



Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs

(3) Faith, Reason and Knowledge

Proverbs 1:7
Romans 1:18-23

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
January 27, 2019

This is the third sermon in a series of sermons called, “Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs.” In the Bible we find a lot of emphasis given to exposing false teaching. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul writes, “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ....” His concern in that context is that the people to whom he is writing would not “be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” This is the biblical justification for this series of sermons. The false teaching that is the greatest danger for us today is the secular world-view. You might also consider a watered- down form of Christianity to be a danger and it is, but the reason that forms of Christianity become watered down in our society is that they are influenced by the secular world-view.

I have shared a number of quotes from Christian authors who have written on this topic and I want to repeat a couple of them because they are too important to be quoted only once. And we all need to hear things more than once for them to sink in. David Wells writes, “Given the intense exposure we have to our modernized world, we need to be alert to the way it can shape our perspective and understanding.” (from *God in the Whirlwind*). And Anthony Salvaggio was written, “The church is often like a sponge that absorbs the spirit of the age prevalent in the surrounding culture” (From *7 Toxic Ideas Polluting Your Mind*).

In the last sermon we saw that we are living in a secular age and that that means that most people around us believe that there is nothing beyond this life and the material world of which we are a part. We also

saw that living in this environment means living in an environment in which the secular way of looking at the world seems more plausible and the biblical way of looking at the world seems very unlikely. And the way that things seem to the majority have a way of influencing all of us so that believing the biblical world-view is harder. We must choose to believe against the current of what seems obvious and reasonable to most of the people around us. And the majority perspective is sustained by the much of what we read and see and hear in the media.

This morning I want to deal with the way our secular age thinks about faith and reason. One of the foundational beliefs of our secular culture is that the secular way of looking at the world is based on reason and the biblical way of looking at the world is based on faith. Most of the people around us think that the conviction that nothing more exists than this physical, material world is based on evidence and reason, while the view that the God of the Bible exists is based on faith with no evidence to support it. Tim Keller writes in *Making Sense of God*, that secular people, “assume that belief is mainly a matter of faith while nonbelief is mainly based on reason” (p.31)

This way of thinking about the secular way of looking at the world compared to the biblical way of looking at the world is deeply rooted in the history of the west. The history of the western world from the late 1400's onward is understood as the history of enlightenment. The periods by which the history of the west is understood includes a period called the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. Here is a short description of the Enlightenment taken from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: A “European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries in which ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and humanity were synthesized into a worldview that gained wide assent in the West and that instigated revolutionary developments in art, philosophy, and politics. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and celebration of reason, the power by which humans understand the universe and improve their own condition. The goals of rational humanity were considered to be knowledge, freedom, and happiness.”

The assumption behind this way of understanding the history of the west is that the secular way of looking at the world is based on reason,

while the religious way of looking at the world is based on a faith and not reason. The terminology of enlightenment assumes progress from darkness to light. The earlier age when most people believed in God and the Bible is referred to as the dark ages and the transition from believing the biblical worldview to the secular worldview is viewed as the transition from a worldview based on faith to a worldview based on reason. Those who believe that there is nothing beyond this physical world claim to base their views on the scientific process and on evidence-based reasoning, while their claim is that people who believe in God and the Bible are basing their belief on faith in things that cannot be proven. The secular belief is that there is no evidence for the biblical worldview while the secular worldview is based on facts and experiments and rational thinking – the scientific enterprise.

One of the things that gives a lot of credibility to the secular way of looking at the world are the great advances that have been made in science and technology. It is undeniable that there has been a great deal of progress in human beings' understanding the world and how it works and applying that knowledge to making life a lot more pleasant for a lot of people. The results of science and technology and the growth of knowledge in general are very impressive, to say the least. Many of us would not be here anymore were it not for the fruits of modern medicine. There has been progress in a lot of areas. And so, it seems to make sense to lump everything together and understand the explosion in knowledge to be an overall enlightenment and to consider the history of the last few hundred years as moving from the darkness of superstition and ignorance to the light of scientific knowledge. And in that way of understanding history, those who still believe in God and miracles and a whole realm that transcends this physical earthly realm, have not yet been delivered from the superstitions of the past that kept people from discovering the truth about the world and the nature of things.

