

# Truth

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I would like to talk with you about a subject that you may think you know a lot about: truth. I would like to base my talk on a number of scriptures that talk about truth.

The first is in John 18. There is a key question in these verses that I always found curious. Christ was tried before Caiphas and then brought to Pilate, because the Jewish Sanhedrin did not have the power to sentence anyone to death. After some interchange His accusers told Pilate that Christ claimed to be King of the Jews, a crime of treason but not the crime Caiphas was concerned about, which was blasphemy. Pilate asked Christ if the accusation of treason was true, and Christ explained that His kingdom was not of this world and added, “Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice” (verse 37). Then Pilate responded with the question “What is truth?” (verse 38).

A few years ago you all watched the news as President Clinton’s problems with Monica Lewinsky unfolded. What was odd about the event to me was that both sides of the argument had identical facts. One side looked at the facts and said, “Clinton is a flawed but great leader.” The other side looked at exactly the same facts and said, “Clinton is a liar and guilty of a felony—he should be thrown out.” What was the truth? It was the same set of facts.

The point is that truth is not just a set of facts. Truth has something to do with your attitudes and philosophy and the way you have of looking at the world. Note that in verse 37, Christ makes an interesting statement: He indicates that we must be “of the truth” to really hear His voice. I think He is referring to this point about truth being more than a set of facts, that you have to have the right attitude and value system and be somehow “of the truth,” as the scripture describes, to understand truth.

The second scripture is found in John 8. The chapter begins with the woman taken in adultery. Immediately following the incident, Christ says that He is “the light of the world” (verse 12). The Pharisees argue that his record is not true, but Christ goes on to talk about how you can know truth and how knowing His Father is really the only way to know truth (see John 8:13–18, 26–29).

*As he spake these words, many believed on him.  
Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;*

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*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* [John 8:30–32]

Several years ago I was a PhD student at Stanford University and was teaching in the MBA program at the University of Santa Clara, a Jesuit school. The leaders of the school were Jesuit priests, and I can honestly tell you they were some of the most insightful people I have ever met. At the same time there was a national controversy going on about the feminist movement. A very outspoken feminist in the Church—Sonia Johnson, for those of you who may have heard her name—was bitterly attacking the Church and its leaders. She went through an excommunication hearing. All of the national news media were gathered around the Church building where the bishop had asked her to come in for the hearing and were upset that they weren't allowed into the hearing with the bishopric. The National Organization of Women wanted to provide lawyers to help her argue her case with the bishop. She was ultimately excommunicated.

Soon after the excommunication she went around the country giving speeches. She came to the University of Santa Clara, gave a speech, and had a question-and-answer period following the speech. One of the young students in the audience stood and said, "It must be hard to leave your Church." (Remember, this university is roughly a Catholic equivalent of BYU.) He then asked, "How did it feel?"

Sonia gave a fascinating response. She said she reacted differently than she expected—she felt free.

Huh?

See, before, she had to believe God was a man; now she was free to believe God was a woman. Before, she had to believe her salvation depended on a man—Christ. Now she was free to believe anything she wanted to believe. She was exhilarated! She felt free!

I thought about that response a long time. I had trouble reconciling it with Christ's concept

of truth making us free. And then a thought hit me. Truth is terribly constraining. You see, if  $2 + 2 = 4$ , then we are not free to believe that the total is 5 or 10 or 103. Only one right answer is constraining. You can believe anything you want, but on the other hand, if you want to be free to build a rocket that is capable of flying to the moon, then you had better believe  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Without the terribly constraining nature of truth, we could not be free to do anything!

In high school I did my homework, I didn't sluff class, and I was terribly constrained. A lot of kids laughed at me (and others like me) because we didn't have any freedom. They had freedom: they sluffed class, didn't do any homework, smoked, and drank if they felt like it. We didn't have freedom: we only did what we were told to do—according to them.

It is interesting to look at the same issue several years later. I graduated with a good GPA, got a scholarship, and had a big choice of schools I could attend and a wide selection of majors. As time went on I worked hard and had freedom to do anything I wanted to do. I was constantly faced with a bewildering set of choices. I had more and more freedom to do more and more things. Some of those who thought I had no freedom in high school didn't graduate from high school, couldn't get a good job, couldn't afford a house, and couldn't go back to school because they were earning so little they didn't have enough time or money. Over time they had less and less freedom. I am sure they feel trapped today.

