

SERMON TITLE- "The Secret"

TEXT- Luke 11:9-13

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

DATE- June 10, 2007

Here it is again- another blockbuster bestseller that is topping the lists- apparently out of the blue. This time it is called- The Secret.

The Secret is part of a genre that can make authors very rich. And what is the genre? It is the "how to become successful" genre.

In the early 90's a book called The Celestine Prophecy came along and sold 20 million copies. When I was in university a book called, Jonathan Livingston Seagull took the bestseller lists by storm. In the 50s it was a book called, Think and Grow Rich! that sold 30 million copies.

And now it is The Secret. And what is "the secret" that these books sell? It is very simple- you can do anything you want. You can be successful in achieving your wildest dreams! There are no limits. As long as you know how the universe works you will rise to the dizzying heights of success.

One thing is clear- what these books sell is not a secret. It is a well-worn formula.

What makes it so appealing and easy to sell- if you package it well?

1. It is about encouraging people- there is a way out of tough times. These books have all kinds of stories of people who have been to the edge of disaster, in relationship, in health and financially, and have experienced miraculous recoveries because they discovered The Secret. These stories are inspiring even for a skeptic.

2. It gives people something to do to make life better- think positive thoughts. When disaster is coming down all around you- you desperately want to know- what has gone wrong and what you are supposed to do? These books give you an answer. You are in trouble because of your negativity and if you just say and think the right things- everything will turn around.

3. It often taps into the Bible. In fact like The Secret many of these books claim to draw their insights directly from the Bible and specifically Jesus teaching. This makes Christians pay attention. A lot of the encouraging words come from

people who call themselves ministers and who quote the Bible with great authority.

In fact the verses that books, like The Secret, claim to have Biblical foundations, call on are Jesus well known statement-

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Luke 11:9-10

There you have it, claim these authors, the Bible tells you that you can have whatever you want. All you have to do is understand how the universe works and then follow its rules and you can have whatever you want.

There are a couple of things about The Secret and its type that we need to note at the outset-

1. They are easy to critique at all kinds of levels. A couple of weeks back I read an article in the NP with the title- "Are People Really This Stupid?" This article focused on the fact that apparently the Universe, according to The Secret and its type does not understand "Not." So that if you say "I do not want to be sick" the Universe thinks you are saying, "I do want to be sick." This seems silly but the answer to the article's question is- "Yes! People are this stupid!"

Probably true, but it doesn't lead anywhere.

2. There is something about these books that strikes deep into the human heart. It is because of this that I decided to make this a sermon topic. It is important to understand what is going on here so that we don't get swept up in The Secret even as we are critiquing it.

In fact, I believe that books like The Secret are successful because they tap into patterns of thinking that we easily fall into- even as Christians. In fact since the very beginning Christians have had their own versions of this teaching. It doesn't take long in flipping through the channels of Christian TV before you find teachers and programs that sound suspiciously like it. Their bottom line- you can have success in life just listen carefully to these simple instructions. It's not easy to sort all this out but I think that by looking at The

Secret, what it says and why it is so appealing, we can clarify and what the Bible really does teach and what its “Secret” is.

What Does “The Secret” Teach?

#1. God and the Universe are One

This is the first basic premise of The Secret and is very important to understand. In fact this is a basic premise of a lot of popular religious thinking. We will talk more about this idea and what is wrong with it.

#2. The Universe/God Is Like Aladdin’s Lamp

This follows directly from the last premise. Because God loves us and wants the best for us and because God is and controls everything- therefore everything in the whole universe is at our disposal. The universe, according to The Secret is literally like a giant vending machine ready to dispense anything we can imagine as long as we put in the request in the right way.

The Secret also uses the story of Aladdin and the Lamp. You just have to know how to rub it and it will produce anything you ask.

That is why they look very closely at verses like these looking for secret formulas that will unlock the great treasure chest. The “ask, seek, knock” formula looks like it is the key to success. There it seems to be a simple Aladdin type formula here and if you don’t read anything else in the Bible- it looks like a simple road to fulfilling your wildest dreams.

So What’s Wrong With This?

#1. God And The Universe Are Not One

For those who know the Bible this is an easy idea to respond to. God is the Creator of everything and makes it very clear that He is not one with creation. It is one of the reasons why idols are such an affront to God. To think that an object could somehow represent Him- let alone be Him is to miss the whole meaning of who He is.

So it this is so obvious- why worry about it? We do need to note this because the idea that God and the Universe are one is a pervasive idea that fills our entire culture and because of this it is very easy to have it move into our thinking without even knowing what is happening.

We don’t have to spend a lot of time on this- but we do have to be very clear about it.

The place where it creeps in most easily is the idea that, because human beings are created in God’s image.

#2. God Is A Being- Not A Machine

At first this seems like such an obvious statement that it hardly needs to be talked about. Is God a giant vending machine ready to give out goodies to anyone who punches the right code? Ridiculous, you say.

