

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's communicable attribute of truthfulness.

Dr. Spencer, at the end of our previous session you made a shift that I didn't notice at the time. We had been talking about moral laws and the idea that if God doesn't exist, might, in a human sense, does make right. You then said that "at the end of the day truth really does depend on power because it depends on authority." So, you switched from talking about what is right, to talking about what is true. Can you explain that shift?

Dr. Spencer: I did make a jump there in order to get to the conclusion before we ran out of time and, in hindsight, the jump was too large. So, let's go back and fill in the blanks so to speak to make it clear how I got to that conclusion.

Marc Roby: OK, please do.

Dr. Spencer: We had finished briefly discussing different theories of truth and had then pointed out that our worldview has a pervasive influence on what we believe to be true. It is therefore, extremely important that our worldview be correct. But, our worldview is not something most of us consciously develop or even think about, so you had asked for an example of how we can test whether or not our own worldview is true.

Marc Roby: Yes, I recall that.

Dr. Spencer: And I responded by saying that we can test whether some of the fundamental tenets of our worldview are true or not. Our worldview comprises a set of beliefs about the world we live in, things we believe to be true. And those beliefs can be examined by realizing that we can draw conclusions based on them, in other words things that should be true if the underlying beliefs are true, and then we can check those conclusions to see if they're right. And I gave the example that if an atheistic worldview is correct, then there can be no absolute morality.

Marc Roby: And I think we established that conclusion reasonably well.

Dr. Spencer: I do too, although I may want to come back to that topic later. But, getting back to our example, if an atheist believes in absolute morality, and in my experience most do, even if they won't say so, his worldview is inconsistent. I argued that absolute morality only exists because God has the authority and power to establish and enforce moral law. But I skipped over making the connection that God's authority and power do not end with his being able to establish the moral law. In fact, he has the authority and power to determine everything that exists in this universe and is absolute sovereign over everything that happens in the universe, so that whatever he thinks is true, *is* necessarily true.

Marc Roby: And that is what is meant by saying that truth is, ultimately, a person, it is God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right. Of course, truth is also a property of a statement, but ultimately, a statement is true if it corresponds to what God thinks is true. Wayne Grudem, in his *Systematic*

*Theology*, defines God's attribute of truthfulness this way: "God's truthfulness means that he is the true God, and that all his knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth."<sup>1</sup>

**Marc Roby: Grudem uses the word "true" in two different ways in that definition, doesn't he? To say that God is "the true God" is a different usage of the word than to say that his words are true.**

Dr. Spencer: You're right. John Frame, in his book *The Doctrine of God*, discusses three different meanings of the word truth as it is used in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> And all three meanings are important because God is truth in all three senses of the term. The first of these three meanings is called the metaphysical.

**Marc Roby: Metaphysics refers to the branch of philosophy that studies the fundamental causes and nature of things.**

Dr. Spencer: Mm-Hmm. In talking about the truth as being a person last time, we quoted what is perhaps the most famous verse in this regard, John 14:6, in which Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life."<sup>3</sup> Jesus was using the word truth in its metaphysical sense there. We sometimes use the word that way in our normal speech as well. For example, you might hear someone be described as a *true* outdoorsman. Which means that the person corresponds to the ideal picture of what an outdoorsman should be.

**Marc Roby: Of course, my picture of an ideal outdoorsman might be different than yours.**

Dr. Spencer: That is certainly possible. And that brings up an interesting point relating to the truthfulness of God. In John 17:3, the great high priestly prayer of Jesus, he is praying to his Father in heaven and says, "this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." When Jesus says the Father is "the only true God" he is using the term in its metaphysical sense, but we have to deal with the same question you raised; whose idea of the true God must the Father conform to in order to be the true God? Many people throughout history have rejected the true God because the God of the Bible doesn't fit *their* personal idea of what God should be like. For example, many reject God because in their view he shouldn't allow any suffering in this world.

**Marc Roby: In fact, many people at the time of Jesus rejected him because they were looking for a political Messiah who would deliver them from their bondage to the Romans.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's true. In fact, Jesus spoke about the fact that people rejected him for not living up to their expectations for the Messiah. In Luke 7:31-35 he says, "To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 195

<sup>2</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 475

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marketplace and calling out to each other: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.’ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.”’ But wisdom is proved right by all her children.”

Jesus was making the point that the people who rejected John for being too ascetic and Jesus for not upholding the Jewish traditions of the time were just like children who were upset with others who wouldn’t join in one game by dancing, or in another one by crying. But, we don’t get to choose the game! God is sovereign, not us.

