

# *The Nature of Things*

## *Part 1 – The Nature of Truth*

John 18:28-38

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 18, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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<sup>28</sup> Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. <sup>29</sup> So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” <sup>30</sup> They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” <sup>31</sup> Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” <sup>32</sup> (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

<sup>33</sup> Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” <sup>35</sup> Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” <sup>36</sup> Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” <sup>37</sup> Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” <sup>38</sup> Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” (John 18:28-38, NRSV)

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Not long ago I found myself in a difficult conversation with a friend. We’d gotten into a very controversial subject and we’re having a hard time finding any common ground. My take on things made no sense to her and her take on things made no sense to me. Try as we might, we couldn’t make any headway and so at one point I stopped asking her *what* she believed and asked her *why* she believed the way she did. All at once things became clear. As I traced her perspective back to its roots, and she did the same with me, we immediately saw the problem. Each of us was operating with contradictory core beliefs which meant that no matter how much we debated the issue at hand we were never going to make any progress towards consensus.

Think about it like this. You and I are in an argument over which clothing we should wear tomorrow. You insist that the best choice is a parka and snow boots. I insist that shorts and flip flops are a much better option. But if our argument is only about clothing we’re never going to get anywhere. We’ve got to get to the roots of the issue. You’ve made your wardrobe decision because the weather report you saw called for a snowstorm. I’ve chosen my outfit because the forecast I saw calls for clear skies and 90 degrees. So can you see that the discussion we ought to be having is about weather, not clothing, because if we can’t agree on the forecast what’s the point of arguing over parkas and flip flops?

I’m coming to see just how often this sort of thing happens in the church. We find ourselves in disagreements, even arguments, about all sorts of issues like money, politics, race, sexuality, family, and so on, but we often have a hard time making headway towards agreement because beneath the surface we sometimes hold contradictory core beliefs which inform our perspective on these issues. In other words, if we don’t have unity of belief on the nature of scripture, the nature of humanity, the nature of God, even the nature of truth itself, we’re never going to find unity on these other secondary, but important, issues. Again, if we don’t agree on the weather forecast, what’s the point of even talking about clothing?

Therefore, in these next several weeks we are going to dig deeper and focus on some of these foundational beliefs which, in turn, inform the ways we see the rest of life. As you can imagine, it’s vitally important in the church that we share a foundation of belief if we are ever to move in the same direction as we seek to love and serve one another and the world around us. Truth is, if we believe we have a life-saving message to share with the world we have to first agree what that message actually is.

From the beginning of this discussion I want to point out that when we do see things differently there are two ways we do so and it's important that we see the distinction between the two. For example, I might make the statement, "French fries are not health food." But you disagree. French fries, you argue, are made out of potatoes after all, and you've been eating them for years and you look and feel great. So, on this first point we disagree. Then I make a second statement, saying, "McDonalds French fries are the best French fries in the world." Now you're really worked up. "No way," you insist. "The French fries at In-n-Out Burger are way better. They make them right in front of you!" Now we disagree at two points.

But do you see the difference between the two? My first claim is objective. Regardless of what you say, science has shown us clearly that French fries are not health food. If you eat them all the time it will not impact your body in a positive way and this is true no matter how sincerely you believe it is false. My second claim, however, is subjective. I may indeed prefer McDonald's French fries over all other French fries in the world but that doesn't mean that you must share that same preference. You may not. You may not even like French fries at all. So on this second question it's all a matter of opinion and preference.

Here's the problem. We used to live in a world that had a clear understand between what was objective and what was subjective. However, we are now living in a world where objective truth is increasingly limited to what you might call the natural world, to what science can empirically demonstrate to be fact. Yes, we agree that French fries are not health food, the earth is round and not flat, and two plus two equals four, but when we come to other areas of life, areas such as spirituality, faith, or even morality, areas where we used to also agree there was objective truth, we are now increasingly shifting even those areas into the subjective category. In other words, in issues of faith and morality the party line of our culture is that many of those things are just personal preference and that your perspective, though contradictory to mine, is nonetheless just as valid.

The Scottish theologian, P.T. Forsyth, identified this shift even as early as the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when he observed that modern people believe "we are our own authority." In fact, he saw the root idea of modernity as the overturning of all authority outside the self. In early modernity – from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – Western culture embraced the individualistic idea that we should lay aside all tradition and religious belief and arrive at truth using reason alone. This led to the idea that each of us has within ourselves the capacity to discover truth without the aid of ancient wisdom or divine revelation, and so we can dispose of our long held reverence for moral absolutes and natural law.<sup>1</sup> In 1992 our own Supreme Court wrote this famous line in one of its opinions, "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine how hard it becomes if you believe the weather forecast on Monday calls for snow and I believe it calls for a heatwave and we both are told that our beliefs are equally valid. For one thing, there is now definitely no point in talking together about what clothing is best to lay out for tomorrow morning. This is the challenge we face in a community of faith like ours. If we buy into this idea that even religious and moral truth is subjective, as our culture is increasingly insisting that it is, then how can we possibly move forward together in life and ministry?

