



TOPICAL, LOOSELY ANCHORED TO ROMANS 12:9-21

## Pondering Truth and Love

8<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY – FEBRUARY 26, 2017 (PM)

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### INTRODUCTION:

A couple weeks ago we got into a discussion on Sunday evening regarding *truth* and *love*. It was touched off by 2Ti.1:13 *Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*. Regarding what it means to *follow... in... faith and love*, I quoted a commentator, Donald Guthrie (TNTC Pastoral Epistles V.14 p.150), as saying: *The manner in which Timothy maintained his (right belief) was as important as the (right belief) itself* (TNTC Pastoral Epistles V.14 p.150). The question this raised was whether we need to see *truth* as primary, at least in some sense, even if just logically, believing that if *truth* and *love* are fully of equal importance, couldn't that end up compromising *truth*?

First, let me give you the whole quote: *The Greek construction makes clear that what Timothy has heard is sound teaching and not the 'form' or pattern underlying it. The content must always be considered of greater importance than the shape. The exhortation calls for some effort on Timothy's part, for he is to guard the depo-sit. It is better to treat pattern (without the article) as a predicate and to understand the words to mean, 'Hold as a pattern of sound words what you heard from me'. In this case the words with faith and love would qualify the act of holding and would not be attached to sound teaching. The manner in which Timothy maintained his orthodoxy was as important as the orthodoxy itself. Had all loyalty to sound words been tempered by these great Christian virtues, faith and love, the bitterness of much ecclesiastical disputation would have been impossible. The two virtues must go together, as Paul eloquently shows in 1 Corinthians 13. So, Paul is saying (2Ti.1:13): You heard sound words from me. Receive them as a pattern to follow. And follow that pattern in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. And Donald Guthrie is saying that, as Timothy does this, then he'll be doing what is needful to address the difficulties there in Ephesus, and he'll be insulating against their return. So, follow the pattern of truth you hear in my sound words, and follow it in the faith and love that are ours in Christ Jesus.*

So, doesn't *truth* somehow have to stand as primary over *love*, in logical priority if not in temporal sequence? My answer: *No, according to Scripture that cannot be so. Why? Truth* is embodied in a Person. It's not reducible to a list of propositions—mere statements that are *true* or *false*. It's not just about intellectual content. So when we're talking about *truth* here, we're not talking about any particular assertion or set of assertions that can be evaluated as *true* or *false*. God *Himself* is the *Truth*. Or, more clearly, our Lord Jesus Christ embodies the *Truth*. It was He who said: *I am the truth* (Joh.14:6).

But then, Scripture also says 1Jo.4:8...*God is love*.

So, there is never a time or place when God is not fully *truth* and fully *love*. He defines both. He exists as both. Affirming that *truth* will always be loving does not soften *truth* because *love* is not soft or sentimental in the ways we often believe. God in his *love* both *blesses* and *curses*. In *love* He is at once *merciful* and *just*. Even His wrath expressed in the eternal judgment of sinners can't be separated from His *love*. In Rev.16:1-4, we see final judgment as being such a clear manifestation of His justice, truth, righteousness, and glory that it draws forth worship from His people!

This evening we're not just revisiting this question. We're reflecting further on these qualities of *truth* and *love* that are so central to the character of God Himself, and also to His call in our lives. They've appeared at the top of our worship bulletin for twelve years (*though that may end soon!*). So, we're talking about them as complementary. But we're doing so noting that, at times, they actually seem to be at odds—like there *could* come a time when faithfulness will require us to set aside *love* and speak *truth*! I'd say: *Not so!*

Let's look at these qualities from God's Word by addressing three questions.

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

That is a key question in our age, isn't it? But there's much in God's Word about *truth*. In fact, His very Word is called *truth*. Jesus prayed for his disciples in Joh.17:17 *Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth*. Not only that, but our *keeping* God's Word, *obeying* it, is what it means to receive His Word as *truth*. John wrote to his congregation 1Jo.2:4 *Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him."*

Jesus affirmed a companion *truth* in His conversation with Pontius Pilate. Pilate asked him Joh.18<sup>33</sup>... “Are you King of the Jews?” And <sup>37</sup>... Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to me.” And these very words revealed Pilate’s heart: <sup>38</sup> (He replied) to (Jesus), “What is truth?”

*Truth* is part of the very essence of who God is. And it is therefore and quality essential to those who follow him. *Truth* is *factually accuracy, situational integrity, moral excellence, perfect fidelity*, all in unlimited measure. It is *absolute freedom from pretense, deceit, corruption, falsehood, or appetite*. With *grace*, *truth* is the most evident quality of God’s foremost self-expression in Jesus. Joh.1<sup>14</sup> *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*. These words call the discerning reader’s mind back to God’s self-disclosure to Moses back in Exo.3<sup>4</sup>. He made his glory pass before Moses, who was hidden in the cleft of a rock, covered with the hand of God (Exo.33:22)—and as He did, He <sup>34</sup>... *proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”* This is who God is—His *character, His name*.