**Marc Roby: And, as Jesus said, “wisdom is proved right by all her children.”**

Dr. Spencer: Precisely. And what he meant was that the fruit produced by the ministry of John the Baptist, which was serious repentance, and the fruit produced by Jesus’ own ministry, which was salvation for sinners, would prove them to be true. And so, when people today refuse to accept the God of the Bible because the God they want would never allow suffering into this world, or would never send people to hell, they are being just like the Jews of Jesus’ day. Therefore, we must again ask, in the high priestly prayer of John 17, when Jesus said that the Father is “the only true God”, whose idea of the true God must the Father conform to in order to be the true God?

**Marc Roby: Well, I would assume that, since Jesus is the one praying, it would be his idea of the true God that he has in mind.**

Dr. Spencer: And I would agree with you. But Grudem points out an interesting and unavoidable circularity here. He says, correctly, “that it is *God himself* who has the only perfect idea of what the true God should be like. And he himself *is* the true God because in his being and character he perfectly conforms to his own idea of what the true God should be. In addition, he has implanted in our minds a reflection of his own idea of what the true God must be, and this enables us to recognize him as God.”<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: And, I might add, he has also revealed to us in his Word what it means to be the true God. I am thinking, for example, of places like Isaiah 41:22-23, where God mocks the idols of the people saying, “Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods.”**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is a good passage. According to God, a true God should be able to tell us what the future holds.

In addition, the Bible tells us that a true God should also be the one who created all things. Over and over again in the Old Testament God reminds his people that he is the one who created the heavens and the earth. For example, in Isaiah 45:18 we read, “For this is what the LORD says—

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<sup>4</sup> Grudem, op.cit., pg. 195

he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited—he says: ‘I am the LORD, and there is no other.’”

**Marc Roby: There is only one Creator, and he alone is the true and living God.**

Dr. Spencer: And, as Grudem pointed out, God “implanted in our minds a reflection of his own idea of what the true God must be, and this enables us to recognize him as God.” So, when God points out that he alone is the Creator, the Lord of history, the Savior of his people, and the Judge of all, it resonates with our inner sense of what it means to be God and, if we have been born again, we recognize it as true.

So, when we read that God is the *true* God, the metaphysical use of the term truth here means that we recognize God, as he reveals himself to us in his Word, to correspond in his fundamental nature, to what it means to be God. But we also see that he is the one who *defines* what it means to be God, so we need to jettison any unbiblical notions of God from our thinking. There is no external standard to which God must conform. He *is* the standard.

**Marc Roby: I think we all need to meditate for a while on God’s description of what the true God should be and his revelation of himself as that true God.**

Dr. Spencer: These ideas definitely warrant some careful thought. And let me add one more quick point related to the metaphysical meaning of truth. In John 1:17 the apostle says that “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

John Murray makes an important point about this verse in his book *Principles of Conduct*. He wrote that “We should bear in mind that ‘the true’ in the usage of John is not so much the true in contrast with the false, or the real in contrast with the fictitious. It is the absolute as contrasted with the relative, the ultimate as contrasted with the derived, the eternal as contrasted with the temporal, the permanent as contrasted with the temporary, the complete in contrast with the partial, the substantial in contrast with the shadowy. ... What John is contrasting here is the partial, incomplete character of the Mosaic dispensation with the completeness and fulness of the revelation of grace and truth in Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: That statement gives us even more to meditate on. In the meantime, you said that Frame lists three meanings of the word truth as it is used in the Bible. What is the second meaning?**

Dr. Spencer: The second is epistemological, or propositional truth, which is, as Frame points out, “a property of language, rather than reality.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, if I say that I was born in California, the proposition is either true or false. That is the predominant sense in which we were using the term in our last session when we discussed theories of truth. A statement is true if it

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<sup>5</sup> John Murray, *The Principles of Conduct*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957, pg. 123

<sup>6</sup> Frame, *op. cit.*, pg. 477

corresponds to reality as far as that can be determined, and if it is also consistent with all other statements we know to be true.

**Marc Roby: And God is also truth in this propositional sense. For example, we are told in Hebrews 6:18 that “it is impossible for God to lie”.**

Dr. Spencer: We also read in 1 Samuel 15:29 that “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind”. That is why Grudem’s definition says, “all his knowledge and words are” true. And this is the point I was making last time. Since God is the Creator and the sovereign Lord of history, he controls this universe both in terms of its underlying nature and in terms of what happens to it over time. Therefore, whatever God thinks is true, *is* necessarily true as we have said. Grudem says, “since God knows all things infinitely well, we can say that the standard of true knowledge is conformity to God’s knowledge. If we think the same thing God thinks about anything in the universe, we are thinking truthfully about it.”<sup>7</sup>

**Marc Roby: In other words, God is not only true, he is the standard of truth. Grudem’s definition also says that God’s knowledge and words are “the final standard of truth.”**

Dr. Spencer: And Grudem explains that statement further. He says that “God’s words are not simply true in the sense that they conform to some standard of truthfulness outside of God. Rather, they are truth itself; they are the final standard and definition of truth.”

