

Greg Clarke The truth sets free

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we are indeed grateful that we can meet here tonight in freedom, in peace, to understand you, to explore you, to worship you, to focus our lives together around you.

We thank you for that privilege and we understand that not everyone in the world, not all Christian people can do that. So please protect that opportunity in this country. Protect this church, protect all who would like to gather in the name of Christ.

And Lord, tonight as we open your word and think about how it applies to our lives, please grant blessing and wisdom to the words I have to say and open our hearts to receive what you have to offer.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Can you all hear me all right? Is there a big echo sound? It means I should move this somewhere. Can you hear up the back? Okay, I'm getting nods. That's good. It must just be my old age and my hearing.

Thank you for the invitation to be here tonight. And it's always a privilege to come to a church where you're not regularly part of the congregation and to deliver a message. But you always do it with a little bit of fear and trepidation.

[1 : 12] Think, what have these people been through this week? I've just heard about all the amazing things that are happening at the church. Big changes and building projects. And is it a school, a junior school that's, or preschool, is it?

A Chinese school? Fantastic. What a marvellous thing to be adding to your community. But of course, I come in knowing almost nothing about you. Nothing about your challenges this week. Nothing about the pressures on your life. Nothing about the sadnesses you've experienced or the joys you've had this week. We come together with a common bond that we want to know Christ. We bring all those things, all those stresses, all those joys, all those family situations, to that one goal, to know Christ. And the passage I've brought to you tonight, I think, is one that is extremely comforting, extremely liberating for those who want to know Christ.

Because it's saying to us that if you know the teachings of Christ, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. If you come to this man through this book, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

[2 : 30] It's an enormous claim. It's one that you'd be right to be sceptical about. One that we need to justify. One that we need to explore and see what it has to offer us today.

Do you know anyone who's blind? How many people here know someone who is blind? Anyone? One, two, three people, four people do. That's quite a large percentage, actually, in any gathering. It's not the most common of problems, most common of afflictions in Australia.

But around the world is a very common problem to be blind. In my Bible Society work, I've come across the names of a couple, and forgive me, I need to read them because my Chinese expression is so terrible.

It's Ma Hongming and his wife, Zhao Bilian. Two Chinese people, they live in a rural village. They're in their 70s, and they've both been blind since birth.

I can't imagine how hard life has been for them. How much they just haven't experienced. How much of what I take for granted is completely dark to them in their world.

[3 : 37] How difficult the just basic activities of life have been in a rural village in China, blind since birth. Well, we received a letter from them.

A letter that went to the Bible Society office, I think, in Singapore. And they had received a Braille Bible that's produced at the Amity Bible Press in Nanjing.

Braille Bibles are enormous things, because you know Braille, there's all the little bumps, and you run your fingers along the bumps to read when you're blind. And these are Braille Bibles that can be

understood by an older Chinese couple.

And the letter turned up in the office, and this is what it said. Thank you for the Bible, which we read every day. We have no worries about the future.

God is with us all the time. People have asked us before if we're worried about what is to come, since we're already so old and we have no children to support us. We thank them for their concern. [4 : 42] We told them that we simply take whatever comes our way, whenever it comes. After all, God is in control of our lives. Why should we be anxious about tomorrow?

What an extraordinary thing to be able to write as you come towards, I guess, the end of their lives, having had such difficulties, such struggles, but to feel such peace, such contentment, such release from anxiety.

And it's come from the Word of God. It's come from knowing the teachings of Jesus. I can hear echoes of all sorts of Bible passages that they would have read down the years, from Matthew 6 or Luke 12 or Philippians 4, 6, cast your cares, your anxieties on God, who alone knows what tomorrow will bring.

Now, all of these echoes of Scripture that must be in their ears as they think about it. And our passage tonight also comes to mind because here's a couple who know the truth and the truth has set them free.

They know the truth about life. They know what really matters. And knowing that truth has set them free. Now, of course, it hasn't set them free from their daily struggles, from making a cup of tea when you're blind or from working out where the money's going to come from or who is going to care for me when I'm old.

[6 : 11] They've still got the daily struggles, more struggles than we can possibly imagine. But at a deeper level or a higher level, at a more profound level, they don't have a worry in the world.

The truth has set them free. Well, friends, from this passage that was really well read for us tonight, thank you very much, I want to leave you with just four thoughts around what it means to be set free in the truth about Christ.

Four thoughts about what it means to be radically free. Not free from every anxiety, not free from worrying about what Christmas presents you've got to buy for your uncle or not worried about your job, released from worrying about your job next year or your marriage or whatever it is, but radical freedom.

The kind of freedom you get when you've profoundly grasped what really matters in this world, when you've really got the truth. The first point is that when you come to know the truth through Jesus, you enter into a relationship with him and his father.

