

2023 Theme - Focus On What Matters
Sermon Series - Focus On What Drives Us
Sermon Title - Focus On Doctrine
Sermon Text - Acts 15:1-11
Sermon Presenter - Pastor Larry

Full Sermon Notes

"I cast my mind to Calvary where Jesus bled and died for me, I see His wounds, His hands, His feet, My Savior on that cursed tree, Then on the third at break of dawn, the Son of Heaven rose again, O trampled death, where is your sting? The angels roar for Christ the King!!"

One of the complaints I've sometimes heard about contemporary Christian music is that it lacks good doctrine. Well, that song is spot on good doctrine! Let's pray and we'll talk about why it's so important to focus on Doctrine! Pray!

One of the most influential books in my ministry has been a book called "Biblical basis of missions" written by Avery T. Willis, Jr.. I've quoted this book before and our staff just finished reading it as a staff development book. At the very start of the book, Dr. Willis told this humorous story...

"A few months after I began my first pastorate, Mrs. Jefferies, a faithful but outspoken member, said, "Brother Avery, you know what I like about your preaching?" I leaned forward expectantly. "It's that you don't preach no doctrine." Stunned, I slumped back in my chair. "But everything I preach is doctrine, Mrs. Jeffries!" I exclaimed. "Well, it don't sound like it." "But doctrine means truth or teaching. Everything I preach is doctrine because I preach the Bible."

Avery T. Willis, Jr.

Biblical Basis of Missions

Today we're going to look at the reasons we should never lose our focus on doctrine! We will be looking at a situation in the New Testament Church that developed over the doctrine of salvation and through that passage we will discover some of the reasons we should focus on doctrine. But I want to begin by establishing...

What doctrine is and why it's so important!

According to the Oxford Dictionary doctrine is...

Doctrine - "a belief or set of beliefs held and taught by a Church, political party, or other group."

According to the Holman Bible Dictionary...

"Doctrine is the basic body of Christian teaching or understanding (2 Timothy 3:16). Christian doctrine is composed of teachings which are to be handed on through instruction and proclamation."

Paul, in his second letter to his young apprentice Timothy said this...

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

2 Timothy 3:17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

In other words, Doctrine is critically important!

According to the Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, doctrine is...

Doctrine - "A body of beliefs about God, man, Christ, the church, and other related concepts considered authoritative and thus worthy of acceptance by all members of the community of faith."

(from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright © 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, wrote this...

"Basic Christian doctrine is necessary at all times and in all places because, alas, false doctrine—idolatry and ideology—is pervasive."

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction: The 'Greatest Generation' and Its Legacy for the Future of Evangelical Theology," in *Basics of the Faith: An Evangelical Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, Best of Christianity Today (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 4.

Paul, in his first letter to Timothy made this statement...

1 Timothy 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

I don't know if you've noticed this or not, but the denominations and churches in our world today who have abandoned the doctrines and truths found in Scripture and which have become more concerned with maintaining the institutions and making sure they don't say or preach anything that offends the status quo or puts them at odds with the world, those denominations, and churches, for the most part, are in serious decline. When the pressure of the world comes, and it will, if we turn our back on the message of Jesus and God's Word, and embrace the ways of the world we will no longer be effective in our mission of transforming worship, people or the world!

By the way, Doctrine and Theology are closely related. Simply put...

Theology is what we believe about God!

Theology should be based on the truth we discover about God from God's revealed Word the Bible. That truth becomes the doctrine we teach and follow! Once again, doctrine should be

based on the objective truth of God's Word. More about doctrine in just a moment. I want to talk with you about the concept of truth. In every school of thought in our world today, it is accepted that there are foundational principles which inform the application and actions of that particular activity. Medicine, science, law, construction! Everything except spiritual things. In popular spiritual thought today it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere! I couldn't disagree more! Just because you believe something very sincerely, doesn't mean it's true. People have believed things very sincerely and yet were sincerely wrong and it cost them their life!

In the new Indiana Jones Movie trailer, Indiana Jones says this... "I've come to believe it's not so much what you believe, (then there's a dramatic pause, the music stops and he says) it's how hard you believe it!"

