

Understanding the Ideas that Shape Our World • Part 3

I. INTRODUCTION

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” • Romans 12:2

A. Pressure

1. Do you feel the “*squeeze*” of the world?
2. Do you feel the pressure to *fit in*, to *accommodate* to the society around you?
3. Our friends, family, environment, the media, all exert an influence on us, pressing us into a mold.
4. It’s like there’s an ocean current flowing through the world you never notice until you try to swim *against* it.
5. Then, all of a sudden, the pressure’s on & it seems everything works to keep you trapped.
6. Romans 12: 2 calls for us to swim out of the rip-current of worldliness by carefully changing the way we think.

B. The Mind

1. What we may not realize is that going along with the world’s flow for so long, much of our thinking has been shaped its influences.
2. What we’re doing here on Saturday nights is seeking a radical implementation of Romans 12:2.
3. To that end, we’re taking a look at the *main philosophies* that shape the world.
 - a. We’ll be dealing with specific issues & hot potatoes topics soon.
 - b. But we must first set the philosophical table because specific issues are really just manifestations of some worldly philosophy.
4. As we examine these things, our goal is to diagnose whether or not these philosophies have infected our minds – and if so, how to kill that infection and turn our thoughts over to Christ.
5. So to Romans 12:2, I want to add another passage – one we looked at last week in our review of Secularism & Humanism.
6. 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 . . .

The weapons of our warfare are not carnal [fleshly, physical] but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

7. While we're engaged in a *very real battle*, it's not one that's waged in the physical world.
 - a. The weapons of this battle aren't swords, spears, or daggers.
 - b. They're not guns, missiles, or bombs.
 - c. Because the battle is waged in the spiritual realm, it's weapons are *spiritual* in nature.
 - d. Our main weapon is *truth* – truth is the antidote to the lies & deceit that are the weapons of our adversary.
 - e. With those lies, the enemy has constructed many strongholds in peoples' minds & hearts that resist the Kingdom of God.
 - f. God wants to tear those strongholds down, and bring *every thought* captive to Christ. For captivity to Christ is true freedom.

8. Look at it again –

The weapons of our warfare are not carnal [fleshly, physical] but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

9. Before we can be instrumental in bringing liberty *to others*, we must make sure those strongholds & arguments of the world have been torn down within our *own minds*.
10. So let's turn now to look at another philosophy which has profoundly shaped our society today, and just *may be* influencing our choices.
11. I'm referring to *Pragmatism*.

II. PRAGMATISM

A. -isms

1. Before we launch into our review of Pragmatism, I want to back up & say that all of these philosophies we're considering are based on a core idea that in & of itself is a good thing.

2. The problem is when they're made into a "–ism"; a way of thinking & living that takes their initial premise *too far*.
3. For instance – the word '*secular*' is a good word – it means the world of the present.
 - a. It was originally used to speak of the importance of living out the Christian faith in the real world & not letting it be just a faith for the sweet by & by.
 - b. The *secular priest* was the one who sought to make the world a better place by serving the needy,
 - c. As opposed to the *ecclesiastical priest* who performed all his service within the cloistered halls of a monastery or church building.
 - d. But *secularism* is something else altogether. It's the belief that the here & now is all that exists or matters.
4. *Human* is the term we use to describe that creature who's unique because he/she is created in God's image and has a unique destiny.
 - a. *Humanism* is vastly different –
 - b. It's a way of living that excludes God & eternity & defines mankind's existence solely in reference to itself.
5. *Commune* is a word referring to a group of people who enjoy a shared life, *communism* is something else altogether.
6. By attaching 'ism' to a word, it often radically alters the core and meaning of that word.
 - a. Consider the difference between . . .
 - b. Feminine & Feminism
 - c. Exhibition & Exhibitionism
 - d. Natural & Baturalism

B. Pragmatism Defined

1. Such is the case with the word 'pragmatic.'
2. If something is *pragmatic* it's *practical*.
3. If you're pragmatic you're more concerned with practical *results* than with theories & principles.
4. Pragmatism is something else altogether. It's a way of looking at life which makes *results* the highest good.
 - a. pragmatism sees life as a problem needing a solution.
 - b. if a given solution provides desired results, then it's good.
 - c. goodness & truth are determined by one thing: That which works!

