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WE NEED AN AIR PURIFIER

John 12:20-23

Stanislov Petrov was a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet Air Defense Forces in 1983. His job was to monitor reports at the early warning command center and inform senior commanders of any threats. In September of that year tension between the Soviet Union and the west, especially the United States, was high after a Soviet fighter jet had shot down a Korean Air Lines passenger jet, killing all on board. On September 26, 3 weeks after that incident, the early warning system reported that there had been a launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile from a launch site in North Dakota, followed by launches of 5 more missiles. His orders were that he should immediately notify upper command so there could be a response.

But he struggled with what to do. His orders were clear. Report the launch. But was it real? Had the United States actually launched missiles? He had doubts. To begin he questioned the trustworthiness of the early warning computer system. It was new and he felt its reliability was dubious. Of even more concern was the fact that it made no sense to him that the US would launch an unprovoked attack at that point, and even if they did, they certainly would not do so with only 5 or 6 missiles, given the size of the US nuclear arsenal. When no verification of the launch came from ground radar, he chose to disobey his orders and not report the launch. Bruce Blair, a nuclear strategies expert with the Center For Defense Information, later said had he reported the launch, “The top leadership, told that an attack had been launched and with only a few minutes to decide, would make a decision to retaliate.” That would have initiated a nuclear war that would have devastated the world.

In a critical few moments, Petrov was faced with the question of what was true, and the results of his decision could have been disastrous. His decision to ignore the warning and not inform senior officials was proven to be correct. It was eventually determined that what triggered the alarm was a rare alignment of sunlight on high altitude clouds over North Dakota and the orbits of the Soviet satellite. Petrov was at first commended for his action, but later reprimanded. He said he was made a scapegoat. The pressure on him was so severe at one point he suffered a nervous breakdown.

What is true? Petrov faced that question in a crisis situation. But all of us face that question in a myriad of ways throughout our lives. How do we know what is true? That question is at the heart of a brief incident we will consider today in John 12:20-23.

THE EVENT: Greeks came to Jesus for answers.

John tells us that a group of people identified as Greeks, who had come to worship at the Feast leading up to Passover, spoke to Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples, requesting that he would ask Jesus if they could meet with him. John called them Greeks because they were Greek speaking, Gentile people. They had been attracted to the Jewish religion. They had come to Jerusalem, like others, to worship the true God, though they couldn’t enter into the Temple beyond an outer court called the Court of the Gentiles.

They didn’t go directly to Jesus to ask for an audience, possibly because they had heard that on previous occasions he had made the point that he had come to minister specifically to the Jewish people. In Matthew 10:6 when sending out his disciples to preach Jesus told them to go, “to the lost sheep of Israel.” In Matthew 15:24 when Jesus was in a Gentile area and a Gentile woman asked him for help he said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Knowing this, they might have felt uncertain about whether Jesus would want to meet with them, and thought maybe they needed someone to intercede with Jesus for them. They likely asked Philip to speak to Jesus on their behalf because they felt they had some point of contact with him. Philip’s name is a Greek name, and he came from Bethsaida, which is in an area where a lot of Gentiles lived. It's even possible that they had some mutual acquaintances.

Philip might have been a bit uncertain about whether Jesus wanted to talk to them also. He found Andrew, whose name was also Greek, suggesting he also had some point of contact with the Gentile world. My guess is Philip either went to Andrew to ask, “What do you think?” or to enlist him in the effort to bring the Greeks’ request to Jesus. I suspect it was the latter, though there is no way to be sure.

Jesus’ response to the request delivered by the two disciples is curious. He said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” What does that have to do with Greeks asking for a meeting? John does not record whether the meeting took place or how it went if it did happen. We never encounter these Greeks in the story again. My suspicion, and that’s all it is, is that Jesus did meet with these Greek seekers. I think that’s why John recorded the story. But why did Jesus respond the way he did?

His response tells us that the coming of the Greeks meant to Jesus that something had changed. He has said several times, “My hour has net yet come.” Now he says, “My hour has arrived. Now is the time.” I believe what had changed was that Jesus was telling his followers that his mission to the Jewish people was ending and the door was being opened to the Gentile world. It would take his death for that to happen. His death would also mean that the Jewish people, following the lead of their religious experts, were by and large going to reject him, while the Gentiles would come flocking to faith in him. One door was closing, but another bigger one was opening.

