

THE BOOK - HOW WE GOT IT AND HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT - Part one

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NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN CHERISHING TRUTH

Psalm 19:7-11 - "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; [8] the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; [9] the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. [10] More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. [11] Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

How do we know this is really God's Word? What do we mean when we say it is "inspired?" How did we end up with the books we have in it? Why these sixty-six books? Why not others, like the gospel of Thomas, or other apocryphal books? And how do we know the Bible is now a "closed" book with no additional written revelations to be added? What about other claims to divine authority? And why not include the teaching texts of other religions?

All of those are good questions that Christians need to be able to answer. I hope **you** will be able to deal with those issues clearly when people probe and ask. But there's one question that comes first. It stands out far above all the others. It has to do with the issue of **absolute truth**. And I mean **any** statements of truth, not just Biblical ones. Is there objective truth to be known, and can it be known for certain?

Our world is happy with people **searching** for truth. It is suspicious with people who say they have **found** the truth. That is considered arrogant.

Of course I don't mean can we know **everything** there is to know. Obviously, whether we're dealing with God or anything else, **total** knowledge is impossible for beings who are not only **fallen**, but **finite**. We can't know **all** there is to know about **anything**. But does that mean we can't know **anything** for **certain**? Are all **propositions** now merely **opinions**? That's the issue we need to nail down before we proceed to any others because nobody is going to waste his or her time **doing** the truth if there is any doubt at all that real truth even exists.

1) **BY FAR, THE DOMINANT MIND-SET OF OUR CULTURE TODAY IS THAT ABSOLUTE TRUTH IS AN ILLUSION**

The dominant understanding of truth in our world is that, outside of **scientific** truth, we don't discover absolute, objective truth - truth that actually exists **outside** our perception of it - but we (all of us) **create** our own truth, especially **moral** truth, **inside** our own value system and then **bring** that private truth to whatever we see or read or discuss or evaluate. So something becomes **"true for you,"** rather than just **true** for **everyone, everywhere, all the time.**

"So what, Pastor Don. What difference does this make? Why bother with it? Let's just let people think whatever they want to think about truth. What possible business is this of ours?"

Listen, there are **consequences** to ideas - all ideas. You had better pray long and hard that absolute truth **exists**. And you and I had better pray long and hard that people **know** absolute truth really exists. And I want to take just a minute or two to tell you why.

On May 5th, 1994, **Michael Novak** gave the **Templeton Prize Address** in Westminster Abbey in London. In it he said many profound things, but most important for our point were his brilliant remarks about what he referred to as **"vulgar relativism:"**

"Vulgar relativism, now widely ascendant, undermines the culture of liberty. If it triumphs, [and it now

certainly has] *free institutions may not survive the twenty-first century....To obey the truth is to be free, and in certain extremities nothing is more clear to the tormented mind, nothing more vital to the survival of self-respect, nothing so important to one's sense of remaining a worthy human being - of being no one's cog, part of no one's machine, a resister to death against the kingdom of lies. In fidelity to truth lies human dignity.*"

"Many sophisticated people love to say that they are cynical, that ours is a cynical age. They flatter themselves. They do not believe nothing; they believe anything. Ours is no longer an age of unbelief. It is an age of gullibility."

"One principle that today's intellectuals most passionately disseminate is vulgar relativism....For them it is certain that there is no truth, only opinion: my opinion, your opinion....nothing is left but preference....Vulgar relativism is an invisible gas, odorless, deadly, that is now polluting every free society on earth. It is a gas that attacks the central nervous system of moral striving. The most perilous threat to the free society today is, therefore, neither political or economic. It is the poisonous corrupting culture of relativism."

"...During the next hundred years, the question for those who love liberty is whether we can survive the most insidious and duplicitous attacks from within, from those who undermine the virtues of our people, doing in advance the work of the Father of Lies. 'There is no such thing as truth,' they teach even the little ones. 'Truth is bondage. Believe what seems right to you. There are as many truths as there are individuals. Follow your feelings. Do as you please within. Get in touch with yourself. Do what feels comfortable. Those who speak in this way prepare the jails of the twenty-first century. They do the work of tyrants.'"

Remember where we are. I am wanting to stress that there are **consequences** to the idea that absolute truth doesn't exist - that each person creates his or her **own** truth. There are consequences to **relativism**. And where I want to land right now is on Michael Novak's last sentence: *"Those who speak in this way* ['There is no such thing as absolute truth'] *prepare the jails of the twenty-first century. They do the work of tyrants."*

I want everyone in this sanctuary to understand that Novak isn't just being dramatic when he uses that word **"tyrant"** - *"...they do the work of tyrants."* I want us all to know there is a brilliant reason that word was chosen. It was chosen because it gives the most accurate picture of what **always** happens when truth becomes relative.

Why is it true that relativists **"prepare the jails"** of the twenty-first century? Because whenever two people disagree about anything, they must have some absolute standard to which they can make appeal. If I want to choose one way and you want to choose the opposite - if there's a real, vital struggle between opposite wills - and if there is no **absolute truth - no absolute right or wrong** - to carry the day, then the only arbiter left is **power**. If **truth** doesn't decide, then **power** will. There is simply no other alternative for fallen people.

