

The Trouble with Truth

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[0 : 00] This morning we're going to continue our study in the Gospel of Matthew. We've come to chapter 12 and we're going to look at the whole section that Sophie read for us. But we can read again at verse 30 where Jesus said, Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me.

Scatterj. Over the past couple of weeks we've been working our way through chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12 of this Gospel. And we've seen in these chapters that Jesus is out and about in different places, meeting people, healing people.

As he does so, his fame starts to spread and people are amazed at him. But at the same time, there's also an increase in opposition against him.

So the tension is building. On the one hand there's people admiring Jesus, amazed at what he's doing. On the other, there are people who are more and more and more starting to hate Jesus. That polarization is building up and in many ways it comes to a head in the passage that we read. Jesus tackles the comments that are being made about him behind his back and he sets it out plainly.

[1 : 15] You are either with me or you're against me. In doing so, Jesus is challenging the people to get to the truth. And that's exactly what we want when there's tension. We want to get to the truth.

The result, however, is that as Jesus gives out the truth, he gives us a section of teaching that's not necessarily that easy.

And that is because all too often truth can be difficult. And that's what I want us to think about today. Our title is The Trouble with Truth.

And we're going to look at three things. We're going to say that truth is inflexible, truth is penetrating, and truth is relentless. But before we look at these, I want to just do a quick glossary of terms, if you like, of two or three words or phrases that appear in this passage.

First is Son of David. We see that being mentioned. David was the model king in the Old Testament. And the Old Testament promised that one of David's descendants, a son, would come as God's anointed king and savior.

[2 : 30] And the name for that is the Messiah or the Christ. That means the same thing. So Son of David is a reference to the Messiah. Pharisees were religious leaders, and they were characterised by a very strict emphasis on the Jewish law.

And that included the Old Testament laws, but they also supplemented these laws with additional requirements. And then the third kind of unusual phrase that we see here is the term Beelzebub. That's actually the name of a Philistine deity, which means Lord of the Flies. But in the New Testament, it's used as a term for Satan, the ruler of demons and the ruler of the kingdom of evil. So just wanted to explain a couple of those terms which come up as we go through. So the first thing that we want to say is that truth is inflexible.

We see that at the start of the passage we read, there's a very stark contrast between the reactions to Jesus healing the man who was mute.

[3 : 34] Some people were amazed and said, could this be the Son of David? Others were saying it's only by Beelzebub, the Prince of Demons, that he's doing this. Now the polarisation here is astonishing. There's two options.

Jesus is either the Messiah, God's chosen anointed king, or he's a devil. Now Jesus' response to this is very interesting.

He directly challenges the Pharisee's accusation that he's a devil, and he shows them that that claim is absolutely absurd. They're basically saying that Jesus is destroying the power of evil by

using the power of evil.

And that of course makes no sense at all. The fact that Jesus is casting out demons does not mean that he's working from the devil. It means that he's defeating the devil. And as it says, he's bound the strong man, and the fact that he's casting out demons is a sign that the kingdom of God has come.

But although Jesus challenges the Pharisees in their accusation, he doesn't deny the polarisation. In fact, he emphasises it. He says, you're either with me or against me.

[4 : 46] And he's presenting the Pharisees and us with this very strong either or decision. And all of that is because truth is inflexible.

We see that in the world all around us. If shops or cafes are told to shut, then they're shut. If I'm late for a meeting, then I'm late. While I was coming into the church building to just just now, a road was closed.

And that was that. I had to find a different way. If my Wi-Fi conks out, then my internet won't work. If hearts get relegated, then they're relegated.

Truth is very inflexible. And sometimes that can be helpful, but sometimes it can be very frustrating. And if that's true with shops and Wi-Fi and football, it is most definitely true about Jesus.

Ultimately, the truth about how you view him is inflexible. You are either with him or against him.

This is a reminder that religio-philosophical neutrality is a myth.

[5 : 57] Now, what do I mean by that? Well, I kind of made up that word, religio-philosophical.

What I mean by that is just how you view and understand the world. Religion and philosophy are really two sides of the same coin.