Man, the world spends millions of dollars to promote their ideologies but let me remind you of the truth: I don't care how hard you believe something to be true, if it's false, it's false! No matter how hard you believe doesn't change the truth! You can make believe, but you can't make truth. You can't conjure up truth! God's truth is not subjective to your wants and wishes, it's divine and eternal truth! Are you aware of the changes that are being made in our culture today when it comes to the concept of truth? Here's...

The Old definition of truth found in Webster's 1828 dictionary. It was extensive...

1. The quality or being true; as: -- (a) Conformity to fact or reality; exact accordance with that which is, or has been; or shall be.

(b) Conformity to rule; exactness; close correspondence with an example...

(c) Fidelity; constancy; steadfastness; faithfulness.

(d) The practice of speaking what is true; freedom from falsehood; veracity.

2. That which is true or certain concerning any matter or subject, or generally on all subjects; real state of things; fact; verity; reality.

3. A true thing; a verified fact; a true statement or proposition; an established principle, fixed law, or the like; as, the great truths of morals.

Webster's 1828 Dictionary (Online)

The Grolier Webster International Dictionary, Copyright 1971&1972 reads...

Truth - 'Conformity with fact or reality, veracity or honesty: a true statement; a verified or accepted fact; the state or quality of being true; fidelity; constancy; that which is true or actual; a spiritual or philosophical verity. Actually; in fact.'

So I think it would be fair to say that at one time there was a consensus on the definition of truth even if people didn't agree on what was true. There was agreement at one time that truth existed outside of what a person wanted to believe was the truth. So at one time, it was deemed important to discover truth by seeking truth! In other words, your perception of what is true may not always match up with reality. But guess what. The very concept of truth is being rewritten.

Webster Dictionary's New definition of truth

fidelity, constancy, sincerity in action, character, and utterance

the state of being the case the body of real things, events, and facts

a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality

a judgment, proposition, or idea that is true or accepted as true

the body of true statements and propositions

the property (as of a statement) of being in accord with fact or reality

fidelity to an original or to a standard

Folks, I believe sincerity in action, character, and utterance is important, but you must understand that you can be sincerely wrong about something and there are consequences! When you teach that truth can either be true or simply accepted as true, then you have people who think it's perfectly fine to just create their own truth by thinking it to be true or by telling people something is true when it is utterly false! We're seeing that flawed philosophy being played out in public life today! Richard John Neuhaus said this...

"Decadence is the decay that results from the hollowing out of meanings. When decadence is in full swing, meanings are not simply hollow but we exult in the gutting of them. This we call autonomy, liberation, freedom, the ultimate goal of postmodernism."

—RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS

Charles W. Colson and Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Being the Body: A New Call for the Church to Be Light in the Darkness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

Listen to this quotation found in Charles Colson's book "Being the Body: A New Call for the Church to Be Light in the Darkness..."

"The true Christian...is not only to teach truth but to practice truth in the midst of such relativism," said Francis Schaeffer, and this will "bring forth confrontation—loving confrontation, but confrontation."

Charles W. Colson and Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Being the Body: A New Call for the Church to Be Light in the Darkness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

Do you realize how important it is that we practice what we preach? That we live what we say we believe. I heard a radio preacher, Abraham Hamilton III, say this the other day...

“God is more concerned with the amount of Scripture that we live than the amount of Scripture that we quote!”

So we don't just need to know truth and proper doctrine, we need to live it! I want to give you a practical example in the physical realm that illustrates why truth matters so much. Just last week there was a near catastrophe on a U.S. runway. According to a Newsweek report “A Delta Boeing 737 carrying 145 passengers and six crew members was leaving the New York airport for Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic at the same time as an American Boeing 777 carrying 137 passengers and 14 crew members was setting off for London.” The report goes on to say: “Delta Airlines flight 1943 was ordered to stop by a panicked air traffic controller, narrowly avoiding a collision with American Airlines flight 106.” Thank God the Air Traffic Controller was doing his job and acted quickly! While the investigation is still ongoing, evidently the American Airlines plane was not on the right taxiway. Having around 40 hours of flight time in the cockpit, I know it is extremely complicated when you are at a major airport and you have to closely follow instructions. And you have to trust that the route the air traffic controller has given you is not just a blind guess in the dark. There's a very good reason to follow his or her directions exactly as given! When I get on a commercial flight, I'm thankful that the air traffic controllers base their directions on real, empirical data that knows where the other planes are. Absolute truth matters in these situations. There was once a college professor who claimed there was no such thing as absolute truth. He was questioned by a student who asked if he was absolutely sure that there was no absolute truth!

