

iSpeak: Truth and Lies Online

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Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Please keep your Bible in your hand. You should also have a handout that was given to you on the way in. Welcome to number four, our final session on the gospel, the human, the condition, and the online world. Let's play for God's help as we study His Word together. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much that you are a speaking God, and we pray please that you'd speak to us, that your Spirit will be a work in our hearts as we read your words. Please help us to be wise, to learn from you, teach us things that will profit us, and be good for one another. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, towards the end, states these words, words that students among you will be wholeheartedly in agreement with, having just taken exams, of making many books, he says, there is no end, and much study wearies the body. I wonder how you are with books and bookshops. I wonder if I'm the only one in the room who finds bookshops both exciting and depressing. Exciting because you open the door and there appear to be all sorts of treasures within.

depressing because half an hour spent browsing around, especially outside of your normal areas of interest, you begin to wonder what kind of system it is that spawns such a mass of the trivial, the irrelevant, and the disgusting, of making many books. They just seem to go on forever.

However, amazingly, I understand that from the other side of the fence, the authorial side, the view seems rather different. It is, by all accounts, not all that easy to get oneself published.

The world is full of wannabe writers who, no matter how many times they send their manuscript off, can't get a publisher to bite. However, all that has changed dramatically in the last couple of decades.

[2 : 16] It used to be that if you wanted to get your voice into the public arena, you would have to embark on a career in politics, or broadcasting, or get yourself a place in the audience in question time, or something like that. Now there's the phone-in program, and more recently, the development of text or email access to the broadcasting media. Nearly every news program carries the invitation to text us or email us and tell us what you think. It used to be that if you wanted your ideas in print, you could write to the editor of a newspaper or try to get somebody to publish your book.

And that, of course, demands time and effort, a certain ability with words, and often individuality of thought. Now you can just sit on your computer and type, and others will see it right then.

The discussion forum, the message board, and most particularly, the personal blog. Let's pause for a short glossary of terms for the digitally challenged among us.

Blog. Short for weblog. Someone's personal online blog of comments about events or thoughts or just anything. A place where you publish online anything you're interested in.

Blogging. The activity of putting things on your blog. The blogosphere. The online community engaged in blogging and the reading of blogs. Tweet. A text-based message of 140 characters or less.

[3 : 56] A way of sharing very brief information about what you're thinking or doing. People can get your tweets sent to their phone or email or whatever. Twitter. Where tweeting happens. Just in case you wonder how it's possible for a living, breathing human being not to know what those words mean, let me assure you there are plenty of people in the world not like you.

And one of the most brilliant things about the Lord Jesus Christ is that he is in the business of recreating humanity. And one of the brilliant things about living churches is that represented in a room such as this one will be a much wider range of human beings that would normally congregate together anywhere else in the world.

So there are bound to be some digitally challenged people in the room who did not know what those terms meant exactly, though they might have heard them. The last few years have witnessed a revolution in personal publishing.

Publishing one's own ideas. It's an interesting phenomenon. At best, it's brought clarity and helpfulness to our world. Thoughtfulness.

Public debate. Good investigative journalism now is no longer the preserve of the mainstream media. In fact, some of the best investigative journalism is to be found online, free of the shackles of the multinational news corporation.

[5 : 17] At its worst, it's much more negative, promoting self-obsession, misinformation of all sorts. This morning in our final session on the online world, we're looking at truth and lies online.

The online world where speaking and listening happens. And just as in previous weeks, to get our bearings for thinking about our world, we're going to the Bible because the Bible describes like nowhere else the human condition that's so richly displayed for us online.

So, for some foundational ideas, let's go back please to Genesis chapter 3. Now, we've been here every week and I'm unashamedly back there again. Why? Because these chapters describe with clarity what we often only appreciate dimly by observation.

Namely, that we human beings are both much greater than we can imagine and much worse than we can imagine. Let me enlarge on that for a moment.

We are greater in this sense. We can all see that human beings are capable of enormously clever and sophisticated things and great acts of sacrificial love and kindness.

