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THE COMBAT CARTON ILLUSION

John 6:22-40

There is a party game that young people sometimes play called “Two Truths And A Lie.” Each person tells 3 things about themselves, one of which is not true, and the rest of the party guests are supposed to guess which of the 3 things is a lie. Today I am going to start with a variation on that game. I’m going to tell you 3 things relating to me, but only 1 of them is true. See if you can identify which one of them is actually true.

The first one is that I actually have an extra rib. I have told you before than when it comes to medical matters I have an odd tendency to always be in the very small percentages. One example of that is I have more ribs than people normally do. About a half of 1% of people have that extra rib, 1 in 200, and as expected I am in that small number. The second fact is that when I was young I was asked to go out on a date with a best selling romance novelist. The third has to do with my dad. When he was in the army in World War 2 one dark night he had sentry duty for his unit. He heard someone in the field approaching their position, so he called out a challenge. He got no response. The person was still moving around so he gave a warning. Still no answer, so he fired a shot. There was no more sound. The next morning it was discovered that he had shot a cow that had been grazing in the field.

Which of those is true, which is not? The third one sounds true, but it isn’t. My dad actually wrote a story describing precisely that action, but it was fiction, not reality. I don’t have an extra rib. My son, Toby, does, but I don’t. Which means the one true thing was that I was once asked out on a date by a best selling romance novelist. She wasn’t an author at the time. Her name now is Bodie Thoene, and she has sold over 35 million books. When I was in high school she was a friend of a friend of mine, and she asked me to go to a dance at her school with her. I politely declined because going to a dance at a school where I knew almost no one was deeply unappealing to me.

I’m talking about lies and the truth because today we are going to encounter a passage where we will identify two lies, and they will be contrasted with some life changing truth. Unfortunately, these two lies are solidly embedded in the minds and hearts of most people. When you believe a lie you inevitably will experience negative consequences. Only the truth can enable us to avoid those consequences. So in John 6:22-40 let’s look for those lies and for the truth that can enable us to avoid them.

THE MADONNA LIE

Jesus had pulled off a dramatic feat the day before when he fed a massive crowd of thousands of people using the lunch of one little boy. He had been doing impressive miracles, healing many people, but this one was epic. Thousands of people were blown away that he was able to provide food for all of them essentially out of nowhere. They had never seen anything like it.

The crowd couldn’t get enough of Jesus. They couldn’t wait to see what he would do next for them. They were unaware of the equally astounding event that had happened during the night, when Jesus walked across the lake, completely dumbfounding his own followers. But they knew Jesus had left and gone back to Capernaum on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. So they headed in that direction in search of him.

Verse 25 tells us that when the crowd found Jesus they asked, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” In other words, how did you get here so quickly? They were puzzled about how he got back to Capernaum. It would have been interesting if he said, “Well, I walked part of the way across the lake.” Um, what now? But Jesus wasn’t interested in discussing transportation.

I suspect that having conversations with Jesus was sometimes disconcerting. He had an unsettling habit of cutting through small talk right to people’s real issues. He did that with Nicodemus, who began with some polite words of praise for Jesus, but Jesus went directly to “You must be born again if you want to enter the kingdom of God.” He did something similar in his conversation with that woman at a well in Samaria. He does something like that here. The people want to talk about how Jesus got to Capernaum, and he went straight to, “You are looking for me not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.”

The signs Jesus performed, the miracles, should have told them that something divine was happening. They should have realized that Jesus was the Messiah, and that they needed to heed his words. But that was not what they were mostly interested in. Jesus said what they cared about was they got free food and had enough to eat the day before, and they were hoping for more. I am amazed at the lines that form for the drive thru window at Chick-Fil-A. What do you think would happen if they gave away sandwiches for free for a day? It would be chaos. That crowd had gotten free fish sandwiches the day before, and they wanted an encore from Jesus. That was what they cared about most of all.

These people were not completely destitute, but for the most part they were poor. In his commentary on John Joseph Quimby said that in the first century food was always a problem. The people of the land, the poor people who made up most of this crowd, were almost always hungry. Most of them had one cooked meal a day.

