

Gospel Truthiness

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[0 : 00] Again, let me say welcome to you this morning, and I'm excited to open God's Word together.

You know, we all carry around with us certain beliefs and assumptions that we feel are true, and yet sometimes to our great chagrin we find out they're not true.

So, for instance, most of us would assume, I think, that toilet seats are covered in germs, right? If I told you to eat a meal off a toilet seat, you wouldn't do it, and you'd probably be wise not to do it. But research consistently shows that, in fact, toilet seats are relatively clean. Feels like they would be dirty, that feels true, but in fact they're relatively clean.

They're regularly cleaned and disinfected, so in terms of surfaces in our lives, they're one of the better surfaces to be in contact with. Do you know what has ten times more germs on it than your average toilet seat, though?

[1 : 08] Your smartphone. True story. So that's one kind of example. Another example would be the claim that Napoleon was short. Feels true.

We've heard it a lot. Not true. In fact, Napoleon was slightly above average in his day in France for a man. Feels true.

Not true. Lots of examples like that, right? Go outside with your hair wet, you're more likely to get a cold. Feels true. Not true. When you swallow chewing gum, it stays in your body for seven years. Feels true. Not true. Right? For most of us, not true. Right? So lots of examples. Years ago, Stephen Colbert coined this term that I feel has only gotten more useful with age, and that's the term truthiness.

You familiar with this term? Truthiness. Truthiness, the idea that there are things that we believe because they feel true, or because we want them to be true, rather than because they are known to be true or based in fact.

[2 : 11] And Colbert mainly applied the concept of truthiness to news media and the problem of fake news. But actually here in 2 Corinthians 11, we see a completely different example of truthiness.

And this is truthiness when it comes to the gospel itself. We're in a series in 2 Corinthians, and this week we're going to come to the crux of the whole issue in Corinth.

The reason that Paul had written all of these letters, the reason he was so concerned and filled with anxiety over the church, is because of truthiness that was plaguing the church.

So whether you're here as a longtime Christian or a new convert, whether you're here as somebody who is not sure what you believe, maybe this is your first time in church in a long time or ever, regardless of where you find yourself spiritually this morning, this is perhaps the greatest spiritual danger there is.

And I know that sounds hyperbolic, but this is perhaps the greatest, if not the oldest, spiritual danger that we face in our lives. So we're going to look at this as we look at 2 Corinthians 11.

[3 : 21] First we're going to look at what's the problem, and then why does it matter, and then what can be done. So let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that Your Word, because of Pentecost, isn't just ink and paper.

We're not here to reflect on human insights or wisdom. Lord, we're here because You are a God who dwells in and among Your people. Your Holy Spirit is here.

Your Holy Spirit can take these ink and paper words and turn them into words of flesh. Lord, as we are here not only to read and hear Your Word, but to see Your Word, to encounter Your Word in Jesus Christ.

And so, Lord, as we encounter the Word made flesh, would You turn our hearts from stone to flesh, Lord? Would You change us, bless us, mold us, Lord, as only You can.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So, first of all, what is the problem that we are zeroing in on? The context of this, as we've said in earlier sermons, is essentially years earlier, Paul had come and he had started this church in Corinth.

[4 : 32] He was preaching the gospel, people converted, and the church was born there. And then Paul, when he felt like the church was in good hands, he appointed elders to oversee the church, he moved on to take his mission elsewhere.

And then, not long after, other leaders arrived in the church and they began to preach and teach. And a lot of people were very impressed by these new leaders.

Verse 5, Paul sardonically refers to these new leaders as super apostles. And these are highly persuasive and compelling teachers.

They'd all been trained as professional orators, and rhetoric was a big deal in this day. The way of speaking, your style of speaking, was a way of signaling that you were highly educated, incredible, and worth listening to.

And so, these were all trained rhetoricians, and they're speaking in the most impressive ways. And the problem is, these super apostles, Paul begins to realize, are preaching a truthy gospel as opposed to the true gospel.

[5 : 38] They're preaching a truthy version of the gospel. Paul says in verse 4, for if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

He's referring to their teaching as a different Jesus, a different spirit, a different gospel. And in this case, a different gospel meant that they were teaching a version of what we might call Christian triumphalism, or the theological term would be an over-realized eschatology, a version of what we might think of as a prosperity gospel of sorts.