[6 : 34] We learn in Genesis 1-3 that all our brilliance is possible because we are made in the image of God, built to reflect Him in the world, to engage in His great plans for His world.

We can see that we are great. The Bible tells us we're much greater than we imagine. However, we're also worse than we can imagine.

We can all see that we human beings mess up sometimes on a colossal scale. You do not have to look far to see that happening. But nowhere else in the whole of the created order do we learn how significantly we've messed up.

In Genesis 3, we learn that right back at the beginning, our ancestors turned their back on their Creator.

And that we continue to do that. We can all see that we mess up. The Bible tells us we mess up much more catastrophically than we can imagine.

[7 : 44] Let me reflect on this a little more. This morning, we're thinking about speaking and listening online. Let's think about speaking and listening in Genesis 3.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve become the critics of the world, the judges of the world. Rather than living under God's criteria for assessing things, they become independent judges, making their own rules, assessing things from their perspective.

Let's just look at that in a little more detail. Look at Genesis 2, verse 15 for a moment. It's an incredibly straightforward instruction, that, isn't it?

Here is the good God speaking. The one who's made this wonderful world that the man inhabits and given him a wonderful role in this world. And the instruction is easy to understand.

Everything is yours to eat. Everything. But don't eat that one because it will not be good for you when you do. There is the true word spoken by the true God.

[9 : 06] And in view of what's gone before, it is plainly an instruction said for the man's good, not his evil. That true word is challenged directly in chapter 3, verses 1 to 4, as the serpent talks to the woman and tells lies.

Lies about God, lies about people, and lies about consequences. Here's the God lie. Did God really say you can't eat any fruit?

What a meanie he is. There's the God lie. And there's a people lie. Was God speaking to you feel good when he told you that you would die if you ate from that tree?

No, he was holding you back. You could be much, much greater. You could change your life. And then there's the consequences lie. It's there in verse 4.

Of course she won't die if you do that. Of course she won't. And so in verse 6, the terrible decision is made to believe that other voice.

[10 : 19] When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. Interestingly, the one who was present when the loving God spoke that true word in chapter 2 fails to intervene at this point.

He just says nothing. See what's happened? In the course of this brief interchange, they've moved from being happy subjects of a loving God to playing the role of ruler.

They've moved from being contented creatures to the position of being dissatisfied critics. Their assessment of how things seem wins over the true word of the loving God.

Of course, it's not really their assessment, is it? They're only doing what's been suggested to them by that lying voice. They're listening to and acting on another voice.

[11 : 36] A voice that lies about God and about them and about consequences. And from this point on in human experience, things are never ever the same again. The effects of this disobedience are far reaching in the world.

Physically, we're no longer what we're made to be. We decay and die. Take a look around the room, folks. Apart from the very smallest persons in the room, we are all on the downslope physically.

You will not look better next year. Intellectually, we are not what we were. Says the Bible, our thinking has become darkened since that point. Spiritually, we're not what we were.

We are naturally God's opponents rather than his representatives in the world. Everything changed. Now, let me make three observations flowing out from this in relation to our particular topic for the morning.

Here they are. Number one, truth and lies is the axis around which our human experience revolves. The biggest question back then was whether they would listen to the true words of the loving God or the lying words of the deceiver.

[12 : 54] And that remains the very biggest issue for every human being right now. What we listen to and therefore what we speak is the most important thing about us.

It's much more important than what exam results we get or what kind of job we do or whether we get married or not or all those stuff that people worry about.

Truth and lies is the currency of our world. Second, we human beings are not neutral in relation to truth now.

Back then, our ancestors swapped sides in the battle of truth versus lies. And we are now born into enemy ranks.

We have a natural tendency to pay attention to things that are not true about God, about ourselves, about consequences. One of the things we've observed every session is that though the online life has massive possibility for doing genuine good, it's a very powerful medium, not least for the dissemination of truth.

[14 : 06] Despite those great possibilities, so often we don't use the online world in that way at all. We human beings are not neutral in relation to truth.

And our technology is not neutral either. Care is needed here. Of course, our technology is neutral in the sense that we can use for good or bad the things that we've made.