They're both describing your worldview and everyone, absolutely everyone, has a worldview. So whether you're an atheist or an agnostic or a Muslim or a humanist, you have a religio-philosophical position.

Now, by myth, I mean something that people imagine but something that doesn't actually exist in real life. So when it comes to Jesus, people think and talk a lot in terms of religio-philosophical neutrality.

So rather than saying we're with him or against him, people say, well, I'm kind of in the middle. So some will say I admire Jesus, some would say, well, I respect Jesus, some would say, well, I maybe have my doubts about Jesus, but I'm not against him.

All of these things are kind of seen as neutral. And that sounds great, but the idea that these opinions are neutral is actually a myth.

[7 : 14] And it's a myth because the claims that Jesus makes are polarizing and ultimately there's no flexibility. All the stuff that looks neutral is just a variation of the same thing.

We're either with him or we are against him. Now, that's not to say that the respectful doubter is no better than the vicious critic.

Jesus makes that clear when he goes on to speak about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in verses 31 and 32. Now, there's a lot that we could say about this topic and in many ways it's a kind of whole sermon on its own.

There's different views as to exactly what this means. In general terms, though, we can say that Jesus is referring to a willful and deliberate rejection of the truth about Jesus.

So this is not talking about some kind of sin that you might accidentally slip into and then you're doomed forever. It's not like that. It's a very conscious and deliberate hardening against Jesus that leaves a person totally unrepentant and totally hostile.

[8 : 24] And Jesus is saying this because the Pharisees who are witnessing a miracle and who are saying that he's a devil, they are in serious danger of doing exactly that.

And so you do have those who are kind of at the far side of the spectrum, who are just utterly consciously hostile, irreversibly hostile to Jesus.

But the crucial thing that we have to recognize is that when truth forces polarization, the neutrals in the middle who don't want to be with Jesus are ultimately going to default into being against him.

And all of that is because truth is inflexible. Now, humanity struggles with this in regard to religion and morality and worldview.

And in response to that, people try to kind of bend the truth or stretch the truth so that multiple worldviews can be brought into one kingdom if you like. But if you try to bend something that's inflexible or if you try to stretch it, it's going to break.

[9 : 43] You think of a piece of raw spaghetti or a cream cracker. And that's why the attempts to stretch truth across all sorts of different worldviews, it doesn't last.

The inflexibility of truth makes polarization unavoidable. And the result is just as Jesus says, a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. And we see that in lots of places around us.

So you see politically just now the UK is struggling to cope with unionism and nationalism. You see feminism and transgenderism struggling to cope with each other.

You see people rightly objecting to fake news. All of that is because ultimately truth doesn't bend or stretch.

The trouble with truth is that it's inflexible. The second thing we see is that truth is penetrating.

[10 : 42] This is shown to us in verses 33 to 37 where Jesus speaks about a tree being either good or bad. It's either a good tree with good fruit or a bad tree with bad fruit.

And Jesus used that imagery to apply to ourselves, our hearts, our inward heart and our outward actions. That either going to be both good or both not good.

Jesus is re-emphasizing a point that he made in the Sermon and the Mount. One that really runs right through the whole Bible. The fact that integrity matters. From the inside to the outside, God wants us to be people of consistency and integrity.

That's why Jesus had absolutely no time for the religious leaders who were just wanting to put on a really good outward show. But inwardly they harbored all sorts of sin.

You can see in verse 34, he calls that kind of people, he calls them a brood of vipers. And so the idea that you can kind of put on an outward show to cover inward sin and brokenness is a lie.

[11 : 49] Jesus is saying that if your heart is bad, then your outward fruit is going to be bad as well. If the heart is good, then the fruit will be good. Ultimately, the truth about who we are can't be hidden or masked or spun.

And that's because truth is penetrating. And again, we see that in the world all around us.

Sometimes truth can be suppressed for a while, but eventually it will penetrate through.

That happens with scientific discoveries. And when DNA was discovered, it wasn't that DNA suddenly just appeared into the universe and into existence.

