

I. Set Up: This morning we continue our Renewal series with the third message from Mark 12. This is where Jesus notes that we are to “love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.” So far we have looked at what it means to love God with our heart and also with our soul. Today Mike will look at the command to love God with our mind.

II. Introduction

A. I'd like to open by reading the introduction to a sermon I preached on Philippians 4:8 twenty-six years ago. The passage is Paul's closing comments about thinking. He writes, “Finally, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” That is the passage. This is how I opened the sermon twenty-six years ago. I'm reading:

1. History was made this week at the Woodruff home. Jason Daniel – all seven months and sixteen pounds of him – became mobile. J-Bug, as he is affectionately called, has mastered a commando crawl that would make a Marine proud. He stays low to the ground in his tireless pursuit of electric sockets, the fireplace, plants and everything else we are trying to keep him away from.

2. I don't know how long it's been since you've been around a seven-month-old, but he's quite fascinating to watch, and I find myself wondering, “Why is he doing that? What is he thinking about? Does he know he is a person? How did he learn to recognize his name? Why does he laugh at the stupidest things? What does he remember from day-to-day? How does he think and what does he think about?”

3. I'm not curious because I believe his thinking is in any way profound or noble. Even with all my vanity as a Dad I can't help but notice that he's never met an object he wouldn't try to put in his mouth. I'm curious about his thinking in part because he is my son, but in part because I believe that who he will become is going to be determined almost entirely on how well he thinks and what he chooses to think about.

B. Well, Jason is now 26 and married, and though he's moved beyond the commando crawl, and doesn't put everything in his mouth, his thinking still continues to mystify both Sheri and me. (I'm joking).

C. My point is, we continue to believe that for him – and for you and me – how we think and what we choose to think about, shapes us in profound ways.

D. Paul thought so – given his comments in Phil. 4. So did Jesus, given what he said in Mark 12 – the command to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

E. This is our third message on this passage. Two weeks ago I argued that our heart was command central, but that it could be a challenge to control – something like an elephant with a will all its own. Last week Anson looked at our soul, which he noted was often very quiet and unlikely to assert itself if we didn't go out of our way to develop it. He then spoke about developing a rule of life and noted some of the other resources we have for you and your small groups at this moment.

F. Today we are thinking about loving God with our “mind.” Or, to state this differently, we are thinking about thinking: the process of making sense of things – of taking an account of ideas and assumptions, weighing them, unpacking them, ordering them and the like. We are talking about engaging in what Blaise Pascall described as “an inner dialogue.”

G. We are thinking about thinking and to that end, I want to make four points.

III. Number One: We are expected to think.

A. Thinking is not just allowed, it is assumed.

1. We see this in the way God made us. He fashioned us in his image, not as the biggest, the strongest, the fastest or the loudest, but as the smartest – the ones who have the largest pre-frontal cortex.

2. We see this with the Bible. One of the principal ways God has revealed himself to us is through a Book, which assumes that we will learn how to read so we can study the Book. He is assuming we will think.

3. Finally, we see that thinking is assumed in that we are never told to think, we are always told what to think about. Just as we are never told to worship - it is assumed that we will. It is understood that we cannot not worship. In the same way, we are never told to think. It is understood that we cannot not think. We cannot turn our brains off. The screen is never blank. So, this Book assumes that we are thinking.

IV. We are commanded to think. As it turns out, thinking is not just expected, it is directed, ordered.

- A. The command comes up a lot. Philippians 4 and Mark 12 are just two of many passages in which we are told to think.
- B. In 2 Timothy we are commanded to study the Book.
- C. In 2 Corinthians 10 we are told to hold every thought captive to Christ.
- D. We see this line of thinking in play in the Old Testament as well. For instance, the Psalms open with a call to cultivate our mind.
 - 1. Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.
 - 2. We are called to meditate – which is focused thinking. We are to slow down and think about God, to reflect on aspects of his character, to focus on things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy.¹
- E. There are many other passages as well. It's worth noting that when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment and he replied by citing Deut 6., he added this idea about the mind. Deut 6 tells us to love God with our heart, soul and strength. When Jesus repeats it he calls on us to love God with all our heart, soul, MIND and strength.
- F. So, point number one: we are expected to think. Point number two: we are commanded to think. Thinking is a God-ordained activity.

