

A Test of Truth

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- [0 : 0 0] We're in a series on this letter, first John, and this is the old man, John, the very last, probably, of the apostles alive, and he's writing to the Ephesus region.
- And he says here in this passage that Christianity is all about knowing the truth. And you see it right there in verse two. He says in verse two that you can know the truth.
- This is the truth. And you know somebody's telling the truth. And they say that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and that He's come from God. And that that's the truth.
- And at the very end in verse six he says that this claim is the difference between truth and falsehood. That Jesus Christ has come from God in human flesh and that you can know the difference in the spirit of truth and the spirit of error according to that one sentence.
- Now that means that John is saying if you're not able to say Jesus Christ has come in the flesh from God, then you don't have the truth.
- [1 : 1 1] And that's a problem, you know, because in a city like Edinburgh all of you know very well and some of you today maybe are here and you're curious about Christianity, but as soon as I say that and as soon as you hear John say that you immediately feel the weight of this problem.
- And the weight of the problem which everybody here knows about because you've heard it in many times and in many ways is that this claim that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father that He is truly God and truly human and that this is absolute capital T truth, it's an exclusive claim.
- And it does. It excludes. It excludes other religious claims, other absolute claims to the way, the realm of the supernatural and what it is and what it's about.
- And anytime you're asking a massive question like what must I do to be saved, a religious claim comes along and here we're being told that this is the only right one.
- And that's exclusivity. And of course all of you know you don't have to be convinced. I don't need to spend any time on the fact that it's a huge problem for the contemporary world for any religion to say that they have the truth and they have it exclusively.
- [2 : 2 9] Now I'm not going to unpack and deal with all the issues and ins and outs of exclusivity and the meaning of truth today. We don't have time for that.
- But instead we want to hear from John because John actually does something very surprising with this claim of exclusivity, something you might not immediately recognize or expect and then he tells us how you can test it.
- Okay, so three things. He first tells us the truth about truth and then he teaches us the truth and then at the end he tells us about the test of truth.
- So we've got to hear the truth about truth and then know the truth and then hear his test of truth so that we can know when we hear truth. Okay, got it?
- All right, we will get it. Here it is, the truth about truth. It's right here in verse one. It's surprising. In verse one you'll see part B of verse one.

[3 : 30] He says that many prophets have gone out into the world. He's talking there about in the context, this is language in the present tense, in the Ephesus region where John had planted this church and he's now writing to it, there are people who are coming there as teachers.

He calls them prophets and they're making massive religious claims, the kind of claims that pertain to absolute truth claims, what must I do to be saved and all sorts of things like it.

And he calls them and one be false teachers. He says they're lying, they're not telling the truth. And instead what they're doing is they're trying to manipulate you and get you to put your faith, your time and your money into whatever they're saying.

And he's saying very clearly the point of the passage is don't be gullible, that people even within the realm of Christianity and outside of it of course are always making claims on you and telling you to believe this and believe that and put your money here and there.

And he's saying there's actually a test, there's a way that you can know who to listen to and who to follow and who to believe, we'll come back to that. But here's what's surprising is that clearly he's talking about people, teachers, men and women, somebody who's opening their mouth and making big claims about absolute truth.

[4 : 54] But then in verse one he doesn't say, okay church, test these false prophets, put these men to the test, what does he say in verse one?

He doesn't say that. He says test the spirits to see whether they're speaking the truth. And that means that John is saying that underneath every single claim to absolute truth, religious claims, claims about salvation and about the afterlife and all sorts of things, he's saying that there is a supernatural reality at work underneath every absolute truth claim.

That whenever anybody goes out into the world and says this is the truth, I've got it and I'm going to tell you who the true God is and what you must do to be saved, that underneath that there's a spirit, a supernatural realm actually at work underneath it.

Now a modern person says, if you're this person today, the modern person comes and says, you know, I don't like exclusive truth claims about religion.

I don't think any religion can say what the whole truth is and what the true truth is. I don't think we have that ability. And John responds by doubling down.

[6 : 13] He says, well let me up the ante, let me say even more that actually every time anyone says anything else than that Jesus is the Christ from God who's come in the flesh, that false claim actually has a spirit at work underneath it.

