

Introduction

How many of you have ever testified in a court of law? The bailiff asked you a question before you did. What was it? That's right, it was, **"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."** That oath implies something - just how vital nothing but the truth is in a court of law. But you know what? It's just as vital in human life and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Truth Defined

In the text we read, Proverbs 23:22-25, the wise man identifies the children who make their parents (if they're good ones) proud. They are, according to verse 23, those who **"buy truth, and do not sell it."** In the Bible, the word **"truth"** connotes reality. It refers to what is real or so. It refers to what exists or is the case, as we say it.

There are of course various kinds of truth. God is in all places at once. That is spiritual truth. $1+1=2$. That is mathematical truth. The acid in our stomachs is strong enough to dissolve razor blades. That is chemical truth. Anger feeds on anger. That is psychological truth. The earth is 93 million miles from the sun. That is cosmological truth. Jesus rose from the dead. That is historical truth. Pre-marital sex is sinful or wrong. That is a moral truth. All of those propositions are so - are the case - and thus, are true.

Now, truth, by its very nature, has two prevailing characteristics, each of which demands an appropriate response from us. If we respond appropriately, life will go well. If we respond inappropriately, it will go poorly. We want it to go well. So, let's examine those two prevailing characteristics of truth and the appropriate response each demands.

Truth Is Objective

The first characteristic is that truth is objective not subjective. I

saw a young man at the mall wearing a t-shirt that said, **"It is what it is."** I say that frequently and so do many of you. I've heard you. We say it to express our resignation to the reality of the circumstance or situation before us. That points us to the objectivity of truth. It, whatever that is, isn't necessarily what I think it is, or what I feel it is, or what I want it to be. It is what it is instead.

I overheard a mother tell her son, **"You can do whatever you set your mind to."** The mother desires that to be so and believes it is so, but it isn't. Determination, hard work, and passion will increase what her son's capable of doing. But it won't make what he's capable of doing limitless. It is what it is. Truth is objective not subjective.

Know the Truth

Because it is, the appropriate response is to know it. The wise man uses a metaphor in the first line of verse 23. He commands us to **"buy truth."** The Hebrew word translated **"buy"** connotes attaining something. In this case, that something is truth. Attain truth, this is, come to know it.

The second line in verse 23 reveals how we do that. We **"get wisdom and instruction and understanding."** Since it's objective, truth isn't a construct. It isn't something that we can create or devise. It's something that we can only discover instead. Well, we discover it by getting wisdom, instruction, and understanding. We say it differently today but the meaning is the same. Do the math. We discover truth by doing the math, which means two things.

First, we gather as much information as we can about the subject or issue that concerns us. We have an array of resources to assist us in doing that including the Bible (which is our first resource), insightful teachers, books and magazines, the internet, insightful acquaintances, observation coupled with analysis and thought, and experience coupled with analysis and thought. Employing those resources, we learn as many facts as we can about the subject or issue that concerns us.

Doing the math means a second thing. We follow the information we've gathered wherever it leads us. I can't impress upon you enough the importance of this. When I was 36 years-old, the Holy Spirit spoke to me in his still small voice and said, "**Be an objective pursuer of truth.**" Objective means "unbiased" – not influenced by traditions, desires, lifestyle, or pride. No one is ever 100% unbiased, but we need to be as unbiased as we can be in the pursuit of truth. In his book *Plato's Socrates*, Plato identified a Socratic principle that all of us should embrace and it's this: "**Follow the evidence, wherever it leads.**" That is one of the most life-altering principles we will ever learn. Follow the evidence or information wherever it leads. It takes great courage, but we're objective pursuers of truth when we do.

Take the value of organized sports as an example of what I mean. This is a critical issue because of the time, money, and other resources devoted to them. Is their value worth that time, money, and resources?

Most people believe that the primary value of organized sports is that they build character. Christians go even further and contend they instill Christian values and traits. One top tier university, for instance, claims that its athletic program helps athletes "**grow deeper in their relationship with God and our understanding of how to honor Him?**" But do organized sports, in reality, build character and instill Christian traits? There's only one way to find out. It's to do the math.

First, we gather information. We examine the history of the notion that sports build character, which goes back at least to Plato and Aristotle. In addition, we examine the numerous studies and surveys that address the issue and their results. We also examine our own experiences with sports and observe the experiences of others.

Once we've gathered the information, we follow it wherever it leads us. This is a difficult thing for many of us who love sports, including me, to do. But do it we must. We put aside our biases, including our love for them, and draw a valid conclusion about the issue. When I say "**draw a valid conclusion,**" I mean discover the truth.