In fact however, while we all agree that God is not a machine there is a side of this thinking that creeps into our relationship with Him and with people as well.

We can easily start to treat people as machines. The vending machine picture is actually one that describes what happens when start to see people as vehicles to get something we want but it is not limited to this.

Does that sound strange? It shouldn’t. It is part of how we interact and it has problems, as you will quickly note.

What does it mean to treat a person like a machine? It means that we treat them like an object with a whole series of buttons, which can be pushed to get predictable reactions.

Now you should be thinking- that is how people are. If I say something nice to someone their face lights up- if I say something mean they become angry. Sounds like a machine to me.

The difference is this- the person you are speaking to assumes that when you say something nice- you mean it and that you are not saying it just to get a reaction. If they think you are do that everything changes.

What happens when you treat a person like a machine? It is insulting. I remember when we first went to seminary and one of my friends learned some basic counseling techniques. Good techniques, I might add, like listening empathetically and asking questions with open ends. So he decided to come home and practice them on his wife. The reaction was swift and unpleasant. Why? because he was treating his wife as an object to be manipulated.

As parents we are used to our children begging us for things they want. We may not give in but no parent should react poorly to a child begging for something.

In fact, as Jesus illustrates we are actually taught to learn to “beg” from God. This is the mystery of prayer. God does know what we need before we ask- but in this our relationship to God is that of children- and as such asking persistently is something we are specifically told to do.

But every parent also knows that something changes when begging turns into manipulation. We all understand disappointment and even desperation but when tears or praise are just tools to get something- things backfire. That is not what works in relationships.

This is an incredibly important lesson to remember as we work to have a healthy relationship with God.

#3. It's About A Relationship

1. It is important to be reminded that God, like a responsible parent, is not a candy store for whatever we should happen to be craving at a given moment in time.
2. It is important to remember that- like any child we will fall into the habit of seeing God as a candy store. And that God like any healthy parent is not shocked by this. We as children of God don't have to feel too bad when we discover the habit we have fallen into- and not surprised or hurt when we are reminded that this isn't very good. Like normal children we will probably instinctively feel chagrined when we realize this but when a child recognizes this parents are actually very happy. Because this leads to the third lesson-
3. The basis of the relationship between God and us is “fellowship.” Good relationships have tremendous benefits but these benefits rise out of the relationship. We all find ourselves trying to get more for ourselves out of relationships- that's how we selfish human beings are- but once we realize that we have turned the equation upside down we need to go back to work on the basics. Good relationships that have a strong foundation on fellowship go back to that basic and begin to work at simply rediscovering the essentials again.

#4. Asking Is Very Important- This Is NOT A Secret

Asking is what we are supposed to do. God as the perfect parent give us an incredible promise that every child needs to

hear from its parents- “Just ask!” God loves us. At the point at which we ask- we then are to listen and respond to what God does in response to that request.

If we don't think God will respond- why ask? Jesus tells us to ask and that asking makes a huge difference.

Having asked the ball goes into God's court and Jesus explains-

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? Luke 11:11-12

This is a very important verse to add to the idea that The Secret puts out- the idea that if we somehow we have to be very careful what we say to God.

We do of course need to be careful because it is a valuable relationship but not because it is like a vending machine in which pushing the wrong buttons gets you something you didn't really want.

This idea is actually a big problem with a lot of Christians. How often have you heard people say, “You had better be careful what you pray for- you might get it!”

Yes we should be careful what we say to God- as we should be careful what we say to someone we care for- but no one you love will give you something you didn't want because you asked for it in the wrong way.

The idea that we need to be careful- in that sense comes directly from a deep misunderstanding of God- and it is a misunderstanding that feeds the instinctive popularity of books, like The Secret. It is another reason why understanding this is important.

It matters what we say to God but not because He will give us something bad if we say things wrong.

But there is one more very important lesson that comes out of a Biblical response to The Secret and it comes from the ending to the ask, seek, knock passage in Luke-

If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! Luke 11:13

#5. It's Not About Changing The World- It's About Being Changed

This is such an important end to this passage. When we read the Bible we find all kinds of promises from God about all kinds of things- many of which are pieces to successful living. But the NT is very clear that the ultimate change that needs to happen in the world is not that we get more things- the ultimate change that needs to happen in the world is that our hearts become tuned to the way God sees things.

The purpose of prayer is not to shape the world into a fantasy that we can imagine- the purpose of prayer, coming out of a relationship with God, is to have our hearts tuned and shaped to reflect God's way of seeing the world.

To do that the Holy Spirit working in us from the inside out is the bottom line- and there it is at the end of this passage. What is it that God wants to give us? The Holy Spirit.

Does this mean this will be an easy process? No.

Does this mean we will occasionally wish we could go another way? Yes.

But is this gift is finally the ultimate gift that God gives those He loves.