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"Mission Impossible" Series

Sermon 4: "To the shut out (blind)"

April 10, 2011

For several years now I've been part of a reading group. Kind of a weird group: an atheist, an agnostic, a guy who believes in Jesus, kind of (just not the Jesus of the Bible), and a couple of us evangelical Christians. We eat well, then we argue about some book for an hour or two. The last book we read I thought was really good (probably because I picked it). It's called, "10 Books that Screwed up the World, and 5 Others That Didn't Help," by a guy named Benjamin Wiker. If you read the reviews, people either love it, or hate it. I loved it —because it helped make sense out of some things in our world, and because I agree with his conclusions.

Wiker believes that ideas have consequences. What we believe shapes how we live. Do you buy that? So bad ideas have bad consequences. If we believe stupidly, our life is going to be a mess. So he picks 15 people, 15 books that have shaped the way people think — badly, and therefore shaped the way people behave — badly. These people, these books have profoundly influenced our culture. These people, these ideas have shaped you — whether you know it or not. And every one of them has brought us chaos, and pain, and evil. Bad ideas have bad consequences. Here are of the few of the books Wiker reviews.

- Machiavelli's, "The Prince." Heard of it? He says, "It is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself (if he wants to stay in power), to learn to be able not to be good." If you want power, he says, you need to learn how to use evil. A lot of politicians have mastered Machiavelli. Calculated ruthlessness, cold brutality, downright evil are acceptable tools for men in power, he says. And people buy it!
- Rene Descartes, "Discourse on Method." Doubt everything, and reject anything that you doubt. You be the judge of everyone and everything, and don't let anybody judge you — not even God. You define your own reality. What's true for you isn't necessarily true for me. Descartes worshiped the God of ... "me." Sound familiar. It was written 500 years ago, but it still shapes how people think, how some of us think.
- Hobbes, "Leviathan." There is nothing good or evil, nothing right or wrong, nothing just or unjust. Good is simply getting what I want; evil is anything standing in my way. There is no passion, no desire that is sin in itself. Every man has the right to do anything that brings him pleasure and avoids pain. Sound familiar? The book is 500 years old; the ideas are in the morning newspaper.
- "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," by Marx and Engels. Perhaps never have so few pages done so much damage. The estimate is about 100,000,000

corpses, and multiples of that oppressed. The communist manifesto is a perfect blend of atheist and materialist. Guys, if you need to be convinced of the Christian doctrine of sin, just put power into the hands of someone who rejects God and who rejects sin and watch what happens.

- Charles Darwin, "The Descent of Man." Guys, I'm not bothered by the idea of evolution. I don't care how God created the world. But I'm mortified by the idea that man is just an animal and that survival of the fittest applies to us as well. Darwin wrote (listen to this – this doesn't make it into our biology textbooks): "With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilized men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbeciles, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of everyone to the last moment. (He thinks this is bad! He says,) There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would have died from small-pox. (He thinks that's bad!) Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. (That's bad!) No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man... Excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant to allow his worst animals to breed." By letting the inferior and the weak live, we are hurting the human race, he said. Do you know where these ideas of Darwin lead? To Hitler – with his extermination of the Jews, and the crippled, and the diseased, and anyone else judged inferior. And to the abortion of millions of babies, and to the serious consideration of euthanasia.
- Adolf Hitler, "Mein Kampf." Did you know that Hitler was a ruthless Darwinian, who saw himself as a philosopher-king, living out the lies we think we believe but don't have the guts to practice.
- Friedrich Nietzsche, my personal favorite, with his "Beyond Good and Evil." He calls Christianity "the most calamitous kind of arrogance yet. His madman says, "Where is God? I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are murderers... (without God) Is there any up and down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." There is no God, so there is no good, no evil, no meaning, nothing matters. Nietzsche was the most brutally honest of atheists. Guys like Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris are pussycat atheists by comparison. Nietzsche's courage to follow the path of atheism to its logical end led him eventually into insanity. He was an honest man.
- Lenin, Freud – with his attack on religion as an illusion, Margaret Mead – with her shoddy science that still shapes our textbooks, Alfred Kinsey – who made so

many giddy by telling them that anything goes, sexually, Betty Friedan with her "Feminine Mystique."

Every one of the books either marginalizes or excludes God. Every one of the books either trivializes or denies the idea of sin. Every one of the books is built on the notions that God is irrelevant, that there is no God-given right and wrong, that man is just an animal, and that we will have to figure out our own way in this world. And guys, if you start by excluding God, it's not going to end well.