So what Michael Novak means is, when someone tells you your religious beliefs are unacceptable because they are too exclusive, and when they say you must renounce them or be thrown **into** those jails, and you object and say, "No, that's not **right**. My beliefs are **true!**"; they're going to say, "Your beliefs don't matter because my **sword** is bigger than your **truth**. And who's to say what you're doing is right or what I'm doing is wrong?"

Listen, church. It is no coincidence that the last century we concluded, the twentieth, was, by far, the bloodiest century in human history. We had all better pray the relativists don't carry the day. They truly are **"preparing the jails of the twenty-first century."** *Don't play truth games with your professors at university. The games don't end in the classroom. Pray and think and read and struggle and proclaim the centrality and the Godliness of absolute truth.*

I know I took a lot of time with that first point, but it leads into a second one that I'm going to consider much more quickly:

2) **AS THE CULTURE TILTS TOWARD RELATIVISM THE CHURCH FINDS ABSOLUTE TRUTH A MUCH HARDER SELL**

The result of this is that as the church becomes more and more aware that its audience is morphing toward relativism it is increasingly inclined to change its product to attract buyers into her message. In other words, **relativism** in **truth** breeds **consumerism** in **religion**. As the desires of **self** replace the unfluctuating core of a **revealed message** driven and shaped by absolute truth, something has to give. And the love of external success will always place relativistic consumer religion in the driver's seat.

This has always been the case. Look at **John 5:42-44** - **"But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. [43] I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. [44] How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?"**

How does Jesus **know** these people don't have the **"love of God"** in them? Does He know this because He's God and can read their thoughts? Perhaps, but I don't think so, because the very next verse **tells** us He knew they didn't have the love of God in them by something He and anyone else **could observe about them**. **Verse 43** is the money verse: **"I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him."**

What does this short verse really mean? It means there are certain religious leaders that these people will admire and buy into. They will like what they have to say. And the reason they will embrace them is these prophets and leaders **come in their own name**. They come with a message full of themselves. And these hearers will welcome these leaders because, like the leaders, they too are full of themselves. They make **themselves** the measurers of the message. They put their values and their opinions and their desires at the center of the message. So as long as the coming leaders are working from the same center of self, Jesus says the people will embrace them.

But Jesus says He doesn't come on those terms. In His humble, incarnate state, He doesn't come on any terms but Father God's. Father God's honor. Father God's glory. Father God's authority. Father God's message. Father God's rules. Father God's absolute grace. Father God's absolute judgment.

There is nothing **man-centered or self-centered** in anything Jesus brings to the table. And the people won't embrace **that** kind of truth - **"How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?"(5:44)**.

These other leaders will tell the people what they desire. They will scratch where the people itch. After all, the leader and the followers are all after the same thing. They're all after, in Jesus' words, the **glory** (or the **success**, or the **fulfillment**) that comes from **one another**. They're all on the same page. And the page is entitled **"Whatever Fits My System and Ideas."**

2 Timothy 4:1-4 - **"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. [3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."**

Jesus wasn't on that page. He still isn't. Jesus - and I mean the **real** Jesus of the New Testament - not the man-made Jesus of the crowds - doesn't market well in a relativistic age. You can **crucify** Him. But you can't **modify** Him.

I have to hurry on to the last point:

3) **THE VALUE OF GOD'S WORD LIES PRECISELY IN ITS TRUTHFULNESS, NOT ITS EASE OR ADAPTABILITY**

And now we return finally to our opening text. And especially one portion of it: **Psalm 19:9b-11** - "**....the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether [10] More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. [11] Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.**"

Having described the law of God as being perfect, sure, right, pure and clean, it's when David describes it as being **true** that he immediately launches into praising its preciousness (**gold**) and its sweetness (**honey**).

Here is something special indeed, about God's laws or rules. God's rules won't vary. They won't mix in with the other delusions and deceits of our sorted minds. They apply to **all** cultures equally because they adapt to **none** particularly. God's truth is **undiscriminating** in the truest sense. God's laws provide the only safe **standard** against the fads and deceptions that make up, what David describes in Psalm one as, the "**counsel of the ungodly.**"

And notice also that it's the "**rules**" of God that are true - **Psalm 19:9b** - "**....the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.**" In fact, that's what makes them precious. They're **rules**. They provide standards. They abide. They arbitrate. They regulate. They protect. They guide.

Here's something external to our own changing opinions. Here is something bigger than our feelings and values. You can anchor your whole life here.

But if these laws are ultimately **sweet** (like honey), they are also **costly** (like gold). Are you studying God's Word every day? Do you labor to hide it in your heart? The Psalmist's assessment is my love for God's Word is too slight if it comes second to my passion for material wealth.

The day will come all too quickly when everything else will be stripped away from your life. Either through old age, or sickness, or perhaps even persecution that we can't even imagine right now, all you will have to rely on will be the Word you've treasured enough to hide in your heart.

It's going to be increasingly hard to do this. Not only will **time constraints** put all sorts of pressure on us to binge on this world rather than feed on God's Word, but the climate of our culture will become increasingly hostile to Word-saturated disciples. We will be mocked as prudes and persecuted as intolerant. Gold doesn't come cheap.

But let it all pass by. Keep the Word alive in your mind, memory and heart. Obey it till your last breath, whether you see immediate dividends or not. Remember, in the keeping of God's law, there is "**great reward**" (19:11).