

"Why Truth is Absolute"

Dallas Willard [59:20]

*Scribe's Comments - The session was transcribed from the recording in good-faith effort but it is not verbatim. The **bold** and underline offer the scribe's emphasis and the [brackets] refer to other Willard teachings.*



[NOTE: This video is listed on YouTube as "Bringing Truth to Life" 4/5, however Dallas shares two illustrations in this session he also uses in the two other "Bringing Truth to Life" sessions listed below. This appears to be a different time & setting.

- 1.) "Girl in Sunday school" in #4 @ 11:45 also #2 @ 36:00
- 2.) "USC Philosophy building" in #4 @ 37:00 also #1 @ 28:00]



"Why Truth is Absolute" (audio)

~ ~ ~

Introduction

[0:00:30] I said last evening [what night session?] what I really want to concentrate on today - Why truth is absolute or non-relative.

To get us to focus our minds on something that great confusion has been created around. There is a current crisis about truth in our world especially in our universities. In the 20's & 30's, Philosophers wrote books defending the absoluteness of truth and explaining the follies of thinking of it as relative.

The Ways of Knowing by W.P. Montague - Careful discussion of truth as relative.

Traditional Philosophers that "Truth as relative" is laughable.

The situation is very recent and has to do with political and social ideals that have felt the idea that "truth is absolute" is threatening. It is difficult to deal with what you have and keep your dignity in place because it is not a very comfortable position to be wrong.

If you are told like what **Aristotle** said,

"There are many ways to be wrong but only one way to be right."

That immediately sounds anti-social in our context. If you have been marginalized, the one who turns out to be wrong may be you. There is a deep social drive against the idea of truth as being one way.

This has created real problems for us in the intellectual world. Nearly all of our fields are in epistemic crisis. Fields of practice - Law, Education, Theology, Medicine, instead of going for knowledge, we go for accepted practice.

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What we have is "Standardization without Standards." Standardization is important to say out of trouble with your clients, colleagues and the law. You don't need truth for that. You just have to follow accepted practice.

Universities are at the center where we no longer have a point of appeal that is common, objective and able to provide a common ground for basis of discussion and interaction. It is absence of that, we go to the place,

"It is not an issue of truth, not an issue of logic, it is an issue of power."

In a very ironic way, Nietzsche triumphs, who at the end of the 19th Century, read how the intellectual winds were blowing, *"The final word in every area of human life is not truth but power."*

Focus on Truth

[7:15]

1. Everyone knows perfectly well what truth is.

Imagine if you could were not able to establish truth from falsity. Consider the simple cases - you're looking for your car keys or shoes. Suppose you had a thought you left them in the garage. Would you be able to establish the thought as true?

* Finding your car keys? Think where you left them. Is it within your competence to determine if that thought is true. Take that thought where the object is thought to be and compare that thought to the object.

* Shoes in the closet? Take that thought to the closet and compare. You all know you could do that. If you could not do that, you would want to send out for help because **the ability to recognize truth is a condition of basic human competence.**

The structure is the structure of truth and we learn it very early and we learn it by experience. We learn to compare our thoughts & our expectations and the statements of others to what we find to be the case.

* Children learn it at a very early. They learn to instruct their parents about the truth and falsity of various statements the parents have made.

* If Johnny stole cookies & Susie tells Mommy, "Johnny stole cookies!"

Mommy - *"Is it true that you took cookies?"*

If Johnny says, *"What is truth?"*,

you know what Johnny is doing. He is not responding to the point.

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It is very important to understand it is on the human agenda right up close to the top for everyone to be very careful about truth because truth is dangerous.

* Johnny knows if he took the cookies, a course of action will happen.

* Girl in Sunday School - "A lie is an abomination..." [11:45]

[Same joke in "Bringing Truth to Life" 2/5 @ 36:00]

* Taking Inventory at Work - Able to look at the inventory and compare it to what the inventory is about and be able to state if that is the case. If the inventory is as it states, you can go home. If it not correct, there is a discussion. You don't have to have a piece of paper. You can carry the inventory in your mind.

2. Language takes its semantics properties from the minds of those who use it.

Meaning are a means of "Thoughts & Ideas". This is one of the problems in the discussion about the relativity of truth. In our time, the mind has been thrown away. A lot of the pursuit of truth, you can not talk about the mind in any intelligible way, you have to talk about language. The mind provides the substance for truth. Our culture lost the mind at the philosophical level at the end of the 18th century in Hume & Kant and has been trying to find it again.

"Language & Behavior" are the two main aspects of the mind, more subtly brain chemistry. These are offered as substitutes. When you examine behavior, language and brain chemistry them at a naturalistic knowledge, you can not find meaning and truth.

