



Lesson 3 – What Is Truth?

Let's say you take your average unbeliever in America, someone vaguely familiar with the Bible and Christianity but who follows the culture in its morals, entertainment, and beliefs. Then you take a Canaanite who lived in the land right before Israel began its conquest. You bring them together and add a Pharisee, and for good measure a Greek philosopher and let them start talking about the meaning of life. All four of these individuals would need Christ, yet all four would likely see life from very different perspectives. If you were able to preach one message to try and share the gospel with them, how challenging would that be?

What kinds of things does everyone in that group needs to hear?

What kinds of things would be different would be some of the major differences within this group?

On the one hand, every person there needs the same basic message – they are a sinner and need a Savior named Jesus. But all of them will have different issues to address in sharing the gospel: the Canaanite and the Greek philosopher would be mortified by the idea of never worshipping an idol again, whereas the Pharisee and the American would find idol worship bizarre. The Pharisee would hate the name of Jesus, but the American would think that he is a follower of Jesus if he checks “Christian” in a survey. As for the philosopher and the ancient near easterner, they would likely never even have heard of Jesus! All four individuals will have a different understanding of life, morality, and purpose. While it is possible to preach a message on the gospel that would be understandable to all four, if you were in private conversations trying to lead one of them to Christ those four conversations would likely look very different.

The reason for this is that each one of these individuals has a different worldview, a different way of looking at life. In this lesson, we are going to examine what a worldview is and why it matters. We will then outline the typical American worldview and compare that thinking with Scripture. Understanding how our neighbors think about life will help us more clearly share Christ with them and will help us realize ways in which we might have adopted an unbiblical perspective without realizing it.

Defining Worldview

So what is a worldview and why does it matter? In this first section we will explain this important concept and then briefly show how it will impact our apologetics.

A worldview is a story that makes sense of life.

People have spent a lot of time studying and debating worldview, but the simplest way to sum up a worldview is “the story by which people live their lives.” If you were to have a serious conversation with someone and ask them, “How did we get here and where are we going?” the answer they give will be their worldview. This is important because the stories that people tell themselves make a big difference in how they live their life.

What are some of the “big stories” that people are believing today, in America and around the world?

A worldview answers life’s big questions.

Once you have in a place a story that makes sense of the world, you can begin to answer some of life’s big questions. Once you know where we came from and where we are headed, you start answering other questions, such as “What is our purpose?” “How do I decide what is right and what is wrong?” and “Why is there so much evil?” For example, if you believe that God created us and that we are accountable to Him, then our purpose is to bring Him glory, He decides what’s right and wrong, and evil is the result of rebellion against Him. If we are here because of millions of years of evolution, we have no purpose, right and wrong are arbitrary, and evil is just survival of the fittest. The story you believe will ultimately answer the questions of purpose, morality, and suffering.

Everyone has a worldview, whether they know it or not.

While for some “worldview” is a trendy term, many people have never heard the word or have little idea what it means. Yet everyone has a worldview. Everyone has some way of understanding the world that informs what they think about origin, destiny, purpose, morality, and suffering. They may never have called it a worldview. They may even at times live inconsistently with their worldview. But everyone has some understanding of the world that they rely on to make sense of life. Understanding this concept can help us evaluate the worldview of our culture so that we can carefully share the gospel.

The American Worldview

Understanding the modern America worldview involves looking at several “isms.” There are even more “isms” that we could be looking at, but these three do a fairly good job of telling the story of Western thinking over the past several hundred years. You may recognize some of these words; you may not. But odds are that you and your neighbors have been impacted by these philosophies whether or not you have heard of that particular “ism.” For each term we will study the wrong thinking of the world around us and then what God’s Word has to say about each.

Naturalism

- **What is naturalism?**

Naturalism is the belief that the material world is all that exists. The ancient and medieval worldview believed that God was very much involved in the everyday affairs of life, but during the Enlightenment this idea began to change. God came to be seen as setting everything in place and then getting it going, like a watchmaker building and then winding up a giant clock, only to step back and remain uninvolved going forward.¹ Eventually, the need for God disappeared and all that remained was the physical universe and the laws of nature.

Naturalism teaches that gods, angels, and demons don't send rain; rain is the result of water evaporating into the atmosphere, condensing into clouds, and then coming down when the weather conditions are just right. Naturalism teaches that emotions, feelings, hopes, and dreams are just chemicals bouncing around in your brain like cogs in a machine. Naturalism teaches that there is no heaven, hell, or afterlife of any kind. Death is nothing more than a biological machine breaking down. Naturalism sees a world completely devoid of God.

How does naturalism impact the thinking of modern people today?

How do some Christians fall into similar wrong ways of thinking regarding naturalism?

Naturalism explains why many people today live as if God and the spiritual world does not exist. It explains why future judgment and eternity never really come into the picture. Many believers, while rejecting the idea of naturalism, can end up living as if this world is all that really exists.²

- **What does the Bible have to say about naturalism?**

In what ways does the Bible confront the wrong thinking of naturalism?

The Bible teaches that the spiritual realm is real (Ephesians 6:10-12).

We spent some time in our first lesson talking about this important point, but we need to realize that there is a spiritual battle going on all the time all around us. Even as believers we often forget this and live as if what we can see is all that exists (cf 2 Corinthians 4:18).

The Bible teaches that God is sovereign and active (Daniel 4:35; Romans 8:28).

God made the world, and He did indeed make physical processes such as rain that continue at a regular, predictable pace. But God is still very involved in His creation. Through His sovereignty God

¹ This is another "ism" called Deism. Deists believe that God created the world, but they don't believe in miracles. They think that God built a rational universe and put man in it as rational creatures, and therefore it is through reasoning that we will figure things out as we go through life.