The same is true in the gospel. Doing what you are asked to do may seem like anything but freedom. But you see, God gives us commandments because He wants us to be free. Suppose you knew a child better than the child could possibly know himself, and you knew that the only thing that would make that child truly happy would be to, say, become a neurosurgeon. What would you tell the child to do? Go to school, don't sluff, take the hard classes, get good grades—terribly confining

stuff. But did you give him the commandments to make him miserable? No, you gave him the commandments because you knew that the only way he was going to be free to achieve the greatest possible happiness and do what he really wanted to do—if he only knew it himself—was to follow your rules.

It is the same way with God. Truth may appear to be irritatingly confining—think of the BYU Dress and Grooming Standards and the Honor Code. Other schools look at us and laugh, just the way my high school friends used to look at me and laugh. Now the greatest agony of my high school friends who thought they were free is knowing what might have been. I believe the greatest agony of mortality and eternity is knowing what might have been. Note that the LDS version of hell, “outer darkness,” is only for those who know the truth and reject it. Knowing the inexpressible joy that might have been and never experiencing it can certainly be expressed as the agony that is much like being in eternal torment or, as the scriptures often put it in a metaphor, “burning.”

Don’t go through the agony of knowing what might have been when it is too late. Learn the truth now. Obey the truth. I promise you and, more important, the Lord—who knows you better than you know yourself—also promises you that you will achieve a happiness so great, so awesome, so far beyond anything you can imagine you simply cannot comprehend it. If you really understood that truth, you would sacrifice anything—everything—to achieve it. Understanding this truth is central to your purpose for being on the planet.

I want you to imagine yourself as a missionary. You have just been made senior companion and you have a new greenie who barely speaks the language. You have been teaching a young mother and her two small children. Her husband is not interested in the Church and has not been meeting with you, but she and her children have been attending church, and she

has developed a deep testimony. They love the members and the joy that the Church and the gospel bring into their lives and have accepted the baptismal challenge.

One Sunday you go to church and she is not there, even though she promised you a couple of days earlier that she would be. You are concerned that she might be ill, so after church you go to her apartment. She meets you at the door, and she does not appear to be ill. You chat for a minute and ask if you can come in. She reluctantly lets you in the door. After a couple of minutes of chatting you ask her why she wasn’t at church. She looks down and says nothing for two minutes. Two minutes can be an eternity without a word being spoken. In a broken voice she weeps and says that if they go to church anymore her husband will leave them.

Now I want you to think for a moment about what you will say. I hope you realize that there is not a memorized dialogue learned in the Missionary Training Center you can roll off the end of a glib tongue and expect to solve the problem. There is no canned approach you learned in some university class that will work. In fact, what might be exactly the right thing to say to one person in that situation may be exactly the wrong thing to say to another person who appears to be in the identical situation.

There is only one way you can know what to say. Someone who knows that person and that situation better than you could possibly know or understand has to tell you what to say. The wrong words have the potential to destroy the life situation of that mother and her children. The Lord through His Spirit has to tell you what to say.

That means that you have to be able to hear what the Lord wants to tell you. And that requires a clear channel between you and Him. That means that you have to be clean and pure and able to hear His voice. You have to be “of the truth” in a very real sense.

One of my favorite authors is C. S. Lewis. He wrote a set of children’s books called *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which reflect his powerful Christian beliefs. In one of these books, a selfish boy is transformed into a dragon but still has on his bracelet, which is way too small for a dragon. He cannot get it off, and it hurts terribly. In this part of the book called “The Voyage of the *Dawn Treader*,” Eustace is recounting the story to his cousin Edmund. I should note that the lion in this series of books represents the Christ figure. Let me read:

*“Well, last night I was more miserable than ever. And that beastly arm-ring was hurting like anything—”*

*“Is that all right now?”*

*Eustace laughed—a different laugh from any Edmund had heard him give before—and slipped the bracelet easily off his arm. “There it is,” he said, “and anyone who likes can have it as far as I’m concerned. Well, as I say, I was lying awake and wondering what on earth would become of me. And then—but, mind you, it may have been all a dream. I don’t know.”*

*“Go on,” said Edmund, with considerable patience.*

*“Well, anyway, I looked up and saw the very last thing I expected: a huge lion coming slowly towards me. And one queer thing was that there was no moon last night, but there was moonlight where the lion was. So it came nearer and nearer. I was terribly afraid of it. You may think that, being a dragon, I could have knocked any lion out easily enough. But it wasn’t that kind of fear. I wasn’t afraid of it eating me, I was just afraid of it—if you can understand. Well, it came close up to me and looked straight into my eyes. And I shut my eyes tight. But that wasn’t any good because it told me to follow it.” . . .*