Truth matters in your physical life and your spiritual life! Absolute truth matters when it comes to what you base your life upon here on earth. Truth is also critical and crucial when it comes to what you believe, and what your doctrine and theology are in regards to eternal life! Critical means that something is of decisive importance with respect to the outcome. Crucial means something involves an extremely important decision or result. Both definitions involve making a decision. Don't underestimate the importance of making the right decision when it comes to what you believe about your faith and your doctrine!

Let's examine the reasons why Correct doctrine is both critical and crucial and should be something we focus on as a church and as individuals. So let's look at what happened in our text in this second part of our message...

The reasons we should focus on doctrine.

Reason #1: Challenges and Questions will Arise

Acts 15:1 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

This was a direct challenge concerning the doctrine of salvation! How does a person find a relationship with God? How does a person come to a place where they know they will go to heaven when they die? One group said it was by what you do, but Paul preached it was through

faith in what Jesus had done for them on the cross! In fact Paul presented the doctrine of salvation like this...

Acts 13:38 "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

Acts 13:39 Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

But there were those who disagreed with Paul! So how did the early church deal with this major question and challenge to doctrine? They sought Godly counsel! Our text says...

Acts 15:2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

I believe they remembered this Scripture from the Old Testament...

Prov 11:14 Where there is no guidance, a nation falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. NIV

So they went up to Jerusalem to see the elders of the church and St. Peter was among those elders. But before we see what happened next, I want to remind you that not all challenges and questions will come from those who oppose you. The questions may come from a very innocent source. Sometimes there's just the honest questions that come from your children. Questions like, why do we believe this or practice this? That's natural and normal for them to ask questions and maybe even challenge you a little bit. You need to be able to give them your reasons for believing. You may have to admit sometimes that you don't fully understand a particular doctrine or situation. This is especially true when dealing with the loss of a loved one! Just be honest with them and help them understand why you believe what you believe. Done right, it can bring great comfort to them. And there may be times when it's a coworker, a neighbor, a friend, or a fellow student who has a valid question. We have some guidelines for the way we answer these questions:

1 Peter 3:15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...

Be loving! And you'll see that Peter followed his own advice as we discover yet another reason why correct doctrine is both critical and crucial and should be something we focus on as a church and as individuals.

Reason #2: False Doctrines are Real

Acts 15:5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

While circumcision is sometimes still practiced for religious reasons today, it is more often for medical reasons. However, these Pharisees still believed that salvation was by good works and circumcision was an important part of that process to them. They couldn't let go of their belief that salvation was something an individual earned by their own efforts and religious ritual. Isn't it amazing that Jesus had offered to pay the price for their sins, to give them amazing grace which would cost them nothing, but had cost Him His life, and yet they were insistent that salvation was dependent on what they could achieve. That's equivalent to someone coming up to you and telling you they are willing to pay off your mortgage, but you say, "No thanks, I got this! I don't need your help, how insulting!" You know what that is? That's pride in action! And when a person refuses God's offer of salvation by grace, they lose way more than a house, that's letting pride keep you from divine purpose and meaning in this life as well as the gift of eternal life! One of the reasons many people reject Christianity today is the same reason many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day rejected it. The reason? Because it requires humility to admit that you're a sinner, unclean and unable to save yourself! The tragedy of this line of thinking is that you could never be good enough or do enough! Without God's grace we're eternally lost! Our text goes on to say...

Acts 15:6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

Acts 15:7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

Acts 15:8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

Acts 15:9 He made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith.

When it comes to Salvation it's our faith and belief in what Jesus did for us on the cross plus nothing! It's not faith plus church membership, or faith plus baptism, or faith plus good works, or faith plus anything. It's faith in what Jesus did! When He was on the cross He said, "It is finished!" In other words, Jesus had done for us what we could never do for ourselves! Jesus had lived a perfect life so He could be the perfect sacrifice!

Don't get me wrong! It's not that how we live doesn't matter to God, oh it does! While we are not saved by our good works, we are saved to do good works and that is clearly stated by Paul in Ephesians 2. I read these verses a lot, but it's good doctrine and we should have them memorized!