That brings us back to those Greeks and why they had come to Jesus. Clearly these were people who were seeking truth that would satisfy their souls. They had likely grown up in a pagan Gentile culture, and had found that lacking, leaving them with a thirst for something better. They had discovered the truths of the one Almighty Creator God whom the Jewish people worshiped. That had spoken to them powerfully enough that they even participated in the Jewish festivals. Likely they were what is called in the New Testament God fearers. They were Gentiles who did not become Jewish converts, but still worshiped the God of Israel. However, they also found that to not be enough. They have seen and heard Jesus, and his message resonated with them. They wanted to find out more because it appeared to them that he was what their souls longed for. Thinking about the progression in their lives can help us see what needs to happen in our lives also. This brief incident is about finding the truth.

APPLICATION TO US

To know the truth:

THEY HAD TO REJECT THEIR OWN CULTURE

These Greeks had grown up in a polytheistic, idol-infested culture. The supposed gods of their culture were by and large depicted as capricious, often selfish and at times venal. Their culture felt that explained how life is, but it reveals they created their gods in the image of human beings. The moral content of their religions was rather lacking compared with the religion of Israel. These particular Greeks also likely questioned the very reality of their supposed gods. Their journey to seeing Jesus began with them recognizing that their culture had not given them what they needed. They had to look elsewhere for the answers their souls longed for. That took them to the Jewish religion.

We are going to have to make a similar leap. Believing Jesus has the answers is going to mean we have to say no thank you to the beliefs our culture offers us. But what are those beliefs? There are many, but I am going to point out a few of the crucial ones today. We need to understand that culture is pervasive. It is a bit like the air we breathe. It is all around us, and it affects us every day without us even noticing it.

In my case, breathing the air has some unhappy effects. I have been plagued with allergy and sinus issues all my life. At one point I went to an allergist and was tested. I didn’t have any food allergies they concluded, but if it is a plant that grows, I’m allergic to it. Grass, trees, bushes, plants of all kinds, I’m pretty much an equal opportunity allergy sufferer. I recently had a whopper of a bout with these allergies. It’s frustrating that there is no clear pattern. These bouts can hit at any time. All I know is, the air I breathe starts making me sick. As a result of this latest attack we bought an air purifier in hopes that it can ease my symptoms. I submit to you that culture is like that. We’re breathing it in all the time without realizing that it is actually making us sick. We need an air purifier. The Greeks were thinking that maybe Jesus could be the air purifier they needed. I’m going to point out this morning a few ways our culture makes us sick that we are at times affected by without even knowing it.

I need to mention one caveat. Not everything our culture says is wrong. We can and should learn from other people who are not believers. It is important to remember that all truth is God’s truth. If it is true, then it is of God. This is good to remember because we all have blind spots, and other people can often see what we cannot. We can learn from them about our own foibles. Having said that, here are 4 ideas our culture promulgates that make us sick.

The first is that **there is no one truth**. No truth is absolute. It is all relative. Surveys show that this is believed by the large majority of Americans. It is even accepted by almost two thirds of those who consider themselves Christians. Our culture tells us that each person must find his or her own “truth” and that supposed truth won’t be the same for everyone. Truth, we are told, can even vary with circumstances.

The implication of this is that there is also no absolute right or wrong. That being the case, no one way of living is “better” than another way, because that would imply some absolute standard of measure of how good a way of living is. No culture is “better” than another culture. Each person must decide for himself or herself what is right and wrong, what is true, what is the best way to live, and all that matters is that they follow their own path. We can have no way of judging that path, because there is no one standard, no one way.

This becomes an obvious conflict with what we see in the Scriptures and with what Jesus taught. Jesus said he is the truth, and knowing the truth will set us free. There are many instances in Scripture that tell us some things are wrong, labeled sin. The Scriptures insist there is a right way to live and a wrong way, that some ways of living are better than others. The world view of Jesus puts us in direct conflict with the world view and the assumptions of our culture.

