

“Terrible and Essential Truths”

John 8:12-59

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Additional notes:

P 14 True Freedom

P 15 John 7:53-8:11 – the woman caught in adultery

I have titled today’s message – “Terrible and Essential Truths.”

I chose the word “terrible” because there are truths in the Bible that the words “happy” or “comforting” don’t fit.

In the dictionary, it is only the third definition of the word “terrible” that means bad.

The first two definitions are “terrifying” and “awesome.”

The passage before us today presents one terrifying truth and one awesome truth.

And in both cases they are also essential truths.

They are indispensable, basic, fundamental truths, meaning that life and death hang on these truths.

Now I realize, we glibly say that about a lot of things.

For example, “I’ll just die if I don’t get that new car;” “It’ll kill him if he doesn’t get that promotion.”

But I’m not speaking of trivial issues; I’m using the words “life and death” the way the Bible uses them to describe eternal issues.

So what are these terrible and essential truths?

Listen to Jesus in John 8:24 “I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.”

In the passage of Scripture before us today Jesus is going to describe the terrifying truth about every one of us that, unless God intervenes, we will die in our sins.

And secondly, he will describe the awesome truth of who he is – as he said it, “believe that I am.”

Or to say it more succinctly, he will describe our depravity and his sufficiency.

Now the gospel is that the awesome truth can remedy the terrifying truth.

If you have read the scripture text for today you might remember that it begins with Jesus’ words, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

You might wonder how I could read such bright and positive words and turn the sermon into something so “heavy” as the words “terrible” and “terrifying.”

As I said at the beginning, there are truths that the word “happy” do not fit.

But they are essential truths.

We are looking today at John 8:12-59.

Look at 8:12 “When Jesus spoke again to the people...”

I want you to imagine the scene.

We understand it best by going back to 7:2 “But when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near...”

This Feast was prescribed by the Law of Moses and it was the most celebrated of the Feasts – people did indeed come from all over Israel to participate.

One aspect of this Feast was a special ritual wherein the Priests would carry water from the Pool of Siloam into the Temple courtyard and there pour it out as an offering to God.

It symbolized both the past, when God gave them water in the desert after they left Egypt **and** it symbolized the future when God would pour out his Spirit when the Messiah came. (Carson, 322)

That setting formed part of the context for the words you heard last week from John 7:37 “On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.”³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”

What followed that was an argument about who Jesus was.

Finally in verses 50-51 “Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of (the Pharisees), asked,⁵¹ “Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?”

There is almost universal agreement that chapter 7, verse 53, through chapter 8, verse 11, are not part of the original text of the Gospel of John.

In the sermon notes that will appear on-line tomorrow you can get more information about that issue.

But whether the story of the woman caught in adultery is actually part of the Bible or not, most scholars will agree that the argument that we were just talking about in chapter 7 is picked up again in chapter 8 verse 12.

It is still the same day, they are still celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles and the argument is still going on.

And in our text today we will see the religious leaders confronting Jesus, just as Nicodemus had suggested was the lawful thing to do.

Not only did the Feast of Tabernacles have a water offering ritual but it also had a light ritual.

There were four huge open oil lamps, probably raised high on columns.

There is evidence, as one author tells it, that “men of piety and good works danced through the night, holding burning torches in their hands and singing songs and praises. The Levitical orchestra cut loose and some sources attest that this went on every night of the Feast...” (Carson, 337).

The entire Temple area and beyond would be illuminated.

With that scene in mind, hear Jesus’ words in 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

At that point Jesus is apparently interrupted.

And so the author, John, will come back to that theme of “light” again in chapter 9 when Jesus does the miraculous sign of restoring sight to the man born blind.

We will look at that theme of light and its sign next week.

But in the meantime Nicodemus’ suggestion that they question Jesus is what we hear next beginning in verse 13 “The Pharisees challenged him...”

So before Jesus and John can continue this theme of “light” we have this confrontational dialog.

I call it a dialog but when you read it you realize it is more like one of those conversations some parents have with their teens.

The parent wonders if he’s speaking a foreign language to the teen.

The more times I read the passage, the more impressed I was that Jesus used the confrontation to describe the two essential truths I mentioned earlier.

The first of those is the terrifying truth of our depravity!

