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WHY IS TRUTH SO HARD TO FACE?

Today's text: Exodus 34: 28-35; 2 Cor. 3: 12-18

Extracts:

1. **“And Moses called unto them; and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned unto him; and Moses talked with them. And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a vail on his face, but when Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he took the vail off” [Ex. 34: 31, 33-34]**
2. **“Even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless, when he shall return to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” [2 Cor. 3: 15-17]**

That's My Mama was a popular weekly American TV sitcom in the 1970's. It featured an African-American mother and her family. In one of the episodes, the family declared a Truth Day, that is, a day to tell one another the whole truth. Within minutes, the whole family was in turmoil! Everybody was angry with everybody else. The Mama was angry to be told to watch her ample weight. The son was angry that the rest dared to ask him to get a better job. The daughter did not want to hear any “unfavourable” comments about her mode of dressing. Within minutes, the family resolved to return to their old ways of hypocrisy!

Daily or often, we all face a similar situation. We would rather put a veil over the truth so as not to offend. Which spouse would dare to tell his/her partner that they have bad breath? Which of us would be happy to be told plain truth about our mannerisms by family members, friends or colleagues? In the law court, we swear an oath to “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Then, we go on to weave the biggest lie on the matter! What makes truth telling such a big ordeal?

For believers, this is an important matter because those who aspire to worship God earnestly are commanded to do so “in spirit and in truth” [Jn 4: 23-24], and all liars are heading for hell [Rev. 21:8]. If we are the light of the world, then we cannot be hidden [Matt. 5:14]. By putting a veil over the truth in whatever we do, we are putting our relationship with God at risk.

In today's lesson, we shall use the story of the relationship between Moses and the people of Israel soon after his return from the second 40-day sojourn with God to develop the theme.

1. Background

Moses had been up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God. He was there for forty days and nights [Ex. 24: 18]. At the end of that period, God gave him “two tables of testimony, tables of stone, *written with the finger of God*” [Ex. 31: 18]. However, during his absence, the people prevailed on Aaron to make them a god to worship. He made them the Golden Calf, which he proclaimed as the god “which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” [Ex. 32:4-5]. As we saw in last week’s Bible Study [*Standing in the Gap, Vol. 3, No. 21: 7 July 2002*], Moses pleaded with God to spare the people whom He had wanted to totally destroy. In the end, only three thousand [out of two-and-a-half million] were killed. However, in his anger, Moses had thrown down the two stones on which God had Himself written the Ten Commandments [v. 19].

When Moses returned to God on Mount Sinai to replace the broken stones, God ordered him to do the writing this time [Ex. 34: 1], “and he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; *he did neither eat bread, nor drink water*” [v. 28]. So, by the time that Moses came down to meet the people of Israel, “behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him” [v. 30]. They could not look at his face when he spoke with them. So, Moses had to put a veil over his face each time he spoke with them, but removed it each time he came before God’s presence [vv. 33-35]. Bearing in mind that this was not the first time that Moses had spent forty days with God in the mountain, nor the first time to bring down the Ten Commandments, why was his face different this time? Why were the people able to look at his face last time but not on this occasion?

A possible explanation is that Moses brought back anger last time, having already broken the two stones of the Commandments at the foot of the mountain [Ex. 32: 19]. This time, however, he radiated the presence of God. One verse of the song that Moses taught the people of Israel gives some attributes of God as follows:

He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are judgment; a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He [Deut. 32: 4]

When Moses returned to the mountain top the second time, the Lord descended from the cloud and stood before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and *abundant in goodness and truth*” [Ex. 34: 6]. Struck with awe, Moses did not know when he fell on the ground, prostrating and worshipping the true God. Therefore, what shone on the face of Moses was the truth of God, which was too much for the people to bear. Before, we dig more deeply into that theme, let us examine the concept of truth.

2. What is truth?

When Jesus came before Pontius Pilate and told the Roman ruler that He had come into the world to “bear witness unto the *truth*,” and that “everyone that is of the *truth* heareth My voice,” Pilate asked Him, “What is *truth*?” [Jn 18: 36-38].

