

“Life of the Mind”

Romans 8:1-11 • Ephesians 4:17-32

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 9, 2015

Today we continue our summer sermon series about what it means to live our lives *with* God. You could call this the *With God* life, which is so much better than the without God life. Life with God leads to love and joy and peace. When you involve God in your daily life you overflow with kindness and goodness and gentleness. Life with God manifests itself in your life in patience and self-control. I want that. I want it for myself and I want it for you.

For the past two weeks we have talked about spending our **time** with God. The most important moment of your life is right now. This is the only moment you ever get. If you are going to be with God it has to be in the present. Over the next few weeks we will look at different aspects of our lives and how God can be at the center of each one of those.

This morning I want to talk about your **mind**. If you are going to be in God’s presence, in this moment or in any moment, more than likely it’s going to involve your mind. John Ortberg says, “It is in our minds that we live in conscious awareness of and interaction with God.”

So obviously the first question we need to answer is, “what is the mind?” This is harder than it seems at first. Maybe we think it’s our brain. But the mind is more than just the brain and its biological functions. So maybe we go farther and say the mind is the part of us that thinks. But there is more to the mind than just thoughts. Our minds include memory and emotions and awareness and it’s all very complex. Dr. Curt Thompson is a psychiatrist and an expert in the science of the brain. The focus of his work is the relationship between discoveries in interpersonal neurobiology and the biblical truths of God and creation. His book is called *Anatomy of the Soul*. Here’s how Thompson defines the mind: “an embodied and relational process that emerges within and between brains, whose task is to regulate the flow of energy and information.”

You might be really smart and that makes perfect sense to you the first time. But I’m going to go out on a limb and say that at least one of you is like me and needs to hear it again. Slowly. So here goes. The mind is an embodied and relational process that emerges within and between brains, whose task is to regulate the flow of energy and information. Here’s the key points, I think. First, your mind is embodied. It’s more than your brain. Your mind involves your whole body. Think about how your emotions interact with your body. When you’re anxious, you get a knot in your _____ - your stomach. Right. When you’re sad, crying produces _____ - tears.

Even more importantly, what Thompson and others who are studying the mind are discovering is that our minds are not only part of our body, they are connected to other people. The mind emerges in and *between* brains. It’s a relational process. God said, “it’s not good for man to be alone.” Neuroscience is just now catching up with what the Bible has said for thousands of years. God designed us to be in community and our relationships, as it turns out, are part of our mind.

So what part does the mind play in being *with* God? If you have ever tried to spend time with someone whose mind was somewhere else, you know that there is more to being with someone than just being physically present. You can be side by side on the sofa and yet be miles apart. To truly be present would include what we could call “interactive awareness.” You are each aware of the other person and are interacting with each other. Your words and actions affect the thoughts of the other person. The same goes for God. To be with God means you have a conscious awareness of God and interaction with him. It’s in this interaction, Thompson says, that we create space for God to work in us. Romans 12:2 puts it this way: “Do not be conformed to this world, but 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.”

In verse 23 of today’s reading from Ephesians, Paul says basically the same thing when he writes, “be renewed in the spirit of your minds.” It’s that work that God does in us *through* our minds that we’re interested in today. But how do we go about that kind of renewal? The first thing we need to know is that there’s nothing we can do to bring about God’s transforming work in us. We can’t make Him do anything. Notice in both these verses that Paul says, “BE transformed. BE renewed.” We can’t make it happen but there are things we can do to make our minds more receptive to Christ’s presence in our thoughts.

In his book *God is Closer Than You Think*, John Ortberg says, “Every thought holds the promise of carrying me into God’s presence.” In other words, the creator and ruler of the universe is as close to you as your next thought. That’s staggering. It makes my heart beat faster. But it also kind of scares me. Because every thought I have is pulling me either toward God or away from Him, leading toward light or toward darkness, to life or to death. With each thought my mind is either being renewed or darkened.

Actually, I think there are three kinds of thoughts in the life of our minds. The first kind are thoughts that take you away from God. Our passage says that the result of this kind of thinking is futility of our minds and darkened understanding. We become alienated from the life of God. What kinds of things lead to that darkness? Sensuality...greed...deceitful desires...falsehood...theft...bitterness...slander...foul language...anger...did I leave anyone out? I see those in my life from time to time and that’s not who I want to be. When I see those things I know that they are not from God.

The second kind of thoughts are things that are not necessarily bad, but they *distract* you from interacting with God. Busyness keeps us from being present with God and with each other. Dallas Willard said that “hurry” is the mortal enemy to spirituality. The other great

threat to a life with God is mindless entertainment. I think Ortberg is helpful here when he says, “Television is attractive because it distracts us, but of course in the long run it simply makes our minds that much weaker and more dependent on outside stimulation to keep us entertained.” Television, video games, the internet, can all fill our time and our minds, crowding out Jesus.

The third kind of thoughts I can have are those that lead me to Christ’s presence. I want those kinds of thoughts. But in my experience they don’t just come naturally. So how do we learn to have thoughts that bring us closer to God? Verse 20 says, “that is not the way you *learned* Christ.” R.C. Sproul has said, “The only way to get a transformed mind is to *pursue* knowledge of God.”

Many of us like to think that we can do what’s called “multi-tasking,” doing multiple tasks at once. But the truth is that our brains don’t work that way. When it comes to thoughts, you can only have one thought at a time. Imagine your thoughts are like beads on a string. Sometimes you can have lots of conscious thoughts, one after the other and sometimes you only have a few, but you only have one at a time. The first step, then, is to become aware of those thoughts that are not God-thoughts and then take them to Jesus for Him to transform them. Let me give you a little illustration of how this works. The other day I was coming across the causeway from Portland and this car pulled into my lane right in front of me and then slowed down. At that moment I had a series of not-God thoughts. But then suddenly it occurred to me that I was not loving my neighbor as myself. So right then I said, “God, I’m sorry for those thoughts. Please give me YOUR thoughts.” I actually stayed in the same lane, slowed down and gave them a little more space. I became a little more tenderhearted and forgiving because I remembered how God has forgiven me. The goal is intellectual awareness of God that leads you to take those not-God thoughts to Him.

The second step in having God in our minds is right thinking. The thoughts you think are the result of what you put into your mind – what you watch or read or listen to. This is where pursuing the knowledge of Christ comes in. Fill your mind with God's Word. As our reading from Romans says, "set your minds on the things of the Spirit." Get serious about what you watch and hear because whatever repeatedly enters your mind is what will shape your thoughts and ultimately your actions. If I'm going to make my mind a home for Jesus, I want to fill it with the things that God says are important – truth, honest work, generosity, forgiveness.

Finally, remember that our minds are not merely our own private thoughts. We are connected with others in community. We are not complete without being known by other people and by God. The with God life has to include life with other followers of Jesus. We can't do it alone. You can't simply watch church on TV. God shows up in the midst of His people, as messy as that is. What we discover is that loving God with all our mind means loving our neighbors and being loved by them.

Amen