

"The Genius of Jesus"

Dallas Willard, Veritas at Ohio State University - 11/14/2002

*Scribe's Comments - The session was transcribed from the audio with good-faith effort but it is not verbatim. The [brackets] & **bold** disclose the scribe's commentary and also cross-references other Dallas Willard teachings.*



Presentation Description

"It is essential to the human being to find knowledge on which to base life," says Dr. Willard, and he argues that the present-day University is defective in this regard because it fails to take seriously the moral and religious life of the student.

In this talk, Dr. Willard posits there are four "Great Questions of Existence"—

- What is the nature of Reality?
- What is the Good Life?
- Who is a Good Person?
- How does one become a Good Person?

The University, however, fails to answer these questions by framing life in only a materialistic paradigm. Ultimately, Dr. Willard explains how Jesus of Nazareth has been such a force in history by providing answers to these questions and providing a basis for life in which all the aspirations of the human heart can be realized.



["The Genius of Jesus"](#)

[start 1:00]

[39:30]

Title: *The Genius of Jesus, The University and the Question of God*

—> What it means to be human.

"Any system of education that ignores the moral and religious nature of the student is fundamentally defective." (1882) University President

[also quoted at the beginning of Willard's "Human Nature"]

I'm here to say that is the system that we have. I'm probably going to say some things that will be inflammatory in the course of my remarks. I don't have time to tell you what I don't mean by what I say. We need to address this question directly. **It is essential to the human being to have to find knowledge to base life on.** You can even say that the burden of humans existence is to find an adequate basis knowledge for life. Unique to all living species that falls to the human being. We are talking about human nature.

* We can't just hatch out and run like Quails.

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* Dogs don't sit around on the back porch wondering if they have enough bones laid up for their declining years.

We do. We have to deal with our future.

Human beings are responsible for their future and they determine what kind of person they are going to be. That requires knowledge.

Sometimes I have to explain on a **University** campus what knowledge is. Explain why students are here. The only point of taking classes is to gain knowledge. That may sound trite. In fact it isn't. Because you rarely meet anyone today who can tell you what knowledge is. So I'm going to tell you. [4:00]

Knowledge (def.) - *We have knowledge when we have the ability to represent things as they are on an appropriate basis of thought and experience.*

That's what you hope you've got when you go to the doctor or automobile mechanic. You hope they have [knowledge as defined above.] Good luck to you and lots of grace because often it's not there.

We have to be very careful and not define knowledge in a way that presupposes a lot of answers to things. In particular, the problem on our campus today can be expressed very simply - **we have defined knowledge in such a way that the most important matters of human life can not be subjects of knowledge.**

TRUTH - We have defined knowledge in such a way that **TRUTH** itself is in real trouble. "Veritas" means truth. Knowledge involves truth. But in many parts of the University today and our culture, truth itself is laughable. We have whole philosophical systems that affect our culture that really set truth aside as a reasonable goal for human beings.

[\["Worldview" @ 8:00; "Human Nature" @ 22:45\]](#)

The University's role still is to find truth.

* WASC - "Integrity in the pursuit of truth."

"An institution of higher education is by definition dedicated to the search for truth and its dissemination."

* The one statement written on more university & college walls -

"The truth will make you free."

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If truth is not a legitimate goal, if it is not rational and makes sense and is available to people, it won't make you free. It won't do much of anything for you.

What we are in today is a tension between **TRUTH & DESIRE**. Truth, like reality, & DESIRE always come into conflict. That's where **BELIEF** comes in.

* **Belief** is like the rails on which our life runs.

When you believe something you act as if it is true.

* You believe those chairs will hold you up. If you didn't believe them to be reliable, how would you be sitting there?

Not like you are, not relaxed, not confident.

What we we need is to have beliefs that are true.

We often believe what we don't know.

Sometimes we know what we don't believe. [*Gambling odds]

This is a common human phenomena concerning human nature.

The truth is we know a lot of stuff we don't believe because our will is set against it.

That happens over and over again in human life in government and so on.

Leadership requires that followers believe that the leader knows what he or she is doing, that the leader has truth. We have to have that confidence in order to follow those that are leading. We have to be confident that they know the truth. Sometimes they manufacture it. You can't manufacture truth. No one has ever made a proposition true by believing it or by saying it. That's the bitterness of truth no matter how many people believe it or like it does not make it true. 10 million Frenchmen can be wrong. 10 million Americans can be wrong. Truth is totally indifferent to who believes it or who doesn't.

Rumors of Truth - To manipulate truth, leaders and tendencies in culture often manufacture "Rumors of knowledge" where there isn't any knowledge.