It was that the truth of DNA penetrated into our understanding. It's the same with business. If a company is struggling, eventually that truth is going to penetrate through to the shareholders.

And it can even happen with our cars. If something like the alternator is not working, sadly that truth is going to penetrate through as well. Sometimes it might take a long time.

[12 : 56] And for some things, it might not even be until the day of judgment that the whole truth penetrates through. But no matter how long it takes, it will happen.

And that applies even to stuff that can seem small and insignificant. And Jesus highlights that here when he talks about words. Our words can so easily just pop out of our mouths, and yet they can penetrate a long, long way.

Sometimes that can be for good, but all too often it can be for harm. There's a really clear example of that right here in Edinburgh at the moment concerning the statue of Henry Dundas in St Andrew's Square.

Henry Dundas was an MP who was involved in the debates about the abolition of slavery at the end of the 18th century. And he inserted the word gradual into the legislation proposing to end slavery.

So instead of making it happen quickly, he said it needed to happen gradually. Now there's a big debate as to whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. Some people argue that that caused half a million more people to be enslaved.

[14 : 09] But others are arguing to say, well, if he hadn't put that word in, then the legislation would never have passed. And there's a big discussion to be had about what the truth actually is.

The key point is that that little word gradual penetrated a long way. It penetrated into the laws of the British Empire. It penetrated into the lives of half a million slaves.

And it's penetrating down into the news here in Edinburgh and in the UK in 2020. It's a powerful reminder that truth is penetrating.

And if we apply that to ourselves, it can be unsettling. I'm often very relieved that the rest of the world can't penetrate into my heart and see all the brokenness that's there.

But God can. And God's standard of truth is so high that it penetrates everything. We can't hide anything from him. We can't pretend to be something that we are not.

[15 : 12] And I wish I could say to God, I've never said a careless word that I've never done that. I've never hurt anyone with a careless word. I wish I could say that.

But the truth is I have. As a result, we would prefer to pretend that truth isn't penetrating. And one of the best ways to do that is to try and distract ourselves.

But even that tactic doesn't work for long. The trouble with truth is that it's penetrating. The third thing we see is that truth is relentless.

This is highlighted in verses 38 through to 45 where as the tension builds around the truth of who Jesus is, the scribes and Pharisees demand a sign from him.

And so that's if they're saying, well, prove yourselves, prove yourself. Jesus refuses and instead he points them back to the Old Testament. He talks about Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a fish and he applies that to what is going to happen to him in his death and resurrection.

[16 : 25] Now, one of the key points been emphasized here is that Jesus doesn't need to prove himself with a fancy sign in front of these leaders because the truth of what the Old Testament prophesied about him and the truth of what's going to happen to him is certain.

He doesn't need another sign to prove it. And that's because truth is relentless. So if what the Old Testament says about Jesus is true, then that is going to show itself and prove itself to be true.

But equally, the truth about the generation around Jesus of whom he speaks in these verses, the truth about them is going to show itself as well.

That's why Jesus refers to another incident in the Old Testament. He talks about the Queen of the South and the men of the South who came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, the men of Nineveh to whom Jonah preached.

They stand in judgment over the generation in front of Jesus because their faith is exposing the unbelief of the people who are confronting Jesus.

[17 : 40] And the consequence of that is very serious. And it all kind of culminates in verses 44 and 45 where Jesus talks about an evil spirit leaving a house but then returning and bringing others with it.

So that the last state of that person is worse than the first. So it will also be with this evil generation. In other words, if this generation, the people in front of Jesus, if they maintain their opposition to him, if they keep regarding Jesus as a devil, if they keep opposing him, then the implications of that are not going to go away.

Eventually, this generation is going to find itself worse than ever. And that's because truth is relentless.

And again, we can see that all around us. The truths of past injustices are relentless. And maybe for years, people have tried to suppress or ignore that, but truth is relentless.

Truth won't go away. And again, for us personally, that can be really difficult. The truth about our mistakes, our regrets, our weaknesses, our feelings, they don't go away.

