

## **“Fulfillment through Denial”**

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I'm the kind of a person that, in order to keep sermons relevant and vital, I try to study beyond just religious information. I don't know a lick about math and science, so I go another direction sometimes and I take these great courses - if any of you have done those. I think they are really good, I don't know how profound the speakers are in other areas but in the religion area they are marvelous. They have some of the greatest speakers and professors of our time.

I'm going to talk to you today, because I was listening to one on philosophy. I don't know much about philosophy and I wanted to learn a little more. It just seemed appropriate for today's sermon. This is Dr. Patrick Grim. [Picture on the screen in the Sanctuary.] He is a professor at New York Stony Brook and also has been a professor at Boston University. He is a philosophy professor there at these two schools.

He talks about needing to learn to use two different phrases: one of them being a “descriptive” understanding and another, in philosophy, having a “normative” understanding. A descriptive understanding teaches us how human beings think and a normative understanding teaches us how we need to think better - how we do that. Grim does this in kind of a unique and interesting way. He provides the students with a presentation of thinking techniques: little ways, little studies that you can do to figure out how to learn differently and more effectively.

Grim gives this illustration - and I want you to think about it. He gives the illustration of a bat and a ball. Now, I'm not a mathematical person but I think I can figure this one out, or so I thought. A bat costs \$1 more than a ball; together they cost \$1.10. How much does the ball cost? 10 cents. Really?

Let's reflect. If the ball costs 10 cents and the bat costs \$1 more than the ball, then the bat is \$1.10. If the bat is \$1.10, plus 10 cents for the ball, so that means it's \$1.20. We are wrong - at least I was. I got this really wrong. Now even if you got the right answer, your first thought was 10 cents, and you had to figure out that might not be right.

There are two normative lessons that Dr. Grim says we learn from that little study. The first is that the immediate answer is almost always wrong. When you think about that with almost anything - from raising children to completing math problems, to doing things at work, often the first response is wrong. Then you have to back track and figure out the right answer.

The other thing about normative answers – normative lessons - is that, it is easy to do better. You just have to check your answers. Thoughtful thinking.

How does thinking inform our understanding of God? This might have been a philosophy and math lesson, but we are getting to some God here. Just hold on. Thinking in a new way helps us think about who God truly is and how we interpret the Bible. How does it “inform” our understanding of the Bible? In the same way as a math problem, with

religion and understanding the Bible we have to check our answers, and not just accept the easy first answer that comes along.

So let's check our answers from the bat and the ball. Let's have a revised answer. How much does the ball cost if the bat costs \$1.00 and together they cost \$1.10? The ball costs five cents, because the bat costs \$1.05 and that equals \$1.10.

One-half of the students at Harvard, MIT and Princeton got the answer wrong, because even those brainiacs didn't check their answers. So if you got it right at five cents, you are smarter than half the people at the three most amazing institutions in the country. Or, if you are like me, keep working at it.

The Apostles need to check their answers.

Peter stopped Jesus from what he was saying because Jesus' answers didn't fit Peter's understanding of religion and the world. When Jesus was saying, "Get behind me, Satan," it wasn't that he was calling Peter, Satan. Jesus was trying to shock Peter with something to say, "Check your answers. Look in a new way."

We need to do the same. It amazes me how many people can be brilliant in marketing, can be great at mathematics, who teach and instruct, do all these different things and then, they check their brain at the door when they walk into a church or open a Bible. It takes the same critical understanding and criteria in reviewing the Bible and theology to get a deeper understanding of our faith.

Now Peter's world view needs to be checked. First of all, he believed that the Messiah would overthrow worldly armies. Everybody believed that. That was even a theme throughout the Old Testament, so it's even biblical: If God's happy with us, the army wins. If God is unhappy with us our armies lose. A weak Messiah is an unworthy Messiah.

Now, think about what that means for Jesus. Jesus was politically weak. He had no power. They hung him on a cross. Jesus was financially weak. He didn't have any money to his name. He was an itinerate preacher. Jesus couldn't have been the Messiah, according to Peter and the rest of the known world. That didn't stop God from developing a new paradigm. Peter couldn't make that new paradigm shift, because he couldn't recognize the new patterns Jesus was describing for a new way that we were going to relate to the world.

Now I go back to Dr. Grim. We want another example of how we see the patterns of how the Bible is developing and changing, so we need to learn from philosophy again.

I want you to listen to the clues and see if you can come up the answer. It is almost a riddle: A newspaper is better than a magazine. No, that doesn't give you a lot to go on. A sea shore is a better place than a street. At first it is better to run than walk, it takes some skill but it's easy to learn even for your children. (I think that was directed to Jill and me.) It's true you need lots of room.

Boy, you haven't come with the answer yet?

Beware of rain it ruins everything, and a rock will serve as an anchor, and if things break loose from it, however, you won't get a second chance.

Anybody have an answer yet? It is so obvious. What is wrong with you people?

