

# Being the Truth

“Jesus is the truth about God.”

John 18:33-38

Fourth in the series, *IM Jesus: Instant messages about the difference Jesus makes.*

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## Truth Is

The 60's folk singing group Peter, Paul, and Mary came out with a song called *The Great Mandala*. I didn't know at the time that the wheel of life they were talking about was a Buddhist symbol of life with all its decisions and temptations. But I understood the story the song told about a young man that believed the War in Vietnam was wrong and decided to take a stand against it, even though it was an outrage to his father and dishonor to his brother who had died serving in the war. As the song unfolded, the young man was arrested and thrown in jail. But still in protest, he continued to take his stand through a hunger strike that lasted until he died.

With each chorus, the song engaged the listener:

*Take your place on the great mandala  
As it moves through your brief moment in time.  
Win or lose now you must choose now  
And if you lose you're only wasting your life.<sup>1</sup>*

It was the late 60's and the War in Vietnam was raging and every young man especially in his teens and twenties had a lot on his mind. Lots of people opposed the war as morally wrong. Others believed that supporting it was a duty we all owed to our country. So, it was a time of weighty decision; and the stakes were as high as you can get.

*And if you lose you're only wasting your life.* The song posed the question that would have made me struggle with an answer no matter where I stood on the war. “Is this a matter worth dying for? Is there such a matter? After all, if you pull back and play it safe and you don't entirely live up to your principals, isn't there something to be said for living for another day?”

We all had our lives ahead of us. At that age, shouldn't we have all been given a pass on having to take a stand?

I found out that the answer isn't necessarily "Yes." We were still in high school and a good friend of mine told his father that he believed that God wanted him to become a pastor. It was when I was at his house: I was upstairs and he and his father were downstairs and I still remember the shouting. His father was a very successful executive in a large corporation. They had a lot of money and had lived in some very interesting places in the world. His father was saying things like he didn't want David to waste his life in a career like ministry. His father was very powerful; and I couldn't believe how David stood his ground. He was taking his place. This was something that was as important as life and death.

You might say it was his truth.

It didn't stop there. I kept some track of my friend through the years. There were all kinds of barriers to fulfilling that calling that were set against him – not just from his father. Yet, it seemed something he was willing to lay down his life for. And he kept on pressing until he was ordained and commenced doing that which he was certain God wanted him to do. It was his truth.

### **Which Truth?**

The Gospel of John is a book in the Bible that shows two people with vastly different truths face-to-face. One's name was Pilate, a Roman procurator. The other was Jesus.

When the procurator is confronted by the King, the world is confronted by the Kingdom. This is the moment of truth.

This is Pilate's truth. Accounts about him written by both Jewish and Roman sources describe him as a mean-spirited and harsh ruler who was filled with contempt for his Jewish subjects.<sup>2</sup> Here he was, handed a Galilean preacher who had been accused of sedition by the Jewish leadership. He would have had no sympathy for Jesus and he didn't respect the authority of the accusers. He would have been out for only what was politically expedient. What was going to leave him in the best position, overall? If Jesus had been trying to be a king it was up to Pilate to silence him; even if he wasn't, it was to Pilate's advantage to avert a public riot. He had all that to consider.

In any case, Pilate needed to stay in control. Control and self-service was what Pilate was all about, and it appears the extent that he understood control, he would have controlled by force. That was his way. It was the Roman way. In fact, isn't controlling by force the way of the world?

This is the truth about Jesus. One day a man who was covered with leprosy saw Jesus and bowed his face to the ground and said, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." What was it about Jesus that people just knew that he could do this kind of thing; or that he would have the slightest inclination to do such a thing? Leprosy was one of the vilest scourges of the ancient world. It was thought to be hereditary, a curse, or even a punishment from God.<sup>3</sup> It was considered to be highly contagious. People with the disease were shunned and treated worse than criminals. They had no rights and were worth nothing. Yet, the man with leprosy said to Jesus, "If you choose..." perhaps because he already knew enough about Jesus to have hope.

Jesus said, "I do choose." He stretched out his hand to this untouchable man who was, in everyone else's eyes, without value. He exposed himself to the man's disease. And Jesus said, "Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him and so did the stigma. Immediately the man was given his life and his value while Jesus, at the very least, would have been considered ritually impure.

A miracle and a sacrifice.

This is the truth about Jesus. This is his way. And he is convincing that this is the very embodiment of God's truth. Life-giving. Un-forceful yet assertive. Other-serving. Pouring out love. A king of a different kind of realm.

Pilate and Jesus come face-to-face. Pilate wants to know how he can control the situation by force. Jesus is in control by love. He doesn't need to win. Embodying God's love, he is already victorious.

Pilate strives to make ground. Jesus lives like God's kingdom has already come: and that's the point. Jesus' way *is* the way for God's kingdom to come.

The way of love, of caring for others with the full compassion of God: there is no other way to get there.

Earlier in the evening Jesus had been with his friends, probably aware of what was about to happen, with his arrest and trial. He said to them, “I go and prepare a place for you and will come again and take you to myself so that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas asked, “How can we know the way?” That’s when Jesus said, “I AM” – another God moment – “I AM the way, and the truth, and the life.”<sup>4</sup>

A lot of religious people have used this passage to be exclusive – to impress on everyone who is in and who is out. They have turned it into a way of forcing who gets God’s blessing and who doesn’t. I don’t think that’s what Jesus intended.

What Jesus intended is to say that he embodies God’s truth. If you want to walk with God and live your life filled with all that it means to experience God, you will live the same way as Jesus lives.

You will love rather than force.

You will pour out compassion rather than be selfish.

You’ll be willing to live sacrificially in order to never give up God’s love.

Just like my friend, David, who stood his ground and wouldn’t give up because he had to live out the truth of who he was: Jesus would never give up God; and neither would you.

### **Way of Truth**

So, Jesus was told by leaders who were threatened by the different way he represented God that he’d better take back everything he’d said and done. He was given an ultimatum by Pilate, who was just like the rest, that he’d better not say that he was a king. Take it back.

He could have stepped back and served himself and played it safe and let go of God’s truth. But he wouldn’t. He stood his ground and died a death that was full of God’s truth. Love: for you and for me.

In the days when I was young and caught up in new spiritual growth so that I was smug and certain and was prone to decide who else was saved by God and who was

not, I wondered about my dad's status. He wasn't as vocal as my mother, after all; he seemed to be lower-keyed and harder to read. I don't know if he knew what was going on in my head or not, but one day we were in the house alone when out of the blue he said, "You know John, you need to be willing to die for your faith."

It blew me away. Not only did I understand at once that my dad was grounded in Christian faith; but I realized that he was miles ahead of me. And he taught me in that one, brief sentence:

you need Jesus to be the truth of your life.

That's when you live like you belong to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Yarrow, *The Great Mandala (Wheel of Life)*. Pepamar Music Corp. – ASCAP © 1967 Warner Bros. Records. <http://www.peterpaulandmary.com/music/f-08-06.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. IX*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. p 815.

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<sup>3</sup> "History of Leprosy," Stanford University web site.

<http://www.stanford.edu/group/parasites/ParaSites2005/Leprosy/history.htm>

<sup>4</sup> John 14:1-6.