Here are a few of the conclusions I came to after reading the book.

- #1: The bad idea of a smart man is infinitely more dangerous than the bad idea of a stupid man. These guys were all, brilliant, geniuses. So they convinced millions to follow them down terrible paths. Just because a man is smart doesn't mean you should follow him.
- #2: Every one of these guys started with the idea that God is either irrelevant, or he doesn't exist at all. Guys, if you start by excluding God, you are not going to finish well.
- #3: I began to understand that what makes an idea bad is that it clashes with reality, as defined by God. God made this world, and God decided how it works best. He made us, and knows how we work best. Any idea that clashes with God's truth is not going to end well.
- #4: All of these guys, except one, tried to discover some way to figure out right and wrong, some purpose for living without God. And it never works. The only guy who was honest enough to admit that without God there is no right and wrong, there is no purpose to life was Nietzsche – and it drove him insane.

And into this world, into our world, steps Jesus. And in that synagogue in Nazareth he stands up to read these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see – that the blind will see -- that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come." (Luke 4.18-19) And then Jesus sat down and said, "This scripture is about me; this is who I am, this is what I can do."

And they thought he was talking about the physically blind. because Jesus did – give sight to the physically blind. They are amazing stories. In Mark 8 Jesus puts his spit into a blind man's eyes, and the guy sees. Weird story, powerful story. In Mark 10 a blind beggar keeps yelling at Jesus, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" So Jesus just says a word and the guys sees. In John 9 Jesus makes some mud with his spit, puts the mud on the eyes of a guy who had been born blind, and tells him to go wash in a pool. The guy does, and for the first time in his life he sees. And there are others – amazing stories. And these miracles blew their socks off more than they do ours. You see, in their world, a lot of people went blind, but they

didn't have the medicines we do, they didn't have the glasses we do, they didn't have the surgeries we do. When people went blind in Jesus' world they stayed blind – except when they encountered Jesus...

But when Jesus said, "I have come that the blind will see," he wasn't talking about the physically blind. He was talking to people like us whose minds have been screwed up by guys like Machiavelli, and Descartes, and Hobbes, and Marx, and Darwin, and Nietzsche, and Hitler, and Freud. You see guys, physical blindness is bad; spiritual blindness is hellish. Physical blindness handicaps people for a time; spiritual blindness corrupts and destroys forever.

At its root, blindness is about living in the dark, isn't it? People who are blind live in the dark. Listen to what the Bible says about darkness.

- It says the world = darkness. Our world is at war with God; and if you side with this world, you live in darkness. The Bible says, "We are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6.12) The world is darkness. And it says that untruth = darkness. There is only one truth, God's truth. If we don't embrace God's truth, we are living in darkness. The Bible says, "If we say that we share in life with God and keep on living in the dark, we are lying and are not living by the truth." (1 John 1.6) Untruth is darkness.
- And it says that Satan = darkness. The Bible says, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Corinthians 4.4)

Do you know what real blindness is? Blindness is living for this world instead of God. Blindness is living by your truth instead of God's truth. Blindness is siding with Satan instead of God. And here's the deal... the blindness of most people is self-imposed. Most spiritual blindness is a self-inflicted wound! We close our eyes and pretend God isn't there. We close our eyes and pretend he can't see us. We are unwilling to fix our eyes on Jesus and follow him. Not unable, unwilling. We prefer our dark to God's light. Do you buy that? In the dark, stains don't matter. In the dark, accountability shrinks. In the dark you can misbehave and no one notices, no one cares.

So what happens when someone who is blind sees light for the first time? When you think about it, all of us have experienced going from deep darkness to bright light. Maybe at night, someone shines a spotlight in your eyes. Or you open the door from a dark room and stare into a dazzling sun. It can hurt. When you are used to the dark, bright light is painful. You know what I mean? Apparently inside our eyes there are some cells that normally aren't exposed to light. If we are in the dark for a while, our pupils dilate – they get really big...

If we are suddenly exposed to bright light, the pupils are so big they don't focus the light on just the cells that are designed for seeing. So the light strikes those sensitive cells and causes us pain. At least that's what I read. Light hurts us if we are used to the dark.

It's that way spiritually too. Light hurts us if we are used to the dark. Rick Warren put it like this. He said, "The truth will make you free, after making you miserable." That's pretty good. The truth will make you free, after it makes you miserable. You see, God's truth challenges the myths of darkness, and it makes us wince – because that's where we live, it makes us squirm.

