

Think About These Things: The Mind and Christian Faith

I am encouraging you today to think. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that Holy Scripture is encouraging you today to think. In the inspired words of Paul, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” It sounds so simple. It makes sense, and you see, there we go...for something to “make sense,” you have to think about it.

It’s been said that human beings are the only creatures on earth that can think about thinking. In other words, everything else on earth operates on instinct; automatically, if you will. The fruit tree doesn’t stand in the field and say, “Hmm, maybe I ought to push out an apple or two.” The tiger doesn’t have a committee meeting to discuss best hunting practices. Only humans have the ability to be self-reflective; to think carefully about our own behavior and beliefs. And that can lead us in some intriguing directions, as well as down some rabbit trails.

For example, those who spend a lot of time thinking about thinking will tell you that there are different styles or modes of thinking, such as Concrete, Convergent, Divergent, Creative, Analytical, Linear and Holistic. That’s pretty abstract (which is also a mode of thinking), so I took a few online quizzes to find out what kind of thinker I am. You’re about to find out more than you ever wanted to about me. The “Top Brain/Bottom Brain” quiz said that I normally think in “Situational Adaptor Mode,” which means that I am “open to being absorbed by local events, am action oriented and responsive to ongoing situations, but am particularly context dependent.” Does your brain hurt yet? Here’s a little better one. The General Electric Thinking quiz told me that I am a visual thinker, which means I think in pictures and that I understand all things spatial, which is probably why it falls to me to pack the car when it’s time to take a trip. The ProProfs Quiz said that I am a Wishful Thinker: that I am a dreamer in perfect moderation with reality, and that having a positive mind is more important to me than just about anything else. And another quiz told me that I was a visionary, meaning that I’m most interested in the big picture, leaving the details for other people to figure out. The example that was used was of people in a car—one person is driving, another has their eye on the gas gauge and is calculating miles per gallon, while the job of the visionary is to make sure we are traveling in the right direction towards our destination. Are these quizzes accurate? Some more than others. But the point is, all these results allegedly describe the thoughts going on in one person. Me! Human beings have the privilege of self-reflection, but it behooves us to use that privilege wisely. In other words, what we think about, and how much we think about it, has a huge impact on how we move out into life, or if we move out into it at all.

So again, God has created us to be thinking creatures. He never asks us to “check our brains at the door.” He wants us to use our minds in a variety of ways, including, and maybe especially, in our relationship with him. Once more, our theme verse for this gathering today says: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Elsewhere, in Matthew 22 it says “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And in his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul makes the exciting invitation to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

By God’s own description, it is good for us to contemplate things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise, and of course, all of those things could be said about Him, first and foremost! But Paul says, “Whatever” is true, honorable, just, and so forth. You are not limited in any way in dwelling on things that honor God and that communicate something about His character. But have you stopped yet to consider “why?” Why do we need direction when it comes to our thoughts?

One reason is that, now more than ever, you and I are engulfed in a tsunami of bad news and negative influences. And incredibly, we do this to ourselves, voluntarily. Whether its internet, television, radio, smart phone, you name it, many of us live with those channels wide open because we feel we must. But a growing number of voices are questioning the wisdom of occupying our minds with a constant barrage of bad news.

One such voice is Rolf Dobelli, the author of the book “How to Think Clearly.” In an article about unplugging from a constant news cycle, he writes: “News is toxic to your body. It constantly triggers the limbic system. Panicky stories spur the release of cascades of glucocorticoid.” Glucocorticoid is a class of steroid hormones that can cause impaired digestion, lack of growth, nervousness and susceptibility to infections. So if you think you feel bad after watching the news, it’s because you do, from a physiological standpoint.

Dobelli continues: “Thinking requires concentration. Concentration requires uninterrupted time. News pieces are specifically designed to interrupt you.” And there’s much more he has to say that we can’t get into now. And the point is not to say that network news is the singular cause of our problems, but Dobelli effectively illustrates that what we think about has a direct effect on us. When you give something access to your mind, it can become a matter of health, and it’s not going too far to say that it can become a matter of life and death. I think we are all aware of the potential that stress has to trigger physical maladies. When we begin to concentrate solely on the stressors and ponder our problems exclusively, it can create a dangerous cycle that becomes increasingly difficult to escape.

Knowing this, God has presented us with a plan for a healthy mind. It is outlined for us in this passage from Philippians 4. Our theme verse is an important part of this plan. But we have to back up just a few verses to get the full impact.