So, according to the Bible scholar D.A. Carson, they're emphasizing things like spiritual power, and exaltation with Christ, and ecstatic spiritual experiences, and freedom, and triumph, and victorious living, and leadership, and religious success.

And they looked the part. They were successful. They looked successful. They had nice clothes. They were suppressing, however, those aspects of Christianity that stressed things like meekness. They were suppressing the idea of servanthood. They rarely mentioned the need for obedience. They rarely talked about or evidenced humility. You would never hear a sermon about the need to follow Christ in His suffering if you are to follow Him in His crown.

[7 : 12] Notice they were not denying the gospel altogether. They weren't denying Jesus. Some of what they said was true, and they could actually point to Bible verses to back up the claims they were making.

They could proof text their sermons. But in their teaching, they were subtly redefining the gospel to make it more palatable and attractive, so not surprisingly, many of the Corinthians flocked to these teachers.

They were excited about these new ideas. They found them very empowering, very enlivening. Now, next week, we're going to talk a lot more about the relationship between Paul and these super apostles and the difference between their ministry credentials, the ways they boast about their legitimacy.

But for now, what I want to do is to draw out the implications of what we've just said before we move on. The problem that we're talking about this morning is not the problem of unbelief. Certainly, that's an issue for some of us.

But the problem in view here is far more subtle and far more insidious. These are well-meaning people, ranging from new converts to mature believers, who go to church, who listen to this teaching, and they believe that they're hearing the gospel.

[8 : 36] They believe that what they're being taught is the true gospel. For the most part, they have no idea that they have, as Paul says, bought into a different gospel than the one Paul proclaimed.

And, you know, the same problem exists today, only on a much larger scale. Everywhere you look, there are prominent speakers and podcasts and thought leaders and Instagram gurus and books and articles all selling truthy versions of the gospel.

You know, some examples that I've sort of personally encountered over the years, it's very common to speak with people who assume that the gospel is a kind of moral gospel.

That's one very common example of a truthy gospel. The moral gospel says something like, all good people go to heaven, and God essentially simply wants us to be good people, to be nice people, to be decent people, to recycle, to teach our kids to say, oh my gosh, instead of, oh my God.

And if we are those kinds of people, then we will be saved and go to heaven. And you hear that, and we've heard it so often that many people hear that, and that feels true. That feels true.

[9 : 52] That feels right. But it's not true. Right? If you really penetrate into what's being said there, it's actually the exact opposite of the gospel. Nothing in that statement, all good people go to heaven, is true.

First of all, the ultimate promise of the gospel is not that we go to heaven. It's a resurrected body and a renewed world. And the great miracle of the gospel isn't that good people get saved, it's that bad people, sinful people, people who are hopelessly lost, get saved.

Right? And so it's actually the opposite of the gospel. Another thing that you're likely to hear in our culture is some version of what we might call a therapeutic gospel.

This says, Jesus came to help us live a happy life, to be our true selves, to live however we want, as long as we are happy, however we define that happiness.

Again, feels true, feels right to many people. Not true. God's ultimate aim isn't to make us happy, it's to make us holy.

[10 : 56] Right? One day we will be completely satisfied in Jesus, but until then we're probably going to face tremendous hardship. And yet it's often in those times of suffering, and this is a really hard thing for us to wrestle with, it's often in those times of suffering that we most experience intimacy with Jesus and grow in holiness.

You say, where do you see that in Scripture? Paul's entire life. Paul's entire life. We'll talk about that more next week. So there are many more examples of truthy Gospels that we could give.

The prosperity Gospel, the idea that if you give yourselves and your money to Jesus, He'll bless you with health and wealth and prosperity. The self-improvement Gospel, that the Gospel is really about helping us maximize our potential.

It gives us six steps to a better marriage or eight steps to a healthier lifestyle. The universal Gospel, love means acceptance. Because God is love, He should accept everybody regardless of who they are, what they believe, how they live.

The social justice Gospel, the Gospel is really about becoming aware of privilege and overturning oppressive power structures. The political Gospel, many versions of the political Gospel.

