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What Are You Thinking

Philippians 4:8-9

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Thinking can be an interesting exercise that leads to questions, some profound, some more mundane. For example, why do drug stores make people who are sick walk all the way to the back of the store to get their prescriptions while somewhat healthier people can buy cigarettes right at the front? Why do people order double cheeseburgers, large fries, and a *diet* coke? Why do banks leave the doors open and chain pens to the counter? Why do people leave cars worth thousands of dollars in the driveway and put junk in the garage? Why do we use answering machines to screen calls and then have call waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place? Why do they sell hot dogs in packages of ten and hot dog buns in packages of eight? Why do drive up ATM's have Braille lettering? Why don't we see the headline every week: "Psychic Wins Lottery."

I want to talk with you today about thinking. The tough thing about thinking is that our minds are exposed to so much noise, gossip, so-called news (can you imagine Walter Cronkite and Eric Severeid discussing Anna Nicole Smith or Paris Hilton – it is inconceivable), entertainment, images, temptation, distraction, horror and busyness that we are over-stimulated. We're told we live in the "information age," in which we have greater access to more information than any generation that has ever lived. We have the opportunity of high speed Internet access and hundreds of television channels, but all the information we're exposed to seemingly hasn't made humanity a whole lot wiser or nobler. Every week the media brings the latest acts of unspeakable violence into our homes and this past week was no exception. It is crucial to our faith, our character, our behavior and our speech that we spend time thinking about thinking - reflecting, analyzing, and pondering deeply on life, the scriptures and on what is right, true, honorable, and just.

The image of Rodin's famous statue, *The Thinker*, seated, deep in thought, reflects a desperately needed posture in our digital age. Yet focusing on and thinking about the right things has always been a challenge for people. The apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8-9,

"Finally, beloved, whatever is **true**, whatever is **honorable**, whatever is **just**, whatever is **pure**, whatever is **pleasing**, whatever is **commendable**, if there is any **excellence**, and if there is anything worthy of **praise**, **think about these things**. Keep on doing the things that you have **learned and received and heard and seen** in me, and **The God of peace** will be with you."

When I say the word "faith," think of the first three words that come to mind for you. What about when I say "religion," how about "discipleship?"

How many people associated faith, religion, or discipleship with the word "think," "thinking," or "thoughtful?" We believe in the value of faith, yet I suspect only a few of us, even if we thought of more than three words, would have come up with "think" or "thinking." Many people do not think of Christian discipleship as involving the intellect or they've been taught that you check your brain at the door of the church and pick it up again when you leave. This is not what God wants from us, nor is it good for us.

Throughout the Bible we are urged to think, to use the brain God has given us to better understand God, ourselves, each other and how we are to live. The scriptures are full of stories of people whose thinking is challenged. A poster I saw years ago displayed a classic painting of the crucifixion and underneath were the words, "**He died to take away your sins, not your mind.**" Jesus, quoting the scriptures said, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and **with all your mind;***" (Luke 10:27).

God wants us to apply all of our mind, our thinking, our education, our brain power to learning more about God and how the Lord wants us to live and what God wants us to do. Sometimes people get confused because Jesus tells us we need to have the faith of a little child which they interpret to mean a simplistic, unquestioning faith. I think Jesus means we need the trust that a child

has in a loving parent in recognizing our dependence, but Jesus certainly didn't mean we should be childish in our thinking.

Jesus begins several parables by asking,

“What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep...(Matt 18:12).”

“What do you think? A man had two sons...(Matt 21:28)”

Psalm 94:11 says, “The Lord knows our **thoughts**,” an ability Jesus possessed.

In Matthew 9:4 Jesus asks his opponents, “Why do you **think evil** in your hearts?”

Once when the disciples were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest we read “But Jesus, **aware of their inner thoughts**... (Luke 9:47).”

I've always found the fact that the Lord knows my inner thoughts rather disconcerting. Most of us control and manage our behavior more than our speech, and our speech more than our thoughts. In other words, we usually think more than we say and say more than we do. For example, we get angry and we think, “I'd like to punch his lights out, the stupid so and so.” We actually say, “What's the matter with you?” and instead of physically attacking them we make an angry face. **The Lord knows our thoughts are the basis for our actions. You are what you think.**

James 2:4 warns us of the danger that we can, “*become judges with evil thoughts*” in how we view and treat other people. What is truly scary to contemplate is when Paul writes about God's basis for judgment in Romans 2:16 he claims there will be “*the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ will judge the secret thoughts of all.*”

The idea that God will judge our secret thoughts should be enough to inspire all of us to stop worrying about what we perceive to be the sin in other people's lives and to focus on the cleansing of our own minds and hearts.

How do we learn to think well?

Reading the Bible is crucial in this process of thinking because Hebrews 4:12 teaches us, “*The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to*

judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Regular reading of the best of scripture will help to convict, challenge, and call us to Christ-like thinking.