The supernatural realm has active agency and so every single absolute truth claim about religion that comes into the world either comes from the work of the spirit of the true God or the work of spirits that are evil spirits.

And these are what he calls anti-Christ, literally anti the proclamation of Christ that comes from the spirit of God. They're the anti-Christ and they're at work and they're all over the place.

And verse six he said, you can either know that in these absolute truth claims it's either the spirit of God speaking truth or evil spirit speaking falsehoods.

Now this is a theological claim. How can Christians come and say about Jesus Christ that he is the capital T truth in the only way of salvation?

[7 : 31] And what John is doing is he's trying to give you the theological reason. And here's the theological reason. He says that any other claim actually comes from evil spirits.

And that this comes from a supernatural invisible realm that you can't see but is very real. Now let me give you some applications. First Christian friends here today, one commentator says it like this, that means that for all of us it is a mistake to identify the supernatural with the divine outright as if they're the same thing.

You can't just look out into the world and say, look I've had an amazing experience. I've experienced something supernatural. I've seen a miracle, whatever it may be, and suppose that supernatural activity and the true God at work in the world are always the same thing.

John says you can't do that. You can't say that because there is a supernatural realm of evil also at work in the world and that we've got to then be called and compelled to test the spirits, to test the ways that the spirits are at work in the world.

Now let me press it on this, Christian friends, do you know today that the spirits of evil are at work in the world to thwart and to frustrate the claims that the church carries forth about Jesus Christ?

[9 : 01] Do you know that? Not only in your head but in your heart, that that's real? That that's exactly what's happening in the world all over the place? That you are, remember Ephesians, that you are not battling flesh and blood but you called out from that by God or battling against principalities and powers of the darkness, evil spirits, Paul says, that you are at war with evil spirits and that's real, that we believe that.

Let me call on you because today maybe you don't feel, we don't feel the weight and the impact of that invisible reality.

And we're experiencing a little bit of what the old world called Asidia, do you know that word, Asidia? It was the word that before the word boring or boredom, the word boring or boredom wasn't ever an English word until the 19th century.

And before that they called it Asidia. And Asidia is complacency and experience a little dullness in life even with the religion, the God that you believe in.

It's Asidia, it's being a little bit dulled by it over time, not having your spiritual senses up and alert. And just here, all I can do time wise is say, here Ephesians 6, 11 to 13 again, and know that you have been called out by God to put on the armor of God which is to battle evil in the invisible realm.

[10 : 34] And you do that with the armor of the gospel and the word of God and all sorts of things. And that's very real. Now, if you're here today secondly, second application, and you're not a Christian and you're curious about Christianity and you're here because you're exploring it, you're probably going to say, I know, you're probably going to say, John says that there's an exclusive truth that Jesus is the only way and that underneath every absolute religious claim, there are evil spirits at work or the spirit of God at work, you're going to say, I don't buy that.

And I understand that. And that's what secular people in the contemporary world are of course going to say. Now let me just say two things to you.

One is to consider this. Most people in the world today are religious even in the age of the computer that we live in, even in the age of secularity, well over 90% of all human beings across the entire globe believe in the supernatural today.

So secularity just really hasn't been very successful, not in stamping out religion. And when you look at that throughout world history, what you realize is that 99.99999999% of all people believe in deity, believe in the supernatural and always have, and they always will.

It's never going to change. And let me say to you that that's not an argument for being frustrated by ignorance. Instead, what that can be is the fact that we all feel the weight of the religious impulse in our hearts and it's precisely because the supernatural actually exists.

[12 : 19] What if that's the answer? That the reason 99.999% of all people in human history believe in the supernatural is because it actually exists, not because they were just ignorant.

They didn't read enough science. And so let's say that you're willing to go there. Secondly, you say, okay, religion is meaningful perhaps, but that doesn't mean that Christianity or any other religion has the access to the exclusive truth.

Well, this is a played out illustration. I know that. I know you've heard this. Many of you, and you're going to be bored by it, but this is from Leslie Newbighan.