Truth can mean different things to different people, but they all cannot be right! *In general, truth means a reality that cannot vary.* Using that definition, the following cannot be regarded as truth:

- ❑ Scientific truth is based on what can be proved empirically [what can only be proved by facts]. As new discoveries are made, old scientific truths disappear. For example, a skull discovered by archeologists last week in the Western part of Africa is already forcing scientists to backdate the origin of man by several billions of years! Also, as scientists invent more powerful telescopes, they discover more stars and planets and revise their earlier truths! Moreover, scientists cannot prove matters of the spirit for “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him” [1 Cor. 2:9].
- ❑ Philosophical truth is based on the assumptions of each philosopher about human nature. One philosopher [thinker] may see things only as “either-or,” [true or false, black or white, yes or no, etc.] while another may see a continuum [i.e., shades of differences, from one extreme to another]. In geometry, the distance between two points can be by a straight line or by city-block distance [going along the streets around the buildings], etc.! That is why Paul has warned that “my speech and my preaching was not with *enticing words of man’s wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit* and of power *that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God*” [1 Cor. 2:4-5].
- ❑ Culture and tradition may be regarded as the totality of a people’s values that defines and governs their way of life. Thus, we hear of African or Indian cultures, Western or Eastern cultures, etc. On virtually every human problem, there is a culturally acceptable truth, which may be different from one culture to another. For example, in some cultures, adultery is neither an offence nor a sin. Of course, we know that cultures change over time as they are influenced by other cultures. Consequently, no human culture can hold lasting values on truth. In condemning the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus asked them, “Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?” [Matt. 15:3].
- ❑ Religious values and beliefs may be based on falsehood, paraded as truths, and actions based on them cannot lead to the truth. For example, atheists claim that there is no God, and the Bible calls such people “fools” [Ps. 14: 1]. Idols are the works of men’s hands and “they that make them are like them: *so is every one that trusteth in them*” [Ps. 135:18]. Is the God of the Moslems, *Allah*, the same God worshipped by Christians? *Allah* has no Son but the Christian God is the Father of Jesus Christ, by whose grace we

can call God Father [**Rom. 8:14-17**]. It is instructive that Moslems *do not* address *Allah* as Father!

On the contrary, the following will count as truth:

- God Himself. Jesus referred to His Father as “the only true God” [**Jn 17:3**], and as we saw earlier, truth is an attribute of God [**Deut. 32:4**]. Since God does not change [**Mal. 3:6**], His truth is also constant.
- Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, “and *no man* cometh to the Father but by Me” [**Jn 14: 6**]. Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the triune God, *Elohim* [**Gen. 1: 26; Matt. 28:19**].
- The Holy Spirit has been called the Spirit of truth by Jesus Christ Himself [**Jn 14: 17; 15:26; 16:13**], and “He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you” [**Jn 14:7**]. He is the Third Person of the Trinity.
- The word of God is truth, as Jesus has also confirmed [**Jn 17:17**]. This word, which is forever settled in heaven [**Ps. 119:89**], is a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths [**v. 105**]. It became flesh and dwelt among us [**Jn 1:14**]. That is why Jesus told Pontius Pilate, “Everyone that is of the truth heareth My voice” [**Jn 18:37**]

3. Why do we find it difficult to tell or hear the truth?

When God commanded Ezekiel to eat a scroll that contained His word, Ezekiel found that it tasted in his mouth as sweet as honey [**Ezek. 3:3**]. John also found the little book given to him to eat by an angel sweet as honey, but “as soon as I had eaten it, *my belly was bitter*” [**Rev. 10:9-10**]. What does that tell us? Truth is there on our lips, if we have the courage to tell it, but it is too bitter to tell or to take it! Here are some reasons why we behave that way:

a) *Fear of punishment*

From our early childhood, we may have discovered that those who told the truth were punished or not rewarded. In the law courts, suspects who plead guilty without any contest are hardly set free. So, we have now dug trenches to hide our offences!

