

The Truth

by George MacDonald

The sermon explores the nature of truth, its relationship to facts, and the importance of action in fulfilling our duties and relations to become true men in harmony with God's purposes.

Scripture: Psalm 25:5, Psalm 86:11, John 4:24, John 8:32, John 8:36, John 14:6, John 17:17, Ephesians 4:15, Colossians 3:9, 1 John 3:18

Topics: "Christian Living", "Jesus Christ"

Description

George MacDonald preaches about the concept of truth, emphasizing that truth goes beyond mere facts or intellectual knowledge, but involves being, life, will, and action. He delves into the importance of understanding the truth as revealed by Jesus, who declared 'I am the truth.' MacDonald discusses how recognizing and fulfilling one's duties and relationships with others are essential aspects of being a true man, leading to a deeper connection with God. He highlights that the ultimate truth is found in the obedience and perfect relation of Jesus Christ to the Father, and how every individual's truth is the perfected Christ within them, guiding them towards freedom and oneness with God.

Transcript

I am the truth.--John xiv. 6.

When the man of the five senses talks of truth, he regards it but as a predicate of something historical or scientific proved a fact; or, if he allows that, for aught he knows, there may be higher truth, yet, as he cannot obtain proof of it from without, he acts as if under no conceivable obligation to seek any other satisfaction concerning it. Whatever appeal be made to the highest region of his nature, such a one behaves as if it were the part of a wise man to pay it no heed, because it does not come within the scope of the lower powers of that nature. According to the word of the man, however, truth means more than fact, more than relation of facts or persons, more than loftiest abstraction of metaphysical entity--means being and life, will and action; for he says, 'I am the truth.'

I desire to help those whom I may to understand more of what is meant by the truth, not for the sake of definition, or logical discrimination, but that, when they hear the word from the mouth of the Lord, the right idea may rise in their minds; that the word may neither be to them a void sound, nor call up either a vague or false notion of what he meant by it. If he says, 'I am the truth,' it must, to say the least, be well to know what he means by the word with whose idea he identifies himself. And at once we may premise that he can mean nothing merely intellectual, such as may be set forth and left there; he means something vital,

so vital that the whole of its necessary relations are subject to it, so vital that it includes everything else which, in any lower plane, may go or have gone by the same name. Let us endeavour to arrive at his meaning by a gently ascending stair.

A thing being so, the word that says it is so, is the truth. But the fact may be of no value in itself, and our knowledge of it of no value either. Of most facts it may be said that the truth concerning them is of no consequence. For instance, it cannot be in itself important whether on a certain morning I took one side of the street or the other. It may be of importance to some one to know which I took, but in itself it is of none. It would therefore be felt unfit if I said, 'It is a truth that I walked on the sunny side.' The correct word would be a fact, not a truth. If the question arose whether a statement concerning the thing were correct, we should still be in the region of fact or no fact; but when we come to ask whether the statement was true or false, then we are concerned with the matter as the assertion of a human being, and ascend to another plane of things. It may be of no consequence which side I was upon, or it may be of consequence to some one to know which, but it is of vital importance to the witness and to any who love him, whether or not he believes the statement he makes--whether the man himself is true or false. Concerning the thing it can be but a question of fact; it remains a question of fact even whether the man has or has not spoken the truth; but concerning the man it is a question of truth: he is either a pure soul, so far as this thing witnesses, or a false soul, capable and guilty of a lie. In this relation it is of no consequence whether the man spoke the fact or not; if he meant to speak the fact, he remains a true man.

Here I would anticipate so far as to say that there are truths as well as facts, and lies against truths as well as against facts. When the Pharisees said Corban, they lied against the truth that a man must honour his father and mother.