C. Home Grown

1. While most of the philosophies that influence us today are European in origin, Pragmatism was made in the good 'ole USA.
2. The Europeans who came to the New World were from formal, rigid societies where choices were limited and a person's station in life was pretty much fixed from birth to death.
3. But American was a blank slate where a person could write their own fate and carve out just about any life he/she wanted.
4. Settling the frontier placed deep within the American soul a profound sense of pioneering spirit, one that saw every problem as another opportunity.
5. Creativity & ingenuity became a part of the American way of life, & we were known around the world for it.
6. As secularism became more & more accepted & society lost its sense of the supernatural & eternal, the simple pragmatic nature of America became a full-blown philosophy of living.
7. Instead of truth being determined by eternal, unchanging absolutes fixed in the nature of God, truth became simply, "Whatever works."
8. We see it today in such clichés as,
 - a. "Hey, it works for me!"
 - b. "If it works for you."
9. It's not uncommon today to hear a conversation something like this . . .
 - a. You're talking with someone about spiritual things & you express faith in God.
 - b. The other person will ask, "Does belief in God bring you satisfaction?"
 - c. "Yes" you say.
 - d. They say, "Does your faith provide the guidance you need to cope with the challenges of life?"
 - e. Thinking these questions are a great opportunity for you to show the *value* of faith you respond with a hearty, "Indeed it does."
 - f. But before you can say another word, the person you're talking to says, "It's great religion works for you. But I find the *need* for God unnecessary."
 - g. When you protest and ask what about *truth*, the reply you get is

- that God may be *your truth*, but not theirs.
10. This is the position of the pragmatist.
 - a. The pragmatists sees life as a series of problems to be solved.
 - b. Any solution one finds acceptable is good & becomes truth.
 - c. For the pragmatist, goodness and truth are *not* eternal absolutes.
 - d. They're determined by how *preferable* a given solution is.
 11. The pragmatist takes little thought for the *long term consequences* of a solution.
 - a. You see, since life is nothing but a series of problems to be overcome,
 - b. *Consequences* to present solutions are *expected*.
 - c. The pragmatist is concerned with one thing –
 - d. What's the most satisfying way around, over, or through the *present* crisis?
 - e. If that decision creates more problems . . .
 - 1) I'll just deal with them when they arise.
 - 2) We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.
 12. We see this in the way elected officials make decisions that effect the economy.
 - a. They recognize the need to cut the budget, but won't budge on projects in their voting base.
 - b. During election years they *refuse* to make important decisions that might harm their support among voters.
 - c. Instead, they pass laws that endear them & ensure their re-election, even though they're imperiling the future of the economy, **AND THEY KNOW IT.**
 13. Michael Crichton's newest book, *State of Fear*, contains several passages which give illustration to the dangers of the philosophy of pragmatism.
 - a. One especially poignant illustration is that of Yellowstone National Park.
 - b. It was the first area to be designated as protected wilderness in 1872.
 - c. The only question – the *problem to be solved* from the pragmatists point of view was, how does one *preserve* "wilderness" since no one had done it before.
 - d. The pragmatists thought the solution was simple – *keep thing as they are.*

- e. When they saw the elk herd thinning out, they moved to correct it by killing off some of the park's predators through poisoning & shooting the wolves
- f. They also banned all hunting by Native Americans.
- g. The elk herds exploded and ate so much of certain trees & grasses that the ecology of the area began to change.
- h. The elk ate the trees the beavers used to make dams, so the beavers disappeared.
- i. The park managers realized the beavers were vital to the overall water management of the region when the parks beautiful meadows dried up.
- j. The trout and otters vanished, soil erosion increased, and the ecology of the park further changed.
- k. By the 1920's, the park managers realized there were *too* many elk, so they began to shoot them by the thousands.
- l. But it was too late; the plant ecology had permanently changed, the old mix of trees and grasses never recovered.
- m. It also became clear that the Native American hunters of old had played a vital role in maintaining the proper balance of elk, bison, & moose.
- n. In fact, researchers came to realize that the presence of man on the North American continent had profoundly shaped the way it appeared when Europeans first saw it!
- o. They were **NOT** seeing "untouched, pristine wilderness" as they thought.
- p. What they encountered was land that had been *dramatically altered* by the presence of humans for hundreds of years.
- q. Many other mistakes have been made at Yellowstone.
 - 1) grizzlies were protected, then killed off.
 - 2) wolves were killed off, then protected.
 - 3) a policy of fire prevention was installed, with no understanding of the regenerative effects of fire on nature.
 - 4) when it was finally realized that fire was a crucial part of the whole cycle of forests, thousands of acres were burned in an attempt to catch up – but by then there was so much brush produced by the artificial conditions of fire prevention, that the fire burned too hot a sterilized the ground.

- 5) The forest had to be re-seeded.
- r. rainbow trout were introduced in the 70's, they quickly killed off the few remaining native cutthroat trout.
- 14. The list of errors in the management of Yellowstone goes on & on.
- 15. They're all *a perfect demonstration of pragmatism*.
 - a. See a problem – devise a solution.
 - b. What if that solution creates other problems?
 - c. We'll cross that bridge when we get there.
- 16. Can you see how pragmatism is a reflection of secularism with its emphasis on the here & now?