For a passage that begins with Jesus talking about “light,” this is one of the darkest sections in the book.

Jesus will describe those around him (and by implication every human being) as being willfully ignorant, arrogant, slave to sin, guilty, condemned, murderer, liar, child of the devil, dishonoring to God, and having no relationship with God.

We tend to love the false ideas of the basic goodness of humanity and the 'spark of divinity' that is supposedly in every person.

We assume that within us is the power to choose God when we wish and we'll eventually get around to it when we are ready.

Lest you get the impression that Jesus is here describing only a certain class of people, really bad people, notice who he is talking to.

8:12 "When Jesus spoke again to the people... (This is the whole crowd.)

8:13 "The Pharisees challenged him..." (These were the religious leaders.)

8:30-31 "Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him.³¹ To the Jews who had **believed him** Jesus said..." (He is speaking even to those who claimed to believe in him.)

Jesus is describing everyone - religious leaders, the hoi polloi, and even those who feigned a belief in him.

Now look at the words Jesus uses to describe them and us:

8:14-15 "But **you** have no idea where I come from or where I am going.¹⁵

You judge by human standards;

8:19 "**You** do not know me or my Father,"

8:21 "**You** will die in your sin. Where I go, **you** cannot come."

8:23-24 "**You** are from below...**You** are of this world;²⁴ I told you that **you** would die in your sins."

8:26 "I have much to say in judgment of **you**."

8:24-25 "I tell you the truth, **everyone** who sins is a slave to sin.³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family."

8:37 "Yet **you** are ready to kill me, because **you** have no room for my word

8:38 "you do what you have heard from your father (the devil)."

8:40-41 "As it is, **you** are determined to kill me...⁴¹ **You** are doing the things your own father (the devil) does."

8:43-45 “Why is my language not clear to you? Because **you** are unable to hear what I say. ⁴⁴ **You** belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ Yet because I tell the truth, **you** do not believe me!”

8:47 “The reason you do not hear is that **you** do not belong to God.”

8:49 “**You** dishonor me.”

8:55 “**You** do not know (God).”

Jesus is unrelenting in his condemnation of them.

He does not say that basically they are on the right path and that with a little divine help they can make it.

He does not say that by correcting some failings or overcoming some bad habits they’ll be okay.

I’m convinced that many people assume that with a little effort on their part, they can become acceptable to God.

Yes, compared to others, we may be better or worse, but compared to a holy God we are dead in our sins.

In spite of how difficult it is for us to accept this about ourselves and others we love, Jesus says the terrifying truth is that we are guilty, condemned, helpless and hopeless.

Elsewhere the Bible says it this way: Ephesians 2:3 “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

How terrifying is that? Do you believe the Bible?

Listen to 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord...”

Jesus described our depravity – sin has corrupted every facet of our being. We are so spiritually dead that we don't even understand what Jesus is talking about.

Listen again to how Jesus said it, 8:44 ““Why is my language not clear to you? Because **you** are unable to hear what I say.

The response of those listening to Jesus should have been despair.

But even those who said they believed him were arrogant, questioning, and self-sufficient.

Imagine a hiker who heads into the woods with a compass, a cell phone, a GPS device and a topographical map.

He gets disoriented for a minute but he's not even nervous, after all, he has many resources at his disposal.

But in my imaginary story, when the hiker realizes he is not on planet earth, his resources are worthless.

We can use our “I'm not as bad as others” card when we comparing ourselves to each other but it won't work when comparing with God.

Instead of self-sufficiency, consider the value of finally realizing how desperate we really are.

My three-year-old grandson Ben got separated from us in a large store this past week.

We were unaware of it for maybe four or five minutes.

With the assistance of a store clerk we were quickly reunited.

But what I want you to consider is what Ben was probably thinking.

He began looking for us but soon enough he realized he couldn't find us and he dissolved into tears.

His tears were from fear of course, but they were also undoubtedly tears of complete helplessness.

He had no resources – he had nothing to use to make his family appear.

He was desperate.
Intervention was his only hope.

Salvation, a right relationship with God, begins with desperation.

In truth, the Christian life begins and continues with an awareness of our total inability.

The terrifying truth is that apart from Jesus' intervention, we will die in our sins.

But there is a second “terrible” and essential truth that Jesus describes in these verses.

