

What Is Truth?

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[0 : 00] Well, as I said today, we are continuing our study in John's Gospel. We've come to the second half of chapter 18, and I want to read again, verses 37 to 38.

Then Pilate said to him, So you're a king. Jesus answered, You say that I'm a king. For this purpose I was born, for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.

Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Pilate said to him, What is truth? After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him.

So we're moving towards the climax of John's Gospel. All the way through his book so far, he's pointing us forward to the cross. And now for Jesus, the hour has come.

The cross is looming. Everything is reaching a climax. And as Phil said last week, at the heart of Christianity stands Jesus' death on the cross.

[1 : 01] It's for everything, everything that John's Gospel, everything that the whole of the Bible is pointing towards. And John gives us loads of detail about these days leading up to the cross.

And one detail that he gives us is this fascinating interaction that we have between Jesus and the Roman governor Pilate. And that's what I want to spend a wee bit of time looking at today, because Pilate is a very, very intriguing person.

Because at one level, the cross has got nothing to do with him. He's not been involved with Jesus up until now. He's been neither a follower nor an opponent.

And here, he only gets dragged into the whole affair because as verse 31 tells us, the Jews aren't allowed to put someone to death without his permission.

So there's a sense in which the cross has got nothing to do with Pilate. Yet at the same time, the cross has got everything to do with Pilate, because he's the one who actually hands over Jesus.

[2 : 04] And in doing so, he condemns him to death. And because of that, the name Pilate is known all over the world because of the role he had in Jesus being sent to the cross.

And as you read the second half of John 18 and as you read on into chapter 19, there's this fascinating tension between, in Pilate, between the impressions he has of Jesus and the pressure that the crowd are putting upon him.

I want to suggest today that Pilate is also fascinating because he is maybe the Persian in John's Gospel who is most relevant for us to think about today.

The reason he's relevant is because he is doing something that thousands of people in Scotland want to do today. He's doing something that so many of us want to do as well.

What is he doing? Well, when it comes to Jesus, he wants to stay neutral. I've said this many times before, but I have very rarely met people who are vigorously opposed to Christianity.

[3 : 22] And even the people who I have met in my life who have been quite opposed to the Gospel, it doesn't tend to be because they're opposed to the idea of God or to the claims of the Gospel.

Usually that hostility is because they've been hurt by somebody who goes to church. I don't tend to meet people who are just viciously opposed to the Gospel. But what I do meet is a lot of people who just want to be neutral.

And that of course is a reflection of where we are in terms of intellectual history in the Western world. We live in a society that's heavily influenced by what we call postmodernism.

And that's the philosophy that's characterised by the idea that you can't make exclusive truth claims. So you can't say that there's one absolute truth. And there's no overarching reality that explains life.

And instead, truth is seen as something very individualised, something very subjective. And that's why today you'll see that the most important truth principle for many people is that you just need to

be true to yourself.

[4 : 29] And that's a very, very postmodern way of thinking. And the consequence of that in terms of the Gospel is that many, many people are respectful, but they just want to remain more or less neutral.

And people will say, well, it's great that you've got that in your life. But I just want to stay neutral. Loads of people want to stay neutral.

Some of them are sitting in here. Some of them are watching online. And so it's such an important thing for us to think about.

And as we look at Pilate, our title comes from his question in verse 38, what is truth? And we're going to look at two main headings, building neutrality, dismantling neutrality.

So starting here with building neutrality. When we look at Pilate, you can see various ways in which he wants to try and build a neutral position for himself.

[5 : 27] First of all, he starts by basically saying, I don't want to get involved in this. So when they come to Jesus, when they come with Jesus to Pilate, they said, he comes out to meet them.

He says, what accusation do you bring against this man? They say, well, if he wasn't doing evil, he wouldn't have taken it here. And he says, take him yourselves, judging by your own law. So while they're standing there at the entrance to his headquarters, his instinct is just to send the crowd away.

But of course, as we said, imperial law, which Pilate himself represents, forces him to be involved. So then we see the second thing.

He doesn't really want to have an opinion. So as he interacts with Jesus, he asks him if he's the king of the Jews. Jesus says, do you say this of your own accord? Did the others say it to you? And Pilate says, am I a Jew? It's your own nation that's delivered them over to me. What have you done? And so Jesus, as he often does in these verses, answers a question with another question and forces Pilate to think about what he's saying, but Pilate's response is just to say, am I a Jew?