* When you check the inventory of medicine in a cabinet, you don't worry about those things. You can compare that thought to the objects.

3. Truth Defined

Truth is..."That peculiar relationship which obtains between a representation and what it is about if what it is about is as the representation indicates." [16:03]

Everyone you deals with truth and falsity constantly. You know exactly what it is. You can identify it, argue about, refute it, defend it, question it. You know exactly what it is. You can not go anywhere in this discussion if you give up on that basic insight about what truth is and how it is presented to you. If you give up on that, there will be no stopping place or no intelligibility in the discussion about truth.

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Why are we at a loss about truth today? Generally speaking, truth as it is in itself, is not a respectable subject matter in the academic world.

Brain Chemistry? Fine.

Language? That's good.

Behavior? That's good too.

But it will never get to you anything that you will recognize as truth.

There is a very serious problem about truth because truth falls in a domain of reality and knowledge which is not intellectually kosher.

Do people go on and act as if they know the truth? Sure they do!

--> To **"Truth is Relative"**, I ask...

* Do you believe that about your fringe benefits? They may choke it down and say, "Yes". Or, "No, It's a power play. If I have enough power, it will stick what I say. If we go to court, it's just power."

* Courts - Truth is not established in court. Decisions are reached. Power is exercised.

Not all truth is verifiable in the way I have suggested. [19:00]

* You can establish the belief if your shoes are in the closet.

But it's not possible to establish most of the truths we are interested in the academic world in that way. We have to use other means of evidence. The basic laws of logic are designed to enable you to get from true premises to other statements that must be true if your premises are true.

It is possible by using logic to proceed beyond things that can be directly verified. When I use the phrase "directly verified" I do not write into it the history of Empiricism which is largely responsible for the mess we are in about truth and knowledge. Our culture has not escaped Hume's critique on the assumption of Empiricism that all things come from sense perception or feeling. If you bought that, personality, truth, values, sets, universals, everything that makes human life worth living goes out. Hume knew that and that's why he got sick on his own philosophy. He had to get out his philosophical arm chair to feel better. He had to step out of his philosophical arm chair that had dissolved his whole world around him.

I do not mean empirical verifiability. It is not to be understood as Hume tried to understand it and later philosophers known as Positivists or Logical Empiricists.

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Truth still persists in cases where you can't directly verify.[21:18]

- * "Next to" - If I asked, "*Is the paper next to the salt?*"
How would you verify it? By looking at the pepper & salt.
What is the relation of "next to"?
Normally means "spacial proximity" but not very precise.

* Is Mars "next to" the Earth in the Solar System"?
You would be prepared to draw distinctions.
You know what "next to" and you can apply far beyond observation.
Truth is not dependent upon observation any more than "next to" does.

--> Truth is Ruthless and Unrelenting [23:40]

It does not change because of beliefs, voting, tradition.
* Gas tank empty - Vote, cheerlead, develop a tradition
Do anything but your car still will not run
You can not change truth by believing one thing or another
You can make something true by acting on it.
* Put gas in your tank and make your belief true.
Not by belief, wishing, hoping, taking attitudes, cheering or booing.

--> Truth is No Respector of Persons [25:10]

No matter who believes it.
It will not go from truth to false because a different person believes it.

BELIEF is a readiness to act as if something were so. [25:45]

Belief is about something. It is selective.
Belief always has a definite kind of object.
* Belief I have gas in my tank

Difference between Belief and Truth? They vary independently. You can believe what is true and believe what is false. No necessary connection between belief and truth.

Some speak in such a way as if it's impossible to have a false belief because if you believe it, it's true for you.

- * "World's leading experts" can believe what is wrong

There is no correlation between belief and truth that is automatic. If you are going to establish a correlation, you have to go beyond belief and move toward evidence.

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--> Why is truth so threatening?

[28:00]

Truth carries claims to truth and truth carries an authority that belief does not.

A belief needs special circumstances to make it authoritative. Merely belief does not demand respect. Belief does make a difference in our behavior. What we believe is rigorously correlated with how we act. It is claimed we don't live up to our beliefs. We always live up to our beliefs. You can't do anything else. Which you can do is to not live up to the beliefs you profess.

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you flee."

Jesus, "People love darkness rather than light."

[He says the same statement in the beginning of YouTube Session 1/5]

--> Truth is often not directly inspectable.

[30:15]

We may wonder if truth is there when we can't directly inspect it.

We will notice that many of our beliefs do not refer to things we can directly inspect.

"Well, I don't know about "true" but it's true for me".

