

Loving God With Your Mind

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Philippians 4:4-9

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

...I missed the memo that God created us for relationship, not rule keeping.

In his book *Christian Behavior*, C. S. Lewis writes about a schoolboy who once asked what he thought God was like. He replied that as far as he could tell, God was “The sort of person who is always snooping around to see if people were enjoying themselves and then trying to put a stop to it.”

For much of my early life, I could have been that schoolboy. I imagined God to be a cosmic killjoy, who wanted to curtail my fun. Somehow I missed the memo that God created us for relationship, not rule-keeping. I imagined God as a divine accountant keeping a careful ledger of everyone’s vices and virtues. The Ten Commandments were drummed into me. Do this, don’t do that. More about that later.

“Which commandment is most important?” a lawyer asks Jesus. Someone had tallied up all the laws in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament). They came up with 613 laws: 248 written in the positive form, “you shall,” and 365 in the negative form, “you shall not.”

Jesus answers his question with the words, “You shall love

the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your might.” Then Jesus added, “The second [command] is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” These two love commands originate from the Torah. Loving your neighbor is taken from Leviticus 19:18, while loving God with all your heart originates in Deuteronomy 6:5. This portion of Deuteronomy is called, in Jewish circles, the Shema, for the simple reason that its first word is the Hebrew term for hear.

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The Shema is the closest thing to a universal creed in Judaism. These verses are still recited daily by observant Jews. They placed these verses in little boxes called phylacteries and wore them on their arms and across their foreheads. They also placed them in containers called mezuzah and attached them to the doorposts of the homes.

There’s one substantial difference in the way Jesus

“Most people would rather die than think; many do.”

- Bertrand Russell

recites this verse from how it appears in Deuteronomy. Jesus adds the phrase, “with all your mind.”

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul *and all your mind* and all your strength.” Both passages call us to love God with our whole being. One of the ways we love God is with our minds.

According to the National Science Foundation, we think anywhere from 12,000 to 50,000 thoughts every day. Some of us may be in the 12,000-thought category while those deep-thinkers among us are in the 50,000-thought range. That means that during this sermon, you will entertain hundreds of assorted thoughts.

The first talk on a Great Banquet weekend centers on priorities. We ask people three questions. Where do you spend your money? Where do you spend your time? What do you think about?

Most of us don’t give much thought to our thought life. We become so accustomed to anxious thoughts or jealous thoughts that we don’t pay them much notice. But what seems like mindless thinking may not be mindless, after all. Some of it is downright destructive. We think negative thoughts, super-critical thoughts, sinister and evil thoughts. AA has a name for it—“stinkin’ thinkin.”

Scripture calls us to a purpose-filled thought life.

Living an intentional thought life doesn’t come easy. TV drones on everywhere—when I’m in the airport, when my car is being serviced. Our technology robs us of prolonged thinking. I read this week that 78 percent of 12-year-olds go to bed with their cell phones. Text messages and internet images bombard us at every turn.

Some of us invest little time in serious reflection. The atheist Bertrand Russell was right about one thing: “Most people would rather die than think; many do.”

Mark Noll, in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, writes about Charles Malik, a Lebanese diplomat, scholar and Eastern Orthodox Christian, who was invited to Wheaton College to address the opening of the Billy Graham Center. He spoke about the challenges facing Western civilization. These intellectual dilemmas of modern life are just the sort of thing universities exist to explore. Malik wanted his Christian university audience to realize the magnitude of its task. “The problem is not only to win souls but to save minds. If you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world, you will soon discover that you have not won the world. Indeed, it may turn out that you have actually lost the world.” Our souls not only need to be saved, our minds do, also.

God is relational to the core.

