**Modern Day Idols: The Idol of Knowledge**

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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**Psalm 131 and 1 Corinthians 2:1-10**

Once again, I will start the sermon by reminding you that all idols start with good things. Idols are not pure evil; they are good things lifted too high or twisted out of shape, or both. The same thing is true for today’s idol. Knowledge is a good thing. Whatever I may say later in this sermon about the dangers of idolatry, don’t let those words erase this basic, biblical truth: Knowledge is good. Learning is good. Study is good. Heaven forbid that on this Christian Education Sunday I should make you think that knowledge is bad and that intellectual curiosity is dangerous. That is NOT the message of Scripture. The Bible calls us to grow in the knowledge of all God’s works and words. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” says Jesus in Matthew 22. It’s not something he says in passing; he calls it the first and greatest commandment. God gave us a mind to know things, and he wants us to love him with that mind.

How do we love God with our mind? There are all sorts of ways. It happens all the time in our Christian Schools. You can do it by meditating on God’s works in redemptive history and his law, the moral shape of the universe. “Blessed are those whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditate on his law both day and night,” says Psalm 1. In Philippians 1 Paul says, “I pray that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.” When a middle school Bible class sits down and studies the Ten Commandments and how they apply today, they are loving God with their mind. The High School Theology class studying the different models of the atonement - talking about what Christ’s death on the cross means - is loving God with their minds.

How do you love God with your mind? By meditating on his works in creation. Psalm 19 says, “The heavens are telling the glory of God, the skies proclaim the works of his hands.” When the high school biology student learns how cells reproduce, she is loving God with her mind. When the history student studies the patterns of history and the way humans create and destroy flourishing in God’s world, he is loving God with his mind. When the kindergarten class goes to the Critter Barn and they hold the baby chicks - their faces full of joy as they feel how soft and delicate they are and their teacher talks about how God made the chicks fearfully and wonderfully, those kids are learning to love God with their minds. When we delight in the ways and works of God, when we discover the intricacies of his creation, when we proclaim his handiwork either in a scientific paper or in a song of praise, we love God with our minds. In the words of Neal Plantinga, the command to love the Lord your God with all your mind defeats any anti-intellectualism. It is an invitation to walk out in a world of wonders with a head full of curiosity and a mouth full of praise. So knowledge is a good thing, intellect is a good thing, but like all good things that good can be made into an idol. Because knowledge is powerful. When you combine human knowledge and human ingenuity, it’s amazing what people can do!

Just think of your car. We get into our car all the time, so we don’t think about how it’s a testament to human knowledge and ingenuity. In front of you is the engine, someone figured out how to create tiny little explosions within perfectly machined cylinders and then translate these explosions into smooth, rapid forward motion. Under you are the tires made of this remarkable material called rubber, that is soft, flexible, but also durable – a chemical wonder. Around you is a metal of the car. Humans have figured out how to take minerals out of the ground, figured out how to refine them and strengthen them to the point where they have created these alloys that are both strong and light. In front of you is a dashboard filled with ridiculous computer power. Punch in an address and your car can tell you where you are and how to get to where you want to be. On some newer cars, if you are distracted and miss an obstacle in the road, they will stop the car for you. Every time you go to the grocery store, you are carried along by the power of human ingenuity and the power of knowledge.

Human knowledge is such a powerful force, it solves so many problems and gives us so many conveniences, that we begin to put our hopes in it. Whatever problem we face, there must be some innovative solution, some medical miracle, some piece of technology that will take care of our problems.

As our society becomes more secular, human knowledge, human technical achievement becomes their default source of hope. Knowledge and reason becomes their replacement for God. The radically secular are forceful about this replacement. Religion, say these people, is superstition. It’s what creates all the problems of this world. If we would just stick to reason. If we would all be rational and use our minds and follow the principles of science, we could deal with our problems. In one of his books, Tim Keller quotes from a website called A Good Life Without God, which gives a pretty typical statement of this belief. “Without faith and religion we will finally be able to achieve and tolerant open society where [there is] mutual respect and equality for all people…and all people will be able to reach their potential.” Who needs the Father, Son and Holy Spirit when you have knowledge, reason and a really good research and development team. Knowledge becomes an idol.

There are real problems with this view of human ingenuity. I read this observation in a book by Daniel Taylor this week. Taylor notes that we often hear leaders and thinkers who are frustrated with the state of our society say something like this. “Why can’t we solve the problem of homelessness! We put a man on the moon, surely we can solve homelessness.” Or maybe it’s not homelessness, maybe its world hunger: “we put a man on the moon, surely we can eliminate world hunger!” Have you heard that sort of statement? It’s a thing people say. Taylor says this statement is completely wrong-headed. “Putting someone on the moon is almost infinitely easier than solving a problem that involves the nature of human beings.” Putting a man on the moon is largely a technical task. It involves equations, experiments and engineering. Getting rid of world hunger is a problem that deals with human souls. When you try to deal with homelessness, you are dealing with mental illness, fear, cycles of abuse and family dysfunction, human greed, prejudice, indifference. These are problems with the soul. You don’t fix a soul with knowledge. There is no lab experiment which will give you a cure for greed. No math equation that will end prejudice. No microscope will tell you how to extract selfishness from the human heart. Reason and knowledge, ingenuity and technology are powerful gifts, but without addressing the issues of our soul, we human beings will just keep committing the same old sins, only now we’ll commit those sins with bigger tools on a larger scale.