There’s a lot about this pervasive idea that is seriously problematic. There is the obvious logical contradiction of stating the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth. The statement nullifies itself. There is also the problem that the reality is that no one actually lives by that belief, regardless of what they claim.

For instance, noted atheist, Richard Dawkins has said, “There is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pointless indifference…We are machines for propagating DNA.” There is no evil and no good. All is relative. We are only machines, and there is no moral standard for machines. They just do what they are made to do. But a big problem for Dawkins is that he doesn’t live by his own assertions. He has denounced some doctrines of our faith as being, “morally obnoxious.” Um, excuse me? Morally obnoxious? That is a strong way of saying, “Wrong.” How can he say that if there is no wrong? If we are just machines, nothing is “morally obnoxious.” For something to be morally obnoxious there must be some standard of morality, some clear measure of good and evil. He rails against the evil of what he calls the “religious indoctrination of children” even though he claims there is no evil. He praises the virtues of “cultural diversity” even while saying there is no good. He holds dear things that absolutely contradict his own claims.

We recently have had a spate of things go bad on us. A couple of weeks ago our car battery died on Sunday morning. We were able to work around that. The next weekend our water heater died. We had to shell out a lot of money to have that fixed. The plumber who did the work informed me that when the heater died it took down our water pressure regulator with it, so we needed to replace that too. Now we run into the problem of whether there is truth or not. Was what he told me true? Maybe it was true for him, but not for me. I liked my truth better than his truth, because it would save me several hundred dollars. Would it make sense for me to say, “We all need to find our own truth, and in my truth the pressure regulator is fine”? The real “truth” is, I don’t even know for a fact that a pressure regulator is needed at all. People tell me it is, but the people who say that are plumbers who make money installing pressure regulators. Here’s the *truth*. I can’t function in this world without believing there is truth. I have to make decisions based on what is true. Our entire civilization, our ability to function, is totally dependent on the fact of truth, that there is reality out there that can be known. Not knowing what is real and true, is to be insane. Doesn’t that suggest that our culture is on the wrong track?

In his book, *Visions of Vocation*, Christian thinker, Stephen Garber relates his conversation with the woman who leads the Protection Project, an initiative of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government that is addressing human trafficking. She said the initiative, since it involves Harvard and focuses on human rights, is powerfully appealing to bright young people and it draws unusually gifted women and men from universities all over the US. She says these gifted people always, after a few weeks there, come to see her, asking to talk. She knows what they are going to say. At some point they will awkwardly say, “Who are we to say that trafficking is wrong in Pakistan? Isn’t it parochial for us to think that we know what is wrong for them?” She said, “I just don’t have time for that question anymore. The issues we address are too real, they matter too much…I need people who believe that there is basic right and wrong in the universe.” In reality, everyone believes that, whether they admit it. The people she described are saying, “Isn’t it wrong for us to judge that trafficking is wrong?” If there is no right or wrong, why worry about that? Despite these obvious problems our culture religiously professes there is no absolute truth.

A second message that pervades our culture is that **the material world is all there is**. This means there is no God, no Satan, no angels, no heaven, no hell, and no life after death. The only things that exist are things you can see and touch. To live with the hope of eternal life is to be deluded and to potentially waste the only life you’re ever going to have.

This message runs into a contradiction with the first message. If there is no absolute truth, how can one say there absolutely is nothing except for the physical, material world? That is an absolute statement, and if that first message is correct, this one cannot be. However, this is a reminder that hoping for consistency in a culture’s thinking is usually a futile exercise.

This kind of thinking takes divine revelation completely out of play. If there is no God, there certainly could be no revelation of supposed truth from that non-existent being. Expecting to get real truth from the Bible would be in the same category as believing you’re actually going to get some chocolate eggs from the Easter bunny. It’s fine to read the Bible to learn about history and about what ancient, superstitious people believed, and maybe learn some wisdom from that, but the Scriptures or any other supposed divine revelation has no authority whatsoever.