* Enron CEO's

Our contemporary society with its news is rife with rumors of knowledge, rumors of truth.

* Expert telling us about snipers on the East Coast on TV were nearly all wrong. "*Well, there's research!*" and belief and desire form the rumors by which we live. We need to be very careful about that.

Rumors of knowledge originate from those who have authority in culture. Often those rumors are more from what someone wants than knowledge.

There is always a conflict between DESIRE and TRUTH because DESIRE outruns truth.

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- * Personal relationship and dating
- * Get along with one another in a neighborhood
- * Political campaign

There is always this danger that instead of having KNOWLEDGE and TRUTH with it, DESIRE and WILL will push that aside and promote mere rumors of TRUTH.

[["Disappearance of Moral Knowledge" #2 @ 7:20](#)]

[["Battle between Flesh & Spirit", Willard; "Desire" used 31 x's](#)]

And then people will live by those and their lives can be ruined by them.

4 Great Questions of Life

[11:35]

[["Worldview" \(UCLA\) @ 14:50](#)]

The reason that Jesus stands forth as someone who should be heard in a University context is because of the centrality of these four questions. [["For Such a Time as This" \(Baylor\) Session 1 @ 25:00](#)]

1.) Nature of Reality?

[11:35]

That may sound like a metaphysical question that is irrelevant. That is the most important question you'll ever deal with.

The University teaches an answer to that question, not necessarily by a course on reality. I doubt you'll find one at Ohio State. We don't have one at USC. We need one. An answer is provided by the way we conduct ourselves.

What is reality? Think of "Reality" is what you have deal with.

When you go through a University you pick up answers to that question.

What do I really have to deal with?

"Reality" is what you run into when you're wrong.

Then you have to deal with it.

One of the beautiful things about TRUTH is it enables you to harmonize your life with reality. Instead of running into it, you can prosper in your relationship with it.

That is the most basic question in your life. The most important question you're going to have to deal with.

What is reality? What are you going to have to deal with?

The answer that most often comes in our culture - "Your body."

* Magazines - "Buns & Abs" -- "Beautiful Skin" [13:15]

If people understood and invested in the things that are really going to effect their lives as much as they do in the things that are going to make

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very little difference, but were treated as important in our world, they would be much better off and much more able to live the lives they were meant to live.

The first question is what is the nature reality? Every person has to deal with this question. Every institution deals with it. Our education is organized around it usually in some narrow focus so that we come to be technically competent in some area and deal with that well but it leaves our life as a whole untouched.

2.) Who is well off?

[14:35]

Who has the good life?

Who has blessedness?

3.) Who is a really good person?

[14:50]

This one is more important for most people than the second question. You can get in a fight quicker by questioning someone's goodness than you can by questioning if they are well off. It goes right to the heart of a person.

Am I worthwhile?

Am I worth admiring?

Do I have something to contribute to the world?

4.) How do you become a really good person?

[15:30]

You and I will practice answers to those questions no matter what we do or say. Every University conveys answers to those questions. There's a myth in our culture that at Universities we don't teach morality. We teach morality. If you get crosswise of it you will find out how real and how forceful that morality is.

We convey an impression as to who is well off and who is a good person. Universities answers these questions, not in a straightforward and responsible manner. You won't have a course in which you deal with these issues of being well off or being a good person in explicit terms. It will be conveyed in the whole spirit of the campus by the attitudes, the suggestion of language, the examples that are set, what is regarded as adequate teaching and research in the various fields. All those will convey answers to the four questions.

For example - **Today it is assumed that in no field of knowledge is knowledge of God required.** [["Worldview" @ 19:00](#)]

You are apt to think, "Why is he even talking about that?" The assumption in the answers that the University gives is that expertise in no field of knowledge requires the knowledge of God. It does not matter what your field

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is. The assumption is that God is irrelevant. That is not something that was discovered but it is something that has evolved.

Three Stories frame the human approach in life in Western Culture [17:33]

1.) **Theistic Story** - Ultimate reality is a personal God, indeed a community in Himself - the Christian story of Theism - and that's ultimate reality and everything derives from a personal God who is ultimate.

* Quote from the beginning of the message was from 1882. At that time, the Theistic Story was the story of Universities.

2.) **Nirvana Story** - Moving into the spiritual vacuum that is left by vacating the Theistic story is the Nirvana story. Everything derives from a reality that is undifferentiated - the realm of "no thing". That is what we sometimes call a New Age story.

3.) **Materialist Story** - Physical Universe is the only ultimate reality. That is the official underlying assumption of all of our education system today.

One of those stories is going to frame your life, cultural institution, a University setting. There is no real option outside of those three.