[12 : 09] Well, Jesus really at the end of the day was a socialist. Well, at the end of the day, it's very clear that Jesus was a capitalist. Jesus was obviously a refugee. Jesus was an immigrant. Jesus sides with the poor.

Jesus sides with America. Right? In one way or another, Jesus takes sides in our politics, isn't it clear, from Scripture? And see, all of these versions of the Gospel, they all feel true to some people, but they've all been diluted and subtly redefined.

And here's the real issue. Most people can't tell the difference. Most of us will hear that and we will just sort of nod our heads. Right? Not all of them, but some of them. And so some of us might hear this and say, okay, that's great, but why gatekeep the Gospel?

Right? Why police it? Right? We live in a culture where people are free to believe what they want. Why don't you just let people believe what they want to believe? And whatever version of the Gospel they want to believe, let them believe it. What's the big deal?

So why does this matter? And from the text, we see three reasons why this actually does matter, why the stakes are actually fairly high with this issue, higher than we might think. The first reason this matters is this.

[13 : 19] The true Gospel isn't just about beliefs. We're not simply here to debate theological abstractions. The true Gospel is actually about a relationship, a very important relationship.

Paul says in verses 1 and 2, I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. He's being kind of playful here. Do bear with me, for I feel a divine jealousy for you since I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

Now, that's no accident that he's using this metaphor. One of the primary metaphors, if not the primary metaphor in all of Scripture for the relationship that God desires to have with you and with me is the metaphor of marriage.

Right? When Paul talks about marriage in Ephesians 5, he says, this mystery is profound and I'm saying that it refers to Christ and the church. What's he saying there?

Human marriage is itself as great as marriage can be. One of the greatest relationships you can have. But even that is a pale shadow.

[14 : 25] It's an icon. It's a picture of something far greater, infinitely greater. The relationship that God desires to have with you, the people he made.

And that's a profound thought that even the best marriages on this planet pale in comparison to the kind of relationship that God wants to have with his people. And guess what?

A lot of people want to be married, can't be married. A lot of people want to be in a good marriage, they're in a hard marriage. But this relationship, this is a relationship that is open to every single person on the planet if they come and ask.

So the stakes are fairly high. You know, there's a reason why we have so many longings that will never be satisfied in this life. There's a reason why no matter how great your marriage is or how great your job is or how successful you are or how much acclaim or fame you receive, there's a reason why it's never enough.

There's a reason why people get to the end of their lives of striving and fighting and climbing the ladder only to realize they still feel empty. They still feel regret.

[15 : 32] St. Augustine famously said in his confessions, you've made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Why the restlessness? Because you were made for this relationship with God and until you know that, your life is not going to make sense.

When someone repents and believes the true gospel, they become, in a sense, betrothed to Christ, meaning there's a promise. One day that restlessness will be satisfied in Him.

Right? So the true gospel is not just about beliefs. It's about a relationship. The second reason this matters so much is that truthy gospels inoculate people against the true gospel.

Right? You know, inoculation means giving somebody a mild version of something, a diluted version of something, that then makes them immune to the real thing.

Right? And that's what we see here. When... After the Corinthians bought into this exciting, revised, updated, evolved version of the gospel, they begin to reject Paul and his gospel.

[16 : 44] They were immunized against Paul's gospel. Right? So these super apostles, they would wax eloquent about how Jesus is going to give you victory. Jesus is going to overcome all of your adversaries.

Jesus is going to heal all of your ailments. He's going to take away all of your suffering. He's going to make you successful. He's going to give you the spouse that you've always wanted. He's going to fill you with spiritual power.

And they would go week after week and hear that kind of teaching. And then you have Paul. Right? Paul's poor. Paul's weak. Paul's not speaking like a trained orator.

Paul's, in many people's opinions, a rather boring public speaker. And Paul has suffered. Paul...

The only thing people know about Paul, if they've never known anything else about Paul, man, that guy suffered.

And so these people, they hear all this preaching and then they look at Paul. And then they hear Paul say things like, well, actually, suffering and weakness are a central part of the Christian life. Actually, Jesus was more blessed than anyone.