Let us go up now from the region of facts that seem casual, to those facts that are invariable, by us unchangeable, which therefore involve what we call law. It will be seen at once that the fact here is of more dignity, and the truth or falsehood of a statement in this region of more consequence in itself. It is a small matter whether the water in my jug was frozen on such a morning; but it is a fact of great importance that at thirty-two degrees of Fahrenheit water always freezes. We rise a step here in the nature of the facts concerned: are we come therefore into the region of truths? Is it a truth that water freezes at thirty-two degrees? I think not. There is no principle, open to us, involved in the changeless fact. The principle that lies at the root of it in the mind of God must be a truth, but to the human mind the fact is as yet only a fact. The word truth ought to be kept for higher things. There are those that think such facts the highest that can be known; they put therefore the highest word they know to the highest thing they know, and call the facts of nature truths; but to me it seems that, however high you come in your generalization, however wide you make your law--including, for instance, all solidity under the law of freezing--you have not risen higher than the statement that such and such is an invariable fact. Call it a law if you will--a law of nature if you choose--that it always is so, but not a truth. It cannot be to us a truth until we descry the reason of its existence, its relation to mind and intent, yea to self-existence. Tell us why it must be so, and you state a truth. When we come to see that a law is such, because it is the embodiment of a certain eternal thought, beheld by us in it, a fact of the being of God, the facts of which alone are truths, then indeed it will be to us, not a law merely, but an embodied truth. A law of God's nature is a way he would have us think of him; it is a necessary truth of all being. When a law of Nature makes us see this; when we say, I understand that law; I see why it ought to be; it is just like God; then it rises, not to the dignity of a truth in itself, but to the truth of its own nature--namely, a revelation of character, nature, and will in God. It is a picture of something in God, a word that tells a fact about God, and is therefore far nearer being called a truth than

anything below it. As a simple illustration: What notion should we have of the unchanging and unchangeable, without the solidity of matter? If, such as we are, we had nothing solid about us, where would be our thinking about God and truth and law?

But there is a region perhaps not so high as this from the scientific point of view, where yet the word truth may begin to be rightly applied. I believe that every fact in nature is a revelation of God, is there such as it is because God is such as he is; and I suspect that all its facts impress us so that we learn God unconsciously. True, we cannot think of any one fact thus, except as we find the soul of it--its fact of God; but from the moment when first we come into contact with the world, it is to us a revelation of God, his things seen, by which we come to know the things unseen. How should we imagine what we may of God, without the firmament over our heads, a visible sphere, yet a formless infinitude! What idea could we have of God without the sky? The truth of the sky is what it makes us feel of the God that sent it out to our eyes. If you say the sky could not but be so and such, I grant it--with God at the root of it. There is nothing for us to conceive in its stead--therefore indeed it must be so. In its discovered laws, light seems to me to be such because God is such. Its so-called laws are the waving of his garments, waving so because he is thinking and loving and walking inside them.

We are here in a region far above that commonly claimed for science, open only to the heart of the child and the childlike man and woman--a region in which the poet is among his own things, and to which he has often to go to fetch them. For things as they are, not as science deals with them, are the revelation of God to his children. I would not be misunderstood: there is no fact of science not yet incorporated in a law, no law of science that has got beyond the hypothetic and tentative, that has not in it the will of God, and therefore may not reveal God; but neither fact nor law is there for the sake of fact or law; each is but a mean to an end; in the perfected end we find the intent, and there God--not in the laws themselves, save as his means. For that same reason, human science cannot discover God; for human science is but the backward undoing of the tapestry--web of God's science, works with its back to him, and is always leaving him--his intent, that is, his perfected work--behind it, always going farther and farther away from the point where his work culminates in revelation. Doubtless it thus makes some small intellectual approach to him, but at best it can come only to his back; science will never find the face of God; while those who would reach his heart, those who, like Dante, are returning thither where they are, will find also the spring-head of his science. Analysis is well, as death is well; analysis is death, not life. It discovers a little of the way God walks to his ends, but in so doing it forgets and leaves the end itself behind. I do not say the man of science does so, but the very process of his work is such a leaving of God's ends behind. It is a following back of his footsteps, too often without appreciation of the result for which the feet took those steps. To rise from the perfected work is the swifter and loftier ascent. If the man could find out why God worked so, then he would be discovering God; but even then he would not be discovering the best and the deepest of God; for his means cannot be so great as his ends. I must make myself clearer.