Paul supplies a list of things to think about. This representative list of six adjectives in Philippians covers a broad range of subjects—truth, honor, righteousness, purity, love and virtue. “Whatever is true [the word means real or substantial as opposed to shallow and superficial], whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure [unmixed with evil], whatever is pleasing or lovely [this word refers to things that sound well. If people could hear your thoughts, would it be a pleasing sound?], whatever is commendable or virtuous, think about these things.” To think about these things is to ponder or ruminate over them; to allow them to settle into our hearts.

What are you thinking about right now? Are you thinking about last night, this afternoon or when will this sermon be over? I’d like you think about how God communicates His thoughts with us. One way God communicates is through Scripture. The Bible enables us to think God’s thoughts.

Some of you have never read the Bible. You may have dabbled in Scripture but never actually read it. You may find this book intimidating. You may think it will browbeat you into submission, the way some Christians beat you over the head with this book. Or you may have read this book at some point in your past but have stopped doing so. Perhaps you’ve become bored with it.

You find the newspaper, video and internet more to your liking.

Let me return to the school-boy image mentioned at the outset. I imagined God was all about rule-keeping. Okay, I was wrong. Let me take you back to God’s Big Story. We have been created to live in relationship with God. We fall out of relationship with God through something called sin. God seeks to redeem our relationship through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God is relational to the core. The Creator seeks to live in relationship with his creation. One of the ways God relates to us is through Scripture.

We don’t read the Bible for information so we can pontificate on the identity of the Hittites or find Mesopotamia on a map. We read it for formation. The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to form Christ in us.

This book is meant to be lived. When Paul instructs us to “think about these things,” the next verse adjures us to do those things we have been thinking about. We think about these things in order to put them into practice.

Readers become what they read. Good thoughts become the antecedent to good behavior. Someone said, “Thought is action in rehearsal.”

In the book of Revelation, the Apostle John has a vision of an angel giving him a scroll. The angel tells him to “Take and eat” (10:9). Taste this

Thought is action in rehearsal.

"Danny, it will not work for you to let your thoughts run wild. Just focus on my voice."

Word. Savor and digest it. Scripture is spiritual food. Some of you are feeding your minds with a steady diet of internet fluff. Mental junk food, you might say.

You may find the Bible difficult to digest. It has been known to give people indigestion. It tells us uncomfortable things. The Bible doesn't flatter us or curry our favor. There are hard things in this book—hard things to hear, hard things to obey. This book reads us just as we read it.

But let me offer a minute for witness on Scripture. I started reading this book when I was 19. Six years later, I went to graduate school to read this book in its original languages. For 30+ years I've made it my vocation to teach and preach the Bible. I can attest from personal experience, the Bible will grow on you. There is a thickness to this book that will sustain you. It can change your life just as it has changed mine. The Bible has radically reoriented my thought life, my values and my behavior. The Bible has done this for countless people.

We're inviting you, this fall, to read John Ortberg's book, *The Me I Want to Be*. Many of you are taking us up on this challenge; our bookstore has already sold 331 copies. Our goal, as we've said before, is for everyone to become the person God wants him/her to be so we can become the church God intends us to be. In his

section on *Renewing My Mind*, John writes about Danny, who liked to go spelunking in Iowa caves. His guide took him deep underground through a narrow passageway into a spectacular cave. The passageway leading into this cave was so small that Danny had to get on hands and knees. Eventually, the only way to go forward was to lie on his back and push his body forward with his feet. The ceiling was so low that when he inhaled he couldn't move at all! He had to stop, inhale and exhale, and only then was his chest low enough to allow him to move. By this point, it was physically impossible to back out. If the passageway had gotten any smaller, he would have died in that position.

Danny is a sky-diving, mountain-climbing, hang-gliding thrill seeker, but in that cave he experienced a wave of sheer panic. He told his guide he was about to lose it. His guide got right in his face: "Danny, close your eyes and listen to my voice. I will keep talking and guide you through. We will be okay. I have been there before and I will get you to the other side. But you must listen to my voice. It will not work for you to let your thoughts run wild. Just focus on my voice."

Don't let your thoughts run wild. Focus on God's voice.