That is a powerful story. It is an influential story. And it is a story that questions the credibility and the reasonableness of the Christian faith. To believe in God and the Bible is seen to be naïve and credulous and based on a childish faith, while the secular worldview is seen to be reasonable and much more intelligent.

Now this is an over-simplification, as it must be. This account says nothing about post-modernism which is much less optimistic about any account of the nature of reality. I'm not going to get into that now, because it would simply distract from the point that I want to make in this sermon and because what I have described as the secular worldview is still the dominant way that most people understand the world in our society. Reality is always way more complicated than any summary can take account of. So, while this summary does not describe our culture comprehensively, it does get at one of the major secular beliefs that shape the thinking of the majority of the people in our society and it describes an important aspect of the context in which we are called to submit to the teaching of the Bible and witness to the world of its truth and its power.

Now there are different ways to deal with the reason/faith debate from a Christian perspective, but the most biblical way is to start with the Bible and then from that foundation give a response to what is arguably the most dangerous and foundational false teaching of our time. Some Christians like to begin with reason and built their case on reason, but a more biblical approach is to start with the Bible and follow the biblical themes that show that any thinking that does not begin with God is self-contradictory and thus ultimately irrational and incoherent.

You see the Bible teaches that knowledge begins with God. In the biblical way of thinking the knowledge of God is not the end point of a chain of arguments. You do not start with reason and built on that foundation to the knowledge of God. The Bible teaches that the knowledge of God is the beginning of any true knowledge at all. It is only by beginning with God that we have any justification for reason in the first place. That is what I want to show. If you do not start your thinking with the God of the Bible, it is impossible to give a reasonable account of the world and the big questions of life. You don't start with reason and reason your way to God. You start with God and show that any reasoning about ultimate things that does not start with God is actually irrational.

The Bible begins by asserting that God created all that exists except himself. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This

is the biblical claim. The Bible claims that God exists and that he created everything else that exists. Now that is a claim and it is obviously possible to reject that claim. Many people do. Most people in our society reject it, either explicitly or practically so that the prevailing view point in our society is that God does not exist or that he does not matter.

But the Bible, as it continues, claims further that God's claims upon us are not to be taken lightly. As the biblical story unfolds, we learn that God created us in order to serve him and that he expects us to obey his laws and that the consequence for not doing so is ultimately eternal death which is eternal separation from God, which is eternal suffering as the just punishment for rejecting God and his word. The Bible also gives an account of how sin entered the world and how God set in motion a plan centered on Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners – for the salvation of those whom God would save, who by God's grace would turn from their sins and believe in Jesus and submit to him as their Lord.

Now most people in our society think that this is a lot of hocus pocus and that it can safely be ignored. But it is a serious claim that should be taken seriously because if it is true, the consequences for rejecting it are horrific beyond description and the blessings of embracing it are more precious than anything that this world alone has to offer. This by itself does not prove that it is true, but it is reason to take it seriously. The message of the Bible claims to be the truth about reality and the most important message that we can ever hear.

But is it true and how do we know that it is true? The biblical answer to that question is that there is no way to know the truth about reality apart from God and his word. The biblical claim is that you cannot have true knowledge of anything apart from God. So, we read for instance in Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." This verse and the claim that it makes is more far-reaching and profound than you might think. It is claiming that in order to have true knowledge of anything you must begin with God.

Now the knowledge that the Bible is speaking about here is not what we today would call scientific knowledge. Clearly there is a lot of knowledge

that is based on the secular worldview. Unbelievers are able to make computers and that takes a lot of knowledge. But the knowledge that the Bible is most concerned about is knowledge the true nature of things – how the world came to be, what is the meaning of life, the existence of God and what he is like and the relationships of human beings to God. The knowledge that the Bible is concerned about is “capital T truth” – the answer to the deep questions of human existence. And the biblical claim is that in order to know the truth about the nature of things you must begin with God and not only begin with God, but have the fear of the Lord. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”

And you see, if the biblical account of the world is true that makes perfect sense. If reality consists of a Creator and a creation, the creation is completely dependent on the Creator. This is not proof of the existence of God as the creator, but it is simply to assert that if reality consists of a Creator and a creation, the creation is completely dependent on the Creator. And if, as the Bible teaches, the creation includes intelligent life such as human beings, those human beings are completely dependent upon God for everything including their minds and their ability to think and their knowledge of the world including their knowledge of God.