It is a kite. Now it seems obvious once you know the answer, but if you were trying to come up with the answer before, it was hard. You were not seeing the pattern. But once you have the answer the pattern is understandable. A kite: A newspaper is better than a magazine to use for a kite, it's better to do it by the sea shore than a street because you have plenty of room and open sky. It's better to walk than run because when you are starting, so forth and so on. It's so obvious it's a kite once you know it, but, until then it's very difficult.

When you are reading the Bible, you get mad at Peter because you think, "He [Jesus] is the Messiah. We know that." That's because we know the end of the story. We know that Jesus is the one that is resurrected. But for Peter and those dumb Apostles, they didn't see the end of the story.

They are dealing with all of these sentences of Jesus and they couldn't put the pattern together. They couldn't see - just like we couldn't see that it was a kite - they couldn't see that Jesus was the one that would be resurrected - the Messiah - and what that Messiah's power would truly be.

Our goal is to have a flexible mind, enough that we begin to put those patterns together and not only see that Jesus is the resurrected one, not to just memorize Scripture passages that we can throw back and poke other people with, but so we can have a flexible enough mind to know what God is doing with those sentences in the Bible, and how we interpret them properly thousands of years later.

Dr. Grim gives another example of what a mess our minds can create in allowing things to not receive resolution.

We had the Cold War and Test Ban Treaty that needed to be set up when the United States and the Soviet Union both started getting nuclear weapons. They were battling it out. They knew they needed to negotiate a Test Ban Treaty. Both sides agreed that they needed a Test Ban Treaty, and both sides needed onsite inspections; so the Soviets would come to the US and the US could go to the Soviet Union. They agreed on it. They agreed there was a major verification issue. They agreed they needed to check, because they were getting seismic readings, and they were not sure if those seismic readings were just very light earthquakes, which was possible, or whether they were detonating bombs that were breaking the treaty.

The big thing came down to how many tests each group would have in a year's time. The Soviet Union wanted three and the United States wanted 10. So they got together. They agreed on everything except a number - a magic number - and the Soviets said three and the US said 10. They went back and forth, and everything broke down and they went home without any agreement.

It was so incredibly dumb. Who came up with the numbers? They didn't mean anything. They just pulled magic numbers out of the air. Yet the numbers became more powerful and meaningful to them than the really important things - like a *treaty* with nuclear weapons that could destroy the world 100,000 times over.

The talks broke down because both sides committed to a magic number in advance. They should have placed the focus away from the numbers and on the real issues: protecting sovereignty - which they both agreed with; national security on both sides, which they both agreed with; cutting down the number of nuclear arms, which they both agreed with. Their failure was due to their inability to keep an open, flexible mind as they confronted one another.

Now, how do religions do that? We fall into the same trap. In advance we come in there with our agenda, and we say, if you don't agree with me on this magic formula we won't talk to you. We won't commune with you. We won't pray with you. We won't even live with you. Our inflexibility has destroyed any chance for support, mutual care and respect.

We have made a mockery of not only the Christian faith - but all faiths - and we did it with the same arbitrary understandings that the United States and Soviet Union in the 1960s did, arguing about three and 10.

In matters of faith we cannot be like Peter. We have to have flexible minds and be open - even when we don't like what we are hearing - and think beyond the first answer. Don't accept the first answer without critical reflection. We learned that from the bat and ball illustration.

Don't be too quick to take the easy, successful route. We learned that from Peter not wanting to be on the cross.

We recognize patterns of truth - and we learned that from the whole kite illustration - and retain a flexible mind. We learned that from the Soviet, US issue.

Finally, remain open to God's truth in its many forms. When we learn that we will be able to figure out clear ways of dealing with groups like ISIS; figuring out what it means to get beyond the violence and bloodshed.

As early as this morning (I was listening to the news, so I had to come up with a couple of other slides really fast) there is this cult in Minnesota. I thought everyone in Minnesota was perfect - apparently not. There is a Christian cult in which this doofus, named Victor Barnard, is bringing young girls into his cult and telling them that Christianity is at its best when it becomes a sex cult. They [the girls] are buying it in droves.

It is so incredibly sad. Here you have young girls - three of them - packing up their bags in a comfortable, middle-class community in Europe and moving to Syria to become ISIS' wives, because they didn't know how to think in a way that helped them see the irrationality of that action.

In a not-an-unlike-fashion, you have young girls going to follow this 52-year-old man, (He is my age. Ugh.) and believing what he is saying - with such a warped sense of what

Christianity - because they couldn't think critically and evaluate enough to understand the difference between what the Scripture is saying and what this nut case is preaching, and everything else in between. We need a milder understanding of who we are and how we share it, because if we don't, we end up with those radical extremes of ISIS, and crazy cults, and we lose the truth of the Gospel; that it's not about receiving, it's about giving; it's about loving and not hating; it's about offering one's self, but doing it in a way that builds the other and not destroys them.

It's our responsibility to think through it enough, that we can articulate it enough to others. That is our evangelistic call. May we be up to it in the coming year.

Amen.