And these words, *steadfast love* and *faithfulness*: *steadfast love* refers to God’s *gracious, merciful, covenant love*—His *hesed*, His *lovingkindness* as translated in NAS. And *faithfulness* is a word meaning *firmness*, or even *truth*, again as translated in NAS. These are the same qualities God displayed in Jesus, *the Word (become) flesh*, God’s ultimate self-expression. Thus, it’s not only God’s *written Word* that’s called *truth*. So, too, is His *living Word, Jesus*. Joh.14<sup>6</sup>: *I am the truth*.

That, then, is *truth*. We believe and submit to and obey the *truth* of God revealed in His *living Word* and in His *written Word*. We are people of the *truth*—we test what we hear by His Scripture, and we live our lives in His Son.

## WHAT, THEN, IS LOVE?

Like *truth*, *love* is inseparable from the character of God: 1Jo.4<sup>8</sup>:... *God is love*. But that verse says more than that. It says: *Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love*. Thus, like *truth*, *love* is not

just essential to the character of God. It must also be displayed in the lives of His people. In fact, it is so essential to the character of God that, if it is absent in the life of anyone who claims to know Him, that absence alone is sufficient grounds to question the legitimacy of their confession.

So, what does *love* look like? John wrote 1Jo.3<sup>16</sup> *By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.* From this verse, then, and one very much like it in Joh.15<sup>13</sup> (*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*), many want to affirm that, at it's core, *love* is best understood as *sacrifice—(laying) down (one's) life*. The problem with this is that, in the great chapter on *love* (1Co.13) we read that *sacrifice*, even for the *truth*, can be done without *love*. And when that happens, any *sacrifice* is utterly worthless. So, *sacrifice* alone is not *love*.

Similarly, *love* alone is not merely a *decision*, as many more want to affirm. *Love is an act of the will*, they say, and in the process they gut it of all passion. But, that can't be right! The definitive act of *love* in all the universe is actually labeled, *passion: the passion* of Christ!

No, *love* is the fullest expression of our proper response to God; and it's not at all divorced from *passion* or emotion. And it begins with God: Joh.3<sup>16</sup> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son....* Rom.5<sup>8</sup>... *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* Eph.2<sup>4</sup>... *God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ....* This is the nature of God's *love* toward us, and therefore the nature of what even qualifies to be called *love*. In light of this, we might say that *love* best be described as *a jealous guarding of the beloved's best interest*. Or, perhaps better, *love is the joyful pursuit of the beloved's greatest joy*. Anything which is not this is not worthy to be called, *love*.

So, if we're supposed to *love*—and we are—this is what we're called to do: *jealously guard our beloved's best interest, or joyfully pursue our beloved's greatest joy*. This is this standard of *love* by which our *love* is measured, such that anything that is not this is not worthy to be called, *love*. Jesus Himself said that the great and first commandment is this: Mat.22<sup>37</sup>... *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ...* <sup>39</sup> *And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* We receive the *love* of God by His grace through faith in Christ, and then we respond with complete and unqualified devotion to Him—1Jo.4<sup>19</sup> *We love because he first loved us!*

And the way this *love* shows itself most visibly is in our *love* for one another, our obedience to the second great commandment. The Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel hang on these two commandments! So, we are invaded and conquered by the *love* of God, by His grace, through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and then we display that *love* most clearly in our *love* for our neighbor. And then this *love* is best and most joyfully expressed as we introduce our two loves to one another—the great commission!

Thus far, then, we see that biblical *truth* is of such a high and pure nature that, if it is not motivated by biblical *love* in our hearts, and if it does not produce biblical *love* in our lives, it has been reduced to something less than *truth*. And biblical *love* is of such a high and pure order that unless it produces and affirms and advances biblical *truth* it has been reduced to something less than *love*.

How ought we to pursue Truth and Love?

Well, first we must grant the inseparable link between them. One of the primary characteristics of *love* in 1Co.13<sup>6</sup> is that it *rejoices in the truth*. For practical input, though, there are many passages we could look at, but one I'd commend to you this evening is in Rom.12, beginning in v.9. It gives us three targets we can aim at on the heels of the charge: *Let love be genuine. Let love be (truthful).*

### Honor Your Brothers – 9-13

Just as he did in 1Co.12-13, Paul follows his instruction on the spiritual gifts with a reminder to *love*. *Let love be genuine*. This is like saying: *Let water be wet, or: Let the sun be hot, or: Politicians must schmooze*. It goes without saying! *Love, jealously guarding the beloved's best interest, must be genuine, sincere, to be love*. If it is not *sincere*, it's not *love*.