What we do with this issue, we do with all the vital issues of life: our use of our wealth, our use of technology, how to influence people for good, what to do when people wrong us, the nature of homosexuality, the moral grounds for divorce, the place of music in worship, the appropriate degree of sexual intimacy, and much more. We need to do the math when it comes to those issues. We'll discover and know the truth if we do.

So there you have it - the first prevailing characteristic of truth and the appropriate response to it. It's objective. So, know it.

Truth is Exclusivist

Truth, by its nature, has a second prevailing characteristic. It's exclusivist. Remember these lines of Stephen Foster's minstrel song "**Oh! Susanna**": "**It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry. It was so hot I froze to death Susanna don't you cry.**" We get a kick out of that don't we because it's absurd. If I left at night, I didn't leave during the day. If the weather is rainy, it isn't dry. And if I'm hot, I'm not freezing. The humor in Foster's song illustrates something. Exclusivism is inherent in the nature of truth. This exclusivism isn't a matter of desire or hope but of logic. If something isn't true, then it has to be false. If something *is* real or so, anything that contradicts it or that is opposite it *isn't* real or so.

Look at this window of a retail store. It conveys two contradictory messages. One is that it's open 24 hours a day. The other is that it's open only from 7 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on Sunday. If the first message is true, then the second is false. If the second message is true, then the first is false. Truth, by its very nature, excludes what contradicts it or is opposite it.

That's the second prevailing characteristic of truth. It's exclusivist.

Stand on the Truth

And the first line in verse 23 reveals the appropriate response because it is. Once we buy or know the truth, we must then "**not sell**

it.” Brilliant commentator Franz Delitzsch explains what that means: **“Not to place it over against any earthly possession, worldly gain, sensual enjoyment; not to let it be taken away by any intimidation, argued away by false reasoning, or prevailed against, and not to become unfaithful to it by swimming with the great stream.”** That’s a compelling commentary, and I’d sum it up this way. We must stand on the truth and not waiver.

In 1521, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V summoned Martin Luther to a meeting. Charles demanded at that meeting that he recant his 95 theses, which initiated the Protestant Reformation. But Luther, consistent with verse 23, replied with these words: **“My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me, Amen!”**

That’s what Luther did, stood on the truth, and so must we. Think, speak, and act as if what is true is true and what isn’t true is false.

It takes courage of course to do that and we all know why. We live in a pluralistic society that loathes exclusivism. Our current culture scorns anyone who **“knows”** that he or she is right and that others are wrong about anything – except scientific matters.

Back in the 1970’s, scientist and intellectual historian Jacob Bronowski produced what is still today a widely acclaimed television series titled *The Ascent of Man*. In the eleventh episode, he addresses the harm done by those who think they know. At the end of it, he strides into the ash pond at Auschwitz where Nazis murdered four million people, squats down, and scoops up a handful of mud. He then declares: **“When people believe that they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave.”** Notice the phrase he uses, **“with no test in reality.”** What he’s referring to is non-scientific knowledge, especially in religious and moral matters. There is no knowledge in such matters, he argued, only beliefs.

Bronowski is dead now but his point of view isn’t. One of the

cardinal virtues in our culture today is tolerance. Tolerance is the posture that restricts knowledge to science. We can only believe things, not know them, about other matters, especially religious and moral matters. All beliefs about those matters, therefore, are equal, which means two things. First, no one belief is right and its opposite wrong. And second, no one belief is better than another. That is tolerance.

You can see there's only one thing that tolerance won't tolerate and that's intolerance (thinking, speaking, and acting as if we know religious and moral truth). I know that extravagance is immoral. That means you're wrong if you believe it's moral. I know that Jesus rose from the dead. That means you're wrong if you believe He didn't. Secularists literally despise people like me, and many of you, who think, speak, and act as if they know truth. We're arrogant and unloving, they say.

But we aren't. We are, in fact, the most loving and humblest people of all, precisely because we know the truth. We treat others, including those who are wrong, as neighbors and love them. We're also modest about what we know.

But we're firm as well, and never sell truth. We stand on it instead just as Luther did. We think, speak, and act as if what is real is real – as if what is so is so. We teach the truth, defend the truth, promote the truth, and act according to the truth – come what may. We know gambling is evil. So, we don't gamble. We know simplicity is right and materialism wrong. So, we teach that to our children. We know the Bible is God's written word. So, we contradict those who claim it isn't. We never sell the truth. We stand on it.

Conclusion

When I prepped witnesses for hearings or trials years ago, I said the same thing to each, "**Just tell nothing but the truth and you'll be fine.**" And I close this morning by saying something similar to you. Know and stand on nothing but the truth. You'll be fine and, according to our text, make your Heavenly Father proud, if you do.