V. Point Number Three: Our thoughts matter to God

- A. I think this clearly follows. In a way I am just doubling down on point two. We are not simply told to think, we are told to think in a certain way. We see this idea developed all over.
 - 1. I already noted 2 Corinthians, where Paul instructs us to hold every thought captive to Christ.
 - 2. In Matthew, Jesus makes it clear that we are accountable not just for our words and actions, but also for our thoughts. This is seen most readily in the Sermon on the Mount. Early in that message – Matthew 5:21 – we read: **You**

have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

B. Later in vs. 27: You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

C. Jesus makes it clear that even our thoughts matter. That what we think about – not just what we say or do, but what we think about – matters to God.

D. This is one of the things that drove the late Christopher Hitchens crazy. Hitchens, the British wit and curmudgeon who passed away not that long ago, wrote – among many other things, *God is Not Good*. He described himself not just as an atheist, but as an anti-theist – in other words, he didn’t just not believe in God, he was against those who did.

E. I’ve read some of his books and articles and listened to a few of the debates he entered with Christians. And at some point, I heard him say that one of the things that really drove him mad was the idea that we are responsible for what we think. He said that this made being a Christian worse than living in North Korea – because even Kim Jung Il (this is a little dated, his son is now in power), for all the maniacal control Kim Jung Il held over his citizens, could not control what they thought.

F. He thought that any hint of thought control was horrible.

G. Well, it’s obvious that Hitchens knew that his thoughts were not all good. He was smart enough to realize that his thoughts – like mine – are full of pride, greed, lust, anger, ambition, fear.² He knows some things, but it seems there are a few things he does not grasp:

1. First, God knows the worst about us and loves us all the same. In Christ there is grace and love and freedom and joy in Christ.

2. Second, God knows our thoughts because He knows all things.

3. And third, of course God cares about our thoughts because everything about us matters to God. Everything about you matters to Him. Not just Sunday morning. Not just what you do – also what you say and what you think.

H. And, and here we go to point four – our thoughts absolutely matter because they shape our lives.

I. Point one is: We are expected to think. Point two: we are commanded to think; point three: our thoughts matter to God.

VI. Point Number Four: Our thoughts matter to us. We are what we think about.

A. In the same way that our physical diet determines our physical health, our mental diet determines our mental and spiritual health. We are who we are today as a result of

the things we thought about five years ago – the books we read, the friends we talked with, the shows we watched, the web sites we visited, the Tweets we consumed, the podcasts we listened to. In profound ways, these are what shape us.

B. What we think about shapes our soul and our future. For better or worse, we are what we think. And we are especially shaped by what we think about God.

C. Men and women, let's not kid ourselves. You are some amalgamation of the books you read, the shows you watch, the podcasts you listen to, the news you take in, the Bible study you are engaged (or not), the Scripture memory you are doing (or not). That is who you are.

D. To the extent that your thoughts are right and good and true you veer in one direction. If they are ugly and vile and base you veer in another. Garbage in = garbage out. Good things in = good things out.³

E. It really is that simple. I'm not saying it's that easy. It's actually quite hard, because of sin. We like things we shouldn't like and we are not always willing to direct our thoughts as we should. It is not necessarily easy to order our thoughts and our loves. But it is that simple.

1. Love God – cultivate that love by meditating on his majesty and grace and holiness and mercy. Focus on the Gospel and go one way. Be consumed with anger or greed or Season 8 of some Netflix series and be shaped in another.

2. Entertain thoughts about whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy and you develop in one direction.

3. Entertain thoughts – feed thoughts, nurture thoughts that are petty, selfish, lustful, vile and you trend in another.

F. About twenty years ago, my Aunt went in big for Tony Robbins, the motivational speaker, peak performance coach.

1. This was not that surprising. Every December when she and my Uncle would show up for Christmas she was into something new – puzzles or an author, or a diet or something.

2. But what got my attention this particular year was that my Uncle – who usually appeared to have little interest in what she was up to – seemed quite taken by Robbins as well. I listened to them a bit and decided to look into it more. In part because some of the claims Robbins was making – all of these promises to help you change your life, be better, have more joy – they sort of positioned him in competition with the claims of Christ.

3. Well, his big deal at the time – and I have not paid attention in the last twenty years, so I have no idea what he is talking about now – but his big idea at the time was what he called Neuro-Linguistic Programming. That is, reforming your mind by what you say to yourself.