But it isn't quite as simple as that because it's a product of ourselves. And we are not neutral beings. And if the Bible's take on human nature is right, then one has to expect not only that human beings will tend to use things wrongly, but we will tend to invent things that can be wrongly used.

Things that in various ways serve our fallen human interests. Invent things that are good at reinforcing the sinful ideals of human autonomy and self-interest.

Why make this point? Well, folks, if that's true, if that's true, it may take special effort for us to use our technologies in ways that are good and helpful.

[15 : 24] And in no effort at all to use them in ways that are unhelpful or abusive. The technology that we have is enormously good for self-publication, self-promotion.

And it takes no effort at all to use it to those ends. So let's get some perspectives on the self. Let's talk about the self online for a moment.

There's so, so much online that is good and helpful and useful. You can just learn about everything online. But, and it's a big but, never has it been easier in our world to pursue that you-could-be-greater lie that's told in Genesis chapter 3.

We have at our fingertips the technology for self-promotion. Each one of us, in our homes, probably in our pockets now.

It used to be that getting yourself in print was really hard. You had to get your book past a publisher, who'd at least decide whether it would sell some copies. You had to get your letter past the newspaper editor, who would at least decide whether it made good reading or not.

[16 : 48] You had to get your academic paper past peer review. And even if your work was esoteric, at least someone else would check up on whether it had any credibility or not. But not now.

Now you can publish instantly. You can make your writings and your ideas public property today. You can put them on your own website.

You can blog them. You can tweet what's going on in your world now for everyone to see. And you can do that all the time. You can put things in writing for public consumption that you haven't really processed yourself yet.

Just get them out there. And of course, the whole world can do this. The technology for self-publishing is in everyone's hands. The power to speak to a mass audience all the time is an attractive power, isn't it?

Three things it does. First, it makes us feel important. It used to be that the self-important person in our world was to some extent restrained in their self-importance by the fact that people could see them.

[17 : 58] You can spot a self-important person quite quickly when you see them face to face. Online, the self-important person can disguise their self-importance and talk to a huge audience without restraint in a few keystrokes.

A couple of times in this series, we've reflected on just how much time people spend online. Well, one of the reasons, I think, is that in all sorts of ways, being online makes me feel important. Gives an illusion of power, control, significance, knowledge of being loved by others. It makes us feel important.

Second, the online world often reassures us that our ideas are just the right ideas. Let me explain. Online, we select who we relate to. And much of the time, people relate online to a whole bunch of people who think basically exactly the same as they do.

[19 : 03] People have likened stepping into the online world as being like stepping into an echo chamber. You speak words and echoed back are a whole bunch of words just the same as yours from people who agree with you.

So who are you listening to online? So often it's merely yourself and other people who think exactly like you. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why when disagreement happens online, it's often so violent and angry and hostile.

Despite the massive different opinion out there, we are not used to relating to people who actually disagree with us. So when somebody does, it's viewed as a hostile act, not a normal human interaction.

Third thing the online world tends to do, it keeps you rooted in the trivial and earthbound. The online world distracts us all the time with trivial information.

Tony Ranker in his excellent book, which I'd thoroughly recommend, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, says this, owning a smartphone is similar to dating a high-maintenance, attention-starved partner.

[20 : 22] It's loaded with prompts and beeps and allurements. Many of them, perhaps most of them, are not sinful, but they're pervasive and distracting all the time.

The digital world is a noisy world. It's full of distractions. And if I listen to it all the time, it shifts my perspective, distracts me from what's really important.

So for example, my experience in the online world is that I'm not usually reminded online that I am a mere creature and belong to a creation facing judgment.

I cannot remember the last time I came away from the online world more aware of the fact that I was a creature, not the creator. Online, I'm constantly entertained and interested, but not usually reminded of the consequences of a trivial, self-obsessed life.

Online, I don't usually come away from the interaction with my computer on my phone thinking, whoa, Jesus is Lord.

[21 : 41] And He's coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead. That's what really matters. Were you reminded of that recently online? Or maybe not.