Paul begins by saying “Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again: Rejoice!” It is worth pointing out that when Paul says “rejoice,” he is using what a grammar student would call an imperative. That means he is commanding us to “Rejoice in the Lord!” This really isn’t an invitation. To our ears that seems a little aggressive. But it also can give us the sense that rejoicing is something you can intentionally do, and, in fact, sometimes rejoicing in the Lord is something you will have to intentionally do; it is something you are going to have to will yourself to do, because you do not feel like doing it.

Now, just to be sure we’re clear: Paul is being specific here. He is choosing his words very carefully. He does not say: Rejoice in your happy circumstances or rejoice in your nice possessions or rejoice in your good health. Nor does he say rejoice in your unhappy circumstances or rejoice in the loss of your possessions or rejoice in your frightening diagnosis. He says, rejoice in the Lord. Do you see where that is focused? The rejoicing is focused on the Lord Jesus. The apostle Paul is teaching us how to set our thinking straight, and it begins with intentional focus on Jesus Christ. That means we utilize the power of our mind to review the story of Jesus, our Savior. We consciously recall his birth and teaching ministry; his temptation and Passion; His precious death and burial; his resurrection and ascension; and we remember it was all for us. The personal nature of Jesus’ sacrifice and victory over death and what it earns for you is the source of Christian joy. We are to rejoice in Jesus always—to always be taking our thoughts and moving them back to the Lord of heaven and earth, who became one of us.

The challenge is, of course, that all manner of things are going to try to move you off that solid base. Rejoicing in the Lord is really a matter of “Yes, but.” Do you know what I mean? It is learning how to insert “Yes, but...” into your thinking. I’m facing something really scary. Yes, but, a living Lord who conquered death and the grave goes with me. I feel unlovable. Yes, but it was the strongest love of all time that moved Jesus to take my place in death and new life. In a sense, rejoicing in the Lord is the art of preaching the gospel to yourself. I wish I had come up with that phrase, but I didn’t. I credit Timothy Keller, a noted New York City pastor and author for that. It is the art of preaching the gospel to yourself, of rehearsing it, of drawing your joy from the Lord and not circumstances, of figuring out how to remember that when you need it most. It’s great when someone is there to remind us. That’s a huge part of a pastor’s calling—reminding people to rejoice in the Lord. But there will be times when there’s no pastor around, or there’s no Christian friend by your side, and you’re going to have to be the one to preach the gospel to yourself. And I don’t want to make that sound like it’s a big impossible task. It’s not. It’s something that your mind can do when you’ve filled it with God’s Words throughout your life.

I heard somebody once talking about a house that they had bought. It was a lovely home and had all the amenities the family was looking for. But it seemed like no matter what they did, the basement was always damp. Even on hot, dry summer days, there was humidity down there you could sense. They tried all kind of remedies and machines and gadgets, but finally they found out from someone who had been in the community for years that the house had been built over a natural spring.

Under the foundation of your life is a spring of living water that never runs out. Rejoicing in the Lord is remembering that His promises are down there for you all the time. It's a matter of looking at the things that threaten you and saying, "Yes, but, Jesus."

The next step in God's plan for a healthy mind is very simple. It is to pray. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord." Did you hear that? Guard your hearts and...minds in Christ.

A healthy mind is a praying mind. This is an exceptionally rich passage, and I can't do it all justice, so I will just ask you notice one thing. Paul teaches us to put thanksgiving before the answer comes. Did you catch it? Isn't that something? We learn from the time we are little children to make our request, wait for the answer, and then say "thank you" when the request is granted, and when we're little kids we often depend on some adult saying in kind of a stage whisper, "WHAT DO YOU SAY???" And you say, "Thank you." But here Paul says, when you pray, find things to thank God for before you ask Him anything. If you think that one through and really start practicing that in your prayers, it's probably going to change your prayers. And there's a tremendous promise that is made here too. Paul says when you have made your thankful prayer to God, a transcendent peace will descend on you that will guard your heart AND MIND in Jesus. Why? Because you trust Him. You trust him to make the right decision. A man named Joseph Scriven absolutely nailed it when he wrote these words: "Oh, what peace we often forfeit/Oh, what needless pain we bear/all because we do not carry/everything to God in prayer." A healthy mind is a praying mind.

That brings us back once more to our theme verse. "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." God's plan for a healthy mind includes rejoicing in Jesus; coming to God in prayer and receiving peace that guards your mind; and thinking about the type of things that are in this list. How to go about doing that will be the substance of the sectional presentations you will hear today. We are so grateful that you are here, and may you be blessed as you contemplate the deep love of Jesus.

Philippians 4 English Standard Version (ESV)

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,

whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.