Jesus said what had gotten their attention was that not only had they had food to eat, but they had their fill. When Laurie and I were first married and living in Solana Beach we had little to no money. But there was a restaurant we loved to go to for special occasions. It wasn’t a super fancy place. It was a Mexican restaurant down near the airport. It had a nice view of the bay and it had food we loved. Friends told us we should get their nachos as an appetizer. So one special evening we ordered the nachos, and they were some of the best I’d ever eaten. They were piled high with cheese, beans, delicious guacamole, sour cream and all the trimmings. I devoured them. Then they brought my entrée. It was on a plate the size of a car tire. It was huge. It was so good that I plowed through the whole thing. I ate so much that night it was painful. I didn’t think I’d ever want to eat again. I usually don’t eat like that. But I almost always eat until I am full. People in that crowd did not know what it was like to be full very often. The day before they had eaten until they could eat no more, and they did not have to do a thing to get it!

I suspect that a lot of them, maybe most of them, were dreaming of Jesus providing them food every day. They’d have enough to eat without worrying about it. They wouldn’t even have to work to get it. Jesus could just miraculously produce it, and all they had to do was receive it. They couldn’t imagine anything better. Jesus was right when he said they mainly cared about food. In verse 29 Jesus called on them to believe in him. Their response was astonishing. In verses 30-31 they said, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness.”

What sign will you give us that we may believe in you? Seriously? Are you kidding me right now? Jesus had just blown you all away by miraculously producing food for thousands of people, and now you insist he give you a sign in order to believe in him? Excuse me, but where were you yesterday? Did you eat the food? Don’t you think that was a sign? It is absurd that these people asked for a sign. But there was an ulterior motive at work. They knew Jesus thought they should believe in him because of the signs he had done. But that wasn’t really their concern. There was almost an attitude of “Okay, whatever, sure, we’ll believe in you if that’s what you want.” But they ask for a sign because they want him to give them more food.

Notice what “sign” they suggest. Hey, Jesus, remember how our ancestors ate manna every day in the wilderness? Uh, that would be a really good sign, don’t you think? How about if you miraculously provide food for us every day like Moses did back in the day. We like that idea that all we have to do is go outside and pick it up every morning. We’ll never have to worry about getting enough food again. Yeah, that sounds good to us. How about if you do that as a sign?

The best those people could envision was having enough to eat every day and not having to stress over it. That would have been an answer to their prayers. They couldn’t dream of anything better. They thought if only they could have that, they’d be happy. They would never need or want anything else. This was their dream come true, because life was hard, and this would make it so much easier. *They were all about their lives on this earth being better*. That was what mattered to them.

Many years ago the singer, Madonna, became known as the Material Girl. That nickname came from her song that rocketed to the top of the charts. The title of the song was *Material Girl*. In the song she sang about guys that would do all they could to woo her and win her, but all she cared about was whether a guy had cold, hard cash. She cared about money. The refrain said, “We are living in a material world, and I am a material girl.” That was repeated many times in the song.

This is the big lie that everyone of us falls prey to. It is a material world, and we are material people. The fulfillment of our dreams and hopes has to do with material stuff. In other words, what we long for, what will finally fill and satisfy our hearts, give us peace, joy, fullness and satisfaction, is stuff of this material world. For those simple people, it was just enough food to eat every day so they would never be hungry. We have all the food we want, so we move on to other things. It is success in some career, it is some achievement that will bring notice and approval to us, it is the applause of people, it is money and possessions. It is just being healthy and feeling good.

Let’s think about that assumption. Consider what the people in the crowd that day in the first century thought. They were certain that if Jesus would provide them with some form of manna, food to eat every day without stressing or working hard for it, enough to eat their fill every day, they would never need anything again. They would be happy, satisfied. Their lives would be full. Do you think that was true? We have mostly what they wanted. We have enough food to eat every day. We can eat our fill, and we don’t really have to stress much to get that. Are we satisfied with that? Is that enough for us? Are our lives complete and fulfilling because we have what they hoped for? No, they absolutely are not. Having enough to eat, we go on to other things and identify other things that we think we must have for life to be as good as we want it to be. We also have dreams, but they will be as successful at bringing us that satisfaction and peace as food every day would have been for those people. Yes, the food would have made life easier, more enjoyable, but it would not have been enough for them, or for us.