Ephesians 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

Ephesians 2:9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So let me put it this way: We are not saved by our good works but we are saved to do good works! In other words, when you place your trust and faith in Jesus to be your Savior, and you have believed in your heart that Jesus suffered horrifically on the cross to pay for your sins, died, was buried and then rose again on the third day, there's no way you will want to just continue to live the way you lived before you believed. And this leads us to the third reason we should focus on doctrine...

Reason #3: What you believe affects this life and your eternal life

Peter reminds the Pharisees of their past failures and inability to live by the law they were trying to get others to live by. He says...

Acts 15:10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

Acts 15:11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

If you base your life on your own goodness, wisdom and abilities or your subjective feelings of what is right and wrong rather than the objective truth of God and His Word you run the extreme risk of fulfilling Paul's prophecy about such things...

2 Tim 4:3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

2 Tim 4:4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 Tim 4:5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Paul said, "Keep your head!" Feelings are subject to circumstances and circumstances change. The truth of God's Word is constant, and consistent. Its meaning is the same today as it was yesterday and will be the same tomorrow! It is reliable. We've all seen the tragedies of what happens when people base their lives on their feelings rather than on God's unchanging truth! Some despair of life and give up. Some go on rampages. Some throw caution and commitment to the wind and simply live for pleasure. What does this have to do with focusing on doctrine? Remember this, Doctrine is the truth of God's Word. Doctrines are the beliefs that guide us in the decisions we make each and every day. Right doctrine is vital to our peace of mind. Let me put it to you this way. If your doctrine of salvation is based on your good works and your good outweighing your bad on some cosmic scale at the end of your life, then your peace of mind is out the door. Why? Because you will always wonder if you've done enough good, if you've got enough time left to outdo or undo the bad things of your past. But if you are trusting in what Jesus did on the cross for you and you've accepted His gift of eternal life then you can walk in peace during the day and sleep peacefully at night! The Apostle John wrote these words in 1 John...

1 John 5:13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Now let me remind you of what John had written in his Gospel as to what constitutes salvation by grace so you can know that you have eternal life.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

John 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 3:19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

John 3:20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

John 3:21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

So we're not saved by works but by believing in the work that Jesus did on the cross for us! Notice that John said...

John 3:21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

So the good that has been done in a believer's life has been done through God and it will bring about glorious changes to your life and that will in turn glorify God. But make no mistake about it, it should be clear that the changes in your life are the result of God working to change your heart, soul and mind as well as your life! You won't be perfect but you will be forgiven, and your heart and mind will begin changing. Remember Peter said...

Acts 15:9 He made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith.

And Paul puts it this way in Romans...

Romans 6:1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

Romans 6:2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Romans 6:3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Romans 6:4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Folks, that's God's truth and I believe it and I preach it and with God's help I will live it! I'm not perfect, and I've got a long way to go in my quest to be like Jesus, but thank God He didn't leave me in my bondage to sin and with the help of His Holy Spirit, I'll keep growing in my walk with God! That's the doctrine of salvation and of sanctification. A sinner saved by grace and being sanctified as I seek to follow Jesus more closely every day! Those truths impact the principles and morals by which I seek to live my life! Again, not to earn my salvation, but because I've received salvation. That salvation impacts my life here on earth and my eternity in heaven! I believe these teachings of Scripture are absolutely true and that's why I teach them. It matters.

However, a majority of Americans, according to all the research and polls, do not believe in spiritual absolutes. They believe morality is whatever you want it to be. God's Word is considered irrelevant. It's what society deems acceptable now and as a result, many of our young people are confused, mixed up, and troubled. Their moral compass has been taken away from them. I think it's time we give it back! They need it and it is our responsibility to show them how to use the Compass of God's Word by focusing on the doctrines of truth and living them. I want to close by reading to you what Paul told the Ephesians right after he gave them the doctrine of salvation by grace. Listen closely because it really explains the doctrine of salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike...

Ephesians 2:11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—

Ephesians 2:12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

Ephesians 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Ephesians 2:14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

Ephesians 2:15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,

Ephesians 2:16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Ephesians 2:17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

Ephesians 2:18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,

Ephesians 2:20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

Ephesians 2:21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

Ephesians 2:22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Let's pray!