A lot of modern thinkers are starting to get this. Jonathan Haidt is a Social Psychologist who teaches at the business school of New York University. He’s not a believer, he’s an atheist. But he’s done a lot of influential work on the roots of human behavior. He challenges the notion that humans operate by knowledge and reason. He describes human behavior with the image of rider trying to steer an elephant. The rider is our reason, it’s trying to steer us, make us go where it wants to go, giving us reasons why we should do this and not that, explaining our behavior to others. The elephant is all our passions, our desires, our dreams, our moral intuitions, our moral taboos, our fears, our anxieties. These parts of us are not formed by our reason. These parts of us aren’t formed by thinking and logic. They are formed by our communities, our relationships, our experiences, our habits, our traumas, our wounds. Haidt says that when it comes to steering our lives, the elephant has all the power. The rider can try to steer, but if the elephant wants to go in a certain direction, all the reasoning in the world won’t stop the elephant from doing what the elephant wants to do. Anyone who has ever struggled to keep to a diet or exercise regime knows the truth of what Haidt is saying.

We didn’t need Social Psychologists to tell us that. The Bible already tells us the same thing. We already talked about how the Bible says many positive things about knowledge and the life of the mind, but the there is another voice in Scripture. The Bible is very clear about the limits of human knowledge. Throughout scripture, God tells us some version of, ‘I love you people, but you’re not as smart as you think you are.’ Isaiah 40:28 “Do you not know? Have you not heard/the Lord is the everlasting God. His understanding no one can fathom.” Proverbs 3:5 “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” Proverbs 3:7 “Do not be wise in your own eyes.” Romans 11:33 “How unsearchable are his judgments, his paths beyond all tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?”

Not only does the Bible tell us the limits of human knowledge, it points us to knowledge’s foundation. My favorite Psalm is Psalm 131. Psalm 131 is a picture of a person who has learned the limits of his knowledge. Life has chastened him. He’s been hurt. He’s experienced inexplicable loss. Like a weaned child who can’t understand why mom has stopped giving him breastmilk. His brain can’t figure out God’s way. Terrible things have happened and they make no sense. But instead of raging and instead of trying to figure it all out, he goes to the place of true wisdom and understanding. I’m not raising my eyes too high anymore. I’m not trying to figure out things too wonderful for me. Instead, I have stilled and quieted my soul. Like a weaned child with its mother is my soul within me. He is able to survive in a world he can’t control because his soul is properly rooted. It’s not about what you know, it’s about where your soul rests.

Can you hear Paul saying the same thing in 1 Corinthians 2? He calls Christ the wisdom of God and he sets the wisdom of God in Christ over against the wisdom and power of the world. He sets the wisdom of the cross over against eloquent speech and heady philosophy. When he does that, he’s not dismissing human knowledge and human power, he’s saying that the wisdom of the cross is deeper than those things, it’s foundational to those things. The wisdom of God starts at the soul level. The blood of Christ cleanses the soul; the power of the Spirit fills the soul. The wisdom of God works at the level of the elephant - changing our loves, our passions our desires our dreams. The wisdom of God isn’t against every human philosophy - there are things in human philosophy we can learn from knowledge is good - but the wisdom of God goes deeper and transforms the part of us that is really our center. Our soul.

For Paul, wisdom starts at the cross. The cross doesn’t ask you to prove yourself or show understanding. Knowledge doesn’t help you at the cross. Cleverness means nothing. You aren’t at the cross to get information. You aren’t at the cross to learn atonement theory. At the cross, you open up your soul in all its murky, messy depths to the blood of Jesus, and you let his Spirit flow down to the deepest part of you. You let it clean out the fear the prejudice, the pride, and replace it with his love. You don’t come to the cross to learn information; you’re there to receive new life. Human life starts with your soul.

This is why we do Christian schools. Christian schools are not the only way to educate a child’s soul - without the support of institutions of church and home their power is pretty limited - but when church, home and school work together to orient a child’s soul around the love of Jesus, they are a powerful tool. Christian schools don’t just spur intellectual curiosity; they educate the souls of our children.

Tim Keller, who is one of my favorite writers, is dying. He has Pancreatic cancer. He was diagnosed months ago. Keller is as knowledgeable a guy as you would ever find. Ridiculously well-read and nimble of mind. But in a recently published article he admits that as he gets closer to death, he finds himself looking beyond his knowledge to deeper things. He told a story I didn’t know about Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas is considered by most to be the greatest of all Catholic theologians. He had a brilliant mind and his work, the Summa Theologiae, is not only foundational to Catholic theology, it is deeply influential in Protestant theology too. On December 6, 1273, Thomas Aquinas suddenly stopped writing his monumental Summa. His friend Reginald was worried. “Brother Thomas, why have you stopped writing your great work?” Thomas told him he had had an experience of God and his love, an experience so powerful, it made all his theology “seem like straw” by comparison. He was spending some time simply restoring his soul in that great love. Maybe a little bit like a weaned child with it mother? Thomas’ experience was no rejection of theology. He wasn’t rejecting his intellect. But Thomas had experienced the difference between knowing about God and his ways, and an experience of the living God stirring your soul, and he knew which was more important. He knew where his life was grounded. And so do we.

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