

**Marc Roby:** We are taking a short break from our study of systematic theology to look at some current topics of great importance from a Christian perspective. Our country has been in serious turmoil since the disturbing video of the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25<sup>th</sup>. A number of protests have turned into destructive riots and the Black Lives Matter movement has become very prominent in the news. Dr. Spencer, why do we want to address any of these topics in this podcast?

Dr. Spencer: Well, as the title of our podcast says, we are interested in looking at what the Word of God says about the world we live in and how we, as Christians, should live. The Bible isn't only relevant on Sundays when we go to church, it is relevant all the time in every arena of life. The idea that we can neatly divide our lives into secular and sacred parts is completely alien to the Bible and, therefore, is alien to true Christianity. The Bible is the ultimate authority for a Christian and whenever we need counsel about how to respond to *any* situation, it should be the first place that we look.

**Marc Roby:** And what does the Bible have to say about our current situation?

Dr. Spencer: It has a lot to say. It tells us, for example, about our purpose, place and priorities in life. And we need to look at these first in order to set the stage for discussing specific current issues in our society. These are foundational for a truly biblical worldview and we can't properly understand any issue without that. Let's begin by looking at our purpose. The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?"

**Marc Roby:** And the answer given is that "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

Dr. Spencer: And the Scriptures they use to support that answer are the classic verses. They first cite 1 Corinthians 10:31, which says, "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."<sup>1</sup> There are many other verses they could also have cited though. The Bible is clear that God created this universe for the manifestation of his glory.

For example, in Psalm 19:1-4 we read, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

**Marc Roby:** That is a great psalm. It begins by speaking about how the inanimate creation displays God's glory and then it moves on to talk about how God's Word displays his glory, particularly by bringing about salvation. We read in Verse 7 that "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple."

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And, of course, reviving the soul here is speaking about new birth, or regeneration, and making wise the simple refers to the Bible giving guidance for living day to day.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. God's glory shines most brightly in his work of redemption. Isaiah spoke about this. In Isaiah 60:21 we are told about the future state of God's church and we read, "Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land forever. They are the shoot I have planted, the work of my hands, for the display of my splendor." The English Standard Version renders it more literally, saying, "Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified."

That is our purpose as God's chosen and redeemed people, his church. We are to bring him glory.

Marc Roby: Saying that we are the work of his hands reminds me of Ephesians 2:10 where Paul wrote that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Dr. Spencer: This idea of our being created for God's glory is all through the Old and New Testaments. In fact, in the same letter you just quoted from, we read in Ephesians 1:5-6, that God "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace". Then a few verses later in Ephesians 1:12 we read that "we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory." And in Verse 14 we are told that the Holy Spirit "is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory."

Marc Roby: It is amazing to think that sinners like us can ever bring any glory to the perfect, triune God!

Dr. Spencer: That is amazing. But it isn't because of what we do, it is because of what he does in redeeming and perfecting us. In his commentary on Isaiah, E.J. Young wrote about God's glory and said, "This glory is displayed in the whole of the created universe, but was manifested in particular in the history of redemption, ... for salvation is a manifestation of the Lord's glory."<sup>2</sup>

Marc Roby: That is wonderful. And I think we have provided sufficient support for the idea that our chief end is to glorify God, but the Catechism also says that we are to enjoy him forever. In support of that phrase the Catechism cites Psalm 73:25-26, which say, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Dr. Spencer: And those verses also point out that this earth, or we could say this physical universe, is not all there is, there is also a heaven, and we could add, a hell. Our joy is not primarily for this life. A Christian is a pilgrim here, a stranger in a strange land, passing through enemy territory so to speak. We are on our way to our eternal home. The instant we start to let

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<sup>2</sup> E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1972, Vol. 3, pg. 444

our focus slip to being on our life here on this earth, we have lost the proper perspective for living godly, that is God-pleasing, lives.

