute truth.”

This is what the writer is talking about and even celebrating here in Psalm 119, and not just these few verses we’ve read, but the whole Psalm, actually, is a celebration of the existence of objective, absolute truth.

Now, let me mention just a couple of things about this Psalm that you may or may not know, but which may help you impress your relatives at Thanksgiving dinner this year.

This is not just the longest *Psalm*. This is the longest *chapter* in the Bible, *and* it is just one chapter off from being the perfect, physical center of the book. That honor goes to Psalm 118.

Steve Lennox writes with no exaggeration, “This chapter is truly monumental, not only in length, but in artistic skill and in the breadth to which it develops its theme: the truth found in God’s law.”¹

Psalm 119 is made up of 22 stanzas, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. That’s what those words are in between the stanzas (at least as my NIV has them). They are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet: *Aleph, Bet, Gimmel, Dalet* and so on.

Each of those 22 stanzas is eight lines long. What you can’t easily tell from our English translations is that each of those eight lines begins with the same Hebrew letter that heads the stanza.

Each of the eight lines of the first stanza start with the letter Alef, and so on all the way through, so it really is a remarkable stylistic work that a writer has put together here to celebrate the truth of God’s law – in two main ways.

First, as something of a sequel to Psalm 1, it talks about how important it is to study and know the law; and second, as a sort of sequel to Psalm 19, it speaks of the law’s immeasurable value in making our lives better.

Now, personally, I don’t know anyone who would be against making their life better.

And you see, followers of God – followers of Jesus – are for that: *we are for making our lives and the lives of others truly better.*

That’s why the law, the Psalmist says, is so valuable – why it’s worth studying: because knowing and following the law makes life better.

Now, I don’t know about you, but for me, this raises two questions: first, what exactly is the law that the Psalmist is talking about, and second, how does it make our lives better?

OK, *what the law is* – what the Psalmist knows the law to be – is *the clear, blessed revelation of the will of God, given through the prophets.* That is the law to the writer of this Psalm.

And though “the law” is not necessarily a perfect synonym for what we today know as the Bible, much of what this Psalm says is certainly true of the whole Bible, since the Bible itself reveals God and His will to us.

And along those lines, our New Testament surpasses the Old, because it is the New Testament that records the most complete revelation of God and His will that we have: the life and word of Jesus, God’s son.

So, the law, to the Psalmist, is God (the Creator of our world) letting us know who He is, and what He thinks, and how this world that He made actually works.

So then, if that’s what the law is, the answer to the second question – the question of how the law can make our lives better – is pretty obvious, right?

To the Psalmist, having the law is like suddenly finding out that you have the owner’s manual – the user’s guide – to life itself, written by the One who made life itself.

It’s like going through life having glasses, but never being told how to wear them, so you wear them backwards. You can see, but everything looks a little wonky.

And, they don’t stay on your head, so you have to duct tape them to your head or something.

And it kind of works, but not very well – it’s all quite awkward and uncomfortable.

And for months and perhaps even years, you go through life like this, until you meet the one who invented glasses, and she looks at you with them on backward and sort of laughs, and then she tells you, “No, turn them around and wear them like this.”

And you do. Ah! A revelation! Suddenly everything is clear and sharp and comfortable, and you don’t need the tape, so it doesn’t hurt when you take them off at night!

Suddenly, you know how it’s supposed to work – how it was designed to work, and so now you can use it the way it was intended.

That’s what the law is to the Psalmist.

It’s like having a phone like this [holds up a smartphone], but not realizing there’s a volume control on it. So, for years, you’ve heard these faint sounds coming from here – voices, rings, dings, buzzes and even music. You’ve heard them, but just barely. They’re so quiet that you have to hold this to your head and be in a totally silent room to hear them. So, it works, but not very well, and it’s awkward and uncomfortable and very limiting.

And then suddenly, you find this [hold up phone’s instruction booklet] and realize: “This comes with instructions!” You read there that there’s this volume button, and, low and behold, now you can hear it!

That is the significance, to the Psalmist, on a *much* greater level, of truth, of the law, of the revealed will of God.

¹ Lennox, Stephen. *Psalms*. Wesleyan Publishing House. Indianapolis, IN. 1999.

There's an account in 2 Kings that reports how, during the renovation of the Temple in 622 BC, the high priest Hilkiah discovered a scroll, which he showed to the king's scribe, who then took it to King Josiah.

The prophet Huldah pronounced it genuine, and most today believe it was at least part of the book of Deuteronomy.

And after having it read to him, Josiah suddenly understood the reasons for his people's hardships.

For the first 18 years of Josiah's rule, and for a long time before that, the people of Judah had suffered and been subject to all sorts of calamities. But now, Josiah sees why: they had failed to be obedient to God, because they didn't know all this about God! They didn't know how God made life to work.

So, after observing a period of grief – dust on his head and tearing his clothes and all that, Josiah declared that, from now on, he and His people were going to live as God said to live. So, he implemented sweeping reforms in Judah's religious and political and economic life, all according to what the scroll said.²

And things began to turn around!