Laurie had a little saying on our refrigerator for years. It said, “It’s not an empty nest until their stuff is out of the garage.” We had our kids stuff in the garage for a long time after they moved out to get on with their own lives. Some of it is still there and we’re glad. Laurie wisely kept many of their toys, and now our grandchildren love playing with them. But a few years ago we gave notice we were going to clean out the garage, and if there was something they wanted, they’d better claim it. In the process of doing that we came across an item that will be part of Toby lore forever. When he was around 3 Mattel came out with a line of toys called “Food Fighters.” They were food items made to look like soldiers and weapons. One of them was called the Combat Carton. It was shaped like an egg carton, but made to look like an armored personnel carrier. It had a launcher on the top that fired toy tomato slices as weapons. Toby absolutely had to have Combat Carton. He was obsessed with it. This was the thing he needed most in life. If only he could have it, then he would be happy forever. It wasn’t Christmas time, so he couldn’t get it from Santa, so he decided there was another equally reliable and more accessible source. That was Grandma. He pestered my poor mother relentlessly saying, “Amma, go Target, get Combat Carton.” She finally did. He got Combat Carton. It made him happy for a few days. When we found it in the garage we asked him if he wanted it, and he just laughed. He could care less. He might have changed his mind if he had checked eBay. People have Combat Cartons up for sale for anywhere from $70 to $150, and the ammo for the launcher, the toy tomato slices, are going for $30! However, even if we had sold the toy and gotten something near that, none of us is going to feel like life is full and complete because of it. And that is the problem with the Material Girl approach. It’s a lie. It puts us on a treadmill that never stops. We keep chasing one thing after another, but none of it ever proves to be that thing we need most of all.

THE SMITH BARNEY LIE

The second lie can be seen in verses 27-29. Jesus told the people they needed to raise their sights from physical food to something greater. There is a food “that endures to eternal life.” Ah, he’s talking about the much deeper issues now. He’s talking about the life that we really need. It is life that doesn’t spoil, doesn’t disappoint, but fills our hearts with peace and joy and lasts forever. It is not life that inevitably ends tragically like life always does in this world. This is life as we dream of it. It doesn’t come from the stuff of this world. It comes from God.

That sounded pretty good to the people. Something that wouldn’t disappoint and wouldn’t end. True fullness of life. But how do you get that? What do you have to do? They said, “What must we do to do the work that God requires?” These were Jewish people. They weren’t all experts in the Law of Moses like the Pharisees were. But they’d been taught it since they were little kids. They knew the primary ideas of the Law, and in many cases they knew it inside and out. To me this is a telling question. When they ask what work God requires, that tells you that they knew the Law wasn’t it. They had been trying to live by the Law the best they could, to whatever extent that might be, and they knew that it wasn’t enough. They sensed that God required something else because they didn’t have the food of eternal life that Jesus mentioned.

It is the nature of the question that is important and telling. What work do we have to do to get this food, this life? You have to be really old to remember this. There was a classic commercial that ran on TV many decades ago. It was a commercial for an investment firm called Smith Barney which eventually became Morgan Stanley. The ad featured an actor named John Houseman who had the epitome of gravitas. He had a deep voice and a manner that reeked of class and sophistication. In the ad he talks about the virtue of the Smith Barney investment firm, then he clinched it with the classic line, “They make money the old fashioned way. They earn it.”

The people’s question reflects that classic message. The issue is not how you make money, but how you get the food of eternal life. The answer is, you get it the old fashioned way. You earn it. God requires you do some kind of work to earn this eternal kind of life. They knew the Law couldn’t be it, because it hadn’t worked. So if God doesn’t require that work, what kind does he require? What do we have to do to get this life?

Every human being buys into that lie. This is what makes sense to us. To get anything really good in life you have to earn it. You have to do something good to deserve it. You want the approval of your parents when you’re a little child? You have to behave and perform. You want to get good grades in school and get the notice and approval of a teacher? You have to work hard and be good. You want to earn a spot on that athletic team that you so long to play on? You’ve got to be good enough as a player to make it. You want that girl or guy to notice you and be interested in you? You have to do everything you can to make yourself attractive enough and charming enough. You want to get into that elite college? You have to be the best student, get the best grades to earn it. With everything in this world, that’s how it works. Whatever it is, to get it you have to do it the old fashioned way. You have to earn it. And everything inside us continually tells us that’s how we get God to give us that life, the full one that will never end. We have to earn it. We can’t imagine it being possible to get it any other way.

In this profound passage Jesus blows up that whole structure. He says it is a lie. Verse 29 is some of the most profound and revolutionary words ever spoken. “The work that God requires is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” Were Jesus delivering that line today I am certain that he would have used his fingers to put air quotes around the word “work.” His point is it isn’t work at all. It is nothing but pure grace. Believe in the one God has sent, and that one is Jesus himself. No other requirements. Just believe in Jesus. That’s it.

