

How to Discern the Truth

Hymns 86, 286

John 7: 14-18

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“He shall know concerning the doctrine. . .” John 7:17

## INTRODUCTION

The American news media is setting records these days. But they are not winning gold medals by so doing. If there were a medal made of lead, that would fit the media class better. According to Gallup, confidence in the truthfulness of media reporting is on the decline, and has reached its second lowest level since polling began in 1972. The lowest level was only five years ago - around the 2016 election. Today, nearly 2/3 of the American public has either “not very much” trust in the media, or “none at all.” Even the reliability of the so called “fact checkers” is debated. Many point out that with the onset of “fact checking” many independent media outlets are struggling to stay viable since internet traffic to those sites is discouraged by the fact checker’s claims of “disinformation.” This makes one wonder why the “fact checkers” were deputized in the first place. Could it be that they have been created primarily to limit discussion and control the narrative? I’ll let you be the judge of that. But despite the best efforts of evil angels and evil men, there are still a lot of people who think independently. Many assume that the truth is the opposite of whatever the fact checkers say it is. How did we get here, friends? You would think that there is plan developed by an evil mastermind behind all this distrust and lying. And indeed, there is. Discerning the truth on planet earth - post fall - has never been a straightforward

matter. Pilate's question to our Lord is as relevant today as it was when he asked it - "What is truth?"

In our Scripture reading this morning, our Savior gives us some important hints as to how we can be discerners of truth, especially of spiritual truth. You see, it is one thing to have to deal with deception in the media; it's another thing when people use the Word of God to deceive. Jesus Himself was accused of this. We see this in John 7:12, just a couple of verse prior to our Scripture reading. Public opinion regarding Christ was divided, just as it is today. Some believed Christ to be a good man, but others accused Him of deceiving the people. So it is no wonder that Jesus, here, gives several principles so that His hearers could separate the chaff of public opinion and false doctrine, from the wheat of God's revealed, inspired truth. My suggestion is that we still need these principles today. Would you agree?

So with this introduction, let's take a moment to reread our scripture reading, pondering every word.

**John 7:14** ¶ Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught.

**John 7:15** And the Jews marveled, saying, "How does this Man know letters, having never studied?"

**John 7:16** ¶ Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me.

**John 7:17** If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or *whether* I speak on My own *authority*.

**John 7:18** He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him.

## POINTS TO CONSIDER



*he first thing to consider here is that the discernment of truth does not come by the possession of academic credentials.* Unfortunately, the Jews believed that education in their schools was what made a man a discerner and teacher of truth. Their statement here about Christ's lack of such an education reveals their thoughts about this. "How does this man know letters, having never studied?" John 7:15. Now, I try not to refer to the original language too often in my sermons, but a word or two is warranted in this case. There are two words for know in NT Greek - oida, and ginosko. One means knowledge as mastery, the other refers to the experience of gaining knowledge. The Jews used oida, not ginosko, indicating that in their opinion, Christ had a masterful knowledge of the Bible.

Before we consider the meaning of verse 15, we should be clear about what it does not mean. It does not mean that Jesus could not read, or that His messages were mere emotional rants, given without real thought. The record we have of Christ's teaching shows us the very opposite in fact. His discourses were well crafted, tightly reasoned, and judiciously illustrated. Our Lord always made appeals to the heart, too. What the Jews meant by saying this was that Jesus had not attended their schools and received degrees from them. Of course, in their minds that meant that He had not really studied at all. To them, lack of a degree constituted one an ignoramus - someone not worth listening to in polite society. They used the fact of his lack of conventional schooling to dismiss what He said.

Now I don't suppose that I have to point out how deeply this idea is rooted in our culture at the present time. No matter how accurately a man states the obvious facts, no matter how deep his insights, no matter how well reasoned his arguments, and no matter how inescapable his conclusions, there are always people who will ignore all that and skip right to an evaluation of his credentials. As if mere degrees

and scholastic attainments are the measuring stick of whether one can discern the truth! Let me tell you that I know of a man on the west coast of this country who not only can read and teach Greek, but also composes in Greek - he knows it so well. He used to use this very gospel of John to teach his students. Surely this man is a keen discerner of truth, right? On the contrary, let me assure you that based on all observable evidence, this man stands no nearer to the kingdom of God than does the devil himself. No, friends, as useful as academic training can be in some situations, it alone does not and cannot make one a discerner of truth. If we learn nothing else from an examination of our present state of society, it should be that.

