

The Consequences of Ideas

Lesson 9: Plato

I. Introduction

- a. As Christians, we inherit much of our doctrine and formulation of the faith not only from the Scripture, but also from **tradition**—the body of councils, writings, and great leaders of the faith who precede us.
- b. During the beginning stages of Christianity and at the time of the early Church fathers, variations on **Platonism** were the dominant mode of thinking. Hence it is important to have some familiarity with his ideas.
- c. The Church Fathers interacted with their culture to demonstrate that the God of Christianity was indeed the **universal** God and not a unique possession of Jews alone.
- d. They sought to prove that the universal God of Greek philosophy was indeed **fulfilled** in Christ. As a result, Greek philosophy became a tool for defending and explaining the Christian faith. *Acts 17:23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD . Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. KJV*

II. Plato (427 B.C. - 347 B.C.)

- a. Many of Plato's writings are presented in the form of **conversations** between Socrates and various characters in which Plato's ideas are put forth. The style is much like the Book of Job where each character expresses his ideas.
- b. Plato thought the only hope for democracy lay in developing a "**correct** philosophy" and in creating a new society governed by philosopher-rulers who would form a utopian society in accordance with his vision of reality.
- c. In many ways Plato's theories about education, personality and the welfare state anticipated and inspired much of **modern** thinking.

III. The State

- a. His views on state control, including the regulation of property and the family, is the fore-runner of **socialism**. Plato's ideal society is a picture of the Marxist totalitarian state controlled by those who ostensibly know best.
- b. Plato states that justice is not a matter of gaining personal advantage but of doing what is right. Ultimate justice lies in each member of society doing the work that he has to do. Justice lies in fully discharging that **duty**.
- c. Plato saw three main **classes** in society. The majority of society would constitute the bottom tier made up of farmers, manufacturers and traders.
- d. Above them was the class of auxiliaries who function like a police force or army, **enforcing** the decisions of the rulers.
- e. The highest class of all was the **rulers**. These had been trained in mathematics and philosophy and had a sense of obligation to the state which prompted them to accept the role of rulers.

IV. Theory of Forms

- a. Plato compared the human condition to a cave in which the prisoners could see only the **shadows** of objects cast in the light of a fire.
- b. The prisoners in the cave mistook the shadows for **reality**. But if some of the prisoners were released, they would see that the shadows were not real objects and that the shadows were not the whole of reality.
- c. In fact, Plato would say that only by emerging from the figurative cave is one enabled to see the ultimate truth. The truth is only discoverable when one examines things from the perspective of the **spiritual realm**.
- d. To Plato there is a real world and the things themselves exist in this real world, but what we observe shackles us and **prevents** us from seeing what truly is.
- e. The forms are all ultimately related to the Form of the **Good**, which is like the sun, not only giving visibility to objects but sustaining them, causing living things to grow, without itself being part of the earthly process.
- f. The Good is not only the source of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their existence and reality. In essence this is his conception of **God**.
- g. He believed that most human beings were preoccupied with **material** things. What they needed was be weaned away from the objects of their lower passions and to have their thoughts turned to the immaterial reality behind the world.

V. The Soul and Immortality

- a. True wisdom and wise action required not only an understanding of the nature of the world in relation to the Forms, it also required an understanding of the **soul**.
- b. Plato believed that the soul was an immaterial entity with inherent virtue like the Forms. According to Plato's doctrine of recollection all knowledge **resides** within the soul and merely needs to be brought out by questions.
- c. The goal for the soul is to become "as good and wise as it possibly can." Those who are good find ultimate release from the body in a **higher** existence.
- d. Those that have not been particularly good undergo further purification. This is the source of the Roman Catholic doctrine of **Purgatory**.
- e. Souls are successively reincarnated in the bodies of humans, animals and even birds, until they are purified. The very wicked, however, are tormented eternally in **Tartarus**.

The Consequences of Ideas

Lesson 9: Plato

VI. Plato's Religion

- The truths that Plato finds come from **within** the human soul by recollection and rational reflection. So, in this sense man is essentially good needing only to have his goodness brought forth.
- Plato also refutes **atheism**. He argues that the one who breaks laws intentionally, does so because he believes that the gods do not exist, or that the gods are not concerned with human affairs.
- Plato assumes that those who know good will love and **desire it**. But he also recognizes that moral virtue is of itself a prerequisite to knowing the good. I have to know it before I can do it.
- Desiring good is itself a virtue which must be possessed in order to know the good. In order to break into this vicious circle Plato proposes that society should be ruled by those who know good and can **teach** it to others.
- Plato seeks to prove by showing that a soul must exist which is the **cause** of all motion, including those souls that human beings call gods.
- Plato suggests that human **improvement** through education will lead to ultimate salvation (ending the reincarnation cycle) because of his knowledge of the good and practice of it.

VII. The Christian Response

- Although Plato makes no claims of divine **revelation**, Platonism is seen by some as in some ways offering a philosophical underpinning for Christian faith.
- The Form of the Good (God) rejects a **skeptical** and materialistic view of reality. This is essentially the message of Scripture. *Prov 3:5-7 Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil. KJV*
- Plato clearly taught a doctrine of **life** after death which was linked with rewards and punishments. This too aligns with the teaching of the Bible. *1 Cor 3:14 If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. KJV*
- In spite of some apparent similarities there are however, some major differences. In Christian thought God is not a Form or Idea which is related to all other Forms or Ideas in the world. This is polytheism or **Pantheism**.
- Further differences between Plato and Christian thought emerge when we compare their differing attitudes to human nature and **ethics**.
- Plato's ideas lead to a **rejection** of the physical realm (body) because it is thought to be the prison house of the soul and evil. This, of course does not square with the teaching of Scripture. *1 Cor 6:19 What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? KJV*
- The Christian idea is that ethics and morality are grounded in the righteous **character** of God, the Creator Judge and Redeemer. Human beings are to be holy because God is holy. *Eph 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: KJV*
- In a philosophy which tries to combine enlightenment with polytheism there can be no single standard of ethical excellence. Further, since man is inherently sinful he does not possess a natural inclination to **perfection**. *Rom 3:11-12 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. KJV*
- Finally, the Christian message of redemption by a loving, personal God rather than by one's self effort and education can not be reconciled and constitute an unbridgeable **gap** between Plato and the Bible. *Titus 3:5-7 Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. KJV*

VIII. Application

- In many ways Plato comes close to acknowledging the God of the Bible but he never quite does so. What a terrible tragedy to be that close and yet miss the truth entirely.
- It is not enough to know about God and to be able to describe His attributes but fail to be known by Him. Saving knowledge of God is not an intellectual exercise but it is a matter of the heart.
- The apostle John tells us that we may "**know**" that we are known by Him and that He has given us eternal life (1 John 5:13) when by our own self examination we find that we do the things that He has commanded us.
- To what extent are you confident that you **KNOW** God?
- Have you experienced a change of heart towards the things of God?
- When you take inventory of yourself do you see His grace conforming you to His Son?