4. Now, as you can imagine, there was lots of hype and all of this was mixed with some ideas that I strongly disagree with. But he was just leveraging the idea – the truth – that what you think about shapes you in profound ways.

G. I've kept a column I read back in 1987, entitled, "I Sez to Myself, Sez I," by Dennis Kinlaw, then an editor of *Christianity Today*.⁴ He opened by talking about thinking as an inner dialogue and then noting a few of the conversations he'd had with himself. All the Monday morning quarterbacking he did. And then he wrote:

1. The years have passed, and I have learned more about that inner dialogue. I know what a pain it can be when "somebody" inside wants to talk about the most distressing subjects at the most inappropriate times. (I sometimes think the most threatening "conversations" come around 3 AM, when any intelligent person ought to be asleep). I also know about the inner voice's penchant for introducing subject matter into that conversation that is totally inappropriate to the occasion. At times there seems to be little sense of the holy.

2. I have found a surprising thing, though, about that inner person. "He" is strangely unoriginal. He seems to be little more than an echo who shouts back only what he has heard me say or what I have permitted him to see or hear. The result is that I see now the crucial importance of the care and feeding of my inner self.

H. This is why God instructs us to take control of our thoughts. To discipline them, to direct them towards God. To cultivate a love for Him. God does this because our thoughts matter. They change us. They shape our soul and our future.

1. We are not to "conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Then we will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

I. You are becoming what you think about.

1. Our mental diet - the books we are reading, the shows we are watching, the pod casts we are listening to, the news programs we are trusting, the people we are talking to – all of these things are shaping us.

J. You need to hear that our thoughts need to be shaped by the Word of God.

1. You need to hear that our thoughts need to be constantly brought back in line with truth.

2. You need to hear that we need the patterns of Bible Study, prayer, worship, confession to stay on the right path.

3. You need to hear that there are other voices seeking to lead you in other directions

a) These are voices of evil and they are just voices of the market. People who are not evil, they just want your attention for very different

reasons than to see you grow deeper in love with God. They want you to buy stuff.

VII. Let me note that there are many other things that could be – perhaps should be – said in a talk about “loving God with our mind.”

- A. It’s worth noting that today many do not think they have time to think.
 - 1. In light of that, I have found great value in adding a time of silence to my morning routine.
 - a) I’ve noted this before. That a few years ago I started to think that who I am mattered more than what I did.
 - b) And I realized I had to work more on me.
 - c) I also felt like things were just going too fast. I needed to slow down for a few minutes every day.
 - (1) This mason jar has been my visual on that.
 - 2. I have returned to journaling as well – as it lets me reflect more on what is going on.
 - 3. These things are in addition to Bible reading and prayer.
 - 4. It’s worth noting that you need to own the time you need to settle your thoughts and to direct them – to steer them in the right direction.
- B. It’s worth noting that thinking well is hard work.
- C. It is worth noting that this focus on right thinking is not to eclipse right loving.
 - 1. When I was leading Scholar Leaders – then called CISF – we used to have people push back on our mission of helping fund PhD studies.
 - a) And we’d say: given a choice between a big heart and a big head, we’d pick the big heart. But why is that a choice. They do not have to be mutually exclusive. We want people who love God and who think well.
 - b) That seems to be what Jesus is saying here in Mark 12.
- D. So, there is a lot more that could be said. Let me end by suggesting:
 - 1. Read more and watch less.
 - 2. Work on Scripture memory.

¹ The popular conception of Eastern thinking is that you clear the mind of all distractions, often by focusing on something mindless to help you settle your thoughts. Some argue that the idea of emptying your mind is a caricature of Eastern meditation. I am not an expert on Eastern meditation and have not read any of the

primary sources on it. What I do know, is that Biblical meditation is not emptying your mind, it is focusing your mind on God and the things of God. And many teach that Eastern meditation is about emptying your mind.

² Before coming to faith, C.S. Lewis examined his own heart. What he found appalled him. But in his writings Lewis says that when he finally took an objective look at himself – did his best to make an honest assessment – what he found “appalled him.” He reports that his heart was, “a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears...a harem of fondled idols.”

³ The “Garbage in – Garbage out” statement is very helpful for the point I am making. I do not wish to imply that this is the full story. As Jesus said in ?, our heart is broken.

⁴ Dennis Kinlaw, “I Sez to Myself, Sez I,” *Christianity Today*, April 17, 1987, p. 11