And it's described in the Bible as a disciple relationship. When you know the truth, you enter into a relationship with Jesus and his father in heaven.

[7 : 37] Very few religions actually offer you a relationship with God. Most religions are about law keeping, about appeasing the anger of the deity or about keeping your place in life.

Maybe adding some wisdom, understanding the world a bit better. But very few religions offer you this, the idea that you would know God and be known by God.

If you hold my teaching, says Jesus in verse 31, you're really my disciples, my followers, those who are known to me, those who are close to me.

In a society like Australia, Christianity has been preached for a very long time. After all, the Bible Society came here in 1817. Bibles were available to the early convicts, to the early settlers.

The message of Christianity has been preached and many people turned up in the churches and would hear that message. But so many left it at that.

[8 : 45] So many didn't take that extra step that brings you into relationship with God, to become a disciple of Jesus, someone known to Jesus and known by Jesus.

Deeply understood, deeply known in a deep relationship with God. That is what Christianity offers. That's the kind of understanding of yourself that can set you free.

Uniquely among religions, this is offered even to sinners, even to those who fall short of God's standards. that the truth will set you free to be in relationship with God.

So firstly, if you know the truth, it sets you free to be in a real relationship with Jesus and his Father. Secondly, Jesus' teaching brings truth into a world of spin and lies.

Jesus' teaching brings truth into this world that is full of spin and lies. We've never had a time where you have more access to more information about more things than today.

[10:00] The average person has access on their phone to more information than all the professors of the world had in the 19th century. More access to information and power than those who landed on the moon had in their computer systems.

You have profound access to knowledge. The libraries of the world are open to you. Whereas in the past, to read a book, you had to go to a library, look for that book, take it out, or even worse, go to a bookshop, buy that book, take it out.

You've got your online stores now. You can download them in moments. You've got access to the literature of the world that couldn't have been imagined just decades ago.

And yet, how do you sort out the truth from the lies? How are you going to work out which books matter?

How are you going to work out what teaching matters? Even the religious sphere alone, there's plenty of religious chatter, plenty of options available to you. I had the joy of going to an opening of an art exhibition yesterday called the Blake Religious Prize.

[11:07] And this is a long-standing religious art prize in Australia. It's a wonderful exhibition. It has on display all sorts of artworks dealing with the religious matters of our world.

And it's extraordinarily diverse. You've got perspectives from every religion. You've got Christians, you've got Jews, you've got Hindus, you've got anti-religious material talking about religion.

There's all sorts of religious chatter going on, all sorts of experiences to be had, all sorts of options being made available to you. But Jesus doesn't offer an option.

He claims to have the truth. He doesn't offer one way forward. He claims to be the way forward.

He doesn't offer a religious experience. He offers a relationship with the true and living God. And so when he says in verse 29, the one who sent me is with me.

[12:22] He has not left me alone for I always do what pleases him. He's talking about a special relationship with the living God. He's talking about the father who has sent him, who has not left him alone, whom he always pleases.

He's talking about his closeness to God himself. He's making a profound and unique claim to reveal God to us because of how intimately he knows God.

in a world of spin and lies, Jesus doesn't offer us an option, but he holds out to us the truth.

In a confusing world, that's very welcome. Thirdly, from this passage, knowing the truth about Jesus releases you from false religion.

You may be someone who wants to serve God, who attends something like a prize exhibition, yearning to find religious experience and understanding, yearning to know what is true, deeply searching.

[13:32] Well, Jesus, through his teaching, promises to release you from false religion. And this is what was so difficult for the Jewish teachers of the day. In the passage that we've read, you see some of the confusion and difficulty that the Jews had with understanding who Jesus was.

back in verse 21, Jesus says, I'm going to go away. You'll look for me. You'll die in your sin because where I go, you can't come. And they say, what is he talking about here? Is he about to commit suicide and leave us that way?

What does he mean we can't follow him? There's confusion among the Jewish leaders about who he is. And a deep contrast, I think, between Jesus himself and these Pharisees.

Whereas they have endeavoured to serve God, endeavoured to keep the law, endeavoured to every jot and tittle of the law, as they say, every particular commandment in precision will be kept by us to please God.

Jesus says, to them, you'll die in your sin. Extremely offensive thing to say. Imagine if that's what your church leaders are saying. This is the way to go.

[14:45] And someone comes along and says, no, you'll die in your sin. You've got it all wrong. You've got it wrong. You are from below, he says in verse 23. I'm from above. You're of this world, but I'm not of this world.

I told you, you would die in your sins. If you do not believe me, if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins.

And with that comment, Jesus changes the game about religion. The Pharisees are thinking, if I obey the law, I will please God.

Jesus comes and says, if you only do that, you will die in your sins. If you believe me and follow me, the truth will set you free.