- God says, "Reserve sex for marriage." And that cuts people who think they can be good people and still play with sex outside of marriage.
- God says, "You forgive, vengeance is mine." And that annoys people who believe they have the right to get even.
- God says, "Quit being so obsessed with stuff, learn to give generously." And that unsettles people who love their stuff more than they love God.
- God says, "Tell the truth even if it gets you in trouble. Show some courage, man up. Take some responsibility instead of blaming someone else, or making excuses." And that scares people who try to hide behind their lies.
- God says, "Don't worry so much about being served, love is about serving." And that's just hard.

God's truth makes children of darkness wince. When we look back and realize how much we have wasted or messed up, what opportunities we squandered, how many people we have hurt — God's truth cuts. When we look at ourselves and realize that so much of what we obsess over, so much of what we live for is just empty, trash — God's truth cuts. It hurts to come face to face with the light.

And then, after the pain there is confusion. Imagine you were born blind. You have never seen anything, ever. And then your eyes are opened. Can you imagine how confusing it would be? You've heard people talk about color, but you've never seen it before — it's weird. You see your husband's face for the first time. If I'd known what he looked like, you might not have picked him. You are driving in a car and seeing everything racing by — disorienting. You are flying in an airplane and looking down -- scary. Looking into the eyes of your kid. It would all be so confusing, at first. Spiritually too.

- What do you mean, no sex outside of marriage? Wouldn't it be smarter to

give it a test run before marriage God? God's way doesn't make sense to children of darkness.

- What do you mean forgive? Wouldn't it be wiser to force them to feel the consequences of their misbehavior? If I don't punish them, they won't change? God's way doesn't make sense to muddled minds.
- What do you mean give generously? Shouldn't I wait until I get out of debt and have a little extra? God's way seems confusing.
- What do you mean tell the truth even if it is hard? Wouldn't it be wiser to shade the truth a little sometimes?

God's way hurts, and then it confuses. But if you stick with it, if you try to do life with God, if you try to live life God's way — the Bible calls that "walking in the light" — the whole world begins to open up. To a man physically blind, after the confusion — he begins to understand what he has missed. Guys, have you ever seen something so beautiful it took your breath away? Have you ever studied something so intricate that it dazzled you? Have you ever tried to take in something so immense, so grand that there were no words? Have you ever been captured by the love on someone's face? When you can really see, it makes the world come alive in a wondrous new way.

Spiritually too. After the pain, after the confusion, then — if you stick with it, if you stay in the light — God's world begins to make sense.

- You begin to understand that God's way makes marriage infinitely stronger, infinitely richer. God's way works.
- You begin to understand that by forgiving you set a prisoner free, and then you realize that the prisoner you set free was you. God's way works.
- You begin to experience that it really is better to give than to receive. And it is powerfully rich to invest in something bigger than, and grander than, and more eternal than your own little castle. God's way works.
- You begin to realize that by telling the truth, you start to create integrity, and trust, and honor. God's way works.

Guys, God is smarter than we are — a whole lot smarter. And he loves us more than we love ourselves. And if you'll just trust him, you'll find out that his way works, a whole lot better than our way. His way brings the sense of right and wrong we knew was out there somewhere. His way brings that sense of purpose and direction we have been searching for. His way brings peace, and beauty, and strength, and wonder into the darkest places of our lives.

The Bible says, "God is light, pure light; there's not a trace of darkness in him." (1 John 1.5) Here's the bottom line: If you do life with God, you do life in the light. If you do life God's way, you are walking in the light.

And Jesus says, "I have come that the blind will see." In fact Jesus says, "I have come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in me will no longer remain in the dark." (John 12.46) Jesus came into our world as a blazing light to pierce our darkness. Those who are blind spiritually receive their sight by looking at Jesus. Those who are blind spiritually receive their sight by following Jesus. Jesus didn't come into our world to point people towards God. He came into our world to be God with us. Guys ... without Jesus you are blind, forever.

Here is where the rubber hits the road this morning. There are people in your family who are spiritually blind. They buy the myths that have messed up our world. They think they are doing fine without Jesus. Guys, they are living in darkness, they are on a path to hell. You have neighbors who are spiritually blind. You have friends who are spiritually blind. You have co-workers who are spiritually blind. You have enemies who are spiritually blind. They need Jesus. They desperately need Jesus.

Offer Jesus ...