



Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs

(8) The Psychological Man

Philippians 4:10-20

Hebrews 11:32-40

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This is sermon #8 in our series called, “Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs.” And our subject this morning is “The Psychological Man.” There is some overlap between this subject and what has come before. The reason is that secularism is man-centered and true Christianity is God-centered and so there will be similar aspects to every secular theme that we look at and there will be similar aspects to every biblical response. But that does not mean that we should stop thinking about this subject because we gain additional insights by looking at a subject from different perspectives and these additional insights can help us to recognize dangerous and influential ideas when they come to us in different terminology. So today we are going to consider what is meant by the term, “The Psychological Man” and then we will look at the biblical truth that answers the errors that the term “Psychological Man” is a summary for.

The term itself, as far as I can tell, comes from a sociologist named Philipp Rieff who died in 2006. He was not a Christian, but he understood better than most that western civilization does not have a sufficient foundation for its long-term survival. One of his main points was that a civilization that has as its highest value the happiness of the self cannot long survive.

One of Philipp Rieff’s books, which was published after his death is called, “*My Life Among the Deathworks*.” Here is how Bruce Riley Ashford summarizes that book in an article published in the journal *Themelios*.

“Deathworks is a devastating critique of modern culture, focusing on our vain Western attempts to reorganize society without a sacred center. According to Rieff, a patently irreligious view of society—which many Westerners desire—is not only foolish and destructive, but impossible. We can no more live without a religious framework than we can communicate without a linguistic framework or breathe without a pulmonary framework. Religion is in our blood, and the more we deny it, the sicker our society becomes. As Rieff surveyed the 21st-century Western world, he perceived the sickness had become nearly fatal.”

Rieff coined the term “Psychological Man.” He divided history into ages dominated by the kind of man that represented them. There has been the political man of the ancient world, the religious man of the middle ages, the economic man of the early modern age and most recently the Psychological Man. According to Jeffrey Satinover in an article in *First Things*, the term “Psychological Man means “that psychology ... has become the primary means whereby we try to understand the meaning and purpose of our existence.” “[P]sychology ... has become the primary means whereby we try to understand the meaning and purpose of our existence.”

So, life is about our psychological wellbeing. The meaning of life is psychological wholeness. Therefore, there is a great emphasis on therapy to deal with all the reasons that we struggle psychologically. This is not to say that all therapy is wrong and that all concern for psychological wellbeing is anti-Christian. Rather the problem is that feeling good inside is the highest goal of life. Like most errors that we examine, there are grains of truth here, but the problem comes when a legitimate concern becomes an ultimate concern. The term “Psychological Man” gets at a feature of our current western civilization whereby the highest value in people’s lives is their psychological wellbeing.

There is an older book on this subject that I have read that does not use the terminology of the “Psychological Man” but discusses the same thing. That book is called *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*. That suggests that the issue that we are looking at is an inordinate preoccupation with one’s inner life and an inordinate trust in

psychology and therapy to achieve a state of peace and wholeness and satisfaction.

Part and parcel of this whole mentality is the preoccupation with psychological needs. You may have heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs which is a staple in all psychology text books. At the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are physiological needs (food, water, etc.), then comes safety, love/belonging, esteem and finally self-actualization. Life is understood in terms of satisfying all of these needs.

Carl Trueman has used Rieff's idea of the "Psychological Man" quite a bit in his analysis of the current cultural moment. Many of you are familiar with Carl Trueman, but if you are not, he used to teach Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and has recently taken a teaching position at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania. He has written a lot in the blogosphere and is very insightful in his analysis of our culture and the church in it. He feels that the concept of the "Psychological Man" is a significant one for understanding what is going on in our society and in the church.