Option 4) **Agnosticism** can sometimes appear to be an option. An agnostic is someone who is without knowledge. I think the Latin is "ignoramus". That's why it is not a comfortable position. It is not just saying, "I don't know", it is a stronger claim that says, "We can not know. It is impossible to have knowledge." To defend "we can't know" is as tough job as defending one of those three stories.

One of those three is going to be the one that governs. **In the academic world today, the Theistic Story is taken to be totally irrelevant to course content and serious research.**

Now, individuals may have a faith in God. That's OK as long as they don't introduce that into their knowledge, make that a knowledge claim.

The Historical power of Jesus has been precisely the way in which He has responded to these issues of human life. [21:08]

Of those four questions we can go to anyone. One of the great things about the University campus is it should be open to examine all of the options. To look seriously at those who are going to answer those questions - "reality, well off, goodness, blessedness, who is a good person, how do you

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get to be a good person". It should be open. It has been in the past. When the field was open, the historical power of Jesus came through the power of the answers which He gave to those questions.

Arguably, without much question, Jesus is the single most influential person in human history. That is open for discussion. I don't who else you might suggest. In terms of influence, I can't imagine anyone else who has that kind of influence. Currently there is tremendous influence of Jesus even on people in other religions who are not so sure or they are antagonistic to Christianity as historically understood but are being influenced by the person of Jesus. Why is that?

It is because of the power in the answers that He gives to the four basic questions. That is what made Him such a force in history. His vision of reality, well being and life simply has nothing close to it.

1.) What does Jesus say about **reality**?

[23:00]

This is the first story, [[Theistic Story](#)] the one that the Universities in the Western World was founded on. **Reality is God and His Kingdom.**

(def.) **The kingdom of God is the range of God's effective will.**

That would include nature in so far as God has created nature. This is one reason why when people go out into nature and experience it, they seem so refreshed. They don't even have to believe anything to experience the greatness of nature.

* Chesterton - Atheist has no one to thank for created beauty.

That is one reason why when people turn away from God they often turn to worship beauty in the arts or in nature. It's because these are expressions of the greatness of God.

The Kingdom of God is where what God wants done what is done.

In order to understand it you should compare it to your kingdom, queendom or person-dom is the range of your effective will.

* Go through your backpack, immediately feel something is wrong.

* Drove off in your car without talking to you about it.

That's your kingdom - what you have say over - the range of your effective will.

The Kingdom of God is what God has say over. He invites us to come and live in His kingdom and know it as an experiential reality.

The trouble with my kingdom or your kingdom is that it can not run on it's own. It is finite. It is limited. That's where the issues about conflict

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between TRUTH and DESIRE and WILL - we find ourselves at war within ourselves and at war with those around us. We live in the midst of kingdoms in conflict. **DESIRE** is in conflict. There is nothing to subordinate that to. There is no greater reality in which people can meet. On our own it is impossible to be simply what we know we should be. [* [Incontinence](#)]

Only life in the Kingdom of God harmonizes the lives of human beings. That is why Jesus taught the way forward is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and then you have the ability to love your neighbor as yourself.

This is really important for us to think about because when we come back and look at University life and we think about the issue of God

- What does God have to do with it? [26:40]

God invites us to live in a spiritual reality in which all of the aspirations of the human heart for welfare and being a good person can be realized.

Jesus understood what would make human life work. He understood that the basic problem for human beings is to find a spiritual home in which they can know that they are cared for, enterally cared for and then from which, they can care for others and not spend their whole life just fighting over what to do.

* LA Riots - Rodney King - "*Can't we all just get along?*"

The answer is obviously "*No, we can't get along.*"

The question is - why can't we?

* Siblings, Parents & Children, Neighborhoods, Nations

We can not get along because we want our way, we want our kingdom to prevail and we can not find a larger kingdom in which to live together with others.

That is what Jesus brought into human life. He made clear what morality is and how it can be lived.

That is the number one problem or omission from University life today. It has nothing to say about that. It teaches a morality. But you don't teach a morality by preaching at people. You do it by body language, subtle suggestions, example, who you criticize, who you laugh at. That's how morality is taught.

That is how it is taught in the home.

~ MORALITY is a matter of passing on a certain kind of life.

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Morality (def.)

[29:30]

"A shared public understanding with associated emotional postures concerning what types of persons are to be or are not to be admired, approved, imitated, encouraged and supported without regard to whether they prosper or not. It is a matter of character and will."

In any context there is always a **Governing Morality**. There is one in our University and cultural situation but it is not the one that goes with the Theistic story because it is based upon a different reality, and that is taking humanity as the ultimate point of reference. As long as we do that we will never find the basis for living out the kind of morality that we know that we should. We'll never be able to just do the things we know that are right. That's why Rodney King was wrong.

