

A Biblical View of Philosophy

By Stephen Mizell

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, students will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read the comments related to Colossian 2:8–10 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What warning about philosophy is given in that passage? Why is the warning given?

Assignment Two

Read the comments related to Proverbs 9:10 and Psalm 130:3–4 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What is the fear of the Lord? Why is the fear of the Lord important for a biblical view of philosophy?

Assignment Three

Read the comments related to **The Christian as a Philosopher** in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: How does philosophy fit into a Christian worldview? Why is faith in Christ important for a biblical view of philosophy?

Scripture to Memorize

“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” Philippians 4:8

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand what philosophy is, what the biblical warning against philosophy is, and how philosophy fits into the Christian worldview.

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As a professor he enjoys journeying with students through the great authors and ideas that have shaped Western culture. Through that journey he hopes to instill in students a desire for intellectual and moral excellence in their Christian walk, to uproot prejudice for novelty by pointing out the value of what is old, and to help students sift through the competing and, at times, contradictory ideas they encounter by reminding them that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

You are sitting in church. Your pastor says something that catches your attention: “. . . the triune God.” You wonder, *How is God three in one?* Later on, something else your pastor says grabs you: “Jesus died so that we might live.” You wonder: *Why did Jesus have to die? Can God die?* Then you hear your pastor say, “Praise be to the eternal God.” You wonder: *What is eternity? Does God experience time?* And as you wonder about such things, you stop. *Should I be asking such questions? Is it wrong to want to understand? Will this not destroy my faith?*

What Is Philosophy?

Many think Socrates captured the essence of philosophy in general when he said, “The unexamined life is not worth living for men.” The word *philosophy* literally means “love of wisdom” and refers to a lifestyle that seeks to understand the fundamental nature of things, usually for the purpose of discovering how human beings should live. In this sense philosophy in general consists of an overall positive set of characteristics—such as a desire to know, dissatisfaction with unsupported or irrational claims, and a willingness to examine oneself for errors in belief or conduct—that guide a person who seeks to understand:

1. why things are as they are,
2. how one can know why things are as they are,
3. what the rules are for distinguishing correct and incorrect reasoning,
4. how humans should conduct themselves in light of the way things are, and
5. what, if anything, is to be appreciated about the way things are.

This is philosophy in general. The word *philosophy* can be used to designate particular systems of thought, such as when someone speaks of “a philosophy” or “the philosophy of.” In this sense, Platonism, naturalism, and skepticism are all philosophies, for they all present a particular understanding of the world as true in opposition to other particular understandings.

This distinction between philosophy in general and philosophies as particular systems of thought needs to be kept in mind when evaluating the place of philosophy in Christianity. Philosophy in general is consistent with biblical teaching. At the same time, philosophical systems may or may not be consistent with biblical teaching.

A Warning about Particular Philosophies

Read Colossians 2:8–10 out loud.

Studying the Passage, vv. 8–10

Verse 8. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception.

Those last four words also could be translated as “hollow and deceptive philosophy.” The inclusion of a Greek article indicates that a specific philosophical system is in view, not philosophy in general. What kind of philosophy is being identified? A philosophy that is **according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ**—that is, a system that ignores biblical truth and is incompatible with Christianity.

Verses 9–10. you have been made complete. Because Christ is God, His authority is preeminent over that of any philosophical system. Christ supplies what is lacking in hollow and deceptive philosophies.

Assignment One Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment One** during the week may now share a report.

On Your Own

In the space below, list some cultural ideas or philosophies that are incompatible with Christianity. Briefly explain why those systems are incompatible with Christianity.

Discussion Question

What are some of the ways Christ supplies what is lacking in hollow and deceptive philosophies? Think of other biblical passages that describe the person and work of Christ and how those descriptions show the deficiencies in other philosophical systems.

Where Philosophy Should Begin

Read Proverbs 9:10 out loud.