Abram lied that Sarai was not his wife because he feared that Pharaoh would kill him and take her away from him [**Gen. 12: 11-13**]. Aaron, a priest of the true God, made the Golden Calf because he feared that the people would kill him if he did not comply with their request [**Gen. 32:21-34**]. Peter was scared to admit being one of Christ’s followers because he feared for his life [**Lk 22:54-60**].

b) *It is an admission of our inferiority to others*

Accepting the truth tends to take away from our self-worth. We believe that telling other people the truth about our economic or marital problems, for example, may reduce our standing in their eyes. Therefore, the less they know, the better, even if it means lying to cover up the rest!

When Moses came to Pharaoh to ask for the freedom of the children of Israel, he said to Moses, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?” [Ex. 5:2]. You can imagine the contempt on his face when he spoke! It was like saying, “Which authority can be higher than I am in this world?” Actually, in hardening Pharaoh’s heart against the truth of His power and glory, God was using the king’s arrogance as the raw material

c) *Sheer mischief*

Some people are just compulsive liars and they can no longer help it! They have lied so much and so often that they even lie against themselves. Referring to such people, Jesus Christ said:

Why do ye not understand My speech? Even because ye cannot hear My word. Ye are of your father the devil, and ... abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him...He is a liar and the father of it [Jn 8: 43-44]

4. Learning how to speak the truth

It is in our own interest to speak the truth *at all times* because God Himself is truth, and “ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” [Jn 8:32]. Since truth came by Jesus [Jn 1:17], we cannot claim to accept Him when we do not *practise* truth telling. So, here are some hints on how to learn to speak the truth always:

a) *Break the old mould*

It is not easy to give up old habits formed over a long time. The spider’s cobwebs have become *Spider Man’s* cables for scaling tall buildings and crossing wide avenues! Therefore, the whole edifice has to come down. How? By being truly born-again, for “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: *old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new*” [2 Cor. 5:17]. Come down from that high horse of self-importance and accept that without Jesus, “ye can do nothing” [Jn 15:5].

b) *Start learning new habits in simple things*

Deal first with what we call “white lies,” that is, those harmless-looking half-truths. Tell exactly the true reason for your getting late to work or absent, why you cannot accept that invitation. Watch your tax returns, the computation of your tithes, the real motive for your offerings, etc.

A 5-year old child once answered his mother's call. He turned to Mummy who sat next to him and told her that so-and-so wanted to speak with her. She replied, "Tell her that I am not at home." The innocent boy told the lady at the other end, "Mummy is sitting by me and she says to tell you that she is not at home." She might have avoided that embarrassment if she had picked the phone and bluntly told the caller, "I'm sorry I cannot speak with you now. I'll call you back."

c) *Reward truth-telling by others*

This is one value that parents need to teach their children from early times, so that when they are old, they will not depart from it [**Prov. 22:6**]. I know of a family where the children have been trained to walk straight to their parents when they have damaged any household items or done anything wrong to report themselves and accept responsibility. It has influenced both the parents and children very positively in other aspects of life.

God rewarded Joshua and Caleb because they were the only two of the twelve spies who came back to tell the truth about the Promised Land. The others perished in the wilderness while two of them possessed their possession in the new land [**Jos. 15: 13-14; 19:49-50**].

d) *Learn to speak the truth without hurting*

Some times, the problem comes not because we have spoken the truth but from the *manner of saying it*. We are enjoined to speak the truth *in love* [**Eph. 4:15**]. When the woman caught in adultery was dragged before Jesus, the first thing He did was to fight off her accusers by showing that they were not any better. Then, He looked at the woman with love and compassion and said, "Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more" [**Jn 8: 1-11**].

Nathan recognized the position of David as king. As prophet, he could have openly charged at him the way young Micaiah did with Ahab in the presence of 400 older prophets, and a visiting King Jehosaphat of Judah [**1 Kgs 22: 17-28**]. Instead, he used a projective technique by telling the story of a rich man who had cheated a poor man out of his prized possessions. David pronounced the punishment on the anonymous offender before Nathan told him, "Thou art the man" [**2 Sam. 12: 1-7**].

5. Conclusion

Truth telling is the surest evidence that we are born-again, for by our fruits we shall be known. Start today, and see a remarkable improvement by year-end. May God grant you His mercy and grace for "by mercy and truth iniquity is purged; and by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil" [**Prov. 16:6**].