Of course we use the words...

* Poster in the Cincinnati airport by Protective Insurance Company

A young boy wrote on the blackboard:

"Treat others the way you would like to be treated."

Do you know where that came from? It came from Jesus.

...Now, how do you do it?

The historical power of Jesus comes from the fact that He knew what to do and could enable people to do it. He was able to provide a morality that would actually make people good.

Who is a good person?

[32:00]

(The reason I go out of my way to make this statement is because I doubt you'll have anyone here represent a view on this matter in any faculty - "Who is a good person?")

[32:27] *"A morally good person is a person who is intent upon advancing the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact in a manner that respects their relative degrees of importance and the extent to which the actions of the person in question can actually promote the existence and maintenance of these goods."*

(That's the kind of statement that makes people hate philosophers.)

Having said that, this is what Jesus is talking about when He said,

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"LOVE your neighbor as yourself."

"Treat others the way you want to be treated."

How do you do it? (4th Life Question)

The question is, "What does that mean and how do you do it?"

It is only for those alive in the Kingdom of God who are in personal interactive contact with the ultimate reality learning from that ultimate reality through Jesus and through His people is the only person who can spell that out and really tell you how to do it.

LOVE - We can say, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* What if you don't love yourself? There are a lot of people who don't. Much of the wrong doing that is done is by people who have no idea what it is to value and love themselves. We talk about human dignity in our culture today but what does it really mean in a consumer culture where the pursuit of pleasure is confused with the pursuit of happiness?

That's why Jesus refines his teaching. He doesn't just say, *"Love your neighbor as yourself"* He says, *"Love one another as I have loved you."* That's different. He says, *"Greater love has no one than they lay down their life for their friends."*

With that fill in, you can begin to ask yourself, *"Has there been a single day in which I can say honestly I have loved my neighbor as myself? Is there progress? Am I learning how to do it?"*

If we follow up the teaching about love and morality and who the good person is by the question, *"How do you become a good person?"*, that is where, above all, Jesus Christ shines greater than anyone else. Now in an open discussion, of course, we want to compare Him with other candidates you might want to bring up.

* Students come to me and say, *"Why are you a disciple of Jesus Christ?"* My answer is always, *"Who else did you have in mind?"*

How do you live it? [["Seek & Test"](#)]

[35:30]

First of all, by serious inquiry and personal testing. In order to do that you have to put Jesus back in the category as someone who is seriously dealing with the facts of life. Serious inquiry & personal testing - Honest comparison of Jesus and His teaching with others. You find truth by honest testing.

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You are going to surrender, "What I want" as the ultimate point of reference. If you're not prepared to surrender that, you will not be able to hear the teaching that Jesus brings and you will not be able to be delivered into life in the Kingdom of God.

If there really is a better way than the way of Jesus, you can be sure Jesus would be the first one to tell you to take it. If you don't believe that about Him, you don't believe that He was really right.

You can't imagine Him saying,

"Well, that's a better, but it's not Christian."

That's why He is out in front constantly of Christianity.

When we hear His saying "*The truth will set you free*", we want to recognize that **TRUTH** will not set you free. Someone said, "You shall know the truth but the truth will make you flee." That's what it often does. It isn't truth. [alone] This is the most misquoted statement in human history I think.

The whole statement is,

"If you continue in my word (put it into practice) then you really are my apprentices (in living in the Kingdom), then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

—> That's the way it works. You KNOW the TRUTH in a way that sets you FREE in an interactive relationship with Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. [\[This is the genius of JESUS!\]](#)

Question - What does it set you free from?

Answer - **It sets you free from your inability to do and live the good you know.**

[\["Flesh & Spirit Battle" - "No longer gripped by the pattern of DESIRE."\]](#)

That's where we are left by a **University** teaching and system that omits God as an essential part of the subject matter.

[\["The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge"; "Human Nature" @ 22:45\]](#)

We know a lot of good but we systematically fail to do it in our individual lives, in our society, often in our churches, our religious groups. You find people constantly unable to do it.

We have to shift the understanding of Jesus away from someone who is perhaps nice, but doesn't really provide knowledge to one

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who provides us with the most essential knowledge about the most important things in human life.

That's where we stand. He doesn't come to just offer us a fire insurance policy. He offers us eternal life now. And that is open to testing, to questioning, to experimentation.

All we have to do to know the **TRUTH** that He is talking about is to put it to the test of experience.

~ ~ ~ End of Session @ 39:12 ~ ~ ~