**Marc Roby: We talked about ultimate standards of truth way back in Session 4 and you pointed out that there really are only two possibilities; either human reason or divine revelation.**

Dr. Spencer: Those are the only two options. But we also pointed out that even though human reason is not the ultimate standard of truth for a Christian, it is necessary. It is a gift from God and without it we can’t understand his revelation to us. But, we must use our reason in a subservient role. It cannot stand in judgment over God’s revelation, it must be used to understand that revelation correctly.

**Marc Roby: And that applies to general revelation as well as to the Bible.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. We must be careful to never let human reason be the ultimate standard for truth, even when we are doing science. Francis Bacon, often considered the father of empirical science, is famous for his statement about God’s two books; the book of nature and the book of the Bible. But, as Christians, we must place the Bible above nature because it is God’s infallible word to us. We can use our understanding of nature to help understand the Bible correctly, but we can never let what we think we know from nature overrule the Bible. So, for example, the idea that all life emerged from non-life by some natural process is unacceptable because it clearly contradicts the Bible. Of course, as I pointed out in Session 1, I don’t think that idea has much scientific merit either, it is the result of an atheistic worldview.

**Marc Roby: Which again points out the importance of our worldview. But, let me bring us back to our topic of God’s truthfulness. You said that Frame discussed three biblical meanings of the**

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<sup>7</sup> Grudem, op. cit., pg. 195

word truth and we've covered two of them, the metaphysical and the propositional meanings. What then is the third?

Dr. Spencer: The third meaning is the ethical. The three meanings are, of course, all related. Frame says that "Metaphysical truth is genuineness; epistemological truth faithfully represents what is genuine; ethical truth is faithfulness in all areas of life."<sup>8</sup>

So, with regard to metaphysical truth we quoted John 17:3, which called God the Father "the only true God", and which speaks of his being the genuine article, to use a colloquial expression. Then with regard to epistemological, or propositional, truth you quoted Hebrews 6:18, which says that "it is impossible for God to lie" and that tells us that God faithfully represents what is genuine. Then, finally, ethical truth, as Frame says, is "faithfulness in all areas of life."

**Marc Roby: And ethics refers to the moral rules that govern our behavior.**

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. And God is ethical truth in at least two ways. First, Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate and, as we are told in John 1:18, makes the Father known to us, walked in perfect obedience to God's commands. He himself declared in John 8:29 that he always did what pleased the Father. And, secondly, God is ethical truth in the sense that he alone has authority to tell us what is right and what is sin. In other words, he alone has authority to give us the moral rules that govern our behavior. Without God's authority to do that, we are left with moral relativism and morality must be defined by human reason and is, therefore, changeable.

**Marc Roby: Yes, I liked what you said in our previous session; that if someone is a logically consistent atheist, he must agree with the premise that might makes right.**

Dr. Spencer: I did say that, yes. And I was deliberately being provocative. I certainly did *not* mean, for example, that any individual who has sufficient might to take something from another is morally right to do so. But, as I noted, if there is no God, we have a serious problem trying to defend any set of laws as being inherently right.

For example, in 1830 it was legal in some states in this country to own a slave. But now it is illegal everywhere in this country. Was there a change in some underlying law of morality? No, there was a Civil War and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to our Constitution was passed. Now I certainly hope, and expect, that our listeners will all agree slavery as it existed in this country prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was morally wrong. But there is a very serious question that we should all ask ourselves; namely, "On what basis can we make the statement that slavery is wrong?" What makes us right and the people who were in favor of it in 1830 wrong?

**Marc Roby: That is a question most people would find unsettling to even ask.**

Dr. Spencer: I realize that, but it is an important question. We all tend to think that we are morally superior to people we disagree with. And, if we are part of a group that has the power at the moment, we may even feel somewhat smugly justified in feeling that way. But the question

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<sup>8</sup> Frame, op. cit., pg. 478

stands. Other than the fact that the majority view is in our favor and the north was able to win the Civil War, what makes us right and the people in favor of slavery in 1830 wrong?

**Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point, although I'm sure it will make a lot of people uncomfortable.**

Dr. Spencer: It does make us uncomfortable. When we find ourselves objecting to the statement that "might makes right", and even self-proclaimed atheists typically do so, we are implicitly saying that there is some higher authority or standard for right conduct. But where does that standard come from?

**Marc Roby: Obviously I would say it comes from God.**

Dr. Spencer: Of course. And I would agree. But if someone claims to not believe in God, how can they answer the question?

**Marc Roby: I don't think they can. And we are out of time, so I think we will need to finish this discussion next time. Let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org); we'd love to hear from you.**