The next statement: *... Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good*, is not a new idea. It is parallel to *let love be genuine*. Christian *love*, just as it is *sincere*, is also firmly committed in its opposition to moral wrong, and in its support of moral right. It's committed to *truth*. Our *sincere love* must not simply express itself in rigid commitment to one another, it must express itself in warm personal, *brotherly affection* as well, v.10—in edification and elevation of each other in *honor*.

And our *(fervor) in the Spirit* should be clearly seen in our zeal for *(service)* <sup>(11)</sup>, in the *(joy)* of our *hope*, our *patience in (affliction)*, our *(faithfulness) in prayer* <sup>(12)</sup>, and even in our giving to those in *(need)* <sup>(13)</sup>. All of these are expressions of our *sincere love*, our *brotherly affection*, our *honor* for one another! And so is our *(showing)* of *hospitality!* <sup>(13)</sup>

The word translated *hospitality* is compound meaning literally a *brotherly love of strangers*. *Hospitality*, then, is essentially a *genuine*, heart-felt *affection* for people, including strangers. Many commentators believe that the charge to *show hospitality* is essentially a completion of the previous charge to *contribute to the needs of the saints* <sup>(13)</sup>.

That certainly makes sense. But, interestingly, the verb translated *contribute* or *share* <sup>(nvv)</sup> is the verb form of the word that means *fellowship*. *Fellowship* actively with those who are in *(need)* by *helping meet their (need)*, Paul writes. This isn't a distant sort of, *throw money at a (need) that you don't feel personally*. This is, *roll up your sleeves and dig in with the need!*

Then, when we get to the second half of the verse, the word translated *seek to show* or *practice* <sup>(nvv)</sup>, might actually best be translated *pursue*. It can be used of an army pursuing a retreating foe. In connection with the challenge *not to be slothful in zeal* <sup>(11)</sup>, it is certainly appropriate to say that it is with all of the fervor of a zealot pursuing his cause that we should be *(pursuing) hospitality* with one another.

### Bless Your Opponents – 14-16

The flavor of Paul's writing changes here. Some <sup>(Barrett)</sup> suggests that it's because the basis of his argument changes. The construction of vv.9-13 is in keeping with ancient Hebrew codes of conduct. The verbs were not imperative but were in participle form. Here in vv.14-16 they change to infinitive forms and the authoritative background seems to be the *Sermon on the Mount* <sup>(12:14; cf. Mat.5:44 ... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.)</sup>.

The verb translated *show* in v.13, which we just discussed, appears again here in v.14, and is translated *persecute*. Now the flavor of the challenge toward *hospitality* is fully revealed! We are to concern ourselves with the happiness, the satisfaction of soul, of those who seek to *persecute* us. And all the while we are to match the passion they have for our demise with the passion we have to warmly receive people of all types!

Loving people calls us to experience their ups and downs with them—evidently regardless of whether they are part of the household of faith! It also calls us to get on their level and not to think of ourselves in a prideful or arrogant manner—we need to reach *out* not reach *down*.

### Love Your Enemies – 17-21

Closely related to blessing opponents is loving enemies. Someone can be your *opponent* and not be your *enemy*. Take the *Bears*: when they're playing the *Rams* or the *Giants*, they're playing an *opponent*. When they're playing the *Packers* or the *Vikings*, they're playing an *enemy*!

Down in v.21 Paul follows a challenge to avoid *evil* (17) with the opposite, pursue *good*. Here in v.17, however, he puts an interesting twist on the matter: <sup>17</sup> *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all*. That is fascinating! Even though it is *true* that no one would blame you for (*repaying*) *evil for evil*, apparently—in fact, obviously—everyone knows it is not right! <sup>18</sup> (*Do everything you can*), Paul writes, *to live peacefully with all, even with those who hate you!* <sup>19</sup> *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God...!* He does a better job of it than we do!

We simply need to concern ourselves with drawing on His grace to walk in obedience to His Word regardless of the type of person who crosses our path. That is challenging enough to keep us busy—actually meeting the needs of our *enemy*, and perhaps even bringing about his repentance! (20)

## CONCLUSION

We need to give our attention to living in *truth* and *love* by the power of God!

### Three Brief Lessons – Think, Speak, and Act

In Phi.4<sup>8</sup> Paul urged his beloved ones the *think* properly. And how did he begin? <sup>8</sup>... *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things*. I believe this lays an excellent foundation: *think truth* and *love*.

As we've seen, Paul wrote: Eph.4:15 ... *Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.* Here's the next step: *Speak truth and love.*

We also read John's words: 1Jo.2:4 *Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.* But then he adds: 5 *But whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.... Act in truth and love.*

Jesus wrote to the church in Ephesus in Rev.2 about this very subject: holding on to the *truth* while not leaving their first *love*. And he offered a promise: 7 ... *To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.* That is a sweet promise! And, friends, that same promise is still ours today!