In an article written two years ago commenting on the fact that President Trump had a prosperity gospel televangelist pray at his inauguration, Trueman wrote about the "psyche of modern America" and in that connection he wrote, "Old-style pragmatism had a social purpose, in that it sought to work towards the common good. Now that the common good has been replaced by the well-being of the psychological self, that which works is that which makes me happy in the here and now." ("President Trump, Therapist in Chief," in *First Things*)

So, in our society life is about the happiness of the individual. We saw the same thing in connection with the idea of expressive individualism. But what we are focusing on now is the fact that our society looks to psychology and therapy to make that happen. And so human wellbeing is thought of in terms of psychological categories. Paul Vitz in his *Psychology as Religion* wrote concerning Carl Jung, who was very influential in this area, "Jung's psychology ... provided ... concepts that could serve as a conscious goal not only for therapy but also for life as a whole."

It will be helpful, I think, for me to list a number of those concepts. A key concept is self-realization or self-actualization. That is the idea behind expressive individualism. Further, there is an interest in some forms of therapy on the influence of our unconscious life on our conscious life. There is the language of repression and becoming better integrated. There is a great emphasis on feelings and self-esteem. There is the idea of self-acceptance and self-love. There is the whole genre of self-help literature. There is the idea of self-enrichment. Of course, sex is an important subject. People are encouraged to be open about sex and explore the various possibilities for sexual fulfillment. The term “felt needs” is an important part of the vocabulary. There is the language of values and values clarification. These are just some of the terms that reflect the influence of secular psychology in our society.

Carl Trueman points out the connection between the pervasive influence of secular psychology and the way that term “oppression.” is used today. Oppression used to be thought of mostly in political or economic terms, but now it is often used to refer to psychological oppression which has to come mean anything that a person finds disturbing. He writes, “Transposed into politics, this model conceives of oppression in psychological, rather than more traditional economic or legal, categories. Hence the current hoo-hah about micro-aggressions and word crimes, and the angst about the legitimacy of freedom of speech on campuses.” (“President Trump, Therapist in Chief,” in *First Things*)

Carl Trueman also points out how this way of looking at life is disseminated by the media. “Sadly, many, if not all, of the most influential organs of our culture are committed to the cultivation of Psychological Man as the norm and thus the categories of therapy as the answer.... From commercials predicated on creating desires rather than on meeting utilitarian needs, to the therapeutic rhetoric of politicians of Left and Right, the gravitational pull toward a psychological understanding of the self is powerful and omnipresent.” (“President Trump, Therapist in Chief,” in *First Things*)

This is why I bring this up as a separate topic and spend some time describing it. “[T]he gravitational pull toward a psychological

understanding of the self is powerful and omnipresent.” “[M]any, if not all, of the most influential organs of our culture are committed to the cultivation of Psychological Man as the norm and thus that categories of therapy as the answer.”

And this works. The influence of secular psychology on the church is very great. That is not to say that there is no place for psychology at all for Christians, but we need to understand that the majority of the psychological assumptions and ideas that are omnipresent in our society are antichristian and profoundly opposed to biblical teaching. And we must be as aware as we can be of how we are shaped by the values and assumptions of the world in every way that we interact with the world. Carl Trueman again, this time from an article in the *Ordained Servant* which is a journal for office bearers in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. “We need to understand that every commercial we ever see is projecting an image of Psychological Man to us: human beings as those who find fulfillment in the purchase of goods that will make us happier and, more often than not, sexier.” (August 2016)

One measure of the influence of the Psychological Man ideology on the church is a study by Christian Smith and others on the religious understanding of a large majority of American Christian teenagers. And it is agreed, across the board that the teenagers in this study reflected a much broader section of American Christianity. The term given to the religious beliefs of many Christian teenagers is “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” It is the word “therapeutic” that shows the linkage to the “Psychological Man” theme. Here is a short description and notice how many psychological concepts are woven into it. “God is a cosmic therapist and divine butler, ready to help out when needed. He exists but really isn’t a part of our lives. We are supposed to be “good people,” but each person must find what’s right for him or her. Good people will go to heaven, and we shouldn’t be stifled by organized religion where somebody tells us what we should do or what we should believe.” (“Moralistic therapeutic Deism: Not Just a Problem in Youth Ministry” by Brian Cosby published on The Gospel Coalition website.)

