**2 Peter 1:19-2:1** June 14, 2020

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*2 Peter 1:19We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20You must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. 21For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

*2:1But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

“If it works for you…” That’s a good phrase. “If it works for you…” It admits that not everyone has to do things the same way, even if someone else’s way seems a little strange. “If it works for you to drive a 1996 Toyota Camry, more power to you.” “If it works for you to wait until the night before to study for the semester exam… okay.”

It’s a harmless phrase, “If it works for you.” Then, in our human love for the new, for a catchy turn of phrase, people started to say, “That may be true for you, but not for me.” People generally mean it innocently enough. I can kind of understand the “true for you, not for me” thing when it’s talking about ice cream flavors, music, and restaurants.

But, and here I am going to get nit-picky, that’s not what “true” means. Not really. Ice cream, music and restaurant preferences are things that are smaller than me. “True” and “truth” are bigger than me. Now, I am not going to fly off the handle if you use the phrase “true for you/not true for me,” or “That’s your truth.” Human language changes. However, do you see the deception that is sometimes played when people utter that phrase “your truth, not mine”?

“Truth” is things that are bigger than me, things that are universal—that’s what the word originally meant for centuries and millennia. In fact, for the time being, the word still carries that residual weight even if no one really thinks that’s what “truth” means. Which is the genius of the phrase and why, at least sometimes, people say “true for you, not for me.” In that single phrase I can dismiss the entire discussion about whether something is true (in the old sense of the word) simply because I find it inconvenient for it to be true. “If I were to admit that truth, that would mean I would have to change, to say I am sorry, or at least to admit your way is better. Nah!!! ‘That may be true for you, but not for me.’” Without explaining myself or looking at the data, I have empowered my preferences with a sort of divine right. “My truth” is a verbal sleight of hand that makes my desires, however unfounded or selfish they might be, unassailable, unquestionable.

Now you might be thinking, “It sounds like pastor has spent too much time reading books this past week.” But this gets down to a crucial religious question of our time. It is a question that becomes the more insistent each year in our relativistic culture. It is the question of spiritual authority: “Who decides right and wrong? Who decides truth?” Twenty-first century America has firmly declared, “Me. I decide! Not everything that is true for you, is true for me.” Our Bible reading answers in a very different way.

This question is not new. It is a question here dealt with by the Apostle Peter. Peter wrote this letter that we call Second Peter to Christians who had apparently been Christians for a while but not a long while; several years but not generations. At first, they had tenaciously clung to the Christian faith even through societal and state-sponsored persecution. Peter’s first letter to these people (what we call the book of First Peter) was an encouragement to suffering Christians. But in this second letter, seemingly written a few years later, the Apostle sees another threat. That early enthusiasm for their Savior that helped them to grit their teeth and make it through the persecutions, that seems to be wearing off. Through the passage of time these Christians have become spiritually careless. In letting their guard down, in becoming lazy in their relationship with their Lord, the enemy has entered the gates. While they may not have let outside persecution get them down, they are letting internal doubts about important things fester.

Now we are not going to talk the issues they had. That’s not what our reading is about. Our reading is about *how* Peter says they should deal with those issues. Remember, the question is spiritual authority.

So, if you have two competing ideas of right and wrong, how do you decide which is correct, which is true? Do you go with democracy? Take a vote of the assembly and whatever the majority wants, you go with that? Do you listen to persuasive speakers, maybe even pundits and commentators and let them shape your opinion into a finely polished monolithic stance? Do you listen to your peer group—whether you define your peers as people similar in age, race, income or profession—do you and your peers confer and reach a consensus on right and wrong?

Who has the authority to decide right and wrong? Times are changing. We are told to discover “what works for you.” Let that be your truth. Peter tells his beloved Christians, ***“We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place.”*** He asserts that we have an objective outside standard. We don’t get to determine it. Someone else has. Not your truth, not my truth, eternal truth. ***“We have the word of the prophets made more certain.”*** ***“The Word of the Prophets”*** refers to the Old Testament writings. ***“Made more certain”*** speaks to the fact that Peter and these Christians had seen the fulfillment of the prophets in Jesus. Jesus fulfilled, illumined and made clear what the prophets had been talking about. Therefore, through Jesus, the prophets were made “more certain.”

That word of God is like ***“a light shining in a dark place.”***Time and again, God’s word describes this world, *and humanity*, as a place of darkness. We are born in sin, live in sin, and die in sin. Humanity, by nature, sits in spiritual darkness. We can’t see right or wrong by our nature. We are inherently sinful and selfish. We will always make the wrong choice as long as we are the arbiters of truth. Only God’s word can enlighten us. Therefore we, ***“do well to pay attention to”*** the word of the prophets made more certain.