This is why in this series on the nature of things the first thing we have to explore is the nature of truth. When it comes to matters of faith, do we still believe there is the same objective truth we still agree exists in the natural world? Can the statement "There are not many gods but only one God" be as objectively true as the statement "The earth is not flat but round"? And if we do not agree on the nature of truth, that there is in fact objective and absolute truth in matters of faith, then there is no point really in going on to talk about the nature of scripture, or God, or love, any other foundational belief which is meant to inform the rest of our life together. If the weather tomorrow is going to be snowy for you and sunny for me then what's the point of trying to figure out what clothes are best for us both of to wear together? If I believe the Bible is divinely inspired, and you believe it's just the words of humans, *and both our perspectives are equally valid and a matter of subjective preference*, then what's the point in debating the true nature of scripture? However, if we can come to an agreement on the nature of truth, specifically that there is objective truth in matters of faith, then the way is clear for us to begin to seek that truth together in all these other areas. That's why we begin this series with truth.

<sup>1</sup> The Forsyth reference and other ideas here are attributed to Timothy Keller, *Preaching* (New York: Viking, 2015), 121-122.

<sup>2</sup> *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, 851 (1992), cited by Timothy Keller, *Preaching*, 123.

In the time we have left I want to get at this question of the nature of truth, and I want to do so by looking briefly at the famous story we just read from John 18. This story is a part of John's account of the Passion. Jesus has been arrested by the Jewish leadership who want to see him executed but cannot carry out their wishes without official approval from the Roman authorities. Specifically, that means they need the green light from Pontius Pilate, who was the governor of the Roman province of Judea at that time.

Early that Friday morning they bring Jesus to Pilate to make their case. Pilate naturally asks them, **“What accusation do you have against this man?”** In other words, Pilate is interested in the truth. If there is no legitimate charge then there is no trial. But notice that the Jews clearly are not as interested in the truth as he is. **“If this man were not a criminal,”** they answer, **“we would not have handed him over to you.”** Instead of saying, “This is what he did, Pilate, and we can prove it to you and then you'll see he is worthy of condemnation”, instead of saying that they merely – and condescendingly! – suggest that Pilate just take their word for it. They are not interested in the truth but in getting their objectives met whether or not those objectives align with the truth. But as they themselves state, they can't kill Jesus unless Pilate gives them permission to do so. So give Pilate at least a little credit here. He sends them away to deal with it themselves, essentially telling them, “If you're not interested in truth than there's nothing I can do for you.”

Still, Pilate is intrigued. Who is this Jesus who has made such enemies of the leaders of his people? And not only is he intrigued, perhaps he's even a little concerned. Remember that in those days Pilate was essentially the king over the Jews. He was subject to Rome but pretty much given sovereign authority over his little slice of the empire. And in those days there were only two ways that a king lost his job. Either he died and one of his closest relatives, often a son, took his place on the throne, or somebody led a revolution and killed the king and seized the throne by force. Now, Jesus was clearly not one of Pilate's relatives so if he was making claims to be the King of the Jews, as the Jewish leaders said he was, that meant Jesus may have some plan to take Pilate's throne by force and so Pilate should at least investigate these claims.

**“Are you the King of the Jews?”** Pilate asks Jesus. “Is what they say about you true?” And Jesus responds, **“Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”** Which is, by the way, not the recommended way of answering the judge overseeing your capital offense trial. When the judge asks you, “Did you murder the victim?” most defense attorneys don't recommend you respond by saying, “Who told you I murdered him? Did you see me murder him, your honor, or are you taking the word of somebody else who claims to have seen me murder him?”

Jesus is behaving here as if he is the judge and Pilate is the accused.<sup>3</sup> If so, what is Pilate on trial for? I think he's on trial for his commitment to truth. Jesus wants to know if Pilate really is committed to the truth, no matter what that truth might turn out to be. In fact, I think Jesus often doesn't even answer people's questions unless he knows they are willing to accept the answer they are given. Remember that when Jesus taught he often began his teaching saying, “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.” You see, Jesus knows not everybody really wants to know the truth because the truth is often inconvenient or uncomfortable. Honestly, I don't always want to know the truth, about myself, about others, even about God, because the truth often doesn't conform to my preferences or desires. As Mark Twain once said, “Denial is not just a river in Egypt.” Denial is, for many of us, a reflexive reaction to truth we don't want to hear.