[19 : 03] And that's why so often we can find ourselves plagued by the question, why did I do that? The trouble with truth is that it's relentless.

So there's our three headings. Truth is inflexible, so it will polarize. Truth is penetrating, so it exposes everything.

And truth is relentless. It won't go away. Sometimes, as I said, that can be for good, but in terms of how we stand before God for humanity, it's a problem.

When it comes to our relationship with God, we don't want the truth to be inflexible. We want to be able to believe and do whatever we like. We don't want the truth to penetrate.

We'd rather our hearts and lives were not exposed. And we don't want the truth to be relentless.

We'd far rather, if all these questions of life and death and God and judgment would just go away.

[20 : 06] Now, you might be thinking, well, Thomas, this is a really depressing sermon. Well, please hang in there. All of this trouble with truth applies if we reject Jesus, either casually or deliberately.

That brings us back to verse 30 that we started with. Ultimately, we are either with Him or against Him. And the seriousness and danger of rejecting Jesus cannot be exaggerated.

If we push Jesus away, then the truth of that is going to cause us eternal trouble.

But the message of the gospel is not follow Jesus in order to avoid something awful. The message of the gospel is follow Jesus because being with Him is utterly amazing.

And that's highlighted in the very last verses of the chapter. While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brother stood outside, asking to speak to him, but Jesus replied to the man who told him, who is my mother and who are my brothers?

[21 : 26] And stretching out his hand towards his disciples, he said, here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

Now, in these verses, Jesus is not rejecting his siblings. We know from other passages that he was really devoted to his mother, Mary, and later his brother became key leaders in the early church. But what Jesus is emphasizing is that his true family are not his biological mother or his half-brothers. His true family are those who put their trust in him.

His true family is the church. And this is highlighting the fact that at the heart of Christianity is family. In so many ways, this is the foundational truth of the whole of the Christian faith. Throughout the whole Bible, the theme of family is constantly at the forefront.

[22 : 31] And if we are trusting in Jesus, our whole relationship with God and with one another is in terms of family. So God the Father is our Father.

The infinite, eternal, unchangeable God is our Father. And you are his precious, treasured, beloved child.

Jesus, God the Son, is your brother. He identifies himself with you. He stands alongside you. He rescues you and protects you. And no matter how much others may reject you, if you are trusting in Jesus, you are his brother or sister.

As believers, we are a family. So the church is not an organization or a society or a club. It's a family. In Jesus, we are united together as brothers and sisters.

And that's a family bond that stretches across all the nations of the world. And through God the Holy Spirit, we enjoy fellowship and togetherness with God the Father, with Jesus our brother, with one another as brothers and sisters.

[23 : 44] At the heart of the church, of the Bible and of Christianity is family. And that means that if you are a Christian or if you become one, Jesus would look at you today and say, here are my mother and my brothers and my sisters.

And that truth is incredibly precious. And there's three reasons why that truth is incredibly precious. Number one, the truth that you are in Jesus' family is inflexible. So if you are a Christian, Jesus identifies you as his sister or brother, and he is absolutely inflexible in regard to that truth.

So that means that there's never a moment's hesitation, never a trace of ambiguity, never a hint of second thoughts. Jesus looks at you and says, you're my brother or you're my sister, and he is utterly inflexible about that.

So if anyone or anything tries to shift Jesus away from his commitment to you as his brother or sister, he is totally and utterly inflexible.

[25 : 07] It's a non-negotiable, it's a non-event, it's an immovable object. Jesus says to you, I am your brother, I am your brother, you are my brother or sister, and I am not shifting.

And the fact that that's true is emphasized very powerfully in these verses, because if you look at these verses, it's not that the disciples and the people around Jesus are saying, can we be your family Jesus?

We are your brothers and sisters, aren't we? It's not them who are saying it. It's Jesus who says it. He is saying, this is my family.

And if you are a Christian or if you become one, then he is saying exactly the same thing about you. The truth that you are his sister or brother is eternally inflexible.