The point here is that the religious thinking of vast numbers of people who identify as Christians, is rooted more in the concepts of secular

psychology than in the concepts of the Bible. The thinking of much of the church today about life and the meaning of life owes more to psychological categories than to biblical categories.

I want to turn the corner now to consider the biblical teaching in the light of the ideology represented by the term “The Psychological Man.” To give the overall perspective, here is a key quote from Philipp Rieff himself. “Religious man is born to be saved; psychological man is born to be pleased.” This is a helpful way of summarizing the difference between the “Psychological Man” way of looking at human life and the biblical way of looking at human life. The “Psychological Man” way of looking at human life is about human beings feeling good about themselves. The biblical way of looking at life begins with God and man’s need for salvation. The assumption of secular psychology is that human beings are basically good and need help to deal with their problems and achieve fulfillment in life. The teaching of the Bible is that humans are sinners and our greatest need is to be reconciled with God. The great concern for man in the worldview dominated by secular psychology is man’s happiness. The great concern of the Bible for mankind is that holiness without which no one will see the Lord. The categories for understanding human beings and the nature of human wellbeing are very different and in most cases incompatible.

The most fundamental difference is that the philosophy of the Psychological man is man-centered and the biblical teaching about life is God-centered. According to the Bible the most important fact about human beings is that we are created by God and for God. And the greatest problem that we face is that we are sinners who need to be saved from our sins. The great assumption of the Psychological Man is that it is possible to be psychologically whole apart from God, while the great truth from the beginning to the end of the Bible is that to live apart from God is death. Man’s wellbeing depends entirely and completely and utterly on being in a state of reconciliation with God – being accepted by God – loving God and being loved by God and living for the glory of God.

So, the Word of God confronts us with the dominating reality of God and with the devastating reality of our sinful condition and the

consequences of our sin. The great problem according to the Bible is our sin and the great solution to our sin is salvation. Jesus is at the heart of the biblical story, not because he is a great moral teacher, but because he came to deliver us from our sins. When Jesus appeared on earth his first concern was not for man's happiness, but for man's salvation. There is no doubt that man's happiness is important in the Bible, but it is never a happiness without salvation.

Think of that great gospel passage, John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And the verses that follow. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

This is the great concern of the Bible as far as man's wellbeing is concerned. It begins with the fact that apart from salvation we are under God's wrath and heading for eternal suffering. It presents the way of escape through Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection. And the great good that it holds out is eternal life – life with God in the new heavens and the new earth. Jesus sums up the biblical priority for our wellbeing when he says in Matthew 6:19-20, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...."

The wellbeing of human beings in the Bible does not begin with man's happiness. It begins with being rescued from the danger of eternal punishment through faith in Jesus and connects man's happiness to his relationship with God. The great concern of the Bible for man's wellbeing is pleasing God and enjoying the favor of God.

There is a great concern for holiness – for living a life that conforms to God's character and God's law. The purpose of salvation is to deliver us from the guilt and penalty of our sins, but also from sinfulness so that salvation includes growing in Christlikeness. Think about the great

emphasis in Paul's epistles when he deals with the kind of life that saved people are saved to live.

A wonderful example is Colossians 1:9–12. These verses record what Paul was praying for, for the Colossians. ⁹"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light."

These are the things that the Bible holds out to us as the good life for human beings. What we need in order to be whole is to be godly and holy. Living a life that is pleasing to God. Increasing in the knowledge of God. Bearing fruit in every good work. Dealing with struggles and difficulties by the power of God, so that we endure and even have joy in our sufferings because of God's love and care and the hope that we have in him.