Josiah found the owner's manual, do you see?

It wasn't just a book of rules!

No! It was the revelation of God: God's character, God's way, God's economy and God's design for His creation.

And right there is the message of the Church to our world:

Do you want life to work?

Do you want to find success?

Do you want to experience peace?

If so, you have to get to know who God is, and you have to know His way, and you have to know the way He made the world to work.

If we don't know that, we're just feeling our way through life. We're just blindly guessing, or following the crowd.

But if we *do* know God and the way He made the world to work, then we have the power to change our future.

And *that*, you see, is the *power* of *truth*.

That's why Christ-followers are for truth. We are for both the *concept* and the *reality* of *truth* – and again, not *a truth* nor *your truth* nor *my truth* nor *their truth*.

You see, truth, by definition, cannot be subjective like that.

Christ-followers are for *objective truth*. *Absolute truth*.

We are for *the truth*. It exists, and it's found in the person of God: in His revelation of Himself to the world, first through His law that the Psalmist celebrates here, and then ultimately through the words and life of Jesus, His son.

In a world that is filled with relativity and subjectivity and with the confusion and wandering which result, Christ followers are for the truth that can be found and known. And where that is embraced and followed, it will be utterly transformative to human lives and families and even whole cultures.

That's the tremendous power and blessing of truth!

That's why the psalmist, here, and all through Psalm 119, goes on and on and on about it.

It is why he says in verse 160, "*God, all your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal,*" and again in verse 162, "*I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil!*"

He writes in verse 164, "*Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws,*" and again in verse 166, "*I wait for your salvation, Lord, and I follow your commands. I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly.*"

He's met the maker! He's found the owner's manual. He's found key to life, you see, and he knows it.

And that is why, centuries later, Jesus came along and said in John 8, "*If you hold to my teaching, then you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"³

Notice that Jesus did not say, "Then you will know *a truth*, or, "you will know *my truth*."

Jesus said, "You will know *the truth*."

And what happens when we realize and receive the truth?

It sets us free!

No more bondage due to not knowing, you see?

No more tripping over things in the darkness.

No more blind wandering.

No more trial and error.

No more mere guesses.

No more skewed or partial vision – looking through glasses backward.

And hey, no more painful ripping off of duct tape, you see? No more of the unfortunate things we do to try, in our own wisdom, to make life work.

No more self-inflicted wounds.

There's enough in this broken world that causes hurt in our lives. Why hurt ourselves even more by stumbling around in darkness when we don't have to?

The Psalmist celebrates the fact that we don't have to.

There is no way that it's a coincidence that the longest chapter of the Bible, and the most artful and thoughtful and skillful, is written in celebration of truth. The truth of God.

No way.

That's why Christians are for the *fact* of truth – the *existence* of truth. We are for the *blessing* of knowing how God made things to work, because it sets us free.

² 2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34

³ John 8:31-32

So much of our world today pushes back against that – against any hint of objective truth. And what do they get from it?

Just like the psalmist writes there in verse 155, *“Because they don’t seek God’s decrees, salvation is far from them.”*

They hurt themselves and others, over and over again.

They’re deceived into thinking that there is no *way* and no *truth*, and so they don’t have that life that God intends them to have.

But, as the Psalmist found and as King Josiah found, there *is* truth – the truth of God and His way. And if we’ll embrace it – if we’ll embrace Him – we’ll find life, and our world will be transformed.

Followers of Jesus are for truth – *the* truth: absolute truth – God’s revelation of Himself and His world through His word.

Can we make people receive it?

No, we can’t.

All we can do is offer it.

But we offer it with no shame and in the urgent hope that others will discover and embrace it for themselves – for the sake of their own salvation and peace with God.

In verse 165 there the Psalmist says, *“Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.”*

That’s the blessing of knowing truth, you see? And we want the whole world to know that. We want the whole world to find, both the written word of God and also God’s living Word, Jesus Christ – God’s perfect revelation of Himself.

Jesus is the living, breathing owner’s manual of life. He called Himself *“the way and the life and the truth”* for a reason.⁴

Do you know Him today?

Have you received Him?

Have you read Him?

Have you embraced Him?

Do you have His Spirit with you – to guide you day by day into His truth?

If you do, celebrate!

If you don’t, you can!

Receive Jesus today.

He is for you. He is for us.

That’s why we’re for Him.

Closing Prayer: Lord, if there is even one here today who is still stumbling in the dark, still hurting himself or herself, still wearing the glasses backward searching for real truth, will you speak to that heart strongly right now about all that you have to reveal and all the good you want to bring. Amen.

Closing Song: *In Times Like These*

Benediction: Everything that followers of Jesus are *for* is rooted and based in the truth of this book – this word of God. Just as the Psalmist says, all that we stand *for* before our world has to start and end right here.

So, in the midst of a blind and wandering world, may the Spirit of God strengthen us all to know His truth, and then to stand winsomely, lovingly and firmly for His truth, that our neighbors might see the way and the truth in us and so find the way to real life.

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⁴ John 14:6