This, of course, means that Jesus absolutely was not God in human form, since God doesn’t actually exist. The stories of his miracles, changing of water into wine, walking on water, raising Lazarus from the dead and his own resurrection are all nothing more than legends. In fact, his whole story is just a collection of legends, not all that much different than the stories of Paul Bunyan and Babe, the big blue ox.

Combine this idea with that first message and you end up believing that there is nothing worth sacrificing your life for. This life is the only one you have, and giving it up for some supposed good that someone has made up makes no sense. The only reasonable thing is to do whatever makes you happy in life.

A third big message that is pervasive in our culture is that **our biggest need is to satisfy our desires**. That is key to happiness, which is what life is about The best possible life is to have whatever you desire, and the closer you get to that goal the happier you will be. To be denied what you desire is terrible and intolerable. Listen to your heart and follow your heart. Pursue whatever your heart tells you that you need in order to have the life you want.

A seemingly ever present example of this in our culture has to do with sexuality. The message of our culture is that you must be free to have whatever sexual habits, whatever sexual identity you desire. There is nothing wrong with any sexual desire or activity, because there is no such thing as wrong. And you could never be happy if you were denied what you desire. Since this life is all there is, being happy now is all that matters. To deny or even question a person’s sexual desires is to injure them terribly.

Once again, our culture reveals its inconsistency here. It says there is one caveat to this freedom of desire. It is that you must not force your desires on another person. Your sexual desires must always be pursued in the context of, and limited by, mutual consent. But wait. You’re using terms like “must not” and “must.” Those are moral imperatives. They imply that to not follow them is to do something wrong. But according to our culture there is no such thing as wrong. What if a man’s sexual desire is to get sex from whomever, whenever and however he wants. If you deny him his chosen lifestyle you’re doing injury to him, and since there is no such thing as wrong, what he wants, by definition, is not wrong. It seems to be quite a conundrum. Our culture wants to say there is no such thing as wrong out of one side of its mouth, while simultaneously saying that some things are just wrong, out of the other. As I said, looking for consistency from an irrational culture is an exercise in futility. I submit when a culture uncouples from truth and from the true God, it instantly becomes irrational. We need to always remember that. Now we see things being promulgated that are irrational in the extreme. We shouldn’t be surprised. Once a culture becomes irrational, it is going to so insane things.

It takes very little thought to see the problems with this message. The problem of clashing personal desires is one. But another problem is there is a serious flaw in the idea that we can trust our own desires. It’s peach season. Laurie makes awesome, delicious peach pies. My heart tells me I desire peach pie every day. I also desire a big, juicy hamburger with French Fries for dinner and peach pie and ice cream for dessert. Oh, and let’s not forget some doughnuts for breakfast. I desire those things. Should I pursue whatever my heart desires? Well, there’s nothing wrong with doing so, because there is no such thing as wrong. My desires are normal human desires. But if I follow them they will destroy my health. We can’t always trust either what our desires or our hearts tell us, because they don’t tell us what is good for us. Of course not, because there’s no such thing as good.

One more thing our culture tells us that we need to be aware of is that power is all important. There is no right or wrong, no good or bad, no spiritual realm, no God, no life after death, and all that matters is that we can pursue our desires. What determines whether we can get what we desire? It is power. **Power is what enables us to control our lives and our circumstances so that we are free to get what we desire.** Our culture makes a big thing out of “empowerment.” The reason is in the end our culture only believes in power. Power is key to having the life we want. Without power we cannot pursue our desires, and pursuing our desires is the only thing that is labeled “good.”

A recent survey by Barna research group involved a large group of Americans. It presented them with several statements and asked if they agreed. One was “to find truth, you must look within yourself.” 91% said they agreed with that. They believe truth is not some objective, absolute thing that stands outside of us. It is something totally subjective, meaning it's not truth at all, it’s opinion. Another statement was “to be fulfilled, you should pursue the things you desire most.” 86% agreed with that one. Another was, “The biggest goal in life is to enjoy it as much as possible. 84% said yes to that one. The researchers concluded, “The morality of self fulfillment is everywhere, like the air we breathe.”

