

Stand Up Stand Out

“A God-Centered Universe”

September 14-15

Introduction

Hey everyone! I'm Mark and I want to welcome you to our service. This weekend we kick off an exciting new series called, *Stand Up Stand Out*. Last week we concluded a powerful series called, *Fireproof Faith* where we learned the significance of an unwavering allegiance to God in the midst of these fallen times. We discovered that a fireproof faith involves more than just avoiding temptation but also be willing to lay down our lives for God and for others. And while we can be inspired by the conviction of Daniel or the selflessness of Esther, we probably won't face the same challenges they did. I imagine you've never been having dinner with your friends at Zippy's and everyone starts ordering the Korean Fried Chicken that had previously been offered to idols and now you have to resolve not to defile yourself. You've probably never been in the break-room at work when your co-worker pops in and says, "Oh hey, don't forget we have that thing after lunch where the boss wants us to meet in the parking lot and worship a nine-story idol of him. It's totally optional but if you don't do it you'll be fired." "You mean I'll lose my job?" "No, we're going to throw you into fire." So in this series we want to unpack some of the biggest issues of today where you will face the choice to either bow down and blend in or stand up and stand out.

From God-Centered to Self-Centered

I often tell the story of how, early in our marriage, Jalee and I went on a trip to New York City. I'm the kind of guy where, when I go on a trip, I am a total tourist. I'm not looking for the underground, off-the-beaten path experience. I'm not trying to blend in. Talk about standing out, I have my camera out and I'm gawking at all of the tall buildings — obvious tourist. And I just want to do all of the obvious stuff — catch a Broadway, ride the subway, eat a slice of authentic New York Pizza at Sbarro's (If you haven't tried Sbarro's it will change your life. Most authentic New York Pizza...kidding). And of course one of the most iconic things anyone can do in New York City is (say it with me) visit the Statue of Liberty. This was a bucket-list dream of mine from small-kid time. So we saved up our pennies, traveled across the Continental US, arrived in New York City, braved the traffic, caught a ferry to Liberty Island, and took this picture with the Statue of Liberty.

[Photo with the Statue of Liberty]

And I share this picture because this is exactly what we have done with God! The Statue of Liberty is so majestic, so impressive, so symbolic, and yet there is so much of ourselves in focus, we've missed it entirely! In the same way, God is so powerful, so majestic, and infinite, but when there is too much of self in focus we miss Him entirely. The apostle Paul urgently warned his apprentice Timothy saying,

¹ “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ² For people will be lovers of self...” (2 Timothy 3:1-2a ESV).

You and I are truly living in the selfie era but it goes so much deeper than just taking pictures of ourselves. “Self” has ascended to the highest place of authority in our society. We've placed “self” at the center of everything. In a God-centered society who defines truth? God. Who defines morality? God. Who defines reality? God. Who defines identity? God. But with each passing generation God has been further removed from the center and has been replaced with “self”. Today, who defines truth? You do (You have your truth and I have my truth). Who defines morality? Every individual. Who defines reality? You do, based on your beliefs and experiences.

I often quote Carl Trueman, not to condemn anyone but simply to point out a shift in our thinking as a society. If, 60 years ago, I went to my Doctor and said, “I feel like a woman trapped in a man’s body.” He would respond, “We need to adjust your mind to match your body.” Today, if I tell my Doctor, “I feel like a woman trapped in a man’s body.” He will tell me, “We need to adjust your body to match your mind.” There used to be objective truths that governed the way we lived, believed, and related to one another but now the only truth that matters is my truth — self truth. We have given “self” ultimate authority.

When you replace God with self, you transfer all of the power, and significance, and authority, and reverence that should go to Him and you place it on yourself. Why do you think there is so much pressure to conform as a society in this area? It is because people have elevated themselves to the place of God and when you are God then there is no room for discussion. If you’re not with me, you’re against me. You either agree with me or you’re dead to me. So here it is Church. As a Christian living in America today, you may not be pressured to bow before a 90-ft. statue made in the image of a king. But you are being pressured to bow before an ever-growing idol made in the image of you. More and more, our world is bowing down to the idol of “self” and if you listen carefully Church, the music has started to play. Will you bow down and blend in or will you stand up and stand out? Because to stand up in today’s society is to say, “There is only One authority in all the universe and it is not me and it is not you. God alone defines truth, God alone defines morality, and God alone defines reality.” If you stand up for that today you will certainly stand out and it may be off to the furnace with you.