Ask a man of mere science, what is the truth of a flower: he will pull it to pieces, show you its parts, explain how they operate, how they minister each to the life of the flower; he will tell you what changes are wrought in it by scientific cultivation; where it lives originally, where it can live; the effects upon it of another climate; what part the insects bear in its varieties--and doubtless many more facts about it. Ask the poet what is the truth of the flower, and he will answer: 'Why, the flower itself, the perfect flower, and what it cannot help saying to him who has ears to hear it.' The truth of the flower is, not the facts about it, be they correct as ideal science itself, but the shining, glowing, gladdening, patient thing throned on its stalk--the compeller of smile and tear from child and prophet. The man of science laughs at this, because he is only

a man of science, and does not know what it means; but the poet and the child care as little for his laughter as the birds of God, as Dante calls the angels, for his treatise on aerostation. The children of God must always be mocked by the children of the world, whether in the church or out of it--children with sharp ears and eyes, but dull hearts. Those that hold love the only good in the world, understand and smile at the world's children, and can do very well without anything they have got to tell them. In the higher state to which their love is leading them, they will speedily outstrip the men of science, for they have that which is at the root of science, that for the revealing of which God's science exists. What shall it profit a man to know all things, and lose the bliss, the consciousness of well-being, which alone can give value to his knowledge?

God's science in the flower exists for the existence of the flower in its relation to his children. If we understand, if we are at one with, if we love the flower, we have that for which the science is there, that which alone can equip us for true search into the means and ways by which the divine idea of the flower was wrought out to be presented to us. The idea of God is the flower; his idea is not the botany of the flower. Its botany is but a thing of ways and means--of canvas and colour and brush in relation to the picture in the painter's brain. The mere intellect can never find out that which owes its being to the heart supreme. The relation of the intellect to that which is born of the heart is an unreal except it be a humble one. The idea of God, I repeat, is the flower. He thought it; invented its means; sent it, a gift of himself, to the eyes and hearts of his children. When we see how they are loved by the ignorant and degraded, we may well believe the flowers have a place in the history of the world, as written for the archives of heaven, which we are yet a long way from understanding, and which science could not, to all eternity, understand, or enable to understand. Watch that child! He has found one of his silent and motionless brothers, with God's clothing upon it, God's thought in its face. In what a smile breaks out the divine understanding between them! Watch his mother when he takes it home to her--no nearer understanding it than he! It is no old association that brings those tears to her eyes, powerful in that way as are flowers, and things far inferior to flowers; it is God's thought, unrecognized as such, holding communion with her. She weeps with a delight inexplicable. It is only a daisy! only a primrose! only a pheasant-eye--narcissus! only a lily of the field! only a snowdrop! only a sweet-pea! only a brave yellow crocus! But here to her is no mere fact; here is no law of nature; here is a truth of nature, the truth of a flower--a perfect thought from the heart of God--a truth of God!--not an intellectual truth, but a divine fact, a dim revelation, a movement of the creative soul! Who but a father could think the flowers for his little ones? We are nigh the region now in which the Lord's word is at home--'I am the truth.'

I will take an illustrative instance altogether to my mind and special purpose. What, I ask, is the truth of water? Is it that it is formed of hydrogen and oxygen?--That the chemist has now another mode of stating the fact of water, will not affect my illustration. His new mode will probably be one day yet more antiquated than mine is now.--Is it for the sake of the fact that hydrogen and oxygen combined form water, that the precious thing exists? Is oxygen-and-hydrogen the divine idea of water? Or has God put the two together only that man might separate and find them out? He allows his child to pull his toys to pieces; but were they made that he might pull them to pieces? He were a child not to be envied for whom his inglorious father would make toys to such an end! A school--examiner might see therein the best use of a toy, but not a father! Find for us what in the constitution of the two gases makes them fit and capable to be thus honoured in forming the lovely thing, and you will give us a revelation about more than water, namely about the God who made oxygen and hydrogen. There is no water in oxygen, no water in hydrogen: it comes bubbling fresh from the imagination of the living God, rushing from under the great white throne of the glacier. The very thought of it makes one gasp with an elemental joy no metaphysician can analyse.