[6 : 33] What's this got to do with me? And look, he says, as I was saying, look, this doesn't involve me. I'm not here to have an opinion on some Jewish religious controversy. All he wants is bare facts.

He's like, what have you done? What's all this about? He doesn't want to be forced into having his own opinion. So he doesn't want to get involved, doesn't want to have his own opinion.

Thirdly, he doesn't really want to make a decision. And this is the fascinating thing we see in verses 36 to 40. If you look at what happens, you can see that in verse 39, there's a telling statement where he basically goes to them and he says to the Jews, what do you want me to do?

Do you want me to release your king? And then it's like, you know, you've got this habit that's, you've got this custom that I should release someone for you. Who do you want?

Do you want Jesus or do you want Brabus? You can see that he's just trying to really put the decision onto them rather than take it himself.

[7 : 37] And in all these ways, Pilate just wants to stay neutral, doesn't want to get involved, doesn't want to have to have an opinion, doesn't want to make a decision. And so many people are just like him.

And this issue of neutrality affects all of us, every single one of us. It's important for anybody here who's maybe not yet a believer or who's maybe not sure where they stand or who's maybe are not yet in the sense of, yes, one day I want to become a Christian.

As I said, I don't often meet people who are hostile to the gospel. I don't think anybody here is hostile to the gospel. I don't think anybody is skeptical about the claims of Christianity.

I don't think anyone here is cynical about what the Bible says. These people do exist, but I don't think any of them are here. I don't think any are watching at home.

But so many of us are tempted to follow the same line of thinking as Pilate, to just gravitate towards a more neutral position.

[8 : 41] So when it comes to the gospel, when it comes to faith in Jesus, when it comes to thinking about the next step, when it comes to committing to a life of discipleship, when it comes to participating in the life of the church, it's easy to think, I don't really want to get too involved.

So maybe you don't doubt the importance of what the Bible is saying, but you tend to think, well, everything that's been said here applies more to other people than to me.

Thomas isn't really talking to me, it's others that need to hear this more than I do. And as the gospel presses us with the big questions of life and death, of time and eternity, of truth and reality, I just don't want to get involved.

It's also easy to think, I don't want to have to have an opinion. And so so many people can be sucked in by the temptation to just kind of shrug our shoulders, to think, well, I don't really know, I'm not sure.

And as the gospel forces us to think about what we really think, it's so easy to retreat to the idea, I just don't really want to have to have an opinion on this.

[9 : 59] And like Pilate, it's easy to think, I don't really want to make a decision. And this is definitely something that leaves lots of people as what we could call gospel, not yetters.

And I think everybody knows what I mean by that. People who know that they need Jesus, who know that ultimately this is more important than anything else, and who know that on the day you die, you need to have your relationship with God right.

And so you think, yes, I will, but not yet. I don't want to make a decision, I want to defer a decision.

It's so easy to think like that. Sometimes it can be because of our own uncertainties or difficulties.

Other times it's because maybe we feel that somebody else has made a decision that's put a hurdle in our way.

So sometimes maybe we feel somebody said something to us once, or maybe we've seen other people. Maybe I saw my parents, they didn't commit to following Jesus, so I'm not going to. Maybe we've seen a Christian who's actually a hypocrite, and we think, well, I don't want to be like that.

[11 : 03] And so all of these reasons are used to kind of build a position where we just want to stay neutral, we don't want to make a decision. It's so easy to gravitate towards neutrality.

But it doesn't just affect those of us who are maybe not sure or who haven't yet put our faith in Jesus. It also affects every one of us in our life as disciples, as followers of Jesus. As Christians we can struggle with exactly the same temptations.

So we can see the ongoing life and work of the church. We can see opportunities to serve. We can see needs that have to be met. We can see things that are going to cost us, maybe in terms of time and energy, but are needed and yet we think, oh, I just don't want to get involved.

Now, obviously everybody has a limited amount of time and energy. And I have to say that in this church here, you are so amazing at what you do and so generous with your time and energy and resources.

But it's always a temptation for us to just back off from involvement in the church family. It's easy to find ourselves in the position.