He was the originator and he talked about the problem of this claim, the problem of the claim that no religion could have knowledge of the exclusivity of the truth.

Nobody could do that. That's the secular mind. That's what it says today. But look, Newbighan talked about the blind man and the elephant, but let's make it fresh today, because you've heard it before.

[13 : 20] Let's talk about the blind man and the donkey. And that'll revive its freshness. What is it? It's that the donkey is like religious truth claims, and the donkey itself is the whole truth.

And all of us, all of us religious people in the world religions, we're like blind men, and we're all just grabbing a piece of the donkey. You grab its tail and you rub its belly and you touch its nose and its ear.

And all of us are touching something true about the supernatural realm, all the world religions, but none of us can see the whole picture. And so none of us can really claim that we know, that we know that this is the way, that our religious claims are the way.

Now, look, here's the problem. Newbighan pointed it out many have. The problem is the only way that you can say that, the only way that a secular mind can make that claim is if they can see the whole donkey, if they're the ones that have stepped back and say, actually, I can see the whole truth.

And I know that each of you are only actually grabbing a little bit of it, but I can see it. And look, what you've done there, as you've said, I don't like exclusive absolute claims, and you've let sneak in the back door what you tried to kick out of the front door, because you've actually made the exclusive absolute claim.

[14 : 37] You're the one that's saying, I'm the one that knows that nobody else could have the absolute truth. I'm the one that knows that no religion could absolutely, truly know. And I truly know. I truly know that nobody else can truly know.

And that's actually against every instinct of the modern person. That's actually quite imperialist. It's imperialist, because what it's doing is saying to every world religion that has existed for thousands of years longer than any of us, they were all happy to make absolute truth claims and disagree with one another.

And you're saying that they're not allowed to do that anymore. And it's actually quite an imperialist move. And so let me say this, that here's a better way, as we move to point two and three, which are quite brief.

Here's a better way. Instead, you could ask this question, what religious claim, what absolute truth claims, what way of salvation, what origin story gives you the possibility of true hope makes the best sense of reality as you experience it and satisfies the needs of your intellect and your heart.

That's the question to ask. Which one does that the best? Now let me tell you what John says it is. Secondly, he calls it the truth. And this is what he says in verse two. He says, this is the truth.

[15 : 59] Jesus, Jesus the text says, Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and is from God. Now there are several ways to translate that. So let me translate it slightly differently.

I think it's at its best when it says, Jesus is the Christ who has come from God in the flesh. That's the absolute claim.

Jesus is the Christ who has come from God in the flesh. There are three things there that make Christianity unlike every other world religion. Three things there that make it totally unique.

And I can say them to you in just one or two minutes. And here they are. One pastor points out when it says that Jesus is the Christ who has come for somebody to come into the world means that they must have been before they came into the world.

You see John is saying something incredible there. He's saying that the man Jesus who appeared in the middle of history actually came into the world and existed prior to coming into the world.

[17 : 03] But he comes from God and John 1 says that he is God from God. And so this is saying that the man who was born, the wee little baby that was born, that Mary at the virgin birth that she gave birth to God himself.

Mary, the little poor woman in Israel, she was the mother of God. And that's unique in all of religious history. All right, the second thing he tells us is that not only did he come from before, he is God from before, but also he is in the flesh.

So this same person, God who came from before, who came through the Virgin Mary, he's human. And there's nothing like that in all of history that he's fully God and he's also fully human simultaneously.

And then third, it says that Jesus is the Christ. And Christ is not his last name. It's an office.

What he came to do. And it says that he is the Savior who was anointed to come as the God man into the world because God loves the world so much that he didn't want to leave it to die.

[18 : 20] Now when you pull those three things together, you've got something that no other religion has. You've got a massive claim that no other religion has. And John says that you've got to say all three of these things or you don't have Christianity.

That Jesus is the Christ who has come from God in the flesh. You've got to say all three. Or you don't have Christianity and you don't have the truth.

Now let me tell you why and we'll move to the final point. Athanasius helped us to understand why this is so important. Athanasius is an old pastor from the fourth century in Alexandria, Egypt, and he wrote a little book on the incarnation.