**B**ut we must also consider another point here, and that is this: *Truth is not a matter of one's personal views or opinions, rather, it is about God and what He has revealed.* We see this idea in verse 16. Note

what our Lord says here: Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me." This is a key point to recognize. You see the Jews had fallen into the habit of allowing supposedly learned rabbis to interpret Scripture for them. There was Rabbi Shammai, and Rabbi Hillel, and others that proposed their own interpretations of the Bible. These two in particular often contradicted each other, leaving the whole matter of truth hanging in the air to be batted around in debate.

Contrast this approach to discerning truth with the solemn words of Christ - My doctrine is not Mine. If this was the case of He who spoke to Israel from Sinai, how much more should it be true of we who are mere under shepherds! Peter echoes this same thought in his second letter (2 Pet 1:20,21): **2Pet. 1:20** knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, **2Pet. 1:21** for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit. According to Peter, the prophetic word of God did not come into being because the prophets crafted it themselves, based on their interpretation of their religious experience. A thousand times NO! Rather, they were moved by the Holy

Spirit. God gave them the thoughts to share, and He guided them to share those thoughts accurately, and faithfully.

I bring this point out because I think it is a key indicator to analyze in the search for truth. We must always ask - "is what I am hearing human opinion, human reason?" Does the person who is speaking benefit from his own doctrine? Who is glorified in this teaching? This is the point Jesus brings out in verse 18. To present His teaching as His own, rather than God's inspired, revealed Word, would be to ascribe glory to Himself. He refused to do it. The Jews, on the other hand, had their own glory constantly in mind. Their teaching was a constant effort to exalt themselves and give themselves liberty to do what they wanted to do, rather than to truly live for God. But to seek to glorify God alone, as our Lord always did, indicated that His teaching was true and genuine. Here we find an important measuring stick of truth. When presented with any sermon or doctrine, we should always ask this question - to whom does the teacher seek to bring glory? God, or himself? No preacher should ever present the glorious truth of Scripture as though it came from him. This is essentially blasphemy, since it takes what justly belongs to God and turns it toward self. I say, beware of such people. Avoid them and you will be blessed.



Now we must consider one further point this morning. So far Christ has presented this matter from the negative view - pointing out what the truth-teller is NOT. *But verse 17 gives us the key element in discerning the truth, and that is this: The ability to discern truth is a matter of one's willingness to be governed by it*, if I can put it succinctly. This ability does not come as a result of education, nor does it come whenever self-exaltation is the motive. We have seen those two fallacies already. Christ says, "If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or *whether* I speak on My own *authority*." This is really the vital thing. But we should note here that the word "wills" is a verb. It is an action word. It refers to a decisive action that one makes in

the heart to do whatever God may reveal. We could translate it equally as well like this - "If anyone purposes in his heart to do His (meaning God's) will, he shall know. . ." This is the kind of thing that Daniel did. Daniel purposed in his heart that he would do nothing dishonor God in Babylon, even in the matter of what he took into his body. And we see in that story that God grants Daniel discernment of prophetic truth!! Note that John 7:17 is a special promise to truth seekers. There are no restrictions on the promise, and only one condition to meet - that we purpose in our hearts that we will seek to live in accordance with the truth God reveals. Other than this single, vital condition, anyone may take hold of this promise. Have you no degrees, friend? It is of no consequence - come take hold of the promise! Are you naturally weak-willed? You come too, for God says, "My strength is made perfect in weakness!" Are you a miserable sinner like me? We can come as well, for so was the publican in Jesus' parable. His words were, "Lord, be merciful to me - a sinner" - because he was sick of himself and wanted to live differently. Did God hear his prayer and answer it? He did!

## APPEAL

So let me close this morning by addressing this question: How important is it to discern the truth? So many in this generation have concluded that the concept of truth is irrelevant, or that truth can't really be known, or that truth is always and only personal in nature. My truth, they like to say. Friends, I want to be clear - according to this book, truth is personal, but the post-modern people are focused on the *wrong person*. They think truth is centered on themselves. It is not. Not even a little bit. Rather the person in whom truth centers is God Himself. He is the truth. So how important was it for the angels in heaven to discern the truth when Lucifer the covering cherub started peddling his fake news about God? It was the difference between life and death, wasn't it? And why does our Savior, in this instance that we've

been studying, spend time laying down principles by which the truth can be known if the whole question is irrelevant? No, my brothers and sisters, the fact is that the truth IS relevant, and discerning it and following it will mean the difference between salvation and condemnation very shortly. Will you, today, commit your life to this privilege of discerning and living the truth? I pray that we all will!