[12 : 12] And I was in this position, I think, in my early adult years where I was like, yes, I absolutely have faith in Jesus. But I don't really want to interfere with my day-to-day life too much.

It's always easy in practical terms to want to stay a wee bit more neutral. We can also struggle with the temptation to not really want to have an opinion.

Or perhaps more accurately, we don't want to reveal our opinion. And the consequence of that can often be that we can shy away from making decisions.

And often that's because we don't want to have to carry responsibility. And often churches are paralysed because there's a decision to be made. There's an opportunity to be taken. But people shy away from doing it, not because they disagree with it, but because they don't want to be blamed or criticized by others.

They don't want to be the ones who have to show their opinion. And that can hold us back so easily. We're all prone to this. We're all drawn to neutrality.

[13 : 16] I can say all this because I've struggled with that temptation myself. I think there's two reasons why this can happen, two main reasons anyway why this can happen.

One, neutrality looks comfortable. And often in the short term, it is more comfortable because big questions, big issues, big decisions are not comfortable.

And they're not easy things to think about. I'm a hopeless decision maker. I can't choose what to have for dinner on the ferry because there's too many good options.

And so you think of the bigger questions of life. When do I change the car? What one should I go for? Should I buy a house? Do I have plans for my pension? None of these are comfortable things to think about.

They're hard, stressful, painful questions. And if they are uncomfortable, how much more the question, where do I stand with Jesus?

[14:16] Where am I going to spend eternity? A hard question makes neutrality look comfortable.

But the key point is that neutrality never makes the question go away. It never makes the question go away. It just makes the question bigger and bigger and bigger.

I hate changing my car. I hate haggling with a passion. I have an allergy to it.

I hate all of that. I feel like I'm getting ripped off. I just hate it. And so I never want to change my car.

I've kept my car for years and it's falling apart. And it's just falling apart more rapidly all the time.

And I think I just want to stay neutral. I don't want to have to think about changing the car. And do you know what I'm doing? I'm making the problem bigger and bigger and bigger. And every year I leave it, the more it's going to cost me to change the car. I need to just do it.

[15:20] But I'm not going to do it because I don't want to do it. And now I'm a hypocrite because I'm telling you to do exactly the thing that I struggle to do. And I'm just saying I understand what it's like. But I'm trying to highlight the point that if you leave something, you just make it bigger.

Neutrality doesn't make these questions go away. And neutrality about Jesus is not going to make this question go away. It just presses you more and more urgently.

So neutrality can look comfortable. It's not. But the second reason why we're drawn towards neutrality is this, and this is even more important.

We stay neutral about the gospel because there's something else that we cannot be neutral about. In other words, we stay neutral about the gospel because there's something else that we care about more. So for example, I have come across many people who are anxious about what people might say about them.

[16:23] And that's a particularly acute problem in a rural community where people know what time you put your washing out, let alone whether you profess faith in Jesus. Everybody knows everything in a rural community.

And people can easily come to the conclusion with, well, I'm not going to commit to Jesus.

Certainly, I'm not going to do anything public because people will talk about me and I don't want that. But do you see what that means?

It means that you are being neutral about Jesus because you cannot be neutral about other people's opinions. And are you sure you wanted to be that way around?

It's the same with maybe lifestyle habits that Jesus might get in the way of, or a sin that we know we will have to strive to repent of and to leave behind as we follow Him, or a fear that following Jesus is going to disrupt our plans or dreams for life.

If any of these issues are leaving you neutral about the gospel, it's because you're not neutral about that issue. And I just want you to think about whether that's a wise decision.

[17:40] Pilot wanted neutrality. Did he make a wise decision? So often we're drawn to it.

It's not a good idea. So Pilot is building neutrality and in many ways we don't want to follow him.

The gospel, however, dismantles neutrality.

And we see that in the question that Pilot asks in verse 38, that question, what is truth? And I think it's a fascinating question to think about because, you know, Pilot responds to Jesus by saying, well, how is anyone supposed to know what's true?

How is anyone supposed to know for sure anyway? And I think this question here is kind of an attempt at a bit of a shrug of the shoulders. It's like, well, it can't be true of anything.

And he doesn't want to be pressed into a verdict. But the question is fascinating because in terms of what Pilot is trying to do, it's actually self-defeating. Because I think he means it in a kind of vague, general, neutral sense.