**Marc Roby: Speaking about our focus makes me think of Hebrews 3:1, where we read, “Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.”**

Dr. Spencer: And we read something similar in Hebrews 12:2, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus is in heaven and we are to have our focus – our thoughts and our eyes if you will – fixed on Jesus in heaven. This earth is not our home. Our primary purpose has to do with our eternal home, not this temporary earthly home. Although, as we will see, we have serious obligations in this life as well.

**Marc Roby: Alright. You said the Bible gives instruction about our purpose, place and priorities. We’ve seen that our primary purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. What did you mean by saying that we receive instruction about our place?**

Dr. Spencer: I had two things in mind. First, we must know our place as creatures. We have noted the Creator/creature distinction many times and it is essential that we keep this in view. When the Catechism says our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, both parts of that answer are God centered. John Frame points out that “We are not to enjoy ourselves, but to enjoy *him*.”<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this refers to heaven of course, but Christians also have joy in this life. In Romans 5:2 the apostle Paul says that “we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”

**Marc Roby: And the Rev. P.G. Mathew points out in his commentary on Romans that the phrase “the glory of God” means both the glory God himself has and the glory God will give to us.<sup>4</sup>**

Dr. Spencer: Which is joyful to meditate on, we will know this glory in heaven and it will certainly lead to great joy there. But the joy we have in this life does not however, always equate with pleasure in this life. We do have many legitimate pleasures in this life, for which we should give God thanks, but in Verses 3-4 of Romans 5 Paul immediately adds, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

**Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point clearly. If we can rejoice in our sufferings, that joy certainly does not equate with our pleasure in this life.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn’t. And we can rejoice in sufferings because, as Paul outlines, we know that God has ordained them for a good purpose. They ultimately help to bring us to that state of glory in heaven. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:28, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Knowing that we are creatures made by a good God for a purpose is an essential part of a biblical worldview.

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<sup>3</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, P&R Publishing Company, 2008, pg. 303

<sup>4</sup> P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 256

Marc Roby: OK. Now, you said you had two things in mind when you said the Bible instructs us about our place. The first is the Creator/creature distinction, what is the second?

Dr. Spencer: The second is that our place is to live under authority. God has lovingly provided us with everything we need to live godly lives that please him. And part of his loving provision for us are the authorities that he places in our lives. We all live under authority in some way.

Marc Roby: I remember that way back in Sessions 28-33 we talked about authority in the home, church and state.

Dr. Spencer: And those are the three spheres of authority under which every human being is meant to function. In addition, most human beings also function as a delegated authority in one or more of those spheres at times as well. We have obligations in each of them. We were all at one time children under the authority of our parents. We are all under authority in God's church, ultimately under God himself, but also under the elders that God places over us. And, the sphere that is relevant to a discussion of current events is that of the state. We are all citizens of some country.

Marc Roby: And we have no choice as to which country we were born in.

Dr. Spencer: No, we don't. And although some adults can choose to switch their citizenship from one country to another, not all have that privilege.

Marc Roby: Now, certainly, the passage in the Bible that is most relevant to our being under civil authority is found in the book of Romans. In Romans 13:1 we read that "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

Dr. Spencer: That is an extremely important point. And we have to remember that Paul most likely wrote this letter either just before or while Nero was emperor of the Roman Empire. Nero was a wicked ruler who persecuted Christians. Paul does not predicate his statement on an assumption that the ruling authorities are themselves good.

Marc Roby: I know that poses a significant problem for some people. For example, it implies that God established Hitler as the ruler of Germany prior to World War II.

Dr. Spencer: Which is absolutely true, God *did* establish Hitler as the ruler of Germany. If God didn't do it, then who did? Are we to believe that it happened against God's will?

Marc Roby: That would certainly present problems.

Dr. Spencer: You win the award for the understatement of the year! If Hitler had become the ruler of Germany in opposition to God's will, then God would not be the sovereign ruler of the universe and we could not rationally trust in any of his promises. After all, they might be negated by the same power that installed Hitler as the ruler of Germany against his will.