C. A Christian Response to Pragmatism

1. How do we respond to the influence of pragmatism which is so much a part of the thinking of our culture?
2. In Matthew 16:26 Jesus said –
What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?
3. This speaks right to the heart of pragmatism.
 - a. you see, the pragmatist's single criteria for assigning *value* to something is, "What is going to bring satisfaction to this moment?"
 - b. But Jesus asks, "What good is a lifetime of satisfaction, if you lose your soul?"
 - c. This world, this life passes quickly. It's not the ultimate reality.
 - d. Present choices ought to be made in the light of eternity.
 - e. Long term consequences to present choices *must be* weighed, because some choices seal our fate between alternate poles.
 - f. We're spiritual beings *destined* for eternity – & the choices we make in this life settle the what, where, and how of that eternity.
4. Listen to what 1 Cor. 3:12-15 says about the judgment believers will face . . .

12 Now anyone who builds on that foundation may use gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. 13 But there is going to come a time of testing at the judgment day to see what kind of work each builder has done. Everyone's work will be put through the fire to see whether or not it keeps its value. 14 If the work survives the fire, that builder will

receive a reward. ¹⁵ But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builders themselves will be saved, but like someone escaping through a wall of flames. [1]

5. The Apostle makes an appeal to believers to not be mere pragmatists, seeking just to get by in the moment, and so building their lives with wood, hay, or straw.
 6. They must consider the long term consequences of their choices, seeking to be motivated by a desire for the glory of God, not merely their own satisfaction.
 7. What the Christian who lives like that quickly realizes is that the satisfaction that comes from living in the light of eternity far exceeds mere selfish pragmatism.
-
8. It seems to me & many of my fellow pastors that pragmatism has become a *major influence* on the Church in America.
 9. It impacts individual Christians as well as the larger Church as a whole
 10. We see it in the divorce rate,
 - a. Which is statistically the same for Christians as for non-Christians.
 - b. Why do believers divorce?
 - c. Well because they have a problem marriage and the easiest solution is to end it.
 11. I have personally talked with many *single* Christians who were romantically involved with *unbelievers*.
 - a. They believed their desire for romantic companionship was a problem they could *solve* by choosing something they knew was against God's will.
 - b. Any consequences they would face from that choice they said they would deal with when they arose.
 12. Christian students know they shouldn't cheat, but a low grade on a test is a problem they have to get around, so they excuse their cheating.
 - a. In a recent Barna poll, most students do not say cheating is wrong, *if* there's a good enough reason to justify it.
 - b. And a good enough reason is not wanting to get yelled at by mom & dad.

13. Something I've been deeply distressed over is the way pragmatism has had such a far-reaching influence on the church as a whole.
- a. The whole church-growth movement is driven by one thing – pragmatism!
 - b. the *problem* was falling attendance rates – the solution, different programs to get people to go to church.
 - c. the problem is these programs aren't Biblical!
 - d. On the contrary, they're usually worldly!
 - e. The whole seeker-sensitive movement is nothing but a pragmatic solution to get unchurched Harry & Mary to go to church by making the church look more like the world.
 - f. Music companies who sell their products to believers have come to realize that the biggest market today is in worship music,
 - g. So the word went out to their artists – write worship songs – record worship CD's.
 - h. That's why everyone and their brother has now come out with a worship project – because that's where the money is.
 - 1) At a pastor's conference last year I was in a conversation with two pastors who had sons who were in bands that had been signed by major labels.
 - 2) Both bands had been told by their agents their next project had to be a worship CD.
 - 3) Neither band were worship bands.
 - i. The record companies had a problem – lagging pop & rock CD sales; The solution – make worship CD's.
 - j. Don't worry that the bands & artists aren't worship leaders & have never written a worship song in their lives!
 - k. The result? A terrible muddying of the streams of wonderful & sincere worship music that was coming from those who *have* been called by God to provide the Body of Christ with a wonderful gift.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Colossian 3:2

1. As we end tonight, I want to ask you to turn to Colossians 3:2
Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

2. Let's end our time together by breaking into discussion groups & pondering together how this verse refutes the pragmatism that drives so much of the world's thinking.
3. Then, consider these questions . . .
 - What evidences or illustrations of pragmatism can you think of besides those mentioned?
 - As Christians, how can we be *practical* without being *pragmatic*?

[1]

Holy Bible : New Living Translation. 1997 (1 Co 3:11). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House.