Resistance to Truth

But let’s be honest, when it comes to the idea of absolute authority and objective truth there are things that make us feel uneasy and maybe even downright terrified.

Loss of Autonomy

Perhaps the most obvious fear is the loss of personal freedom. America is the land of the free. Nobody tells us what to do. If I believe in an absolute authority that means I’m not in authority. If I believe in a higher power, it means I have to surrender power or control and that is a terrifying thought because nobody knows me better than me and nobody will do what is in my best interest more than me. What if this God is restrictive? Do I really want to give up the freedom to live life on my own terms?

Fear of Judgment or Guilt

Let’s be honest, when there is no standard, no rules, no restrictions, we all look good! But once you set a standard and say, “This is right and this is wrong”, now there is a chance I might look bad. What if I don’t measure up? If God has a standard I probably don’t measure up to it. If there is objective truth what if I’m not walking in it? The idea of authority or truth can make us feel exposed, guilty, or even judged.

Fear of Hypocrisy and Abuse

How many of us know that really horrific things have been done in the name of “truth”? Wars have been fought, people have been killed, children have been bullied to the point of ending their lives. Truth and authority can be used to divide and destroy. We’ve also seen how people in authority proclaim “truth” but then live in ways that are totally contradictory to that “truth”.

So given all of this baggage why would we ever want to acknowledge a God as the highest authority or allow Him to define truth for us? Wouldn’t it just be easier to allow people to make decisions for themselves and decide what is best?

The Truth Will Set You Free

But Jesus makes an astounding promise to any who would follow Him,

*³¹ “Jesus said to the people who believed in Him, “You are truly My disciples if you remain faithful to My teachings. ³² And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,”
(John 8:31-32).*

The Apostle Paul echoes the words of Jesus stating again,

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery,” (Galatians 5:1).

The gospel is not bad news, it is not sad news, it is not condemning news, it is good news! And from a Biblical perspective it is in embracing the truth of Christ that we experience true freedom and it is in rejecting that truth that we experience a life of restriction and even enslavement.

Imagine God’s truth as the railroad tracks we were designed to travel along. Now picture a train that jumps off the tracks to roam free. This train may think it is liberated but in reality it is useless and stuck. Though the tracks may appear “restrictive”, the train experiences greatest freedom when it operates on the tracks it was designed for.

“Freedom is not the absence of restrictions but the presence of the right ones.” – Tim Keller

God’s boundaries don’t restrict us, they actually free us to live as we were created.

Sadly, it feels like our society has completely derailed from God’s plan and many people today feel stuck. The same principle applies to the area of finances. When we create healthy boundaries for our spending we are actually more free to enjoy the things we need vs. when we spend without restraint and find ourselves enslaved to debt. Sadly, we are watching our society become morally and spiritually bankrupt.

Americans today are afforded more rights and “freedoms” than any other time in history yet we are also experiencing greater levels of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness. Without the anchors of God’s truth in place many are adrift in a sea of confusion and turmoil. Ironically, by removing all boundaries and restrictions we have created a society of less freedom. Without objective morality it is increasingly more difficult to administer justice, resulting in moral chaos. The prioritization of self over all other institutions is bleeding into homes and families. Communities, marriages, families, and friendships tend to dissolve when you replace self-less love with self-interest. Relativism increasingly polarizes people into ideological camps as our nation finds less and less common truth to unite around.

¹⁸ “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse,” (Romans 1:18-20).

The problem isn’t that God hasn’t revealed His truth to us. The problem is that we have suppressed God’s truth, we have rejected God’s truth and have replaced God’s truth with a truth of our own making.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles,” (Romans 1:21-23).

Instead of acknowledging God’s authority and truth we have rejected Him and exchanged the Creator with the created. We have put ourselves in God’s place. And because of this we’re told that God’s wrath is being revealed from heaven. But many people have misconceptions about God’s wrath. When we think of God’s wrath we picture lightning bolts from heaven or natural disasters but often times God’s wrath is characterized by simply allowing people to experience the consequences of their sins.

