



DECEMBER 25, 1988

Jesus Came into the World to Bear Witness to the Truth

Christmas Day

Resource by [John Piper](#) Scripture: [John 18:37](#) Topic: [Truth](#)

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

Why Did Jesus Come?

Every year Christmas poses a question to the world—and to you this morning—namely, why did Jesus come? Or what is the meaning of Jesus Christ? Or, more personally, what difference should this man make in my life? In my marriage, in my work, in my leisure, in my thinking, in my emotions?

When he was on trial for his life Jesus spoke some words which give an answer to this question. He said in [John 18:37](#), "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice."

The words were spoken at the end of his life, but they are about Christmas. "For this reason I was born . . ." For this reason there is Christmas. Christmas exists because Jesus came to bear witness to the truth.

So what I would like to do on this Christmas morning is to think for a few minutes with you about these words of Jesus. I suggest that we focus on two implications of this verse, or two implications of Christmas, and then close with an exhortation.

- Implication #1: Christmas means that there is truth—truth that everyone should believe.
- Implication #2: Christmas means that Jesus came to testify to that truth—he is the key witness.
- Exhortation: Don't be like Pilate when you hear the truth.

Implication #1

There is truth—truth that everyone should believe.

"For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth." THE TRUTH! There is truth—truth that comes from outside the world and gives meaning to the world. The world doesn't make this truth. It doesn't shape or change this truth. It is THE TRUTH, not a truth for me and a different truth for you. But THE TRUTH for all of us. Unchanging, absolute.

There may have been a generation or a century when this simple implication of the text would not need to be stressed: that there is truth—truth outside of my own mind, truth that I don't create but discover, that I don't control but submit to. There may have been a time when we didn't have to proclaim this as part of the Christian message. But not today.

The Contemporary Rejection of Absolute Truth

Today this simple affirmation is a stunning and controversial revelation. It meets with widespread disbelief. If you try to claim today that there is absolute truth—truth that everyone should believe and follow—you will very likely be considered misguided and immoral.

People will say you are misguided because there's no God to give absoluteness to truth, or, if there is a God, there is no way of knowing him and what he thinks. One person's idea of what he is like is as good as any other person's.

But not only would you be considered misguided, you would also be considered by many to be immoral if you insist on absolute truth. Why? Because to claim that there is absolute truth leads to intolerance and prejudice against what others think.

Morality today has been virtually defined in terms of relativism. If you don't believe that the truth you see is binding on me, then you are humble and good and moral. But if you do believe that the truth you see is binding on me, then you are arrogant and intolerant and immoral. Virtue or morality today demands relativism.

This is the 20th century world to which Jesus says, "For this purpose I was born and came into the world, to bear witness to THE TRUTH."

It's a world in which his message has been nullified even before it is spoken, because TRUTH is seen as the rotten root of bigotry and intolerance and prejudice. But relativism on the other hand is seen as the wholesome mother of cultural respect and tolerance and peace.

The Widespread Relativistic View of Truth

In other words the biblical message of Christmas in America today not only runs into the obstacle that Christ has been taken out of Christmas, but also the deeper problem that truth has been taken out of reality. By and large people don't think about absolute truth anymore. They are not looking for THE truth that can give meaning and purpose to all of life and history.

Instead people are trying to experience life to the full and call this experience TRUTH for them, not absolute truth, just truth for them. And the general guideline in this culture is simply: keep your monkey off my back. If it works for you, fine. But don't lay it on me.

We need to be aware how deeply this view of truth is woven into the fabric of American life today. It infects all of us more or less. You can see it in the church where people resist even thinking about biblical absolutes. Listen to Alan Bloom in his best selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 25,

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That any one should regard [relativism] as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2 + 2 = 4$. These are things you don't think about. The students' backgrounds are as various as America can provide. Some are religious, some atheists; some are to the Left, some to the Right; some intend to be scientists, some humanists or professionals or businessmen; some are poor, some rich. They are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality. And the two are related in a moral intention. The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so they see it.

The Self-Contradictory Nature of Relativism

That's our society, and very largely that is us. And the problem with this relativism is that it is self-contradictory and unbiblical.

Relativism contradicts itself. If you say, "There is no absolute truth that everybody should believe," you contradict yourself, because you make a statement that you want people to believe, but the statement you make is that there are no statements everyone should believe. The hidden agenda of relativism is that it wants to relativize everybody else's claim to truth, but not its own.

Let me give you an illustration of this in actual practice. Two weeks ago in Atlanta about 500 clergy gathered to discuss the new rescue tactics in the pro-life movement where people try to shut down abortion clinics by blocking the doors and risking arrest. The pro-abortion forces in Atlanta called for a counter protest and distributed a leaflet that I have a copy of.

Near the top it says, "Defend Reproductive Rights." In other words, if the pro-life people want to view the fetus as a person with legal rights to life, they can have that view, but don't put that monkey on the back of the women of this country. That's a personal, religious viewpoint. It's relative.

But then at the bottom of the leaflet in big letters it says: "WE WILL NOT TOLERATE INTOLERANCE!" Do you see what this means? "Tolerance" is the moral equivalent of relativism. If truth is relative and not absolute, there should be total tolerance. But to make this moral truth stick, you have to put an absolute punch behind it. "We will not tolerate intolerance" is the moral equivalent of "We absolutely reject absolutes!" It is self-contradictory. It's a testimony to the fact that we can't live without absolute truth.