Because of this, one of my frequent prayers has been that God would help me to be a person who has ears to hear, that in my heart I would see there is truth and thus come to believe that it is to my benefit to know what that truth is so that I can, by God's grace, adjust my life to it. I may not want it to snow tomorrow because I want to wear shorts and flip flops, but if it is, in fact, going to snow tomorrow I'd like to know and face that fact so that at least I can be dressed appropriately. Archbishop William Temple once stated, “Those who are too wedded to their own age are destined to be widows in the age that follows.” The same could be said of truth. If you're too wedded to what you have wrongly imagined is the truth there will come a day when you will find yourself a widow when the actual truth is indisputably revealed.

So back to the question at hand. Is Pilate interested in the truth? At first it appears he may not be. **“I am not a Jew, am I?”** he says to Jesus. In other words, “Do you really think I'm concerned with such trivial matters of your people?” And yet, there is something in him that wants to know more. He just can't let it go. **“What have you done?”** he asks Jesus again.

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<sup>3</sup> I credit this insight to Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1067.

I think Jesus has a favorable view of Pilate's openness to the truth, however slight it may be. Otherwise, why waste his breath. But he doesn't. He answers Pilate, **"My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."** While it may not be apparent at first glance, what I believe Jesus is doing here is making a crucial distinction which is especially relevant today in our discussion about truth.

Biblical commentators point out here that three times Jesus says "my kingdom" as a way to emphasize that he has a unique kingdom. In fact, in the original language it's even more emphatic. Jesus is saying that his kingdom is not like any other kingdom in this world. His kingdom is, you might say, *above* those kingdoms which are, therefore, subject to his kingdom. No matter what the kingdoms of this world say or do, they are ultimately subject to Jesus' Kingdom which is not from here.

Think about it this way. I live in the United States of America, and though technically this is not a kingdom because we don't have a king, I am still subject to the sovereign laws of this nation. Now, I can try to set up my own laws and my own ways of doing things. For instance, I can decide that I am going to drive as fast as I like on the freeway, 100 miles per hour everywhere I go. I can make that decision but I will not get away with it for long, because there exists a greater 'kingdom' over me which will keep me from imposing any other kingdom which stands in opposition.

In essence this is what Jesus is saying to Pilate: "Pilate, people can imagine things are this way or that way, fashion the truth into this form or that form, but in the end everything is ultimately subject to me." To cite Archbishop Temple again, you can be wedded to your own kingdom if you like but one day when the true kingdom comes you will find yourself a widow.

You see, when Jesus came he came to bring his kingdom to this world. It's what he actually taught his followers to pray for when he taught us to pray **"thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."** The problem was that he came to a people who had their own ideas of what was true and so when Jesus brought Kingdom truth, truth that is absolute and eternal because it comes from God, there was a disconnect. For example, the Jewish leaders had a very clear idea of what the Messiah would be like when he came. In their understanding, truth was that the Messiah would never sit down and eat dinner with sinners, that he would never welcome Gentiles and other outsiders into the community, that he would honor their hierarchical systems of authority, that he would seize rather than give away power, that he would affirm their understanding that one earns one's place in the family of God by following the law. But as honestly as they believed all this was true, all this was not the Truth. Jesus showed them the Truth, spoke the Truth, even embodied the Truth.

In Romans 12:2, Paul speaks these famous words to those in the church seeking to follow Jesus, **"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."**<sup>4</sup> Paul is saying that there are patterns and beliefs in this world which are not in line with the Truth and, therefore, we must not be conformed to those false patterns and beliefs. Instead, our minds must be renewed, transformed by the Truth that we find in Christ. Just because everybody runs around saying that the emperor is wearing beautiful clothes doesn't change the fact that he's actually naked. As Dallas Willard writes, "Belief has to accommodate truth. Nobody has ever made a proposition true simply by believing it. Fifty million Frenchman can be wrong. So can fifty million Americans."<sup>5</sup> There is absolute and eternal truth and it is embodied in Jesus, which means all truth is subject to him.

All this is to say that everybody who confronts Jesus needs to ask this question. Is his life and teaching true in the 'French fries are not healthy' sort of way, or in the 'McDonalds French fries are the best' sort of way? Is the truth we see in Jesus objective or subjective? Can it be legitimately rejected? And if we don't believe there is absolute truth to begin with, particularly in areas of faith and morality, then we will never even be open to considering whether Jesus might in fact embody such truth.

