

We have heard the passage many times: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth<sup>1</sup>”. I used to always think of this as a direction to follow the “rules” as perfectly as possible. But lately I have considered that, as Max Lucado wrote, “God seeks a balance.”<sup>2</sup> The rules lead us to God’s Greatness and Goodness, but with overarching values of love and mercy. The passage from James<sup>3</sup> that connects the oppositional qualities of mercy and grace gives us a view to this type of balance.

Jesus used parables to make us look deeper into the surface of things. They were meant to strike a resonant chord within us, to make us think about what God really wants, and what He means with His Truth. It is very interesting that John writes about spirit and truth, even though he did not record Jesus’ parables<sup>4</sup>.

We must Live (Worship) in Spirit and Truth; perhaps there are two levels of “spirit” to be considered. One is in line with the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, and the other in the spirit of the law (what God the Father wants from us). We sometimes speak of the “spirit” of our work, as we try to quantify its internal meaning and purpose. There is also, then, a “spirit” of the truth – the essence of it.

The “Truth” is not exactly just a set of rules, but knowledge of the Greatness of God. We can have the proper spirit without perfect knowledge of that Spirit (and God). We get this by developing a relationship with God as His children. Our obedience to God must stem from the spirit of truth, the spirit of the God’s Love in us. We must find a way to weave Spirit and Truth together in a way that glorifies God.

*Jesus was a man of truth. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, not of insistence on correct doctrine.*<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard

Consider Jesus’ discussion of David taking the Bread of Presence from the tabernacle, even though it was basically against the rules<sup>6</sup>. There was a higher principle involved in the situation, and He connected this with a similar principle concerning the Sabbath.

*Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”* Luke 6:3-5

Perhaps Jesus thought of the story of His own birth. His earthly father Joseph planned to put Mary away quietly when he found out that she was pregnant<sup>7</sup>. This would seem to be a violation of the law<sup>8</sup>, which demanded the death penalty. Joseph was trying to be faithful to the law, to God, and to Mary; but he illustrates the “spirit of truth” in finding another way (helped by God, of course) to deal with the situation.

I was brought up with more of a view of absolute truth, which consisted of rigid rules that demanded punishment if you ignored them. But I think God in His mercy operates at a different wavelength. He would rather inspire us to follow Him than shout us into it.

*... think of the vivid parody of a street preacher screaming truth into a bullhorn. Have you ever met anybody who repented at such preaching? I sure haven’t. Why do we react with such*

*emotional nausea to street preachers? Because it's truth without spirit; it's reality (kind of) without any kind of relational equity or loving presence.*<sup>9</sup> John Mark Comer

There are things that God values more than sacrifice. I consider the meaning of this word “sacrifice” here to indicate an act that you could spend a few minutes accomplishing and then move on with your life. Samuel handed this message to Saul when Saul disobeyed him, “Obedience better than sacrifice!”<sup>10</sup> Jesus restated this message as “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”<sup>11</sup>. Obedience and mercy are proclaimed as more desired than just checking the boxes of “Truth”. The thing that God wants most is that we pursue Him with all of our hearts and souls<sup>12</sup>. We must seek the balance of spirit and truth that reflects the grace in the heart of God.

1. John 4:24
2. God seeks a balance. “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). *A Gentle Thunder: Hearing God Through the Storm*, Lucado, Max; p.78
3. Mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:13)
4. <https://www.catechist.com/does-john-use-parables-introduction-to-johns-figures-of-speech/>
5. *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God*, Willard, Dallas, p.27
6. Leviticus 24:5-9
7. Matthew 1:18-25
8. Numbers 5:11ff
9. *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies That Sabotage Your Peace*; Comer, John Mark; p.75
10. 1 Samuel 15:22-23
11. Matthew 9:13
12. Matthew 22:37