Marc Roby: That logic is unassailable, but it does leave us with the unsettling problem of accepting that God established Hitler as the ruler of Germany. Hitler was certainly a wicked monster who was responsible for a tremendous amount of suffering and death.

Dr. Spencer: He was, and when we say that God established him as the ruler of Germany, we do not in any way mean to imply that God approved of Hitler or anything he did. I don't presume to know God's reasons for putting him in power, but it is not at all logically necessary to assume that God approved of anything Hitler did. This is not the time to get into that discussion, although we've dealt with similar issues before and we will again I'm sure.

For now, the point I was making was simply that when Paul says that we must submit to the governing authorities, he wasn't just speaking about governing authorities that we like, or that we think are good, or anything like that. It was a blanket statement.

**Marc Roby: Although there are some exceptions as we discussed in Session 33. For example, if the government tells us to sin, we must refuse. In Chapter 5 of Acts we read about the apostles being brought before the Jewish ruling council to be questioned. In Verse 28<sup>5</sup> we read that the high priest said to them, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in [Jesus'] name, Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." To which, Peter and the other apostles replied in Verse 29, "We must obey God rather than men!"**

Dr. Spencer: That is the classic verse for making the point that we must refuse if we are commanded to sin. We can also refuse to obey if an authority oversteps his bounds. God has defined the three realms of authority and he also set limits on them as we discussed in Session 33.

And this example leads nicely into the third foundational truth we need in order to consider our current political and social crisis. In addition to telling us our purpose and our place within the creation order, the Bible also gives us our priorities.

**Marc Roby: Hence the apostles' statement that they must obey God rather than men.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Our highest priority is God. If our relationship with God isn't right, then we cannot be the person God wants us to be. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, as we read in Matthew 6:33, "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." "All these things" in that verse refers to our food clothing and so on, in other words the things of this world.

The Bible makes it clear that we are to live in the world. We are to work and help others, to feed ourselves and our families and so on. The idea of withdrawing from living in the world in order to be more spiritual is unbiblical.

**Marc Roby: Yes, we read in John 17:15 that Jesus prayed to the Father about all who would follow him, saying, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."**

Dr. Spencer: Not only did he not want us to withdraw from the world, but he told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount that we are "the salt of the earth", which refers to salt being used a

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<sup>5</sup> The audio incorrectly says Verses 38 and 39 in this part.

preservative. He also said, as we read in Matthew 5:14 and 16, that we “are the light of the world” and are to “let [our] light shine before men, that they may see [our] good deeds and praise [our] Father in heaven.” Christians are to be a great blessing to the societies in which they live. But we can only do that if we properly apply the Bible to every issue in life. It must set our priorities.

**Marc Roby: And yet, I have often heard people, sometimes even professing Christians, say that our faith must be private and can't influence public policy. In other words, it is sometimes seen as illegitimate in some way to make decisions about how to vote and so on based on the Bible.**

Dr. Spencer: I have had exactly that discussion a few times in my life. People will say that because others do not accept the authority of the Bible, it is somehow wrong to base public decisions on it. After all, they will say that religion is a private matter. But then turn that around and you will see how specious the argument is. Is it somehow improper for an atheist to use human reason as his ultimate authority in making decisions because I reject that ultimate authority? Of course not. Every person is going to use whatever his ultimate authority really is when he makes decisions. In fact, you can't avoid doing so. When someone who professes to be a Christian uses human reason as his ultimate authority, he is being inconsistent and is, in a sense, denying Christ as Lord and functioning as a practical atheist.

**Marc Roby: That's a serious charge.**

Dr. Spencer: It's a serious matter. Christians must not surrender the public sphere to atheist ideologies. We *must* bring the Bible to bear on issues in society.

**Marc Roby: I sense that we are heading into a somewhat different topic, so perhaps this is a good place to end for today. I look forward to continuing this discussion next week, and I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We appreciate hearing from you.**