



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 4 – THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

LESSON 85 – DEFINING WORLDVIEWS – NIHILISM AND EXISTENTIALISM

BIBLICAL DOCTRINE – JOHN MACARTHUR, PGS. 399-451

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY – WAYNE GRUDEM, PGS. 439-528

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Defining Worldviews: Nihilism

- ▶ The truth is that Naturalism cannot answer the questions that a worldview is supposed to answer. It collapses on itself. The system that replaced Naturalism basically presents the Naturalist with this encouragement – take your worldview to its logical conclusion. If the universe is a closed system, right and wrong is subjective, and there is no purpose or goal for us being here, then that means, logically, that there is no such thing as right or wrong or meaning or purpose.
- ▶ This worldview is known as Nihilism. The Latin nihil means nothing. That is the Nihilistic worldview – it all amounts to nothing. It makes no sense to ask why we are here or what the purpose is because the answer is nothing.

Evolving or Devolving?

- ▶ We have moved beyond even needing to define right and wrong. There is no such thing as right or wrong no matter what we think. Charles Darwin identified what was wrong with Naturalism, in fact, and stated the obvious in conclusion:
- ▶ If it's true that we've evolved from a primitive protein by an inexorable sequence of cause and effect through natural selection, then how can we know that anything in our brains is not just something that is part of a natural process and has no validity in terms of its description of external reality? What if even our understanding of the inexorable sequence of evolutionary process is just a figment of our imagination?

The Blind Leading the Blind

- ▶ “I fear no man, I fear no God, I seek no heaven, I fear no hell, I have no heroes, I have no faith, I bow before no one. I am a Nihilist. Death to Philosophy, Death to God, Death to Government, Death to Ideology, Death to Money, Death to Love, Death to Morality, Beyond right and left, beyond right and wrong, Nihilism.”
- ▶ In short, the Nihilist believes that if he cannot be God then neither can God be God! It is that root of all sin, pride. There is no God and nothing matters. There is no personal responsibility, no right or wrong, no truth just opinions, and no meaning for anything. It truly is faith in nothing.

A Biblical Response to Nihilism

- ▶ In Ecclesiastes 2:17 Solomon concludes, “I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.” His worldview brought him to despair, to even hating life. So what was his response?
- ▶ In chapter 3 Solomon admits that everything has a purpose and a time. He also admits that we have duties in this life given by God for particular reasons, and in fact, declares, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” Instead of meaningless and destruction Solomon begins to see that God in His timing and purpose indeed makes everything beautiful, “in its time.” He begins to see that God has given us good things to enjoy in this life, so that we might rejoice and do good. God will require an account of us. There is nothing like accountability to snap us out of a pessimistic, self indulging delusional worldview.

A Biblical Response to Nihilism

- ▶ In chapter 5, Solomon instructs us to “walk prudently” before God. To guard our steps, or to walk precisely and carefully. Paul in the New Testament says it this way, “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called” (Ephesians 4:1-6).
- ▶ True to his writings in Proverbs, Solomon in chapter 7 begins to speak about wisdom, having a right perspective about these things. “Wisdom is good...wisdom gives a defense...wisdom gives life,” he writes. Whether we prosper or lack, God is in control and is working out His purposes.
- ▶ Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. – Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Defining Worldviews: Existentialism

- ▶ The questions that Deism could not answer gave way to Naturalism, where all that matters is matter. There is no God, no Creator, no first cause – just nature. This system though cannot deal with settling the differences between right and wrong. That lead the way for Nihilism, which states matter-of-factly, that our faith is best placed in nothing. Life as a machine in a closed system of meaningless incomprehensibility, cause and effect left to chance, with no discernable purpose. Hence, no right or wrong, no truth or lies, no rhyme or reason.
- ▶ There. Feel better about humanity? After all, there is no such thing as a bad boy – right? Just wait. Our next “grid” developed as a result of the fact that ordinary men and women just cannot take Nihilism and remain sane. There is nothing worse to a rational person than to remove all meaning.