This is not proof in the sense of scientific proof, but it is the biblical teaching about how we know the truth about the nature of things and the meaning of life. The biblical claim is that “capital T truth” begins with God and that if God is denied, mankind cannot find – “capital T truth.” That is because according to the Bible, the existence of the God of the Bible is the most important fact and any account of the nature of reality that does not begin with God is false. It cannot be a true count of reality if it does not begin with the most important thing about reality which is the existence of the God of the Bible.

This is what the Bible claims. Clearly many people do not accept that claim. So how can we prove that it is true? Well we can't. We cannot prove that the Bible is true. But that is not a problem or an embarrassment because of this same biblical claim that knowledge begins with God. In the biblical account of knowledge, the knowledge of

God is not something that we find out by reasoning and accept when we are satisfied with the proof that is given. In the biblical account of knowledge God tells us about himself and about our responsibility to love him and obey him and he requires that we believe what he says and respond in faith and obedience. In the biblical account of how we know the Truth about the world and the meaning of life, God speaks with an authoritative word calling us to acknowledge him and submit to him and live for him.

You see in the biblical account of things, the knowledge of God and thus of the nature of reality is not the end of a process of reasoning and scientific investigation so that we are convinced of God's existence by the end result of our investigations. You see, when we talk about proof, we are talking about us being satisfied about the truth of something. We accept something as true if we are convinced of it. The biblical account of knowledge is very very different.

There is a story of one of the influential atheist philosophers who said that if he died and God did exist after all and God asked him why he did not believe, he would say to God that he had not given enough evidence. But that whole scenario is far removed from the biblical account of knowledge.

The knowledge of God is not something that is based on evidence that satisfies our demand for proof. The knowledge of God is given to us with the summons to submit to it and all that it entails. In other words, the claim of the Bible is that God reveals himself to us not as a proposition to be debated, but as our Creator whom we are required to love and obey. The knowledge of God is given to us through revelation and it comes as an authoritative word calling us to submit to the high and holy One who is our Creator and the judge of our lives.

Romans 1:18ff is a very important passage that sums up the biblical account of how we come to know the Truth about the nature of reality. Verse 19 gives the biblical account of how we come to the knowledge of God. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever

since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

This is the claim of the Bible concerning the relationship between faith and reason. Faith is not something that silly people use to when they have no evidence for their convictions. Faith is a required response to God's self-revelation. True knowledge begins with God revealing himself to us and believing that revelation is not given as an option. It is a requirement and those who refuse to believe that revelation will be held accountable. So the claim of the Bible is that the knowledge of God comes by revelation and that that revelation comes as an authoritative summons to acknowledge God and obey him.

So, in the biblical account of things, you need faith in God and his word in order to be reasonable. According to biblical teaching, it is impossible to think correctly about anything without acknowledging God and his word. The Bible teaches that we cannot find out the truth about the nature of things by reasoning that is independent of God. It is absolutely impossible to answer the questions about the most important things of life on the basis of reason alone and any attempt to do so is rebellion against God and it is fundamentally unreasonable.

Notice how Paul speaks of this in Romans 1:21-22, "²¹For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools...." You see, this is how the Bible addresses the question of faith and reason. It teaches that reasoning apart from God is futile and foolishness and darkness.

This is very important when we consider the secular way of thinking about faith and reason. The world thinks that it can find the truth on the basis of thinking that operates independently of faith in God and it thinks that accepting the biblical teaching about God on the basis of faith is like a blind leap in the dark. But in the biblical account of things thinking apart from God can never find the truth about the true nature of things. It can find the truth about many aspects of how the world works, but it can never find the truth about the most important matters such as where the world comes from and what it all means. And what that means for us is that we cannot engage with the secular worldview

on the basis of reason apart from the word of God. The Bible teaches that trying to reason apart from faith in God's revelation can only produce foolishness. Reason that seeks to operate independently of the knowledge of God is futile.