[17 : 49] And yet, Jesus suffered more than anyone. Why would we think, as Jesus' followers, that our lives would be any different? And they would hear that sermon and they would say, no thanks. I want to go back and hear this preaching over here.

At the end of a sermon like that, I feel great. I'm ready to tackle my day. Paul, you're kind of bumming me out. You're kind of a downer. You know, there's an old saying, whatever you convert people with, you convert them to.

If you convert people to a truthy gospel, then that's what they're going to want to hear week in and week out. The third reason this matters is that truthy gospels are actually profoundly spiritually dangerous.

And here's where we really get into the implication of what Paul's saying here. Verse 20, Paul says that by bearing with a false gospel, these believers are actually allowing themselves to be enslaved. They're allowing themselves to be devoured and taken advantage of. This is strong language here. I'll give you an example of what that means. If somebody believes the prosperity gospel, then they believe the idea that the more I give myself and more importantly my money to Jesus, meaning this certain televangelist, the more I'm going to be blessed with money and riches and health and prosperity in return.

[19 : 14] But that promise is never actually fulfilled in the way that it is laid out. And so what happens? People give more and they give more and they give more and they give more and they never quite get what's promised in return.

They're being taken advantage of, as Paul would say. If someone believes the therapeutic gospel, they believe that following Jesus is about happiness and contentment, what happens when the bottom drops out of life?

What happens when they get fired, when their marriage falls apart, when their kids hate them and don't want to talk to them anymore? What happens then? Right? They look at all the promises that were made, Jesus is going to give you a happy life full of contentment, and they say, well, this whole thing must be bunk.

There must be nothing true to this. And they're very likely to probably just leave the faith altogether. If people are sold some version of a political gospel, what happens?

What does the political gospel do? Does it create life, flourishing, unity, joy, togetherness? No. People become divided from one another. Churches are ripped apart.

[20 : 17] Families are split apart. Friendships that have lasted years end in fiery ruin because people no longer have anything to talk about that doesn't create conflict.

We've all experienced that in the last couple of years. You know, there's this great term, I think it came from Andy Crouch, that we're all experiencing, diminishing circles of trust. Who can I really talk to about these issues?

Who are my people? Who can I be myself around? Who can I not tiptoe around? Who... What can I say around whom without fear of some sort of blowback? Diminishing circles of trust.

It's because the political gospel, for many of us, has taken root. And Paul's very clear about who's behind all of this. In verse 3 he says, but I'm afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

And then he says in verses 14 and 15, even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

[21 : 24] Here's what Paul's saying. This kind of deception has been happening since the very beginning of time. When the serpent first said to Eve, did God really say?

This is the insidious power behind truthy gospels. Why does it matter? Because we're not standing on neutral ground. This is contested territory.

There is one gospel that makes freedom possible. All other gospels return us to chains, return us to slavery. Stephen Colbert may have coined the term truthiness, but Satan invented it a long time ago.

Right? So that's the problem, is that there are truthy versions of the gospel, truthy Christianity, biblical truthiness. It's out there. It's everywhere. Most of us have a very hard time telling the difference between the true gospel and a truthy version of the gospel.

And the stakes are very high. Our relationship with God is at stake. Right? Our ability to hear and accept the true gospel without being inoculated against it is at stake.

[22 : 45] And there is actually spiritual power, malevolent spiritual power, behind all of this. The stakes are very high. So what can be done? How do we respond to this issue in our own church?

Well, if you look at Jesus, after His baptism, Jesus goes into the wilderness. And Satan comes to Jesus in the wilderness and begins to tempt Him. We know about three things, three attempts, but it could have been many more than that.

And of course, the purpose of the temptation is to convince Jesus one way or another to forsake His identity and to forsake His purpose in the world. By the way, it's the exact same reason that Satan first tempted Eve and Adam in the garden, to convince them one way or another to forsake their identity and purpose in the world.

And Satan had succeeded in doing this with Adam and Eve using truthiness. Did God really say? And so he tries the same tactics with Jesus.

He actually tries to twist God's words. He uses Scripture. He uses proof texts. But he takes these verses out of context.

[24 : 02] Psalm 91, for instance, he takes it out of context and he applies it in twisted ways that align with his agenda rather than with what God is actually saying.

