

Every Culture is built on a religion, but the religion that forms the foundation for the culture is not always easy to identify because it remains hidden behind a veil. The stated, official religion of the culture is usually not the real religion of the culture. In ancient Israel, very often idolatry had taken over the country. Even while the temple to God still functioned, the hearts of the people were in pursuit of another ideal. In our culture, even though we call ourselves a Christian nation, there is another religion at work, the religion of individualism. This week we will begin to go back to the wilderness, to start over at building a proper culture for ourselves founded on the pursuit of God as the ideal. We will do this by looking at three examples of individualism, then spending the last two days looking at broader patterns.

Day 1

Work

Scripture calls us into the world of work. Most Christians see work as something we are forced to do unwillingly, a product of man's fall from grace. However, scripture makes clear that man's call to work came before the fall, and the fall only affected the toilsomeness of work, not the fact of work itself. The man totally transformed by the grace of God finds joy in his work without becoming a workaholic. The religion of individualism has a different outlook on work. Whereas Christianity called one to work as part of the image of God, individualism calls one to work in order to achieve greatness. Where Christianity offered work to live in the image of God, individualism offers work as a means to make the world in your own image, to make the world to your liking and standard. Where Christianity offered work as a means to community and the economy of blessing one another, individualism offers work to set oneself apart from others, to show your glory over others, a means of personal achievement. Where Christianity offered work as having value in itself because God works, individualism can only offer the fruit of work, and if that fruit can be achieved without work, all the better. Therefore, work, for most, must be endured as a necessary evil. Work is something that we do in hopes of reaching the point where we no longer must do it and can finally retire.

Verses: Colossians 3:23; Genesis 2:15-16; 1 Kings 21:1-24; 2 Kings 22:1-7

Prayer Topics: Work, Attitude, Joy, Community, Service to Others

Day 2

Family

Individualism has lots to say about the family, and often as Christians we are tempted to see anything about the family as something good. I was recently reading a book that contained an interview with a man that was formerly a workaholic, spending every day until midnight working to provide his family with all the material comforts that they could possibly want. He was shocked one day to find out his wife was divorcing him, and in the following years he remarried and found a new perspective on life. He had concluded that there was more to life than material possessions, and that loving his new family and receiving love were worth far more than the nice house and country club membership he had previously worked so hard to provide. Most Christians would applaud this epiphany, but under the surface Individualism lurked. When asked why the family was more important than work, this man could only offer that he liked it more. His personal preference had changed. This was what pleased him now. It could and probably would change in the future. The family was not seen as having value because it was related to the trinity of God and a good because of that, but only had value because he enjoyed it in the moment. This current preference for the family was, as the book described, as arbitrary and unexamined as his previous love for his work. This is what individualism does to everything it touches. Everything becomes about us and can be no bigger or more important than our whim. The bible, on the

other hand, grounds family in the nature of God himself, and so provides a value and meaning that are much bigger than we will ever be and a foundation that will outlast us.

Verses: Exodus 20:12; 1 John 3:2-4:20

Prayer Topics: Love, Family, Humility

Day 3

Religion

Individualism is not opposed to religion, which is why so often as Christians we do not see it for the enemy that it is, if we see it at all. Because it does not come at us with guns blazing but with lips smiling, we do not perceive the danger until it is too late. A recent book I was reading described a modern “worshiper” who was more honest and forthright than most when describing her religion in terms of herself and her preferences, saying that she was just being loving and gentle toward herself and listening to her own little voice. This is, in fact, the religion of individualism in a nutshell, and the only moral imperative of this religion is to be authentic. To listen to one’s own voice, to be one’s true self, to live one’s best life. Being the best version of yourself does not mean, to the individualist, to live up to some external standard, but instead to be aware of and in alignment with your own true desires. To know what you really want and to pursue it with courage and determination is the call of individualism, and it has invaded all modern formal religions and is wearing them like a skinsuit. The call to love yourself excuses any action one might take, and is the get out of jail free card for any transgression of traditional morals. “I had to be true to myself” is the only creed that one needs in the modern world. The problem is, of course, isolation. Whereas traditional faiths like Christianity created community, individualism creates... individuals. The high price of individualism is a terrifying and complete isolation.

Verses: John 14:1-6; James 1:27; Matthew 6:1-34

Prayer Topics: Faith, Humility, Unselfishness, Love of God, Obedience to God

Day 4

Finding Oneself

The new hero’s journey of individualism is to find oneself. This means doing the difficult work of getting rid of all the baggage of family, country, and any other group identity. To be free of all cultural influences so that you can finally understand what you really want is the goal. Most of the time, the story goes, we are actually pursuing what others want for us, and not our true desires. Any notion of duty or expectation must be thrown off, so that the authentic self with its real desires can be found. Of course, the difficulty in this is the problem of peeling an onion, that when all of the outside influences are peeled back nothing is left. Our desires, like our emotions, are constantly shifting sands, and knowing oneself is like knowing a river, it is constantly new and therefore an impossible task. In contrast to this the bible offers knowing a God that never changes, having a definition of good that is solid like a fortress, allowing us to actually make progress toward a goal. Having been made in the image of God, it is impossible to know oneself without knowing the God who we image. And just like salt makes all things taste more like themselves, God allows each one of us to become ourselves as we become more like him.

Verses: Philippians 2:4; 2 Timothy 3:2-4; 1 Corinthians 10:24; James 4:1-2

Prayer Topics: Love of God, God’s Love for Us, Identity, Being a Servant to God

Day 5

A Larger Framework

The big problem with individuality is that it is a null, a void. Like a black hole, it is something that takes everything and returns nothing. It has a constantly shifting definition of good, meaning no progress toward it can ever be made. It connects no desire to any larger framework, it connects no individual to any larger community, and it connects nothing to any larger meaning than an arbitrary and temporary desire. Individuality offers complete freedom at the expense of complete nihilism. Christianity, on the other hand, creates a meaning and purpose in every aspect of our life. It connects us to families, to communities, and to systems of meaning and belief that are deep, strong, and resilient. It connects us to beauty, goodness, and truth that are far larger than any individual life and, if fact, outlast any life. It promises life after death instead of death in the midst of life. I was recently watching a documentary about a series of murders that happened in Times Square in the 70's in which the killer tried to hide the identities of his victims. Times Square, in the 70s, was a wretched hive of scum and villainy where people bought and sold each other, using each other as nameless, faceless tools for the satisfaction of their own desires. It is no wonder that the killer tried to obliterate the identities of his victims, for that was the ethos of the time and place, and it remains the ethos of individualism. Let us go back to the wilderness, and build a personal and social culture on a much better foundation.

Verses: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 13:20-21; Isaiah 54:10

Prayer Topics: Community, Purpose, Meaning, God's Love, Covenant, Faithfulness