Existentialism

- ▶ The leading philosophers of the day decided and determined that while there may not be meaning in the universe, in order to survive and thrive, we could make our own meaning. There is no meaning out there – but we can make things meaningful in here (pointing at head).
- ▶ Existentialism can be summarized as the worldview that says we can make meaning in this world, but that meaning doesn't come from the objective reality. There is no real meaning in the world. The only meaning that can be had in life is meaning we make for ourselves. The idea of the Existentialist is that people make themselves who they are, and decide what they mean to the world and what the world means to them.

Existentialism with and without God

- ▶ There are really two schools of Existentialism, and this is important because after Deism, these systems of thought rejected the idea of God. But now, one school of Existentialism continues in this path and rejects the existence of God while there is another school that embraces Existential thought while believing that there is a God.
- ▶ The Atheistic Existentialist agrees completely with the Nihilist. But then takes one step further than the Nihilist is willing or able to go – we exist, and so we must provide the meaning of life. We are here, so let's decide why we want to be here and that gives us meaning. Then we won't go mad.
- ▶ “My choices” give meaning to who and what I am. Free will is sacred – a doctrine to die for. I can pull myself up by my own bootstraps. I can be a self made man. I can do whatever I put my mind to doing. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I can be a hero!

Existentialism with and without God

- ▶ Now the frightening truth is that here in the other school, on the other side of the Existential road, we bump in to Theistic Existentialism. All of this plus God. Here we get a handful of Bultmann and Barth. They taught that God exists, as a Trinity, as Sovereign, as involved and personal, and as good. He reveals Himself to us, and gives us the opportunity to know Him. Well, so far so good, right? Sure, but, as several writers point out, the Theistic Existentialist adds four things to this premise:
 - ▶ First, we cannot know God through reason, knowledge, or facts.
 - ▶ Second, life is relational, not rational.
 - ▶ Third, situational ethics set the framework for knowing right and wrong in this system.
 - ▶ Fourth, facts don't matter, only the message communicated matters.

Meaningless Meaningfulness

- ▶ Whether the Existentialist believes in God or not, we arrive at the view that we make our own meaning. The world is meaningless until we make it meaningful. It is up to us, we decide, we make it real, we give it meaning, we do it.
- ▶ What a man centered worldview. Yet look at how deeply these roots go into the Evangelical world. It is the story, not the facts; feelings, not the truth; it is up to you to pull yourself up by your own boot straps to be a self-made man; it is all about what you find meaningful; it is about what you can do for God instead of what God can do through you; it is all about positive thinking; it is all about shaping your reality with your “words of faith.”

A Biblical Response to Existentialism

- ▶ It is God who gives meaning and defines reality. We do not save ourselves, we do not make ourselves what we are, we do not choose our date of birth, date of death, or our pathway in between. He sets our path. He causes us to be born. He gives and takes life as He pleases. And He knows our days before there is even one of them. He is the Potter, we are the clay. (Romans 9:14-24)
- ▶ He is the Potter. He is God. He decides what to do and when to do it, and He is not dependent upon us for anything. God does not have needs. He does not lack anything. There are no deficiencies, no shortcomings, no faults. We are right back at needing to see God for Who He is.
- ▶ We do not have to make meaning. We have been created in the image of God and He has decided what life and reality is and what we are to become. He gives meaning to what is and what will be, and He never changes.

A Biblical Response to Existentialism

- ▶ This worldview has so impacted the church through liberalism. Just as Spurgeon fought the “downgrade” to liberalism in his day so we too much fight the pragmatists and those who look outside the Bible to make their own meaning. God tells us what is right and what is wrong. He tells us what He expects of us. It is right there, in black and white.
- ▶ We combat this system by getting back to the Bible and taking a leap away from blind faith. We inform ourselves from the Word of God about His will and His way. We read, memorize, and meditate on the Word of God in order to be able to discern false teaching. We must never sacrifice the truth or the facts in order to tell a good story.
- ▶ Really this boils down to ones view of Scripture. Has the Bible been given to us so that we might use it to pull ourselves up and stand on our own two feet? Or does the Spirit use the Bible to pull us out of the grave and place us on the rock? What is success? It is found only one place, meditating day and night on the Scriptures.

Next Week

- ▶ Lesson 86. Defining Worldviews: Eastern Pantheistic Monism and Post-Modernism