The means, *"I believe it's true."* You can believe something that is true when it is false. When you have whole knowledge industries built on things you can't directly verify, it is very tempting to loosen the word truth and allow it to float over to *"all right thinking people"* believe. Then we can worry about who the "right thinking people" are. Invariably it will move into an authority system.

What prevails today in the intellectual world is an authority system.

* "Girdles Proof" - I doubt 3% of philosophers can work thru it, probably not 1% have actually done it, yet they all believe it. That's authority. That's not working through things on your own and reaching a conclusion. There's nothing wrong with authority. We should recognize when authority is working and when it is not.

Most of the favored positions in philosophy today. These spill over into law, journalism and all of the other professions.

The loss of thought or "Empiricism" leaves any idea of truth or meaning wandering and we try to replace it in various ways. [33:45]

Invariably goes over to language and language is relevant to culture and culture is relevant.

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4. Rise of Sociology of Knowledge

[34:15]

It is a sociology of research, ignorance, stupidity, superstition to make up what a society may make up as knowledge. The problem is it contributes further to the idea that all that is needed is a causal story on how people came to accept it or believe it. The "history of the theory of knowledge" in our culture [epistemology] came to be known as "Representationalism" heavily influenced by "Empiricism". Many believe in their hearts the only story of how something came to be true is to tell the story on how people came to believe it.

Another triumph for Nietzsche - *"All you can do for any prevailing ideas or values is to tell the story of how they came to power."*

All of us will admit multitudes can be wrong.

* 6 million Frenchmen can be wrong.

There is not safety in numbers as far as truth is concerned.

That's because all of us are haunted by the basic idea of truth that we all come to know as children. [\[Point #1 above\]](#)

We keep thinking, "Multitudes might believe what is not really there."

* Exodus - *"Thou shalt not follow the multitude to do evil"*.

5. Truth Will Not Set You Free

[36:53]

Written on the walls of old buildings at universities. You would not be able to write it on a wall of any new building on this university.

[YouTube session comment: Did they move from the Glen Eden Conference center to a university or is this a different audience?]

That's because the effect has been to deflate the importance of truth.

Now you get an education - credits, certifications, people who write letters for you, go up the ladder of advancement. More standardization without standards.

Power is perhaps the last word in the way things are practiced now after truth has been abandoned.

We have to say, "No, truth will not make you free..."

* Elevator plaque - *"...the Truth will make you free."*

[He references USC building & elevator in YouTube Session 1 @ 28:00]

Who said that? Jesus never said that. He said, *"If you continue in my word then you will be my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."*

* If you said, "If you wash the dishes and sweep the floor, you will give them money and they can go to the movie" would you regard yourself as having said, "You can go to the movie"?

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Jesus knew that the truth will not make people free. He knew it would crush people. What they need is not truth. They need truth but that's not their problem. They are not in bondage by falsehood, they are in bondage to passion. Because they are in bondage to passion, they use falsehood to protect their projects.

What we need is grace, what we need is community, is acceptance, is power. We receive that from a transcendental source which is ever present at hand and that is a truth which can be verified.

~ ~ ~ **End of Session 4 Teaching** ~ ~ ~

"Comments or questions...especially about our academic setting"

Q & A

[40:20]

Q - Where do you start to help people deal with the truth of Jesus Christ?

A - Get them to be honest with themselves. Start being truthful in their own lives. We don't start with religious truth. We start with truth about ourselves. We then go on to truth about other things. You have to have the need to go on to the other things.

* Like truth in Engineering. You don't need truth of Engineering if you're not going to build a bridge or something like that. [Algebra students]

We as Christians are not to prove that we are right. We are not in that business. Who cares if I'm right? Begin with the person and help them accept the truth about themselves.

~ ~ ~

Q - How do we go from the observable to unobservable?

A - Use the simple relation of "Next to". There are ways of determining by learning what is "next to" like we do in astronomical research.

* The discovery of Pluto was caused by the disturbances that it set up to the planet next to it.

Argument based on Logic, known facts.

Mathematics - very few truths are known by direct observation.

* Mathematical proofs many don't know but they are true.

The mind has that capacity. That's where reason comes in. Reason and rational standards are the check.

Literary theory - You can not establish many truths about the text by observation but by laying out the reason and test the reasons.

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One thing I argue for is the process of reasoning is an objectively valid process. It doesn't matter what you think about the argument but is it valid because it is logical?

~ ~ ~

Q - Aligning truth with reality and belief? [multiple inaudible questions]

A - When I speak of truth, I am never talking about belief.

If our beliefs are true, they enable us to integrate with reality in a way that is also comfortable with our will. That's the main function of belief beyond intuition is to enable us to integrate our purposes with reality.

By "Verifiable" I mean directly inspectable.