[18:42] You know, what's truth? As if the only answer could be, who knows? And yet the question demands an answer.

What is truth? What is reliable, accurate, ultimate truth? And standing in front of him, Jesus is saying, it's me.

I am the truth. And the minute Jesus does that, Pilot is forced into a verdict because neutrality has evaporated.

Jesus is saying, I have come to bear witness to the truth. Pilot cannot respond to that with a neutral, well, maybe. When Jesus says, everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice, a maybe is not a neutral deferral of a decision.

A maybe is no. I don't agree with you. And that's the key point.

[19 : 52] Neutrality is not compatible with the claims of the gospel. And we see that when we think about some of the things that Jesus has said earlier in John's gospel. He told Nicodemus, truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

He told Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. Everyone who ever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live. And he said to his disciples, I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. These are key claims that Jesus makes. And they are exclusive claims.

And this is where it's so important to remember that the gospel is totally exclusive. And wholly inclusive.

And we have to make sure we know what these are meaning. It's totally exclusive in that Jesus, that not only Jesus can save sinners. Jesus says, I am the way and the truth and the life.

[20 : 54] No one comes to the Father except through me. That's totally exclusive. But the gospel is also wholly inclusive because every single sinner, no matter who they are, is called to come to him.

Everyone, everyone is offered the salvation that Jesus and only Jesus can provide. Now, you might fully agree with what Jesus is saying, or you might recoil from these kind of truth claims.

But the one thing we cannot do, one thing that even a small amount of intellectual reasoning tells us is that these kind of claims make neutrality impossible.

And you see that in Pilate. But Pilate neutrality was impossible. Because even though he tried to turn the questions away from himself, even though he goes on to declare that he finds no guilt in Jesus, and even though that we know from Matthew's gospel, he actually literally tried, he washed his hands to try and sort of absolve himself of any involvement.

Yet still he cannot claim neutrality. He wants to just let go of responsibility. But by letting go, he is actually throwing Jesus into a brutal execution.

[22 : 18] The claims of the gospel and neutrality are incompatible. Compatible for Pilate, incompatible for us.

As we close, I want to ask the question, why does the gospel do this? Why does the gospel dismantle neutrality?

I want to suggest three reasons as we finish. One is because when it comes to the most important things in life, neutrality is deadly.

So Kate has been diagnosed with cancer. She cannot be neutral about that.

Or she will die. She has to respond to that diagnosis, and so does everybody else who's in the same situation as her.

[23 : 16] If your house is on fire, you cannot be neutral. If you see somebody who's had too much to drink walking on the pier and storming away, staggering towards the edge, if you just stand neutrally watching them, they're going to die if they fall in.

And the deadliness of neutrality is absolutely real, more real than anywhere else than when it comes to the gospel. Jesus is calling us to trust in him, and by doing so we can have eternal life, neutrality is not safe.

It's deadly. Second reason why the gospel dismantles our neutrality is because being neutral about Jesus is rubbish in comparison to knowing Jesus.

Being neutral about Jesus is rubbish in comparison to knowing him. In a sermon like this, it's so easy to focus on the seriousness and urgency of the gospel, and it's right to do that because nothing is more serious, nothing is more urgent.

But that is only half the story. It's only half the story because alongside the seriousness of the gospel is the fact that knowing Jesus is just brilliant.

[24 : 29] And neutrality doesn't just expose you to something dangerous, it also leaves you missing out something so amazing. Missing out the joy and the peace and the security and the purpose and the meaning and the identity that you can only find through knowing Jesus as your Savior.

And then number three, last of all, the biggest reason why the gospel dismantles your neutrality is because Jesus is not neutral about you.

Jesus is not neutral about you. Everything that we're reading about in this chapter is moving us towards the cross, and the whole reason the cross happened is because Jesus is not neutral about you.

When it comes to saving you, Jesus doesn't say, don't involve me. He doesn't say, I don't really have an opinion.

He doesn't say, I don't want to make a decision. When Jesus looks at you and at me and sees our sin, our lostness, our desperate need, he doesn't respond with neutrality, he responds by saying, I'm going.

[25 : 49] I'm going to the cross so that I can save them. He does it because he's never neutral about you.

Please don't stay neutral about him. Let's pray.