The water itself, that dances, and sings, and slakes the wonderful thirst--symbol and picture of that draught for which the woman of Samaria made her prayer to Jesus--this lovely thing itself, whose very wetness is a delight to every inch of the human body in its embrace--this live thing which, if I might, I would have running through my room, yea, babbling along my table--this water is its own self its own truth, and is therein a truth of God. Let him who would know the love of the maker, become sorely athirst, and drink of the brook by the way--then lift up his heart--not at that moment to the maker of oxygen and hydrogen, but to the inventor and mediator of thirst and water, that man might foresee a little of what his soul may find in God. If he become not then as a hart panting for the water-brooks, let him go back to his science and its husks: they will at last make him thirsty as the victim in the dust-tower of the Persian. As well may a man think to describe the joy of drinking by giving thirst and water for its analysis, as imagine he has revealed anything about water by resolving it into its scientific elements. Let a man go to the hillside and let the brook sing to him till he loves it, and he will find himself far nearer the fountain of truth than the triumphal car of the chemist will ever lead the shouting crew of his half-comprehending followers. He will draw from the brook the water of joyous tears, 'and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.'

The truth of a thing, then, is the blossom of it, the thing it is made for, the topmost stone set on with rejoicing; truth in a man's imagination is the power to recognize this truth of a thing; and wherever, in anything that God has made, in the glory of it, be it sky or flower or human face, we see the glory of God, there a true imagination is beholding a truth of God. And now we must advance to a yet higher plane.

We have seen that the moment whatever goes by the name of truth comes into connection with man; the moment that, instead of merely mirroring itself in his intellect as a thing outside of him, it comes into contact with him as a being of action; the moment the knowledge of it affects or ought to affect his sense of duty, it becomes a thing of far nobler import; the question of truth enters upon a higher phase, looks out of a loftier window. A fact which in itself is of no value, becomes at once a matter of life and death--moral life and death, when a man has the choice, the imperative choice of being true or false concerning it.

When the truth, the heart, the summit, the crown of a thing, is perceived by a man, he approaches the fountain of truth whence the thing came, and perceiving God by understanding what is, becomes more of a man, more of the being he was meant to be. In virtue of this truth perceived, he has relations with the universe undeveloped in him till then. But far higher will the doing of the least, the most insignificant duty raise him. He begins thereby to be a true man. A man may delight in the vision and glory of a truth, and not himself be true.

The man whose vision is weak, but who, as far as he sees, and desirous to see farther, does the thing he sees, is a true man. If a man knows what is, and says it is not, his knowing does not make him less than a liar. The man who recognizes the truth of any human relation, and neglects the duty involved, is not a true man. The man who knows the laws of nature, and does not heed them, the more he teaches them to others, the less is he a true man. But he may obey them all and be the falsest of men, because of far higher and closer duties which he neglects.

The man who takes good care of himself and none of his brother and sister, is false. A man may be a poet, aware of the highest truth of a thing, of that beauty which is the final cause of its existence; he may draw thence a notion of the creative loveliness that thought it out; he may be a man who would not tell a lie, or steal, or slander--and yet he may not be a true man, inasmuch as the essentials of manhood are not his aim: having nowise come to the flower of his own being, nowise, in his higher degree, attained the truth

of a thing--namely, that for which he exists, the creational notion of him--neither is he striving after the same.

There are relations closer than those of the facts around him, plainer than those that seem to bring the maker nigh to him, which he is failing to see, or seeing fails to acknowledge, or acknowledging fails to fulfil. Man is man only in the doing of the truth, perfect man only in the doing of the highest truth, which is the fulfilling of his relations to his origin. But he has relations with his fellow man, closer infinitely than with any of the things around him, and to many a man far plainer than his relations with God.

Now the nearer is plainer that he may step on it, and rise to the higher, till then the less plain. These relations make a large part of his being, are essential to his very existence, and spring from the very facts of the origination of his being. They are the relation of thought to thought, of being to being, of duty to duty. The very nature of a man depends upon or is one with these relations. They are truths, and the man is a true man as he fulfils them. Fulfilling them perfectly, he is himself a truth, a living truth.

As regarded merely by the intellect, these relations are facts of man's nature; but that they are of man's nature makes them truths, and the fulfilments of them are duties. He is so constituted as to understand them at first more than he can love them, with the resulting advantage of having thereby the opportunity of choosing them purely because they are true; so doing he chooses to love them, and is enabled to love them in the doing, which alone can truly reveal them to him, and make the loving of them possible.

Then they cease to show themselves in the form of duties, and appear as they more truly are, absolute truths, essential realities, eternal delights. The man is a true man who chooses duty; he is a perfect man who at length never thinks of duty, who forgets the name of it. The duty of Jesus was the doing in lower forms than the perfect that which he loved perfectly, and did perfectly in the highest forms also. Thus he fulfilled all righteousness. One who went to the truth by mere impulse, would be a holy animal, not a true man.