So, in order to follow Paul's lead and "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God," we must demonstrate that reasoning apart from God is futile. This is the approach to giving reasons for the hope that is in us that that Bible requires of us. We are to show how unless you start with God all reasoning about the true nature of reality is futile and ultimately irrational. And this kind of thinking about faith and reason is useful both for discussing these things with unbelievers, but also to support our own faith in the truth of God's word so that we will not be intimidated by the confident assertions of the world about its secular worldview and led astray by it.

Here two of the key ways that the thinking behind the secular worldview is foolish and unreasonable. Apart from God there is no reasonable explanation for why there is something rather than nothing. Now the scientific language about the big bang can sound very intimidating and sophisticated, but it is just a smoke screen to hide the fact that the belief that you can move from nothing to this whole vast universe is actually irrational. As R.C. Sproul used to say, "Out of nothing, nothing comes." To say that everything that exists came spontaneously out of nothingness is not a rational thing to say. It is utterly foolish. It is to believe something that cannot be true. And the whole big bang and evolutionary explanation for the existence of the world as we know it is not simply improbable. It is logically impossible. It is rooted in an absolute contradiction. The secular worldview is not simply based on an improbability; it is based on an impossibility. It is simply irrational to believe that there was nothing and then there was something and then everything that now exists came to its current form by chance.

Another way that we can see the futility of the secular worldview is that it has no reasonable explanation for our sense of right and wrong. That we have a sense of right and wrong is obvious. That the main content of

our sense of right and wrong is common to all human beings is also obvious. There is a universal sense of justice. No-one believes that sexually molesting children is a matter of indifference, except the few who are exceptionally evil. Some things are just wrong, always and in every situation. That there is a moral law is as clear as the law of gravity. But there is no rational way to get to a universal moral law from the big bang and evolution. The law of evolution is survival of the fittest. The evolutionary explanations for the universal moral law are laughable. Everything is explained by somehow having an evolutionary advantage. If evolution is true the concepts of right and wrong as absolute categories are meaningless. And yet no one can live consistently as if there is no right and wrong which means that you cannot live consistently on the basis of the theory of evolution. And to have a way of understanding the world that does not correspond to what is clearly true is an example of irrationality.

I need to spend more time with this basic idea and indeed the rest of this series will be an outworking of the principle that unless you begin with the knowledge of God as revealed in the Bible, all of your thinking about ultimate truth and ultimate reality can only be futile and ultimately irrational.

Now I want to end this sermon by making the point that according to the biblical account of how we come to know the truth, this knowledge is ultimately a matter of grace. We see that in the biblical teaching that by nature we all love darkness rather than light. One of the key principles about how we come to know the truth about reality is found in John 3:19, "And this is the judgment: light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."

This is a key biblical truth concerning the whole matter of how we come to know the truth about the nature of reality. In our fallen condition we love darkness rather than the light. That is the biblical explanation for the secular worldview. People who are not saved use their powers of reason not to find the truth, but to escape from the truth. And if we know the truth it is because God in mercy has changed our hearts so

that we become able and willing to receive the truth about life as it is revealed to us by God.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). But the Bible also makes it clear that the will to follow Jesus and come to the light is a matter of God’s grace. Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

When we engaged in this process of demolishing arguments raised against the knowledge of God, we must do it in the light of the fact that having this knowledge is not a result of our superior intelligence or insight or wisdom. It is something that is given to us and it is something that has been given even as we loved darkness rather than light. The spiritual blindness of the secular worldview is a striking thing. The biblical approach to destroying its arguments involves showing that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and that apart from that beginning all reasoning is futile and foolish. But we must always remember that we are what we are by the grace of God and we know what we know by the grace of God. And it is our privilege and calling to “proclaim the excellences of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.”