² One researcher coined the term "moral, therapeutic deism" to describe some people who have no understanding of what Christianity actually is but still consider themselves "Christian." These people believe there is a God who generally speaking wants people to be nice (moral), and who helps them when they are really in a pinch (therapeutic), but other than that He doesn't make much of a difference in how they live their lives (deism).

maintains total control over His creation, and He cares about the details of individual's lives as well as the decisions of national superpowers.

What are some passages celebrating the sovereign power of God over all creation?

The Bible teaches that eternity is real (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Romans 14:12).

One day all of us will stand before God and give an account of our lives. As one preacher said, "Life is one big opportunity to prepare to meet God." Businesses will often plan "with the end in mind." In other words they will try to determine what their company/product/initiative should look like at the very end and then plan backwards from there. For the believer the end is standing before God, and that perspective ought to shape the way we live today.

Which of these three principles do you think Christians struggle to truly believe?

Existentialism

- **What is existentialism?**

Naturalism led to deep depression as philosophers began to realize that if the material world is all that exists, if death is the end, and if there is no greater purpose or beauty or meaning, then there's nothing worth living for.³ It quickly became apparent people couldn't live if they had no meaning, but if meaning doesn't come from God, where do we get it? The existentialist answered that question by deciding the very fact of my existence gives me great meaning and purpose, and that I get to decide what that meaning is! Existentialism is the belief that the individual gets to determine their own meaning and purpose.

How does existentialism impact the thinking of modern people today?

How do some Christians fall into similar wrong ways of thinking regarding existentialism?

Existentialism explains why people think that everyone's opinion is ultimate, and why it's bad to tell anyone they are wrong. If you've ever heard someone say "You do you" or "You do whatever makes you happy," you're bumping into existentialism. We live in a culture where people don't want to tell anyone else they are wrong, because we are all about self-care, self-love, self-actualization, and just generally all about ourselves. This radical focus on the self as the ultimate measure is the sad legacy of existentialism.

- **What does the Bible have to say about existentialism?**

In what ways does the Bible confront the wrong thinking of existentialism?

The Bible warns against the temptation to be "god" (Genesis 3:5). The first temptation of man was the temptation to decide what is good and what is evil. The serpent came to the woman and promised that she would be like God if she ate the fruit, because she would be able to decide what was good

³ This belief is called "nihilism" which comes from the Latin word *nihilo*, meaning "nothing." The most famous nihilist was a man named Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously proclaimed "God is dead" and spent his last few years in an asylum.

and what was evil. That first act of rebellion was a creature telling her Creator that she knew better and could call the shots, and every sin since then has flowed from that same impulse. Whenever someone says, "I know that's what Scripture says, but I don't agree" or says, "Is it wrong for me to want to be happy?" they are listening to the same whispering serpent who continues to suggest that we ought to be the ones in charge.

The Bible teaches that our ultimate purpose is to praise God (Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11).

You and I are not ultimate. God is ultimate, and the choices I make should not be to bring happiness and satisfaction to myself, they should be done to bring glory to God. This does not mean that serving God is miserable; God promises us joy if we follow Him. But the goal ought not be our happiness, the goal should always be the glory of God.

How do God's glory and our joy fit together?

What is the danger of making our own fulfillment our main goal?

Postmodernism

- **What is postmodernism?**

So what happens when everyone gets to determine their own purpose and meaning? A lot of contradiction and a lot of confusion. Once meaning was determined by individuals instead of by God's Word, the next step was to begin questioning if it was possible to know anything. Postmodernism is a movement which questions whether truth can ever be discovered. Everyone has a perspective, a point of view, a bias, and so no one is totally objective. Different individuals and groups see the world in different ways, and no one can be neutral enough to say that one group is right and another is wrong; it's all relative.

What are some ways that postmodernism has affected American culture?

What are some ways that postmodernism has affected Christianity?

- **What does the Bible have to say about postmodernism?**

One of the saddest and most famous lines in Scripture is the question of Pilate before Christ: "What is truth?" Pilate's cynical comment was muttered in front of the one who is Truth. The Bible's response is that truth is knowable, and His name is Jesus Christ (John 8:32; 14:6).

How can we share the truth with people who question the very existence of truth?

Going back to our first lesson, we must remember that the Holy Spirit is the only one who can open blinded eyes, and He does so through the Word. Sharing the truth with people who don't believe in truth might seem pointless, but God can break through even the hardest hearts of unbelief.

Today most Americans, and sadly many Christians, are swimming in a sea of naturalism, existentialism, and postmodernism.⁴ They live as if the physical world is all that exists, as if individuals get to determine their own purpose and meaning, and as if no one can really tell anyone else they are wrong. But the Bible says otherwise. The Bible teaches that there is a God, and a supernatural world, and that we are living in it whether we accept it or not. The Bible tells us that God determines meaning, value, and purpose, and the Bible is truth, and nothing else. If we want to make an impact on this culture, we need to be ready to stand by the truth of God's Word, even and especially when that truth cuts against the thinking of our neighbors.

Which of these three “-isms” do you think has most impacted the culture/church today?

In what ways have you seen these ideas impact the thinking of friends, family, coworkers, or even yourself?

⁴ Other possible worldviews are not covered in this study, such as eastern mysticism, cults such as Jehovah witnesses and Mormons, and Islam. Evaluating the thinking and worldview behind these ideas would be a profitable exercise, but these tend to be less influential in modern American thought generally, and even people who hold to these views have likely been influenced to some degree by naturalism, existentialism, and postmodernism.