And by the way, this is just a great time to point out proof texting. And by that, I mean making a claim and then quoting one or two verses to back that claim up. That allows truthy Gospels to spread like wildfire.

But the good news of the Gospel is that where Adam and Eve failed, Jesus actually succeeds. And we say, well, how does Jesus refute this temptation? How does he persevere in his identity and mission?

And the answer is he uses Scripture. And you say, well, isn't Jesus the Word of God incarnate? Isn't he the voice in Scripture that we're hearing?

Absolutely. Jesus knew all Scripture. Jesus also knew how it all fits together, and yet Jesus uses Scripture. In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere where Jesus is doing anything in his ministry where he is not quoting Scripture regularly.

[25 : 12] He quotes Scripture all of the time, all the way up until the moment of his death. He chooses Scripture to express himself. And what this shows us is the way that we need to think about the issue of truthy Gospels and biblical truthiness in the church.

we always need to allow Scripture to interpret itself, to interpret itself. In other words, we always need to interpret Scripture in context.

And by that, I don't just mean the paragraphs around it. I mean the larger context of Scripture as a whole. You know, the amazing thing about the Bible is, on the one hand, the Bible is not a book. It is a library. It was written over thousands of years. It was written in many genres from history to wisdom to poetry. It was written in a variety of languages.

It was written by as many as 40 different authors. And yet it all fits together to tell one story. And that story is what we mean when we say the Gospel.

[26 : 20] The whole story, beginning with God's creation of all things. The fall in human sin and rebellion. God's redemption of the world through Jesus Christ, His life, death, and resurrection.

And then the eventual renewal of all things. The whole story, soup to nuts, from Genesis to Revelation. That's what we have in mind here. Now, we can try to summarize the Gospel.

You know, I grew up with a summary of the Gospel that said the Gospel is about salvation by grace through faith. Right? We can summarize the Gospel. Jesus died to save us from our sin.

Repent and believe in Him. These are summaries of the Gospel. That's the gist of it. But you actually need all of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation to really draw out the meaning of the Gospel.

You need the whole story. One of my favorite quotes from Flannery O'Connor, she says, a story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way.

[27 : 21] And it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. It takes every word in Scripture to tell what the meaning of the Gospel is.

Every single word matters. And the more we know the story of Scripture, the more it is in our blood and bones, the more we pray it and speak it together and speak it privately and read it and study it and teach it to our kids, the more it is in us and forming us, the more we develop a kind of Gospel instinct.

You know, one of my great favorite illustrations is the Chicago Shakespeare Improv Company. And they're known, they're kind of famous for their ability. They will stand up at the beginning of the night and they'll ask for a title from the audience and they give two 90-minute performances every night and they will say, give us a title and the audience shouts out a title and based on a title alone, they will improv a 90-minute Shakespearean play done in a Shakespearean style.

And you say, well, how in the world could people pull that off with no prior planning? It is because they devote themselves to the study of Shakespeare. They read it, they mark it, they learn it, they inwardly digest it, they marinate in Shakespeare until they develop a Shakespearean instinct and they can speak in a Shakespearean way and they can recognize instantly when they're reading something that is of Shakespeare and we need to have the same approach to Scripture.

We need to develop a kind of gospel instinct so that we are able to speak in ways that are shaped and formed by the gospel and recognize when that has not happened. Right?

[29 : 03] This is what we see here and this is how Jesus is able to overcome this temptation. And of course, the very essence of the gospel is Jesus Christ Himself. Right?

It's not about anything that we do for Jesus. But what Jesus has already done and will do for us. And so the last thing I'll say about it is this. If any version of the gospel you hear either adds to what Jesus has done.

Right? You've got to believe in Jesus but you also need to speak in tongues. Or takes away from what Jesus has done. You don't need to really worry about sin.

You just need to get yourself together. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. If any gospel you hear either adds to what Jesus has done or takes away from what Jesus has done, it's not the gospel.

You're hearing something else. I'll close with one of my favorite prayers from our book of common prayer. Amen. Blessed Lord who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that we may embrace and ever hold fast to the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

[30 : 27] Amen.