We might say that while we know our culture believes these things it doesn’t affect us. But this thinking is bombarding us every moment it is pervasive in our culture and it can subtly creep into our thinking without us even noticing it. Many in the church in our country today are compromising their beliefs because they clash with these cultural shibboleths. They find it uncomfortable to believe and assert there is truth and there is right and wrong. They struggle to believe some lifestyles could be wrong because they are actually destructive. They are gradually deconstructing the Christian faith and don’t realize they are sawing off the limb they are sitting on. They are breathing the air of our culture, and it’s making them sick.

THEY HAD TO REJECT ANOTHER RELIGION

When those Greeks came to see Jesus there was a clear contrast between him and the religion represented by the religious leaders of Judea. What Jesus was finally going to do hadn’t been revealed yet, but he had clearly shown people a new way to think and to live that was in stark contrast to what most of them believed. The Greeks came to Jesus because they saw that contrast. They knew they had to make a choice between the religion of Israel of that day and what Jesus was offering. They had rejected their culture’s beliefs in favor of worship of the God of Israel, but now they were faced with the possibility of a new and better way. What they heard appealed to them. In part, all they had to do was think about the temple. As Gentiles they would never be allowed into its inner courts. They would always be second class worshipers at best. But Jesus was saying that they actually could become fully accepted members of God’s people. His words were appealing to them so they were pursuing it.

We also are going to be faced with rejecting other religions in order to see Jesus and follow him. This is a rather complicated issue, because religions come in so many different packages. There are two basic forms of religion that we have to watch out for. One form is a very large group of religions of various stripes that all have one thing in common. They deny that Jesus Christ is God in human form, who died to take our punishment upon himself and rose from his grave to give evidence of his true identity and to prove he was the fulness of God. In order to see Jesus and live in his new way we will have to reject all of those alternative religions that have a defective view of the identity of Jesus.

The religion that is a more subtle danger is one that says basically, it’s up to you. You must meet the standard that God has set. You must somehow make yourself acceptable to God. This is what most religions teach. It is also the basis of a widespread corruption of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This one is tricky because it can agree about who Jesus is and about what he has done. It can have that all correct, but still insist that there is something you must do besides trust in him in order to gain God’s acceptance, approval and love. You have rules to keep. You have to be in some way “good enough.”

This was the most persistent problem Paul had to battle in the first century church. The book of Galatians is specifically about denying this approach to God. But echoes of that same battle show up in Romans and Colossians, among others. Even though we have that all laid out before us in the Bible, that kind of thinking is still prevalent. Most of us struggle with it to some extent.

How could God really love me when he sees what I really am? How can I expect God to answer my prayers when I haven’t been doing what I should be doing? I have to work harder, be better, be more committed, be more diligent so God can really love me. All of us have those thoughts at times. We rebel at the idea that one could be accepted by God while living a life totally disobedient to him, so we think there must be some rules.

We think that way because it is somehow deeply embedded in human nature. Everything works that way. You have to earn it. You have to work for it. You have to deserve it. The entire system of the world operates on that basis and our minds and hearts default to that thinking. There was a scene in the old movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest*, the sequel to the original *Pirates Of The Caribbean,* that demonstrate this. There were two rather hapless pirates that appeared in the first movie who show up again in the second one. Their names were Ragetti and Pintel. In the first movie they were part of a cursed crew of pirates that were unable to die. The curse had been lifted, but then they had been sent to jail. In this scene they have escaped from jail and are in a longboat on the open sea, in search of Jack Sparrow’s ship, the Black Pearl. Ragetti is in the back of the boat and appears to be reading the Bible, though he has it upside down. The two of them argue about whether their escape from jail was due to divine providence or their own cleverness. Ragetti is also refusing to steal a ship. Pintel says, “since when do you care?” Ragetti says, “Since we’re not immortal no more. We gotta take care of our immortal souls.” Pintel points at the Bible and says, “You know you can’t read.” Ragetti responds, “It’s the Bible. You get credit for trying.”