And so it is not surprising, then, that relativism is also unbiblical. Jesus said, "For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth."

The first implication of Christmas, then, is that there is truth—truth that comes from God outside the world and gives the world its meaning, truth that is absolute and unchanging, truth that everyone should seek for and submit to and believe.

Implication #2

The second implication of Christmas in this verse is that Jesus came to testify to that truth—he is the key witness. "For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth."

How Can We Hear the Testimony of Jesus?

Now the question for us is, What became of that witness? Jesus is gone now. It's not enough to say that he has sent his Spirit in his place. That's crucial. We believe he has. But Jesus said he was born to bear witness. He said he came into the world to bear witness. If we want to hear the witness that Jesus came to bring, we have to get back to those years when he was here—the years of his incarnation, when he walked and talked and worked and loved and died among men. That's what we have to see and hear.

How do we do that? Suppose you are saying this morning, I am persuaded that I need to discover THE TRUTH and live my life by it. I see that relativism won't really work. But how can I get back to the testimony of Jesus? How can I be sure the Bible really gives the testimony of Jesus? And how can I be sure the testimony of Jesus is true?

The answer I want to give to these questions this morning in the few minutes we have left is this. You get a copy of the four gospels—the first four books of the New Testament. And you sit down in a quiet place alone and you begin to listen to the testimony of these four witnesses, and through them listen to the testimony of Jesus as it comes through.

You ask God, if he is alive and real, to help you see the truth. You watch what Jesus does. You listen to what he says. You think about the attitudes that he shows. And you make a judgment whether these writers and this man have integrity and credibility or whether they are frauds or poor religious dupes.

The Self-Authenticating Message of Scripture

I believe that God has made us dependent on the Bible for the testimony of Jesus today because the Bible has the power to convince people that Jesus' testimony is true.

J. B. Phillips was translating the New Testament from Greek to modern English 40 years ago and said afterwards, "[I] felt rather like an electrician rewiring an ancient house without being able to turn the mains off" (*Letters to Young Churches*, London, 1947, p. xii).

When he finished with the gospels, he said, "There is an almost childlike candour and simplicity, and the total effect is tremendous. No man could ever have set down such artless and vulnerable accounts as these unless some real Event lay behind them" (*The Ring of Truth*, London, 1967, p. 58).

What I am saying is that the way you credit a witness is by listening long and hard to him to see if you sense that he is conning you or if he has the ring of truth. That's what you must do with the gospels. Dr. E.V. Rieu was a scholar who translated both the ancient poet Homer and the four gospels from Greek into modern English. He was not committed to their spiritual content at the time.

But he said, "I got the deepest feeling that I possibly could have expected. It . . . changed me; my work changed me. And I came to the conclusion that these words bear the seal of . . . the Son of Man and God. And they're the Magna Carta of the human spirit" (*The Ring of Truth*, London, p. 56).

In other words if you will go to the gospels as they stand in the Bible and listen earnestly and carefully and openly, with a willingness to do the truth if you see it, then the witness of the writers and the testimony of Jesus will prove to you their credibility.

Christmas means that Jesus was born and came into the world to bear witness to the truth. The witness of his work and his words is preserved in the gospels. Read them afresh in the coming year with a willing heart and

you will know THE TRUTH that he came to bring.

Exhortation

The closing exhortation is that you not be like Pilate when you hear the truth. Pilate's response to Jesus in verse 38 was a cynical, or perhaps hopeless, "What is truth?"

If Pilate had been listening earlier when we criticized relativism of being self-contradictory, I think he would perhaps have said, "I'm not included in your criticism because I don't say truth is relative and I don't say truth is absolute. All I say is, I don't know what truth is. It may be relative. There may be an absolute truth. I just don't know. And so I can't be accused of contradicting myself because I just don't know. I suspend judgment."

And that may be where some of you are this morning. You may be non-committal about Jesus not because you think he is untrue but just because you don't know. You live with a suspended judgment on the matter.

Let me ask you a question to see if you are really being honest with yourself. Do you suspend judgment and plead ignorance on the issues that really matter to you and where your personal interest is at stake? Or do you just suspend judgment only in those areas that seem unimportant or troublesome to you?

I have never met or heard of a person who has any trouble believing in moral absolutes when he is punched in the nose. He immediately believes that the aggressor is absolutely guilty. And if a judge said, "Not guilty because truth is relative and for him it was a good thing to punch you in the nose and you can't put the monkey of your absolutes onto his back," then you would say that this judge is a bad judge.

The point is this, Pilate may say—you may say—"I don't know what absolute truth is, and I don't think I can find out." But the truth is, when your own personal interest is at stake, you won't act as though you don't know what truth is. We have very strong convictions when our life and property are at stake, don't we? Strange how agnosticism and relativism are blown away when our rights and our life are on the line!

So I plead with you this Christmas that you realize how much is at stake in the Jesus' claim to bring the truth. It is a matter of eternal life and death. Your life is on the line. And Jesus says in another place ([John 7:17](#)), "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God."

Jesus was not born to keep secret the truth of God. He was born and came into the world to bear witness to the truth, the unchanging absolute truth of God. Realize how much is at stake. Take up the gospel and read. And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.