Relations, truths, duties, are shown to the man away beyond him, that he may choose them, and be a child of God, choosing righteousness like him. Hence the whole sad victorious human tale, and the glory to be revealed!

The moral philosopher who regards duties only as facts of his system; nay, even the man who rewards them as truths, essential realities of his humanity, but goes no farther, is essentially a liar, a man of untruth. He is a man indeed, but not a true man. He is a man in possibility, but not a real man yet. The recognition of these things is the imperative obligation to fulfil them. Not fulfilling these relations, the man is undoing the right of his own existence, destroying his *raison d'etre*, making of himself a monster, a live reason why he should not live, for nothing on those terms could ever have begun to be. His presence is a claim upon his creator for destruction.

The facts of human relation, then, are truths indeed, and of awfulest import. 'Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer; and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him!' The man who lives a hunter after pleasure, not a labourer in the fields of duty, who thinks of himself as if he were alone on the earth, is in himself a lie. Instead of being the man he looks, the man he was made to be, he lives as the beasts seem to live--with this difference, I trust, that they are rising, while he, so far as lies in himself, is sinking. But he cannot be allowed to sink beyond God's reach; hence all the holy--that is, healing--miseries that come upon him, of which he complains as so hard and unfair: they are for the compelling of the truth he will not yield--a painful suasion to be himself, to be a truth.

But suppose, for the sake of my progressive unfolding, that a man did everything required of him--fulfilled all the relations to his fellows of which I have been speaking, was toward them at least, a true man; he would yet feel, doubtless would feel it the more, that something was lacking to him--lacking to his necessary well-being. Like a live flower, he would feel that he had not yet blossomed, and could not tell what the blossom ought to be. In this direction the words of the Lord point, when he says to the youth, 'If thou wouldst be perfect.' The man whom I suppose, would feel that his existence was not yet justified to itself, that the truth of his being and nature was not yet revealed to his consciousness. He would remain unsatisfied; and the cause would be that there was in him a relation, and that the deepest, closest, and strongest, which had not yet come into live fact, which had not yet become a truth in him, toward which he was not true, whereby his being remained untrue, he was not himself, was not ripened into the divine idea, which alone can content itself. A child with a child's heart who does not even know that he has a father, yet misses him--with his whole nature, even if not with his consciousness. This relation has not yet so far begun to be fulfilled in him, as that the coming blossom should send before it patience and hope enough to enable him to live by faith without sight. When the flower begins to come, the human plant begins to rejoice in the glory of God not yet revealed, the inheritance of the saints in light; with uplifted stem and forward-leaning bud expects the hour when the lily of God's field shall know itself alive, with God himself for its heart and its atmosphere; the hour when God and the man shall be one, and all that God cares for shall be the man's. But again I forget my progression.

The highest truth to the intellect, the abstract truth, is the relation in which man stands to the source of his being--his will to the will whence it became a will, his love to the love that kindled his power to love, his intellect to the intellect that lighted his. If a man deal with these things only as things to be dealt with, as objects of thought, as ideas to be analysed and arranged in their due order and right relation, he treats them as facts and not as truths, and is no better, probably much the worse, for his converse with them, for he knows in a measure, and is false to all that is most worthy of his faithfulness.

But when the soul, or heart, or spirit, or what you please to call that which is the man himself and not his body, sooner or later becomes aware that he needs some one above him, whom to obey, in whom to rest, from whom to seek deliverance from what in himself is despicable, disappointing, unworthy even of his own interest; when he is aware of an opposition in him, which is not harmony; that, while he hates it, there is yet present with him, and seeming to be himself, what sometimes he calls the old Adam, sometimes the flesh, sometimes his lower nature, sometimes his evil self; and sometimes recognizes as simply that part of his being where God is not; then indeed is the man in the region of truth, and beginning to come true in himself. Nor will it be long ere he discover that there is no part in him with which he would be at strife, so God were there, so that it were true, what it ought to be--in right relation to the whole; for, by whatever name called, the old Adam, or antecedent horse, or dog, or tiger, it would then fulfil its part holily, intruding upon nothing, subject utterly to the rule of the higher; horse or dog or tiger, it would be good horse, good dog, good tiger.