Peter goes on to explain *why* we Christians should put the Bible, so to speak, on a higher shelf than any other consideration: ***“No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”***

This passage speaks to us of the nature of God’s word, the Bible. This is such an important concept that a special religious term has been coined to wrap it all up in a tight little package. Just like you have a dictionary of abbreviations in the armed forces: TDY, AO, KP, etc.; just like nurses use all sorts of verbal shortcuts, slang and terms with the result that even their patient has no idea what they are talking about; in the same way the Christian faith has its own lingo for some very important terms. We have Trinity and justification and Sacrament. This passage gives birth to another term, “verbal inspiration.” It’s not a term from the Bible, but it is a way to package a complex biblical concept into two words. “Verbal inspiration” is a term every Christian should know.

“Inspiration,” first of all, does not here mean what we usually think of with inspiration—like, “The beautiful scenery was the inspiration for her poem.” In “verbal inspiration”, inspiration has a different meaning. Sort of like a “respirator” is a medical advice that gives you life-giving breath, “verbal *inspiration*” means that the Holy Spirit breathed into the Bible writers the words he wanted. It was Him, not them, They had the pen in their hands and they wrote the words, but what’s here [pointing to Bible] didn’t come from the mind of Moses, Isaiah or the Apostle Paul. It came from God.

The “Verbal” part of verbal inspiration means that God had the exact words he wanted written down. The original Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible contain exactly what God wanted to communicate to humanity. Faithful translations convey these truths to us. We don’t get to say, “Well, God should have said…” or “He should have used this word instead of that word…” No, this is God speaking. He said what he wanted us to hear.

If this is true, that the infinite, all-knowing, just, and merciful God wrote down the exact words he wanted humanity to know, then we must give this volume a place where no other literature can sit, not just on a shelf, but in our hearts. It, not I, gets to determine truth. It is truth. Whether it works for me or not, it is truth. And if I find that this and I are not in agreement, I know which one needs to change. If I choose something other than this as my standard for faith and life, then I have, not “my truth,” but “my lie.”

This is a profound statement of spiritual authority for our day. It is a stark contrast over and against the way our society prefers to determine right and wrong. For example, deviant opinions about what constitutes marriage that were scoffed at at the beginning of the past decade, are now to be embraced, and society has determined that anyone who would say otherwise deserves to be cancelled.

This human-centered measure of truth even enters into the Christian church, as it did into the churches Peter addressed. Living together in a sexual relationship wasn’t even a question for Christians a few years ago. Everyone knew it was gross immorality. But now it is just what everyone is doing. “Remember the Sabbath Day” has apparently become in many Christians’ minds, more and more an option than a commandment. These things happen when we make human reason the judge of “truth”. And then there are the things that we never really had straight in the first place: our tendency to be judgmental, to gossip, to envy, to hate, to be dishonest. All of these we engage in, many of them we justify, but they are all sin and lies, lies worthy of the Father of Lies.

When Peter looked at his Christians and saw whatever the dangers were (remember, we aren’t told specifics), he knew the greatest danger of false teachers and he named it: ***“They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them.”***

That is what naturally happens, sooner or later, when our human reason becomes the judge of right and wrong. Either the saving work of Jesus gets replaced with human works like penance, or else our human reason tells us that we don’t really need saving. Either way, our Savior is denied.

Peter views this as the ultimate renunciation of God’s word, ***“…even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them.”*** And it reveals one final thing about the Word of God. The most important part, the foundational point, the *sine qua non*, the one thing God wants us to take away if nothing else is this: Christ Jesus bought us. He redeemed us from our sin. Because, without that one thing, we have nothing. But with it, we have everything.

If you visit our house, you will find that the back side of our plot is right up against Joe Prather Highway. At four in the morning, there is hardly a car out there. It is quiet. But from four onward, it keeps getting noisier and noisier until at about 7:00am, if you aren’t standing pretty close to each other, you have to almost shout to be heard. These are our times: noisier and noisier; more and more information and opinions coming at us. And not just opinions. People who would intimidate, frighten and shame us into worldly ways of determining truth. There is so much moral background noise, so many claims of spiritual authority, that we almost can’t hear ourselves think. Now more than ever, the Apostles’ words ring true: ***“We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place… For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”*** Amen.