Well that can’t be right. That’s way too easy. Shoot, if that’s all you have to do, people will be running around committing murder, but “earning” this fabulous gift of full, unending life because they “believe in Jesus.” What kind of system is that? That’s a recipe for chaos and mayhem. Suppose a teacher says to a class of junior highers, no matter what you do, if you will just say I’m a good teacher, you’ll get an A in my class. How many of those humanoid life forms are going to work hard and learn anything in that class? Not many, if any.

Jesus claimed that the whole system of trying to earn God’s gift of life is a lie. It doesn’t work. It never has, and never will. This raises the question of why God would make the determining element believing in Jesus. Why does it come down to faith? It seems like that means that people who don’t deserve the “food” of eternal life will get it. Plus it looks like God made the Law of Moses the centerpiece of his relationship with his people for centuries, then Jesus came along saying, “Forget that. You don’t need it.” Why is faith the thing God makes crucial? Hebrews 11:6 says “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” Why?

God made faith the key because no one ever gets the food of eternal life the old fashioned way. No one ever earns it. No human, other than Jesus, is ever able to be good enough to deserve it. Never mind keeping all the stipulations of the Law of Moses, which was really tedious and people just couldn’t do it well. Focus for a moment on the true heart of that Law. It really came down to 2 commands. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor the way you love yourself. How many people keep those commands? Uh, well, what are we using as a grading scale? Is a passing grade 70%, 80%, 90%? Or maybe God grades on a curve. Hey, I’m not perfect, but I keep those commands better than 80% of people. Okay, 70%. All right, maybe only 60%. Do I pass?

Think about what those commands mean. Love God with everything that is in you, mind, heart, soul, will, choices, and do that every moment of every day in every single thing. Your great, driving passion at every moment, is to love God with everything you are. How much of the time is that true of you? Actually, almost never. It’s maybe sort of true some of the time. That sounds like a failing grade to me. How about loving others the way you love yourself. The truth is you love yourself. Our culture tells us we need to love ourselves. That’s an unnecessary instruction. We all love ourselves. We are obsessed with ourselves. We constantly think about ourselves. We evaluate everything on the basis of how that affects me, what do I get out of it? That command tells us to love people that way. Yeah, that doesn’t happen. I’m afraid I get a failing grade on that one too.

The killer is God’s grading scale. The grading scale is this: 100% is an A, anything else is an F. Hey, come on, that’s way too harsh, isn’t it? Well, actually it’s the only scale that is fair and good. What if God said the scale was a passing grade is 90%. How can he exclude the guy who got 89.4% He did awfully well. He’s so close. How can God fail him? The problem with anything less than 100% is what it creates is a small pocket of evil. Evil, by definition is destructive and deadly. It is like cancer. If you let it float around it will end up destroying life.

***God makes faith the key because evil always starts with a failure of faith***. Actions always start with thoughts. Before any evil action there is a failure of thought, in this case a failure of faith. The thought, “I can’t trust God” always precedes any evil action. Consider some examples from the Bible. Abraham took his wife, Sarah, with him to Egypt. While there he became afraid that some Egyptian would kill him to get Sarah. He did not believe he could trust God to protect him. His faith failed. So he hatched a scheme to lie. He claimed Sarah was his sister. This put her in a terrible position. His lack of faith led to evil.

The night Jesus was arrested Peter was confronted by a servant girl who recognized him as one of Jesus’ followers. He did not believe he could trust God to take care of him, so he did the same thing Abraham did. He lied. He denied any connection to Jesus. In Eden Satan told Eve that she couldn’t trust God to look out for her good. He suggested God did not want good for her so she should disobey God and get what was good for herself. She bought it. She didn’t trust in God’s goodness, and untold evil resulted.

Faith, believing God, is always key. We will only obey God to the degree that we have faith in him. There is a young man named Jacob Smith, 16 years old, whose story was featured on CBS News last year. He is a skier, but he is legally blind. He has a little blurry vision, but it is 20/800. That means the big E on the top of the eye chart would have to be 4 times larger than it is for him to see it from 20 feet. How does he ski? He has a radio with him in his pocket. His father transmits directions to him to guide him down a mountain. His dad, Nathan, says, “It’s on me to make sure I don’t let him down. I have to guide him through narrower chutes or not go off a cliff.” Jacob was asked how much he trusts his father. He said, “Enough to turn right when he tells me to.” Jacob does what his dad says because he trusts him. He knows that his dad loves him, is utterly committed to keeping him safe and is able to do it. We are in the same situation with God. We will only obey him if we believe he loves us, is committed to keeping us safe and is able to do it. Faith is always key.