After all this Pilate asks Jesus again, **"So, are you a king?"** He won't let it go, which I think is more evidence that Pilate is open to the possibility that Jesus might be a king. I think Pilate actually does have ears to hear. That's why

<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:2, NIV

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7Mq6KNw9OQ>

Jesus gives him an answer, a straight answer, at least straighter than most of the answers Jesus gives. **“You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”** And with this answer we are reminded again who it is that is really on trial here. It’s not Jesus. Pilate is the one on trial, as are we.

You see, truth is humanity’s deepest legitimate quest, for if we do not find the truth what do we have? And what Jesus is saying here is that truth ultimately isn’t something we read in a textbook, or capture in a mathematical theorem, or summarize in a closing argument. As theologian N.T. Wright puts it, we don’t carry truth around in our pockets. Philosophers, judges and preachers don’t own truth. Truth is a gift, a strange quality that, like Jesus, comes from outside our world and is meant to take up residence in our world among those willing to receive it.<sup>6</sup>

For this reason, Truth ought to humble us. Of course, we must come to recognize that absolute and eternal truth exists. There are absolutely and eternally things which are true about God, and the world, and us, and salvation, and goodness, and so much else. Of course there are preferences and we ought to respect our differences along those lines, but there is also irrefutable truth which extends not just through the natural world but, according to Jesus, extends well into areas of faith and morality and spirituality. If somebody thinks their French fries are the best, so be it. Nothing good comes from arguing over things like that. For one, such arguments are unwinnable. On the other hand, if you believe eating French fries every day is healthy, there ought to be something in me that loves you enough to want to help you see you have missed the truth at this point and if you continue to miss the truth at this point it will not go well for you. Still, there is a lot to be said about how I go about helping you see this truth.

Remember, Truth is always above us. We can’t ever possess and control it completely. We certainly ought never to use it as a weapon against others we believe don’t subscribe to it as we do. In fact, once we do so with God’s truth we have lost God’s truth, for at the heart of God’s Truth is always love and grace. Jesus, in fact, came to the world, we’re told, full of truth, yes, but also full of grace,<sup>7</sup> so much so that even though we rejected him as the Truth he gave himself up for us completely anyway, so that we might ultimately be delivered and set free by the Truth we rejected. Though we shout down the truth, or twist and deform the truth, or take the Truth and nail it to a cross to get rid of it once and for all, the Truth is so full of love and grace that it does not allow us to dismiss him so easily.

And so in grace and love, Jesus doesn’t beat Pilate up because he doesn’t have or acknowledge the truth. He doesn’t say, “Pilate, you’re an idiot. I’m the Son of God. Listen to me or else!” No, Jesus engages him. He probes him. He turns Pilate’s questions back on him. He waits for him. He is patient with him. There is declaration here – yes! - but there is also invitation, because I think Jesus sees in Pilate at least a spark of humble respect for the truth and at least some openness to the truth, whatever it might turn out to be.

In the end, this is the most important moment of Pilate’s life. He is the one on trial and everything depends on the answer he gives to his own question. **“What is truth?”** he asks Jesus. Ultimately, Jesus turns the question around and puts it back to him, and to us. For us all, everything depends on our response. Do we believe truth even exists in the first place? If so, are we open to the possibility that all truth might be embodied in the person and life of the King who stands before us ready even to give away his life?

Amen.



## The Next Step

### A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read John 18:28-38 again. What stands out to you here?
2. Pilate asks Jesus a lot of questions. “Are you king? What have you done? What is truth?” Do you think Pilate really wants to learn from Jesus the answers to these questions? Why or why not?

<sup>6</sup> Paraphrased from N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone*, Part 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 115.

<sup>7</sup> John 1:14

3. Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Imagine somebody asks you the same question. How would you respond? How do you define truth?
4. When it comes to claims of faith (i.e. there is one God), do you believe that things are true in the same sense that things are true in the natural world (i.e. the earth is round)? If two people hold contradictory beliefs can they both be right?
5. Do you believe that the way the world understands truth has changed over the last 25, 50, 100 years? How so?
6. Dallas Willard states, "Belief has to accommodate truth. Nobody has ever made a proposition true simply by believing it. Fifty million Frenchman can be wrong. So can fifty million Americans." What do you think he means? Do you agree?
7. John 1:14 declares that when Jesus came to live among us he came "full of grace and full of truth." What do you think this means?
8. What do you think our approach to truth should be here at Faith Presbyterian Church?



### **Table to Table Question**

#### ***A question for kids and adults to answer together***

Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" How would you answer this question? How do you think Jesus would answer this question?