It’s all about getting credit for what we are and what we do. If we get enough credit, then our immortal souls are safe. If we fail, our immortal souls are in grave peril. The system the Greeks first gravitated to when they left their own culture was pretty much in line with the credit system. It was live by the law of Moses. Keep all the commandments and you have enough credit. Fail to keep the commandments, and you’re in big trouble. It won’t go well with you. But they heard something different from Jesus, something that spoke to their hearts because they knew they weren’t keeping the Law, and they could likely see that no one else was either. Those who appeared to be, the Pharisees, could only keep a shadow of the law, not the real intent. That was the main theme of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which powerfully exposed the whole credit scheme of the Law.

But we struggle believing the message of grace, that we are freed from the credit system and trust that approval from God is a gift. In his book, *Hidden Agendas*, Steve Brown wrote about a conversation with a friend in which he asked the friend’s forgiveness and the friend thanked him because there was no “kicker” in his request. He meant there was no “but” in it. Brown goes on to say we have become a church of kickers. “Of course God loves you, but…” God is your loving Father, but…” What was meant as good news quickly becomes bad news because of the kicker.

The problem is the kicker, which invariably involves some sort of “Up to you” approach, something we need to do to make ourselves holy and acceptable, never sets us free. It always ends up where the Pharisees landed. It can grind us down, exhaust our souls, make us proud, but it can never give us a new heart and fill us with life and joy. In his book, *Gospel: Rediscovering The Power That Made Christianity Revolutionary*, J. D. Greer compares this do it yourself religion to filling a balloon with air by blowing it up. If you want to keep that balloon up in the air you have to keep smacking it up or it will drop down to the ground. That’s what the “up to you” religion does. It keeps smacking you, telling you to try harder, be better, reminding you of your failures. Greer says that the message of Jesus, the Gospel of grace, is like filling a balloon with helium. The balloon floats in the air on its own. It will even soar. Living in God’s grace, knowing who God really is, will enable us to soar spiritually.

Christian thinker and writer Harry Blamires said, “In the Christian life nothing, nothing at all, can be purchased at the do it yourself shop.”

CONCLUSION

This incident presents each of us with one huge question. That question is, what determines what I accept as true and live by?What will determine what is true in our lives? There are a number of possible sources. As we have seen, it could be our culture, it could be religion, it could be philosophy. Some in our culture will say it is science, but science doesn’t give the answers to life’s deepest questions. It could be, “it’s just what I think.” It’s my own opinion, though likely that opinion is a product of the influence of our culture. Or it could be Jesus. The answer this passage points us to is Jesus is the source of the truth that puts life in our immortal souls.

This is a question we need to answer because it is crucial to what we think about who God is, about who we are, what our identity is, what kind of people we should be, how we should treat other people, what our priorities should be, about everything in life. About every matter that comes up in our lives if we truly want to know the truth and live, we should say, “I want to see Jesus.” I need to see what he says, and then do that.

For me, this week presented an opportunity to ask that question. Some time ago in my treatment for melanoma a scan revealed a nodule on my thyroid gland. The doctor said this is quite common in people my age and almost always benign. He put off doing anything about it. But now my treatment is nearly done, so he wanted to deal with it. They did a biopsy of it and told me these are benign 95% of the time. That was concerning for me, because I typically seem to end in the small percentages. We learned this week that has happened again. My doctor informed me that I’m in the 5%. I have thyroid cancer. Fortunately, it is not related to the melanoma. But this was not good news. In that situation I need most of all to see Jesus, to go to him for truth about how to think about it, about the need to trust that he is good and has a plan for me. My doctor informed me that the treatment for this is surgery to remove the cancerous part of the gland and that should be all I need. But whatever happens, I need to see Jesus in this situation.

All too often Christians claim to want to follow Jesus, but they don’t seem to end up living much like him. Years ago when Carissa was in college, she sang in a terrific choir. One evening we went up to the LA area to hear her sing, and after the concert we took her out to eat. There was a restaurant she thought would be good, so we went there. The menu was very large. We were a bit overwhelmed by it. So when our server came Laurie asked him, “We’ve never been here before so we don’t know what to order. What would you recommend?” He said, “I never eat here, so I really don’t know what to suggest.” It occurred to me in that moment that I don’t want to be like that guy. I don’t want to be a person who never partakes of Jesus’ truth. So let’s look to him for the truth that will guide our lives.