[more inaudible questions]

Sit with someone to get them to talk about themselves.

I say, "What you've been talking about is spiritual reality."

What is "**Spiritual**"? (def.) "Un-bodily personal power."

Most people think "spirit" is a vapor, gas, a vacuum.

Being a rational person makes heavy demands on things like your patience, your willingness to listen. This is a helping and learning piece of work. That's the way you proceed, define your terms, collect evidence and proceed from there.

Those of you who are Christians, when you say God is Spirit, what does you mean? God is gas? God is vacuum? You have to give a specific meaning to that.

One of the reasons we are in trouble is not just because some very false tendencies in interpreting knowledge itself have arisen and become historically triumphant but because we have not responded. We have not take the central terms in our vocabulary on which our practice is based and made sense of them. [49:10]

* My conversation with a atheist naturalist colleague. He is a rabid behavioralist. He wants to keep discussing the issues. He will not be convinced because he knows if he gives on this point, his professional career is on the line. He knows that if he doesn't adhere to his very curious view of behaviorism, he'll have to re-write his book, change his whole career. There is a lot of investment here.

Go piece at a time. What is "spirit"? What is "mind"? Deal with the objections and go on from there. There is a very strong case for that. I'm still waiting for anyone when they start describing their life to do it in chemical terms or even behavioral terms.

~ ~ ~

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Q - [50:35] The normal response is how someone came to that belief"

A - In the current context, any idea of truth apart from "true for me" or "true for our group" is dismissed and you get instead historical explanations of how we came to those beliefs.

Q - In response to that, is "testimony" usable or accurate or something that should be used?

A - Anything you judge relative to that person should be used. You can't run this by formula. Listen to people and find out where they are. It may be your testimony may be relative.

A lot of people come to belief because of other people's belief. Most of the things we believe, we believe because other people believe them. You may believe what you read in the newspaper today. That's quite alright.

If they are deeply troubled on the issue with what is "spirit" and "mind", you begin by asking, "Where have you been disappointed lately?" Get them to describe that and then look at its parts. The work of rational analysis is to break things into their parts and then put them back in relationship with one another. [\[see Willard's definition of "morality" in "Human Nature"\]](#)

Descartes - *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*

They are good rules and we should learn them.

~ ~ ~

Q - [53:45] [Inaudible]

A - It limits freedom. If you accept something as true you know you can not do certain things. It's a direct assault on the will.

Nietzsche was profound. Read the last section of *The Genealogy of Morals* where he presents "*Belief in truth as the last vestiges of asceticism - for him it is the denial of the will, especially the will to pleasure.*"

He recognizes that this is deeply connected to issues like the existence of God. It amounts to invoking a power that is transcendent to the human will.

Derrida (d. 2004) - Onto-theological version of reality = Logocentrism*

[\[*Spoken Word & Language are fundamental to external reality\]](#)

There are only two values that are immediately accepted in American culture today - **Pleasure** (sometimes called happiness) and **Freedom**.

If you want to do something, you should be free to do it.

If it pleasurable, why not.

These are the two unquestioned values of our civilization at present.

Everything else has to justify itself. These can only be justified if they involve some kind of self-limitation. They are ultimate - pleasure & freedom.

~ ~ ~

Q - I have a problem with "Agree to Disagree". [56:10]

A - We all sense, "if this is true, this guy is in trouble."

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Q - [Same line of question] Tolerance...

A - It has disappeared in our culture. Tolerance is a very important value. Tolerance is no longer a virtue in our culture. If you tolerate someone, you're apt to be spit in the face. You might be told, "I don't need your tolerance. I'm just as right as you are." If you try to practice it, you find it very quickly. Like trying to forgive someone if they don't think they have done anything wrong. I think we all know tolerance is absolutely necessary.

We have to agree to disagree. If we can't agree on something, we'll hate each other. There's going to have to be a common basis for that. It's not a bad practice to say, "Let's hold that for a moment and back up and see if there's anything we agree on." That might enable us to deal with our disagreements in a way that is profitable, fair and even loving.

Q - Tolerance can mean we stop try to convict one another of truth. [58:10]

A - In cases it may. That's going to be a practical judgment. Sometimes you see people engaged in a debates about truth and you realize they are not trying to help, they are sticking up for their own self-righteousness. We don't need to get into that game. It would be totally unprofitable. The other person is already convinced of your un-righteousness.

I do believe as Augustine pointed out long ago - *"It is an essential part of love for our neighbor to try to help them to the truth."*

As a practical strategy, there may well be times when you don't address that directly. Sometimes the best way to lead your neighbor to the truth is to do nothing except perhaps be there.

~ ~ ~ **End of Session @ 59:20** ~ ~ ~

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