When the man bows down before a power that can account for him, a power to whom he is no mystery as he is to himself; a power that knows whence he came and whither he is going; who knows why he loves this and hates that, why and where he began to go wrong; who can set him right, longs indeed to set him right, making of him a creature to look up to himself without shadow of doubt, anxiety or fear, confident as a child whom his father is leading by the hand to the heights of happy-making truth, knowing that where he is wrong, the father is right and will set him right; when the man feels his whole being in the embrace of self-responsible paternity--then the man is bursting into his flower; then the truth of his being, the eternal

fact at the root of his new name, his real nature, his idea--born in God at first, and responsive to the truth, the being of God, his origin--begins to show itself; then his nature is almost in harmony with itself. For, obeying the will that is the cause of his being, the cause of that which demands of itself to be true, and that will being righteousness and love and truth, he begins to stand on the apex of his being, to know himself divine. He begins to feel himself free. The truth--not as known to his intellect, but as revealed in his own sense of being true, known by his essential consciousness of his divine condition, without which his nature is neither his own nor God's--trueness has made him free. Not any abstract truth, not all abstract truth, not truth its very metaphysical self, held by purest insight into entity, can make any man free; but the truth done, the truth loved, the truth lived by the man; the truth of and not merely in the man himself; the honesty that makes the man himself a child of the honest God.

When a man is, with his whole nature, loving and willing the truth, he is then a live truth. But this he has not originated in himself. He has seen it and striven for it, but not originated it. The one originating, living, visible truth, embracing all truths in all relations, is Jesus Christ. He is true; he is the live Truth. His truth, chosen and willed by him, the ripeness of his being, the flower of his sonship which is his nature, the crown of his one topmost perfect relation acknowledged and gloried in, is his absolute obedience to his father. The obedient Jesus is Jesus the Truth. He is true and the root of all truth and development of truth in men. Their very being, however far from the true human, is the undeveloped Christ in them, and his likeness to Christ is the truth of a man, even as the perfect meaning of a flower is the truth of a flower. Every man, according to the divine idea of him, must come to the truth of that idea; and under every form of Christ is the Christ. The truth of every man, I say, is the perfected Christ in him. As Christ is the blossom of humanity, so the blossom of every man is the Christ perfected in him. The vital force of humanity working in him is Christ; he is his root--the generator and perfecter of his individuality. The stronger the pure will of the man to be true; the freer and more active his choice; the more definite his individuality, ever the more is the man and all that is his, Christ's. Without him he could not have been; being, he could not have become capable of truth; capable of truth, he could never have loved it; loving and desiring it, he could not have attained to it. Nothing but the heart-presence, the humanest sympathy, and whatever deeper thing else may be betwixt the creating Truth and the responding soul, could make a man go on hoping, until at last he forget himself, and keep open house for God to come and go. He gives us the will wherewith to will, and the power to use it, and the help needed to supplement the power, whatever in any case the need may be; but we ourselves must will the truth, and for that the Lord is waiting, for the victory of God his father in the heart of his child. In this alone can he see of the travail of his soul, in this alone be satisfied. The work is his, but we must take our willing share. When the blossom breaks forth in us, the more it is ours the more it is his, for the highest creation of the Father, and that pre-eminently through the Son, is the being that can, like the Father and the Son, of his own self will what is right. The groaning and traving, the blossom and the joy, are the Father's and the Son's and ours. The will, the power of willing, may be created, but the willing is begotten. Because God wills first, man wills also.

When my being is consciously and willedly in the hands of him who called it to live and think and suffer and be glad--given back to him by a perfect obedience--I thenceforward breathe the breath, share the life of God himself. Then I am free, in that I am true--which means one with the Father. And freedom knows itself to be freedom. When a man is true, if he were in hell he could not be miserable. He is right with himself because right with him whence he came. To be right with God is to be right with the universe; one with the power, the love, the will of the mighty Father, the cherisher of joy, the lord of laughter, whose are all glories, all hopes, who loves everything, and hates nothing but selfishness, which he will not have in his kingdom.

Christ then is the Lord of life; his life is the light of men; the light mirrored in them changes them into the image of him, the Truth; and thus the truth, who is the Son, makes them free.

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