And even when dealing with more serious things, the online experience tends to put me in the position of being the point of reference. Me, the critic. Me, the one who likes or dislikes. Mine, the opinion worth hearing. Mine, the voice to listen to. Mine, the blog to subscribe to. Mine, the tweets to follow. Me, the producer of information that other people might be interested in. We have massive personal publishing power. It's got huge potential for good. But along with it, huge potential to feel, to feed our greatest obsession, which is often ourselves. With that in mind, I'd like you to turn to Colossians 3, to that chapter that was read to us a little earlier on.

[22 : 48] Let's look at a different perspective on the human being, the self in Christ. Now, we're not going to look at all of this passage in detail, but I want to pick out three things that are pertinent to our particular subject this morning.

First, notice the Christ-centered and otherworldly focus of the first four verses. Since then, you have been raised with Christ.

Set your hearts on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your heart on the invisible realm, says Paul.

Jesus, the invisible Lord, is right at the center of attention here. And that shapes not only the present mindset, verse 2, set your minds now on things above, not on earthly things, but also determines the future.

Look at verse 4. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

[24 : 00] Verse 4 raises the question, where is true identity to be found? Merely in earthly things? Merely in myself? What a huge mistake that would be.

For Jesus is Lord. And though presently invisible, he is ruling. And he will return. And then, then the significance of each human being will be seen for what it really is.

When Christ, who is your life, appears, then, then you'll appear with him in glory. Those whose eyes are on Jesus do not look glorious now.

But then, when he appears, that will be completely changed. Everything else will seem trivial in comparison with having fixed one's eyes on him in this life.

where is human identity to be found? In the risen Lord Jesus, presently invisible. Where is our attention to be focused if we're Christian? The risen Lord Jesus, presently invisible.

[25 : 13] Second, do you notice the conflict language here? Look at verse 2. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

There's competition for our attention. Look at verse 5. This fixing your eyes on Jesus thing leads to conflict. Put to death, therefore, what belongs to your earthly nature.

Now, let me suggest to you that godliness involves conflict in this world and that online godliness involves conflict. It will take real effort online to set your mind on things above where Jesus is to put to death what is earthly in you.

Third, notice the importance of truthful speaking in this passage. Look at verse 9. Do not lie to each other since you've taken off your old self with its practices and put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge of the image of its creator.

Now, we talked about the image of God a little bit earlier on. Jesus is in the business of recreating people in the image of God making people what they were made to be and a key feature of becoming the person that God made you to be is truthful speech.

[26 : 42] Speech used not for deception and self-publicity anymore but for reflecting your creator for the good of others. We have massive publishing technology at our fingertips but what are we using our words for in this world?

So much of what goes on online demonstrates a deep desire to make our mark in this world. to be significant in this world but you cannot get more significant than being renewed in the image of your creator.

You cannot get more significant than being precisely in the end what God made you to be. It's the ultimate in human significance and folks there's great relief in that.

We do not have to waste our time in this world using our words to build a reputation for ourselves.

The only way to be the people we were meant to be is to have our attention fixed on Jesus and speak truthfully in relation to that.

Let me interact with a very practical example the Christian ministry blog. There is a great celebrity culture online and there's a great Christian celebrity culture online.

[28 : 09] Many people in Christian ministry blog about their Christian ministry and some of that is very helpful indeed. John Piper a very popular contemporary author writes of six reasons for a pastor to blog one to write two to teach three to recommend four to interact with other people five to develop an eye for what's meaningful and six to be known by other people.

and while those are all good reasons and laudable aims it is going to take real godliness and discipline and proper focus on Jesus to make that a worthwhile exercise.

I have to say that lots of what I read online by Christian writers is just self-important or trivial and sometimes the most interesting pastor's blogs are so massive in terms of output that you wonder what else is being done in life apart from blogging.

Let me say it is a good thing to write in a godly way online a good thing but nothing could be more enticing to the self-absorbed self than the possibility of instant publishing and other people reading you.

Rico Tice the inventor of Christianity Explored writes this about his pre-Christian life I was so sinful I kept a diary every day so that one day others could read about me.