The second reason why this truth about family is incredibly precious is because the truth that you are in Jesus' family is penetrating. Now this is really important. Jesus' commitment to you as your brother is not superficial.

[26 : 25] Often other people's commitment towards us only goes so far, and that can even happen in families. When everything is great in their lives, then all is well, but when the truth about our brokenness penetrates to the surface, then sometimes people don't really want to stick with us.

Jesus is not like that. And the truth of the fact that you are Jesus' brother or sister, that's a truth that penetrates.

So if we look within us, so often we can find many reasons why Jesus would not want us as brother or sister. So we peel back our lives and we see failings and mistakes and struggles and sins, weakness and temptation.

And the more you look at these things, the more you think, well, Jesus would never want me. But the truth is, Jesus' commitment to you penetrates through every single layer of your life.

So peel back your life, you peel it back and you see failures. But Jesus is standing over your shoulder and he says, I'm still your brother. You peel back further and you find your insecurities, your fears, your doubts, your jealousies.

[27 : 40] Jesus says, I'm still your brother. You peel back further and you see this massive pile of stupid mistakes. Jesus says, I'm still your brother. You peel back even further and you find all the scars of when you've been hurt.

And Jesus says, I am still your brother. And the truth that you are Jesus' beloved brother or sister, the truth that you are a precious child of God, is a truth that penetrates with unstoppable force. If you are a Christian or if you become one, the truth that you are in God's family is one that saturates everything about you. And that's why when God looks at you, he doesn't see a broken, lost, hopeless sinner.

He sees someone who is completely saturated with the righteousness of Jesus. That's what it means to be united to Jesus. Everything that he is and everything that he has done has penetrated into your whole life.

You're a new person. You are his family. And the third reason, I'm sure you can guess, the third reason why it is a precious truth is the fact that the truth that you are in Jesus' family is relentless.

[29 : 07] So Jesus is your brother. That truth is relentless. That means that it is never going to go away. He is never going to go away.

You think of everything that might happen in the future. We have no idea what a week or a month or a year is going to bring, but no matter what happens in your life, Jesus' commitment to you is relentless.

Jesus is saying to you, I am your brother and I'm not going away. And the relentlessness of that commitment stretches not just to the end of your life, but right into eternity.

Jesus' commitment to you never fades. It never loses energy. It never comes down a notch. It never even flickers. And that's why on the day of judgment, if you are trusting in Jesus, He will look at you with as much enthusiasm and energy and excitement as He ever has done.

And He will say, that's my sister. That's my brother. It's so easy to think that Jesus will reluctantly accept us and reluctantly take us home. That on the day of judgment, it'll kind of be a case of Jesus saying, well, oh, yeah, I think I remember them. I suppose I better include them. That is complete nonsense.

[30 : 24] Jesus' joy over you is abounding and it will always be abounding. And that's because He loves you with a relentless love.

You are His and that's a truth that will never, ever relent. And I think we can see a glimpse of that even in our lives just now.

I'm sure that for everyone of you watching, like me, you really miss your family just now. And we have family that we long to see, grandparents and siblings and aunties and uncles.

We long to be able to see them. I'm sure you feel exactly the same. But I am sure I can say about you that lockdown has not diminished your love for your family one bit.

I'm sure that's true of you. Well, that's just a glimpse of the relentless love that Jesus has for you.

[31 : 31] Jesus is calling us into His family and if we trust in Him, that's a truth that is inflexible. It's a truth that's penetrating. It's a truth that's relentless.

And that's why being with Jesus is so amazing. And that's why that question, are you with Him or are you against Him, is so important.

If we reject Him, then the truth about Jesus and about reality and about life and death, that truth will ultimately cause us trouble.

But if we trust in Jesus, the truth about who He is will take away all our troubles.

The big question is, are you with Him? Let's pray.

[32 : 36] Dear Father, we thank you so much for your truth. We thank you that that truth is inflexible, penetrating and relentless.

And we just thank you so much for everything that you've done for us through your Son, our Saviour Jesus. We pray that we would all trust in Him, follow Him and look to Him.

Amen.