And it was all about this. Why Jesus must be the Christ come from God in the flesh. Now let me have a 10 second aside and say Christmas is coming.

And this is a wonderful book to read at Christmastime. Read Athanasius on the incarnation over the advent season. It's little and it's easy and it's an amazing Christmas book.

[19 : 31] Back to the point. Here's what Athanasius says. He says that the reason that God took on human nature, took on flesh for us in love is because only in becoming fully human could he give life and hope to the human condition directly.

He said it in a little bit more complicated way. He said it like this. That which is not assumed cannot be healed. It's saying that Jesus Christ so assumed human flesh, full humanity in order that he could heal it from the inside out, that he took on our nature in order to reset our nature, that he took on all of what a human being is to create great humans, what they were really meant to be, that he assumed human nature in order to heal human nature from the inside out.

Now, all of you today, Christian or not, do you not think that our nature is marred?

Does it take much convincing to know that there's something wrong with our condition and that we as Augustin put it, that we are bent in on ourselves?

He talked about that we're curved in on ourselves. We're like a, it's as if somebody's taken a magnifying glass and turned it towards and stuck it right in and pointed it right at our own hearts.

[21 : 07] That means that every single thing in life is me refracting everything back to me, that I want everything in my life to be ultimately about me and my good and my will and God says that's not the way of true human nature, which is love of God and other from top to bottom.

This is what Athanasius is saying and this is what John is saying, that this God became human to fix the human condition, that he so assumed who we are so that he could heal who we are and if I could add one final thing, a fourth unique thing about Christianity to jump to next week's passage down in verse 10, it says that this God man became the sacrifice for our marred condition.

In other words, he died with your broken human nature so that he might heal your broken human nature. He died possessing the corrupted human nature that you have so that in his death and resurrection he might heal the human condition that you have.

And I'll just walk away with this. Curious friends today, if you're a curious friend here looking at Christianity and Christian friends too, let me call you to seek him in order that you might find him and I think you will.

In other words, that's to say, especially if you have been absorbed into the secular mindset and this is for non-Christian people and Christian people, if you've been absorbed, if you've absorbed the secular mindset in some way, maybe you're just realizing it, look beyond the simplistic and exclusivist claims of the secular world, which say that nobody can really know anything, nobody can really know the truth, look beyond that exclusivity.

[23 : 08] That's an absolute truth claim that doesn't work. And instead, if you look for what's true, good, and beautiful, if you look for what makes sense of reality and fits the needs of your heart, I think you'll find Jesus Christ.

Seek him while you can find him and you will find him. But lastly, John turns lastly to talk to Christians and he says, you need to test these truth claims when people come into your life and they make big exclusive truth claims, you got to put them to the test.

And you've always got to be alert. Don't be gullible, test the spirits, test the teachers in your life, test the preachers in your life. Don't listen just because they stand here, test them.

And he tells us how to do it. And we can do this very quickly. Now it's Reformation Sunday, all right? So we weren't getting away without talking about the Reformation, at least a little bit, but it's just simply to say this, the reformers were very helpful because what they said is that they talked about the fact that Christianity gives actually every single person in the world the right to personal judgment about religious claims, that Christianity itself says nobody should be coerced to believe in God.

The gospel is non-coercive. Nobody should be forced, not from the church, not from the state, not from the Magisterium in the time of the Reformation. Nobody should be forced. Every single one of you, this is what Christianity teaches, that every person in the world, it's the basic Western democratic ideal, that everybody should have religious freedom, that everybody should not be coerced into belief.

[25 : 01] That's not how Jesus works. He actually works by making a claim upon your heart and calling you from the inside out, not the top down, not from the state down.

And that was a Reformation claim. That was what we learned in the Reformation. And that's exactly what John is saying here. He's saying, because the gospel is non-coercive and because religious truth claims should not be, you need to be a Berean, as we say from the book of Acts.

You need to test everything. And how do you test it? You test it, of course, by the word of God. But John says here one way, I can only give you one, one theological test.

And here it is. Does the teacher say that Jesus is the Christ from God, come in the flesh? Is that there?

Now, there's a, there's a man, we have a set of manuscripts of 1 John that have a slightly different word sometimes in verse three.