Many scriptures remind and encourage us about the importance of what we think about and where we set our mind. Psalm 26:2 encourages us to engage in intelligent self-reflection, *“Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and **mind.**”*

Proverbs 15:14 reminds us of the importance of continuing to learn. *“The **mind** of one who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly.”* Isaiah 26:3 shares a beautiful promise about peace of mind. *“Those of **steadfast mind** you keep in peace – in peace because they trust in you.”*

In Jeremiah 17:10, God warns us, *“I the Lord test **the mind and search the heart**, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.”*

Meditating on and memorizing scripture is one of most crucially important things we can do to think properly and to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Think Positively. It can be challenging to find the true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent or praiseworthy in a given situation in our personal life or in the world, but that is what we are to do.

Anne Phillips wrote in the Christian Reader, about an elderly pastor’s wife who was known for her ability to make a positive comment about every facet of her husband’s ministry in Florida. The church choir, however, consisting as it did of seniors in their 70s and 80s had defied positive but truthful comment. She finally solved the problem one Sunday morning. As the choir members filed into the choir loft, she leaned over to me and remarked, *“Aren’t they walking well this morning?”* We’re blessed to have a choir that not only walks well; but sings well.

In Philippians Paul urges us to focus our thinking on the true, the honorable, the just, the pure, the lovely, the excellent, the praiseworthy. If we were to keep a chart, what percentage of our thinking is spent on these virtues? Keep in mind this would include all of our computer, television, reading, and listening time. How much of what we take in is eternal and how much is trivial? How much is pure and how much is not truly noble or helpful? Often we give

more thought to the food we put in our body than the material we put in our minds.

Think Maturely.

In his letters, Paul frequently shares about the importance of thinking properly and maturely, we need to grow up in our thinking. In 1 Corinthians 13:11 he wrote about his own experience, *“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”*

In the next chapter he exhorts us, (1 Corinthians 14:20),

“Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.”

Romans 12:17 instructs us, *“Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”*

A wise man wrote, “For perverse thoughts separate people from God, and when his power is tested, it exposes the foolish; **because wisdom will not enter a deceitful soul, or dwell in a body enslaved to sin.** For a holy and disciplined spirit will flee from deceit, and will leave foolish thoughts behind, and will be ashamed at the approach of unrighteousness (Wisdom of Solomon, 1:3-5).”

For a variety of reasons, it’s not always possible to leave foolish or negative thoughts behind. The Academy Award winning film *A Beautiful Mind* traces the life of genius mathematician John Nash Jr. Nash studied at Princeton where he sought to discover a truly original idea and where he first began to experience paranoid schizophrenia. In the film, his paranoia climaxed when he worked as a professor in the early 1950’s at M.I.T.’s Wheeler Defense Labs. Nash was eventually admitted to an institution that diagnosed and treated the disease but shock therapy and medications left him unable to think through math problems, care for his young son, or be intimate with his wife. Nash determined to get off the medications and to use his mind to reason his way through severe mental illness. His determination led him to re-establish his relationship with Princeton and eventually to resume teaching.

Nash’s 1950 dissertation, *Noncooperative Games*, which explained his concept of equilibrium, had a profound impact on economics and in 1994

Thomas King from the Nobel Committee met with Nash to assess his mental state and to see if he would be a suitable Nobel laureate. In their conversation, Nash says to King tongue in cheek, *"I am crazy."* Then more soberly, *"I take the newer medications, but I still see things that are not there. I just choose not to acknowledge them. Like a diet of the mind, I choose not to indulge certain appetites."* Nash won the Nobel prize.

A diet of the mind is what the Apostle Paul is urging us to engage in. A diet of the mind where we feed on the pure, true, just, honorable and fast from the coarse, crude, insignificant, and trivial.

Think Deeply

Psalm 92:5 says of God, **"Your thoughts are very deep!"**

Henry David Thoreau, wrote in his essay, *Life Without Principle*, about thinking and our minds:

"Not without a slight shudder at the danger, I often perceive how near I come to admitting into **my mind** the details of some trivial affair – the news of the street; and I am astonished to observe how willing men are to lumber **their minds** with such rubbish – to permit idle rumors and incidents of the most insignificant kind to **intrude on ground which should be sacred to thought**. Shall **the mind** be a public arena, where the affairs of the street and the gossip of the tea-table are discussed? Or shall it be a quarter of heaven itself?

"It is so hard to forget what it is worse than useless to remember!

There is inspiration, that gossip which comes to the ear of the attentive mind from the courts of heaven.

There is the profane and stale revelation of the barroom and the police court.

The same ear is fitted to receive both communications.

Only the character of the hearer determines to which it shall be open, and to which it shall be closed. I believe that the mind can be permanently profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things, so that all our thoughts shall be tinged with triviality.

We should treat **our minds**, that is ourselves, as innocent and ingenuous children whose guardians we are, and be careful what objects and what subjects we thrust on their attention.

Read not the Times. Read the Eternities.

Every thought that passes through the mind helps to wear and tear it, and to deepen the ruts, which, as in the streets of Pompeii, evince how much it has been used.”¹

To think well we can read the Bible, think positively, maturely, and deeply about significant things that truly matter and not where Paris Hilton will be spending the next 39 days.

Let’s pray,

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from far away.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them - they are more than the sand; I come to the end - I am still with you.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and **know my thoughts.***

See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Psalm 139:1-2, 17-18, 23-24

Blessing: “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things.” 2 Timothy, 2:7

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, (Bantam Classic Edition, New York, 1982), from the essay, *Life Without Principle*, 367-369.