24 “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen,” (Romans 1:24-25).

Growing up there would be times when I would reject my parent’s authority and rules. And they would try to explain them to me and reason with me. But if I continued to insist on having my own way there would come a point in the conversation where my Mom’s tone would completely shift and she’d say, “Ok, have it your way.” The local version of this is, “Bumbai you learn”. Sometimes, in order to learn that Mom’s way was best, you had to learn the pain of doing it your own way. Although God possesses all authority and is the author of truth, He still gives us a choice. He doesn’t force us to acknowledge His authority or walk in His truth. He may reason with us, He may send people into our lives to speak the truth to us, but if we insist on living in rejection of His authority He will give us over to our sinful desires and all of the consequences that come with it. So when you look around at the polarization, the division, the vitriol, the dissolving of communities, and families, the violence, and you think maybe God’s wrath is being revealed from heaven, you’re absolutely right. But God isn’t causing these things to happen, He’s simply giving us over to our sinful desires.

“...if My people, who are called by My Name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land,” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

No matter how hopeless things may get, no matter how distant God may seem, He always gives us a way back. Our society didn’t get here overnight and the journey into God’s will won’t be immediate either. But it will always begin with us humbling ourselves, praying to God and seeking His face, and turning from our wicked ways. If we acknowledge God’s authority and follow His ways as truth for our lives He promises to hear us from heaven, forgive our sins, and heal our land.

Conclusion

I want to lead us in a time of response. If you want to learn God’s truth you can certainly read the Bible, which contains the truth of God. I would also encourage you to get to know the One who is truth. Answering Pontius Pilate while standing on trial Jesus responded,

“You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to Me,” (John 18:37a).

And Jesus taught the truth and proclaimed the truth wherever He went. But Jesus took it even further when He said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,”* (John 14:6a). So you can’t just agree with certain truth statements to get to God, you actually have to know the One who is truth. By coming to Jesus you acknowledge His absolute authority. There will be parts of His teaching that you immediately resonate with and there will be other parts that are much more difficult to comprehend. But remember, Jesus promises a truth that will ultimately set you free. He will never force you or coerce you. He is only motivated by love for you and wants your very best but you have to trust that He knows what that looks like and surrender to Him.

For those who have already acknowledged the authority of Christ and seek to walk in His truth, remember,

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven,” (Matthew 5:16).

Let the light of Christ shine in and through you to the people around you. Be a blessing to everyone, especially those who disagree with you so that your deeds will bring glory to God. It is the kindness of Christ that leads us to repentance so help others learn truth through gracious dialogue not heated debate. Remember that God is a God of compassion not condemnation. Be willing to share your own struggles as you try to live according to God’s truth. We all know how difficult it can be. Help others see that God’s authority is not about control or restriction but leading people to life and freedom. Share the ways that God has blessed you as you live under His authority. Always emphasize that the Christian life is not about adhering to a set of rules but living in a loving relationship with the Creator of the universe.

When it comes to being engaged, I would encourage you to research the issues. We must ask the Holy Spirit to help us to vote in a way that reflects the values of a God-centered worldview. We also know that laws and legislation can’t change a person’s heart so while we pray for Government to protect our rights and values we also don’t rely on them to change people’s hearts. That is the role of Christ through His Church.

As we begin this new series, the question you must wrestle with is whether you will stand for God’s truth or bow to the self-centered ways of the world. In a time where relativism and the idol of “self” reign, Christ invites us to a life anchored in His unchanging truth that brings freedom, hope, and purpose. Standing for this truth doesn’t come from our own strength but from knowing Jesus, who walks with us, empowers us, and guides us. It may cost something, but what you gain is far greater. Let’s pray for the courage to embrace God’s authority, trust Him and experience the freedom that comes from living in His truth.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what areas of your life have you seen the temptation to replace God’s truth with “self-truth”? How does this challenge your view of personal freedom?
2. The message compared living according to God’s truth to a train staying on its tracks. What are some “tracks” or boundaries in your life that help you experience true freedom? Where might you need to get back on track?
3. How can embracing objective truth from God help bring healing and unity in a society that often feels fractured and divided? What role can you play in bringing that healing?