[26 : 01] When it says, if they don't confess this, they're a false prophet. Well that word confessed there, sometimes in some of our manuscripts is the word to loosen, to untie a rope.

And so both of the words work just fine. But in the other one, it says, if anybody tries to untie the rope, you know, you have a rope and it's woven together with different strands, he says, Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh.

If anybody tries to take that rope, which has three strands, and start to whittle the strands away and loosen one of them, then that's false prophecy.

That's a bad teacher. It's like loosening a rope. Now we'll close with this. That's a theological test. But there's really something more here within that theological test, and it's a little bit hidden.

But let me show it to you as we close. In verse two and verse three here, the ESV does really well. It says that what makes a Christian, and this is what makes a Christian, this is what makes a Christian, by this you know the spirit of God, every spirit that confesses Jesus is the Christ.

[27 : 18] In some of the older translations, that word there for confess, they translated acknowledge. And hopefully we've shifted that translation to confesses, because the word acknowledge just doesn't really do it.

Because the word that John uses here does not just mean to admit it. You know, to say that intellectually I can get here. Intellectually I can come and admit Jesus is the Christ from God come in the flesh.

It means more than that. And we've already seen this word in 1 John 1 verse nine, which said, if you confess your sins, if you confess your sins, he is faithful and just to forgive them.

It doesn't just mean to admit it in your mind. It means something more than that. And it comes from a Greek word, which is the word homo logos, logos, homo logos.

You know this word. It's homo the same, and logos word. And so the word in the Bible that we have for confessing simply means this.

[28 : 21] Just when you do the work of homo logos to say the same words as the person who told it to you.

That's what it means to confess. That you're willing to say the same thing as the one who told it to you. What does that mean? Well, it's the answer to the problem of exclusive truth claims.

You know, in some way, the secular mind is right. Of course, we're human. We don't have access to the whole truth. We're finite.

We're contingent. We don't know everything, and we can't see everything. But homo logos is the answer, because what it says here is that to confess is to say in humility of heart that I'm willing to say the same words as the one who spoke the words to me.

In other words, to confess is to say I'm willing to say about Jesus Christ what God says about Jesus Christ. You know, I don't have access to the whole truth, but what if God has actually spoken?

[29 : 34] What if God has truly spoken in the incarnate Word Himself, in the inscripturated Word? And then you can say, well, yeah, of course, I don't know the exclusive truth, but He does.

And you see, to confess is to say I'm willing to say the same thing about me and about Jesus that God says about me and about Jesus.

I'm willing to listen to God on this. And this is what God says about Jesus. God the Father and Philippians 2, it says that He exalted Jesus with a name that is above every other name.

And so if you're willing to confess today, it means that you're willing to say, I know that I actually don't have all the answers, that I can't actually know the whole truth, but I'm willing today in faith to humble myself to the point where I will say that what God says about me and what God says about Jesus is the way.

It's the truth. That's what it means to confess. It's a state of humility and a state of faith. Now on this Reformation Sunday, we'll give John Calvin the last word, because in the reflection and the bulletin, if you saw it at the very top, Calvin says exactly what John is telling us here.

[30 : 56] He says that if we are to have any wisdom at all in this life, if we're to have any wisdom at all in this life, it must first be the knowledge of God and in light of that, the knowledge of ourselves.

And John says, true confession is to say that I'm willing today to say about me and about Jesus exactly what God tells me to think about me and about Jesus.

If you're to possess any wisdom in this life, you've got to be willing to say what God says about God and about yourself. And that's to confess your sins and to confess Jesus is the Christ.

Come from God in the flesh. And that's the truth. And that's the way of salvation. And it's for everybody.

Let's pray together. We do ask that you would work faith into our hearts this morning and that we would dismiss any notions of the pride that says that there's no way you could have spoken the truth to us.

[32 : 10] Lord, we submit, we humble ourselves. And I do ask for people here who are wrestling with this and wrestling with doubts that come and hear John make such a bold claim, an absolute truth claim that they would be helped by you, Lord, by the Spirit of God to hear and to believe.

And we ask for this heart in Jesus' name. Amen.