Studying the Passage, Proverbs 9:10

Verse 10. The fear of the LORD. In this context, *fear* means “recognition of God’s right to reverence.” This important phrase is repeated elsewhere in various forms (Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 15:33).

Psalm 130:3–4 indicates that God deserves to be feared because He can and does forgive sins. Because of this, only someone who has been forgiven—that is, a Christian—can properly have “the fear of the LORD . . . the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10). The prerequisite for the life of wisdom is fearing the Lord. Philosophy begins with and is directed by the fear of the Lord.

Verse 10. knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. This expands on the first half of the verse. Knowledge of God is the basis of judgment and insight whereby one distinguishes between truth and error.

Assignment Two Feedback

The student who has completed **Assignment Two** during the week may now share a report.

The Christian as a Philosopher

Anselm of Canterbury wrote: “I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I also believe that ‘Unless I believe, I shall not understand.’” This nicely captures how philosophy fits into a Christian worldview.

First, *philosophy in general is the servant of theology*. Christians accept the claims of the Bible as true. But many times Christians do not understand why some of those claims are true. When Christians seek to understand, they are doing philosophy. But philosophy does not judge whether the Bible’s claims are true. The Christian as a philosopher already accepts the Bible as true. Philosophy comes alongside theology, aiding Christians in understanding *why* what they accept as true is true.

Second, just as one cannot reach a destination without knowing where the journey begins, so also *one cannot find wisdom apart from faith in Christ*. Perhaps a non-Christian might find pieces of truth through philosophy. Perhaps some particular philosophical system might help steer someone toward the truth of the gospel. But if wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, then philosophies incompatible with Christianity ultimately fail to find wisdom. Only in Christ can one find wisdom. Only a Christian can be a true philosopher, a true lover of wisdom.

Assignment Three Feedback

The student who has completed **Assignment Three** during the week may now share a report.

On Your Own

In the space below, list some biblical teachings that are true but you are unable to explain. List some questions you have because of your inability to explain these teachings. Discuss how you might go about answering some of your questions.

Discussion Question

Look back over the section entitled **What Is Philosophy?** Based on what you have learned from this lesson, why do you think philosophy in general is consistent with biblical teaching?

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven.

Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart (the real you) for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something in your life for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit says to you below, and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

At Home: Nail It Down

Philosophy literally means “love of wisdom” and refers to a lifestyle that seeks to understand the fundamental nature of things, usually for the purpose of discovering how human beings ought to live. It is important to distinguish this general sense of the word *philosophy* from the use of the word *philosophy* to refer to a particular system of thought.

Philosophy in general, a lifestyle characterized by

- a desire to acquire knowledge,
- a dissatisfaction with unsupported truth claims, and
- a willingness to live one’s life in accordance with the truth,

is consistent with biblical teaching. On the other hand, philosophical systems may or may not be consistent with biblical teaching.

Two passages were examined in this study.

- Colossians 2:8–10 is a warning not against philosophy in general but against certain philosophical systems. One should beware of philosophical systems that are incompatible with Christianity. Christ is God, and His authority is preeminent over that of any philosophical system.
- Proverbs 9:10 (in conjunction with Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; and Proverbs 1:7; 15:33) reveals the most important prerequisite for philosophy. Philosophy in general—the life of wisdom—must begin with and be directed by the fear of the Lord.

Philosophy fits into the Christian worldview in two important ways.

- Philosophy is the servant of theology in that it is a tool to help Christians understand the claims of faith they already accept as true. Philosophy does not help Christians understand in order to believe; instead, it helps them understand what they already believe.
- Philosophy must begin with the fear of the Lord if one wishes to obtain wisdom. Without the fear of the Lord, the pursuit of wisdom ultimately fails, and philosophical systems eventually go astray. Only in Christ can one be a true philosopher, for only in Christ can one find wisdom.

Parent Question

What is philosophy, and how does it fit into the Christian life?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to teenagers who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.

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