This is the second definition of the word “terrible” where it means “awesome,” stupendous, tremendous.

Have you ever experienced an old truth becoming to you a new truth; a time when an old truth took on new meaning?

Most of the world accepts the idea of God and even worships their idea of some transcendent being or power that gives meaning to this life and to the hereafter.

But Christianity is unique in that it claims that God is manifested to us and available to us, savingly, **only** in the person of Jesus.

I'm struck with that old but new truth again - it really is all about Jesus.

Listen to him:

8:12 “I am the light of the world.

8:14 I know where I came from and where I am going.

8:16 “But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me.

8:18 “**I am one who testifies for myself**; my other witness is the Father, who sent me.”

8:19 “If you knew **me**, you would know my Father also.”

8:23 “**I** am from above.

8:26 “He who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.”

8:28-29 “When you have lifted up the Son of Man (that is, when he is crucified and resurrected), then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. ^{Jn 8:29} The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.”

8:38 “I am telling you what I have seen in the Father’s presence,

8:42 “**I came from God** and now am here.

8:49-50 “I honor my Father. I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge.

8:54 “My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me.

8:55 “I know him and keep his word.

8:58 “Before Abraham was born, I am!”

Those around him wanted proof of who he was.

Earlier, back in chapter 5, he had responded by reminding them of the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of the miraculous signs, the work he was doing, the witness of Scripture predicting his coming, etc. **but here he doesn’t do that.**

Here he simply asserts his deity.

He simply declares who he is.

God the Son and God the Father think alike, they act alike, every word is from both of them and their glory is the same because they are one God.

Three times in this text Jesus uses an expression that speaks to the awesome truth of who he really is.

In verse 24 Jesus said, “If you do not believe that **I am** (the one I claim to be), you will indeed die in your sins.”

Verse 28 “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that **I am** (the one I claim to be)...”

In both verses the translators have added words that aren’t in the original text.

Jesus said simply, “believe that **I AM**” and “know that **I AM**.”

What the translators added is not inconsistent with what Jesus meant, but in a sense they detracted from the sheer immensity of what Jesus was saying.

And in verse 58 the translators didn't add anything.

John 8:58 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, **I am!**”

I'm not just greater than your father Abraham, I am greater than everything else – I have always existed.

Jesus is declaring his deity – Earlier in the Gospel we read, “In the **beginning** was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

You see, because Jesus has always existed, because he is God, ultimately Jesus is self-authenticating.

Where do you go to prove the existence of God that is more authoritative than God's own witness to that truth?

Hebrews 6:16, Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. 6:13 “When God made his promise... since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself...”

Remember, Jesus was before all things.

There was a time where **nothing** existed except the **eternally** existing God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

He is the source of everything that exists, except evil.

That God, in the person of God the Son, was standing before them and proclaiming his prerogatives as God.

You want a witness? Jesus is his own witness!

Hear the words of one man attempting to explain this self-authenticating witness of Jesus:

“How can light convince us that it is light except by what it does for us? We do not demonstrate that light is light by treatises, or by analyses of its constituent rays. It is only light to us when it illumines...us... Anyone can, to his own satisfaction, confute the claim which Beauty makes by saying, ‘I don’t see it;’ or the claim inherent in Goodness, by saying, ‘I do not hear it;’ or the self-evidencing nature of truth, by saying, ‘I do not know it.’ But man does not create Goodness, or Truth or Beauty; and to say that he cannot see them is to condemn himself, not them. So (it is) with light.” (C.J.Wright in Morris,

439 footnote)

And so it is with Jesus.

There is no greater evidence of God than his presence, no greater evidence of truth than his word, no greater evidence of love than his actions.

He is not just showing the way to God, **he** is the way.

He is not just speaking the truth, **he** is the truth.

He is not just conveying life, **he** is the life.

The old idea that takes on new reality is, again, that it is all about Jesus.

As I said at the beginning, this passage presents two terrible truths – the **terrifying truth of our depravity** and desperate condition AND the **awesome truth of the sufficiency of Jesus**.

So how do these two truths come together?

How does the awesome truth of the sufficiency of Jesus mitigate the terrifying truth of our depravity?

Listen to Jesus in verse 51, “If anyone **keeps my word**, he will never see death.”