*“. . . And I knew I’d have to do what it told me, so I got up and followed it. And it led me a long way into the mountains. . . . So at last we came to the top of a mountain I’d never seen before and on the top of this mountain there was a garden—trees*

*and fruit and everything. In the middle of it there was a well.*

*“. . . The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe, it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. . . .*

*“I was just going to say that I couldn’t undress because I hadn’t any clothes on when I suddenly thought that dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can cast their skins. Oh, of course, thought I, that’s what the lion means. So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully. . . . In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to go down into the well for my bathe.*

*“But just as I was going to put my feet into the water I looked down and saw that they were all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as they had been before. Oh, that’s all right, said I, it only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I’ll have to get out of it too. So I scratched and tore again and this underskin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bathe.*

*“Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was longing to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.*

*“Then the lion said . . . ‘You will have to let me undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.*

*“The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. . . .*

*“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt—and there it was, lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again.” [C. S. Lewis, “The Voyage of the Dawn Treader,” *The Chronicles of Narnia* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 473–75]*

To understand truth, we must be “of the truth.” To be “of the truth,” we must be clean. To be clean—to shed our sins—we must repent, and repentance requires Christ. *There is no other way.* This is part of what Christ meant in the 8th chapter of John we were just reading from when He said, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (verse 12).

When our first son was born, I was overwhelmed with the love that I felt for Ryan. I also felt it again with my other children. This love was fundamentally different than love I had felt before. You see, I love my wife deeply for who she is and for all she does for me. I love my parents deeply for who they are and what they have done for me. They *deserve* my love. They have earned it. Ryan was a newborn. I didn’t know him. He kept us awake at night, he needed constant attention, he was sometimes crying and fussy. He *didn’t deserve* to be loved. He hadn’t earned it in any sense of the word. Yet I loved him (and still do) so intensely that I would do anything to help him.

God feels the same love for us—even if we feel we don’t deserve it.

I believe that developing this love for someone who doesn’t “deserve” it is part of our essential experience in this life if we are to achieve our purpose in life. I believe that is why the Lord feels families are so important and that love should be based on something other than selfish gratification.

The Mormon religion is fundamentally different from other Christian religions. Ask people of other faiths if God is our Father and they usually will say yes. But ask them if God is also the Father of cats and dogs and cows and horses and they will also often say yes for exactly the same reason: He created them. When we say God is our Father, we mean something fundamentally different. We mean He is literally the Father of our spirit. We can become like Him. As powerful as the love is that I feel for my children, it pales in comparison to the love God has for you. I feel that my experience as a father provided me with that understanding better than any other means could have. That is truth.

Your experience here at the university and life in general will provide you with truth if you will approach the Lord for understanding. Sometimes things must be experienced to be understood. I remember an experience I had on my mission. I was assigned to the mission home and received a call from a missionary newly arrived in the field. He indicated that he wanted to go home right then. The mission president and his wife were unavailable for a few days. I asked the mission secretary to go with me, and we drove down to the little Swiss village where the missionary was stationed. I went tracting with him while the mission secretary went tracting with his senior companion. We tracted farmhouses, and so we had a long time between houses to talk. After talking about missionary work and life in general, the missionary was feeling okay about staying on.

Our conversation turned to him. This missionary was different than most—he was much older because he was a convert. He was

converted while he was a soldier in Vietnam, and then he went on a mission after he returned home from the war. He talked about his experiences, and at one point he talked about being on reconnaissance when shots were being fired. He and the soldiers in his patrol dove off the road to avoid the shots, and he heard explosions around him. The Viet Cong had placed land mines around and then used gunfire to get the soldiers to jump off the road. He talked about seeing one of his buddies literally blown apart. He became choked up.

There was silence, and finally I said, “I understand.”

I remember that he looked at me and said, “No, you don’t! There is no way you could understand. You had to be there. You had to feel it to understand.”

And you know, he was right.

Sometimes the Lord makes us go through difficult experiences because there is no other way to understand the truth. Sometimes we

have to go through pain to understand pain. But it is the gospel that will provide us with the right attitude and perspective to understand. Without the gospel some people only learn bitterness or anger from these experiences. We have to be “of the truth” to understand the truth. We can have the same experiences, the same facts, but we have to be “of the truth” to understand the truth.

You may be terrified sitting in front of the young mother as a missionary, feeling helpless, not knowing what to say. But if you are clean, you can feel the Lord’s love for the person you are trying to help, and your confidence waxes strong—not because you are perfect, but because you can feel the Lord speaking through you and you know He has the right answer. You are merely the vehicle He uses to help this family. He knows the truth, and you will know the truth, and it will set you truly free.

Of this I testify, and I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.