[29 : 41] Now of course everyone can read your diary every day. The blogosphere is a narcissist's paradise. It's going to take real godliness to navigate that world positively.

Of making many books there is no end writes the writer of Ecclesiastes I wonder what he'd say about web pages. Three questions to conclude our series about time spent online.

Three questions. What am I absorbing and is it worth the time? I can't tell you how many useful things I've learned online.

I mean so useful. I've learned all kinds of helpful woodworking tips. I've learned how to replace the broken screen on my phone which let me say is not that hard and much much cheaper than getting somebody else to do it.

I've learned what to do with a dog that vomits in the morning. So many helpful things one can learn online. Anyone who's observed the net however will know how it's also a source of masses of uncritical misinformation.

[30 : 57] How do you tell that? Well look up something that you really know about online. You really know about and what you'll find more often than not is a whole series of web pages all purportedly from different authors with exactly the same information on them.

Often just cut and paste it. Never was the garbage in garbage out aphorism more true than online. The web is a massive source of uncritical, poorly worked through, unchecked information and opinion.

There is good stuff out there but sometimes you have to sift through a ton of stuff to find the good stuff. I wonder what your favorite sandwich is.

Chicken tikka, prawn mayo, I don't know what your favorite sandwich is. Imagine living on the streets and trying to sift through the bins to find a pristine version of your favorite sandwich.

It's going to be out there somewhere, isn't it? But you might have to sift through tons of rubbish to find it. So often it's like that online.

[32 : 12] Online you meet the outpouring of everything human. Humanity in technicolor, humanity with all our positives and negatives exaggerated. At the touch of a mouse button you can see everything human or rather everything that humans want you to see.

But of course online you cannot see the invisible Lord. And you cannot see the invisible glory of those who fix their eyes on him.

And you cannot see the future misery of those who don't. You can't see heaven online or hell online. Those twin destinies of every human being.

There's so much you can't see online that really matters. And so much of what we can see is part of that ancient lie that I could be the center of everything and it's only what we can see that's really worth having.

What am I absorbing and is it worth all the time? Second, who am I following? Who do I belong to? There is a celebrity culture of the online Christian world and many of us follow it.

[33 : 25] The Pipers, the Kellers, the Driscolls, many good ideas, much helpful teaching out there. But what if the constant diet of online brilliance from somewhere way over there ends up making us dissatisfied with the people that God has actually supplied for us to walk the Christian life with?

The real flesh and bone people in the room that God wants us to love and the people that God has supplied to be our regular teachers for all his brilliance.

Does Tim Keller in downtown Manhattan understand Glasgow culture better than you do or your pastor does? There's not a chance of that, is there? Who am I following?

Where do I belong? And finally, who am I listening to and who am I promoting? Online we listen and we speak. Who are we listening to?

Who are we speaking about? So, a question for us all who are online. If we are active online, could anyone looking at my online presence tell that I'm a person who's listening to Jesus?

[34 : 37] that I'm a person to whom Jesus means everything, that I'm a person looking forward to his return with enormous eagerness, more eagerly than anything in this world, that I'm a person eager to know him better and for others to know him better, that I'm a person whose life is driven by unseen realities rather than by the merely this worldly and trivial.

Let's pray together. Just a moment to respond ourselves and then I'll lead us in prayer. since then you have been raised with Christ.

Set your hearts on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the amazing work you have done on our behalf in sending your son into this world, his obedience to death, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension to the place of highest rule and authority.

[36 : 33] We thank you for your great kindness to us in him. And we pray that you would please help us to fix our eyes on him.

Deliver us, please, from being constantly distracted by things of no significance. Help us, please, to look forward to his as yet unseen return.

Help us to long for that day when it will be absolutely clear that belonging to Jesus and fixing one's eyes on him was the right place to be.

We pray, Heavenly Father, also that you would, as people who fix our eyes on him, please make us people who speak truthfully in this world and relate face to face and online as people who are captured by a better vision than merely the vision we can see with our own eyes.

We ask these things in his name. Amen.