Now hear the words he uses to declare that same truth in a negative way: 8:24 “If you do not **believe that I am**... you will indeed die in your sins.”

Someone has intervened for us in our desperate condition.

Jesus says he has intervened.

Like my grandson Ben clinging to the store clerk who rescued him, so we cling to Jesus.

But unlike the store clerk, who took Ben to the safety of his family, Jesus **is** the safety, he **is** the family, and he **is** the life.

Jesus is not a means to an end.

He is not merely the method we use to gain something else.

We don't merely believe him so we won't go to hell or receive him so we will be better off in this life.

He is the end, he is what we gain.

We believe, accept, and receive HIM!

But belief in Jesus is not simply mental assent that he is God or even agreement that he died for our sins.

Belief in Jesus is not just in the mind but also in the heart and in the life.

Listen to the words Jesus uses to describe a relationship with him:

8:24 "If you...**believe** that I am..."

8:31 "If you **hold to my teaching**, you are really my disciples.

8:42 "If God were your Father, you would **love me**..."

8:47 "He who belongs to God **hears what God says**."

8:51 "If anyone **keeps my word**, he will never see death."

Do you see how Jesus defines "belief"?

To become a Christian is to receive Jesus.

- It is to abandon our ways and adopt his ways.
- It is to trust him and manifest that trust by obeying him even when, maybe especially when, it seems contrary to our self-interest.

- It is to love him as demonstrated by our devotion to him in studying his Word and depending on him in prayer and sacrificing for his sake and his Kingdom work.
- It is to give, not just our destiny, but our very lives here and now into his hands.

Is that your relationship with Jesus?

Do you believe him, love him, hear him, and hold to his teaching?

Here's the promise Jesus made in 5:24 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

As I close, I know that the truths that Jesus describes in John 8 are far broader and more encompassing than what I will say next, but I'd like to give just one example of what Jesus might mean when he said in 8:31 "If you **hold to my teaching**, you are really my disciples."

"If you hold to my teaching..." Are we most concerned about what most concerns Jesus?

What captures our imagination, what consumes our energy, what receives our money, and what occupies our prayers?

It is no stretch to say that Jesus' teaching has to do with his purpose in coming to earth –

- "not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved."
- "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..."
- "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."
- "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."

How can we say that we believe Jesus and hold to his teaching if we do have a heart for the peoples of the world that have not heard of him?

To say it differently, support of **missions** is not optional for the Christ-follower!

We are either the sent or the senders.

If we are the sent, we must go. If we are senders we must give.

We have 9 families of our church who have been sent as “Staff” missionaries of SGC.

Our support of them is through what we call Kingdom Connection - our connection between the sent and the senders, the goers and the givers.

We encourage you to respond.

Prayer

John 8:32 “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Sin enslaves! Take drugs and they take you. We laugh at the person who says, “Quitting (whatever vice it is) is easy, I’ve done it many times.” We laugh because we realize that while they claim freedom of choice, they are actually a slave to their vice.

“True freedom is not the liberty to do anything we please, but the liberty to what we ought; and it is genuine liberty because doing what we ought now pleases us.” Carson, 350

What about the verses from 7:53-8:11 – the section about the woman caught in adultery?

There is widespread agreement among scholars that it is not part of the original text of the Gospel of John but was added later. Not until the late A.D. 300s does the story begin appearing in some copies of the Gospel and in commentaries on the Gospel. Most importantly it does not appear in any, but one, of the many manuscripts before that time.

We know that the 17th C. King James Version of the Bible was based on the 4th Century Latin translation and because the story was included there, it was included in the KJV. But as earlier and earlier Greek manuscripts have been discovered, it has become clear that the story was added to the original text. It is agreed that the story is probably true, but it is also agreed by nearly all that it is not part of the Gospel of John and is not part of authoritative Scripture.

John 5:4 is an example of the same thing.

Mark 16:9-20 is another example.

For further study I suggest:

See the following commentaries on the subject of John 7:53-8:11:

Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John A Commentary*, 735ff; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 882ff; Gary Burge, *John, The NIV Application Commentary*, 237ff; Don Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 333ff; et al.

See also: *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, And Restoration* by Bruce Metzger (1964) 2005 4th edition with Bart D. Ehrman, ISBN 0-19-516122-X and *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* by Craig Blomberg.