This profound contrast is set up between Jesus and religion. the Pharisees struggle with this. You can understand them struggling with this.

[15 : 46] This is a very difficult concept to grasp, but Jesus keeps showing them a true understanding of what God's law is all about. A true understanding of God's law leads you to commitment to God himself, changed hearts, not just changed behaviour and obedience to the law.

He presents a very profound teaching here to the Pharisees. In verse 21-22, as we've said, he claims to be able to judge.

Sorry, verse 26, he claims to be able to judge. I have much to say in judgment of you, you religious leaders, but he who sent me is trustworthy and what I've heard from him, I tell the world.

Jesus takes a position of God as judge. What a thing to wrestle with as a religious leader. He claims to be super close to the father, so close that they can't understand it.

He's claiming that they are one. The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone. What a difficult thing for a monotheistic religion to grapple with.

[17 : 02] The Jews have taught that there is only one God, but here is this figure suggesting that he and the father are one. Surely that's blasphemy, surely that's sacrilege, or it's the truth.

This truth will set you free. But so hard to take. Jesus teaching, when grappled with, releases you from false religion.

It releases you from that idea that you've got to try hard enough to please God. It releases you into the relationship you can have even as a sinner with the living God through Jesus Christ.

And fourthly, and finally, Jesus' teaching here in fact sets you free from sin and from judgment. It sets you free from sin and judgment.

It's spiritually powerful. at the art exhibition I saw an amazing range of religious teaching being depicted in either video installations or paintings or sculptures.

[18 : 10] If you're into art, I'd recommend going over to the University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts and seeing the Blake Religious Prize exhibition. It's a wonderful insight into thinking about religion in contemporary Australia.

But the teaching, the teaching on offer, there's a profound difference between what Jesus has to offer and what the religions of the world have to offer.

Jesus claims not just to set us free from false understandings of the world, to make us wiser, to wise us up to reality. He claims to set us free from our deepest problem, from sin, from our corruption at heart.

What a claim. And it's a radical exclusive claim. It's this radical exclusive claim that drives missionary work around the world. If you think you've found the core to relieving humans of their burden of sin, well, you want the world to know.

You want that to be spread far and wide. You want that message to ring out here in Australia and abroad. It's because Jesus' teaching is so much more than just wise words that missionary movements like the Bible Society begin.

[19 : 30] Because we know that when people know this man, this Jesus, that truth will set them free in profoundly spiritual and deeply relational ways.

Jesus isn't just a good option. He's the one through whom truth and freedom and purpose can be found. And thank God, even in his time, many came to see this immediately.

Verse 30, even as he spoke, many believed in him. I think the message of forgiveness in Jesus is so liberating. It's such good news, it's hardly surprising that people often get it on the spot.

That's what I've been waiting for. I've been searching the world to find the answer, to find the truth, to find the way, to find some teaching that would make a difference. And now I've heard it.

Now I've heard it in Jesus, the revelation of God, the one who is at one with the living God, the Father, the one whose death can set me free from my sin, the one who can remove judgment from me.

[20 : 42] Well, that's something, why am I waiting? That's something I want. And I want it right now. And many on that day believed in him. And then in verse 31, Jesus said to them, to the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said to them, if you hold my teaching, you really are my disciples.

Come to Jesus and accept the freedom and forgiveness he has to offer, and you are now in relationship with me. You're a follower of me, says Jesus. You're a disciple. Then you will know the truth.

You'll have all the spin and all the lies pushed aside. You will know what really matters in this life. You'll understand God and yourself and the world that you live in.

You'll know, even if you're blind and lost from the light in a village in remote China, it won't matter because you'll know the truth from the lies.

It will set you free. And you'll be set free from the struggles you've had to please God, the attempts, the failures, the worry about the law, the worry about am I good enough?

[21 : 51] In Jesus, you're found to be good enough. He sets you free. And that sin and that judgment, that spiritual condemnation that so many of us feel and know is what we deserve, passes away as we come into a relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ.

Friends, this Christmas, the message of Jesus coming into the world will be preached all over the country. How much we long for people to not just hear it, not just understand the story, but for it to enter our hearts so that we can all experience that freedom that comes from knowing Jesus, the true and living God, in human form.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, it's miraculous, it's miraculous that we can know you.

Heavenly Father, it is stunning that you would come into the world in human form through Christ, that we might be able to grasp you in a way that we can understand.

Father, it is mind-blowing that you have preserved this truth for us in the scriptures, that we have access to it here in Sydney, Australia, in the 21st century, in our language, in a format we can understand.

[23 : 24] Lord, may we not take this for granted. May we saturate ourselves in your word. word. And by doing so, may we more deeply understand your truth and experience that freedom that it gives.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. I'll see you next time.