What is really important is that the concerns and categories of secular psychology which permeate the thinking about life in our society are not even found in the Bible or have a very different meaning in the Bible. One of the areas where we see this is in the whole idea of psychological needs. This is a big deal in secular psychology and the idea of psychological needs is foundational to the thinking of most people about life including Christians. The idea of psychological needs is an important feature of much Christian teaching about life. So, we have a need to be affirmed and we have a need to be loved and we have a need to live a meaningful life and we have a need for self-esteem. This idea that we have needs that must be fulfilled in order to be psychologically healthy and whole is pretty much universal both in the world and in the church.

But the Bible deals with the concept of needs in a very different way. Our normal way of thinking about psychological needs does not exist in the Bible. The Bible speaks of needs in connection with food and

clothing. In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus tells us not to be anxious about what we will eat and drink and wear because our heavenly Father knows that we need these things. In Philippians 4:19 Paul writes, "¹⁹And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." God promises to provide for all the needs of his people.

But when we look at how he does that, we find that there are many cases where God's people have to do without the kinds of things that come under category of psychological needs. Some of God's people are lonely. Some of God's people struggle with low self-esteem or depression or all manner of psychological problems. All of the things that secular psychology deals with in terms of needs are missing in the lives of some of God's people. The Bible has the category of suffering and not having some of the things that secular psychology considers needs certainly counts as suffering according to the Bible, but the category of needs has a completely different focus. We need food and clothing and shelter. And other than that, we need salvation and we need our relationship with God. Think of how the last part of Hebrews 11 speaks about how many of the Old Testament saints lived by faith and not by sight. Hebrews 11:35–38, "....Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."

A Christian who is in solitary confinement for his faith has all his needs met. When Paul wrote those words that his God would supply all the needs of his people, he was in prison himself and wondering whether or not he was going to be executed. Earlier in Philippians 4 he had written in response to a gift that the Philippians had sent to him in prison, Philippians 4:11–13, "¹¹Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

So, from a biblical perspective on needs, we need God which means we need salvation and once we have that nothing else is necessary to live a good life. That does not mean that the other things that make life rich and enjoyable are not important, but we can do without all of them and still not miss anything that we truly need as long as we have God and on the other hand if all our desires and longings are fulfilled up to our eyeballs and we do not have God then the one thing that we do need is missing and we are dead even if we are physically alive.

The problem with the language of needs is that it does not reflect biblical categories and priorities and it is man-centered rather than God-centered. What we really need is to be focused outside of ourselves rather than upon ourselves and our own needs. What Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:15 gives the biblical perspective, "¹⁵ [Jesus] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." What we need is what Jesus gives and that is to be turned away from our own perceived needs and find life in living for Jesus. The focus is on our calling to live for Jesus – to live for the glory of God and for the blessing of other people. Jesus' summary of the law also speaks to this issue. What we need is to love God and our neighbor and not to be preoccupied with our wants and desires.

This does not mean that the blessings of this life of being loved, finding satisfaction in our work, of having a healthy concept of self and so many other things are not important in their place. But they are gifts rather than needs. And their significance is in how they point us to God as the giver of every good thing in our lives. Certainly, we can welcome and treasure whatever comforts and pleasures and satisfactions that God gives us in this life. But if God does not give them or takes some of them away, we have not lost anything that we need. The whole language of psychological needs is man-centered rather than God-centered, and it is one of the areas in which the thinking of the world has infiltrated the church.

I do not want to minimize suffering in any of its forms. There is such a thing as psychological pain for all kinds of reasons. And there is a place for counselling, but we must understand that unless the counselling is

truly biblically based, it will almost certainly be rooted in concepts and values that are opposed to the biblical teaching on life and wholeness. And my concern in this sermon is not counselling so much as the way in which secular psychological concepts are so influential in the church as well as the world.

Our wellbeing according to the Scriptures is found in not focusing on ourselves, but on God – on knowing him, and serving him and pleasing him. There is joy in that, but the joy comes from fulfilling the purpose for which we are both created and saved and that is to live not for ourselves but for the glory of God.