There is another reason God makes faith the key. It is because of what the two approaches produce. The old fashioned “earn it” way inevitably produces hypocrisy and pride in us. We can’t master the real heart of goodness and holiness, so we will always produce an outward cheap imitation. And we will compare ourselves with others, convincing ourselves that we are better than them. In contrast, the faith approach produces deep humility because we know we deserve nothing. It fills us with gratitude to God for what he has done for us as well as love for him and an ability to love others.

IMPLICATIONS

There is a principle we must all remind ourselves of continually. It is that believing a lie is dangerous. It will eventually create problems for us. I am at a transition point in my treatment for cancer. The doctor told me when I reached this point they would do scans prior to moving forward. So Tuesday I had some contrast CT scans. I told Laurie she didn’t need to go with me. I’ve had CT scans before and I know they are easy and relatively quick. But she insisted on going with me. I’m glad she did. Several times before the tests they asked me if I’ve had these tests before. I said I’d had CT scans, but never a contrast CT. They asked me if I’m allergic to the contrast fluid. I said, “Not that know of.” It was unlikely. Less than 2% of people have a reaction to it. That probably should have been a giveaway, because I usually end up in those small percentages. As the scan ended my face began itching. I thought that was a little odd, but just headed out to the waiting area where Laurie was. By the time I got there my face was really itching and so was my neck and chest. I mentioned this to Laurie, and when she looked at me her eyes got big. She said, “We need to tell someone.” She did and they acted quickly. A nurse came out and they quickly had me in a hospital bed, taking my blood pressure, with a doctor on the way to see me. Apparently I had a big welt on my forehead and others on my neck, back and chest. They kept asking me if I was having any trouble breathing, which I was not. They gave me a big dose of Benadryl, which calmed everything down. After about a half hour they let me go. It was really good that Laurie was there because after taking all that Benadryl I was not the most alert I’ve ever been. I believed, I thought that I was not allergic to that contrast dye. But what I believed was not the truth, and my belief put me in a situation that was potentially dangerous. I learned that people have even died from that kind of a reaction to that dye. When you believe things that are not true, it does damage and can do even severe harm to you.

RECOGNIZE HOW DEADLY THE LIES ARE

The Madonna lie will send you on a wild goose chase because nothing in this world can give you eternal life. Only eternal life can truly satisfy us. Without it we always are dogged by fear and sadness because nothing in this life is permanent. Eternal life is both duration and quality of life, life with real peace, love, hope and joy. Buy the Madonna lie and you will spend your life chasing an illusion, reaching for something that is always out of reach. It will fill you with disappointment and frustration, and at some point will leave you with only cynicism and hopelessness. It will put you in constant competition and conflict with other people as you all strive for the baubles of this world. There’s not enough to go around so you have to battle for them, but when you get them they somehow are not quite what you had hoped. As long as you live by the Madonna lie you will spend your life chasing combat cartons, and the whole thing will prove to be a waste of time. There will never be any peace, you will never be able to truly love other people, and you will end up cynical and despairing, having wasted your life.

The Smith Barney lie will make you shallow, hypocritical and proud, will keep you from experiencing true rest for your soul, true peace and will absolutely eliminate joy from your life. And worst of all, it will keep you separated from God.

LIVE BY THE TRUTH

There can be no doubt that life is easier and better when we have the things of this world. Life is much better for us, much more enjoyable for us when we have the good stuff. It’s much nicer to have plenty to eat like we do today than to struggle to have enough and often be hungry like many people did in Jesus’ day. Sometimes pastors can oversell the message that life isn’t found in the things of this world. But the simple truth is, fullness of life doesn’t come from this world’s stuff. Joni Eareckson Tada, who is a quadriplegic and has lived a difficult life. But she has done it with joy. In her book, *When God Weeps*, she told the story of her visit to the impoverished nation of Ghana. She described the overwhelming destitution, disease and stench of the place. She also described the fellowship of disabled street people who are Christians there. Their circumstances are unimaginably difficult. Yet they were full of happiness and exuberant worship. In the oppressive heat these crippled people abounded in joy. She cited one boy who live in a box by a trash heap saying to her, “You Americans are the ones we can’t understand. God has given you so much, you have been blessed…Why are so many people in your country unhappy?”

Eternal life comes from God. We get it by faith in Jesus, trusting what he supplies is enough in every way. It is fine to enjoy the good things we have been given and we should give thanks to God for them. But we must always recognize that true life comes from resting in God’s grace, from having the hope of eternal life, from loving God and loving other people.