

Seculosity      Jer. 2:11-13; Matt. 11:28; Ps. 127:2      10/27/19

I recently read a new book by David Zahl called Seculosity. Zahl argues that although attendance at churches has dropped significantly all over our country, the spiritual needs that God and church used to meet have not gone away! People still need affirmation and love, as well as a sense of purpose and meaning. If they aren't getting those needs met through a relationship with God, they will create other "gods" through which these unmet needs can be met. Instead of worshiping God at church, they practice a secular religion- "Seculosity," Zahl calls it. He spends most of the book exploring the specific ways in which people attempt to meet their spiritual needs. You'll see that these things are not bad in themselves, but can they bear the weight of meeting our deepest needs? Let me outline a few of them for you. If you're like me, you'll probably see yourself in some of them, even though you're here in church on a Sunday morning!

How about **work**, for example? Americans seem driven to work. Did you know that we Americans lead the world in unused vacation and sick days? I remember when my dad was approached by HR and told he had to use a large number of vacation days or he'd lose them because he'd accumulated too many! And that was in addition to another conversation about his unused sick days! Why do so many of us live to work instead of working to live? Zahl gives some possible reasons.

First, work can serve as a distraction from other areas of life in which we're not doing so well- perhaps a failing marriage or a child that's out-of-control. Second, work can give us a sense of self-worth & purpose. It's something we can point to and say, "See? I'm producing something of value! I'm important in the world!" Third, work can give us a sense of community. At work people respect us and maybe even look up to us! And, there are people we can mentor, passing something along to the next generation. That's a good legacy, isn't it? And finally, work pays homage to perhaps the greatest American idol, productivity! There's a real sense in which Americans believe that our value lies in what we produce, what we achieve, or what we earn.

Clearly, many of us expect work to meet some of our spiritual needs like the need for self-worth or purpose. The obvious problem comes when we get laid off, or fired, or our career choice becomes obsolete (not much demand for VCR repair these days!), or we can't stand our co-workers (and vice versa!), or when we take time off to have children or when we have to retire. That leads to gaping holes in our identity and self-worth, if we're depending on work to provide them. As the Psalmist said, "*It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.*" (Ps. 127:2) "Eating the bread of anxious toil..." That sounds like a lot of us!

Next, Zahl looks at **romance**! What could possibly be wrong with romance? Perhaps when we expect romance or marriage to meet our spiritual need to feel worthy. Justifying our existence is a basic, deeply-rooted spiritual need. How do we justify taking up space, breathing the oxygen, and consuming scarce food in this world? Most of us expect our partner to help us feel worthy! Partners also help us deal with guilt, assuring us that we're not really so bad after all, even though everyone else may disagree! And romance can even give us a brush with transcendence if we can only find "the one!" You know, that one person among billions of choices that the universe has created to "complete" us. Like in the film, *Jerry McGuire*, when Tom Cruise says to Rene Zellweger, "You. Complete. Me." That's pretty heady stuff! And it's also a lot to load onto another person.

It prompted Alain de Botton to write, in an article called, "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person," "We need to swap the Romantic view for a tragic (and at points comedic) awareness that every human will frustrate, anger, annoy, madden and disappoint us- and we will (without any malice) do the same to them." Of course, that doesn't apply to my wife and me! But part of people's disappointment with romance and marriage stems from the inability of any human being to meet our deepest spiritual needs for

worthiness, absolution, and affirmation, in part because those needs are a bottomless pit! So, romance fails to meet our spiritual needs.

How about **parenting**? Parenting is one of life's most challenging endeavors, isn't it? It's an area of life in which you can do everything "right" and the outcome is not at all guaranteed! And yet, many of us seek to show the world that we're really impressive people based on the performance of our kids- at school, in sports, in the arts, even at church. And we have the bumper stickers to prove it! We may range from helicopter parents to bulldozer parents to free-range parents, or to tiger parents- all to push our children to be the people we think they should be. Why? Well, we do believe that this is ultimately best for them. But on another level, it's best for us! It makes us feel important, competent, and maybe just a little bit superior to other parents whose kids aren't as successful!

But kids can often sense that. And it's a heavy load for them to bear. And heaven help us when adolescence hits and they no longer want to be the solution to our unmet spiritual needs! Zahl tells the story of Paul Westerberg, who enjoyed great success as the front man for the rock band, The Replacements. Surprisingly, his father never heard him perform, which many of us would find appalling. However, that was just fine with Westerberg. His dad wanted to keep his relationship with him

uncontaminated by his musical success or failure. He just wanted to be his dad, and that's what he did.

Now, that's certainly not the choice that every parent should make. But it did cause me to take a step back and wonder how invested I am in my kids' successes, rather than just being their dad.

Zahn also looks at busyness, technology (something we tend to believe can save the world), leisure (which we manage to make as competitive as possible), politics, and even food as areas of life that we tend to trust to meet our spiritual needs, but which in the long run fail to meet them.

Set that aside for a minute and journey back to a time around 600 years before Jesus. The prophet Jeremiah was bringing unpopular messages to the people of Israel as the Babylonian army closed in on the holy city of Jerusalem. He saw the coming siege and destruction as God's punishment for the many ways in which they had abandoned the God who freed them from Egyptian slavery and brought them to the good land of Canaan. He called them to repent! And listen to how he described their situation, <sup>11</sup>*Has a nation (ever) changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.* <sup>12</sup>*Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate,* *says the LORD,* <sup>13</sup>*for my people have committed two evils: they have*

*forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer. 2:11-13)*

Israel has never received much rain (only about 20 inches/year), and most years have a long dry season when it almost never rains for almost six months. So, the people relied on cisterns, large reservoirs of rainwater, to sustain them through the dry months. In this case, God accuses them of abandoning him, the One who is like a fountain of living water, and relying instead on leaky cisterns that can hold no water. What a great image! The people in Jeremiah's day were relying on other gods like Baal and Chemosh and Molech to meet their needs, partly because these gods had physical, tangible images that the people preferred to the invisible Yahweh. Unfortunately, they weren't gods at all and were powerless to help the people. Leaky cisterns. Now we aren't tempted to rely on Baal so much, but we do turn away from God to trust in work and romance and parenting and technology and leisure and politics to meet needs that only God can meet.

John Calvin, the spiritual father of Presbyterians, once wrote that the human mind is a factory for idols. We are afraid of the demands that our Creator makes on us, or we haven't experienced the good life we expected under God, so we create new gods that we believe will meet those needs. But these new false gods also demand a lot from us, and they ultimately fail

to deliver! Most of them are performance oriented- if you work harder, parent better, produce more, or use the latest technology- only then will you be fulfilled. The problem is that we can never work enough or parent well enough or love well enough to get there. In contrast, the whole point of the gospel is that we are never enough. Period. God knows that and loves us anyway and has provided for our salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. He is enough for us.

Jesus said, *“Come unto me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (Matt. 11:28-30) Do you believe that? Each Sunday morning we remind each other that as we get to know Jesus and his love for us and his pattern for how we should live, we find a sense of fulfillment as we become more and more the people God has created us to be. We learn that we have great value because we are made in the very image of God. That justifies our existence! And we are then able to better manage the demands of the world, the demands of good things like romance, work and parenting. We learn where we are misusing these gifts and twisting them to meet our own needs, rather than enjoying them the way God intended us to.

“Seculosity” is a temptation for every one of us living in this society. But it’s an awful lot of work and, in the end, it leaves you feeling empty. I don’t know about you, but I would rather trust in Jesus.