

## Minds that Think

Listen to a reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the fourth chapter, beginning with the 17<sup>th</sup> verse.

(Read Ephesians 4: 17-32)

"They're blocking Highway 99? In front of the airport? During rush hour?" Gary Thomas' pointed questions to a police officer betrayed his disbelief and frustration. "It's a funeral procession, sir. A police officer died here last week." "So can I take a taxi to the parking lot instead of waiting for your shuttle to pick me up?" "A taxi won't be able to get through either."

Gary had been gone for a week. Forty-five minutes crawled by while he waited for a parking shuttle to take him to his car so he could go home. His desperation grew by the second, as the forty-five minutes became an hour. "What if I just walked there?" "Even if you walked," the attendant explained, "I don't think you could get out of the parking lot." "They shut down 99?" Gary asked again. "I'm afraid so." "During RUSH HOUR!"

Once Gary finally arrived at his car, he received a message from that still small voice of the Holy Spirit. "Yes, your trip was delayed by more than an hour. Yes, it was frustrating and inconvenience at the end of two plane trips that, combined, equaled six hours of flying. Yes you woke up on the East Coast fourteen hours earlier and are still two hours from home. "But the police officer being honored will NEVER go home again. He wasn't just late; he is gone, removed for all of earth's time from ever greeting his wife or children at the end of a long day. And you're upset that you lost an hour?"

\*\*\*\*\*

I begin the sermon with that story because as you listened in the text to the Apostle Paul speak of the need for followers of Jesus to get rid of everything connected to the old way of life, you might confuse this with an old fashioned... moralistic sermon warning that your salvation is in jeopardy unless you begin to act like a Christian; I fear you will confuse this with a sermon about what you need to do to get "right with the Lord."

But neither this word from Paul nor my sermon are about creating a check-list of acceptable Christian behaviors, not about avoiding God's displeasure; not about doing the right things to get into heaven or stay out of hell. Paul is writing here to people whose lives are falling desperately short of their own expectations and even shorter of what God wants for them. Paul is reminding them and us that Jesus offers a way to rich and abundant life through a process that gives us the ability to see with new eyes, feel with new hearts, hear with renewed ears, think and process things in a new way.

Gary Thomas's story is about a man who is on a journey with Christ that will transform not just his behavior, but the state of his mind and the condition of his heart, out of which the choices about behavior are made.

By the standards of the world around him, Gary had done nothing inappropriate. He hadn't raised his voice or made accusations in his questioning of the airport attendant. He hadn't taken his frustrations out on someone else, hadn't abused alcohol to medicate his frustration. But his self-absorbed, uncaring attitude clearly does not emulate Jesus and it keeps Gary from experiencing the richness in life he wants; and living into the purposes for which God has specially gifted him.

True transformation takes us beyond the limitations of a traditional understanding about morality, and expands it to include deep issues of the heart. If I am to experience the promised transformation not only do I need to "behave" outwardly like Jesus; I must begin thinking like Christ.

Paul was ahead of his time in pointing out how our behavior and our minds influence and act on each other. Neurologists tell us that our choices and experience shape our brain both literally and physiologically. What we choose actually helps make us into who we are.

Paul seemed to understand that our character is the sum total of the moral decisions we have made. And so as he spoke to these new Christians he didn't mince words in describing the beautiful struggle

they were on in the pursuit of transformed minds. It might help to think of four choices that Paul places before those Ephesians and those of us who are seeking the new life that Jesus promises.

**First, he was direct in saying that we need to choose Jesus' way over societal wisdom as the moral grid for making decisions.**

Without really thinking about it, many times we just assume societal norms are in sync with the teachings of Jesus, particularly in a society in which many people have merged religion and American Patriotism. Suddenly we're not only un-American if we oppose a war, we're unchristian as well even though Jesus was against violence of any kind. Prosperity theology preachers would have us believe that our privileged position in a world of need is God ordained. I can't even count the number of times I've heard the phrase "charity begins at home" quoted as a Bible verse, when not only is it not in the Bible, it is contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

When we measure ourselves against nothing more than the morality of our culture...we fall short...far short of God's plan for our life. Paul said there is to be 'no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch, not only with God but with reality itself."

When we derive our morality from society we are allowed to believe that our excesses and shortcuts are O.K. In its 2008 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, a Los Angeles-based organization reported that teenagers' responses to questions about lying, stealing and cheating reveals entrenched habits of dishonesty. In a study conducted of nearly 30,000 high school students from across the United States 30 percent of students admitted to stealing from a store within the past year; 83 percent admitted to lying to their parents about something significant; and 64 percent said they had cheated on a test.

"As bad as these numbers are," the study warned, "it appears they understate the level of dishonesty exhibited by America's youth, since more than a fourth of the students (26 percent) admitted they had lied on at least one or two of the survey questions." But here's the most sobering finding in the survey; 93% of students indicated satisfaction with their own character and ethics, with 77 percent saying that "when it comes to doing what is right, I am better than most people I know."<sup>1</sup>

When we measure ourselves against nothing more than the morality of our own culture, there is no plum-line for behavior; there is no higher-power to serve as our conscience and call us to moral accountability. Paul was very clear – "That's no life for you. You learned Christ! My assumption is that you have paid careful attention to him, been well instructed in the truth precisely as we have it in Jesus. Since, then, we do not have the excuse of ignorance, everything – and I do mean everything – connected with that old way of life has to go."

And that brings us to the second choice with which Paul confronts us; if we're going to let go of the old way of life....**we must choose to face reality about our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, our obsessions and addictions.** Paul listed a few places where we can test out our vulnerability and denial: "no more lies...no more pretense...no more deception...watch your tongue and keep your anger under control"

Answer the following questions to yourself: Do you exaggerate; tell white lies, or withhold truth in order to present yourself in a better light or to avoid confrontation? Do you cheat on your income tax, or your expense voucher? Do you call in sick when you aren't sick?

Author Keith Miller in writing about trying to own up to his weaknesses and vulnerabilities realized that he had a tendency to exaggerate just a little in order to cast himself in a better light.

So he'd say he spent 8 hours on a project when he only spent 5; or he'd waited in weather below freezing when it was actually 35 degrees. He'd say he was finished with a project even though he hadn't quite wrapped it up. When confronted with a situation in which he'd forgotten to do something, or made a mistake, he'd bluff his way through.

---

<sup>1</sup> Josephson Institute, 2008 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth

Our tongues can also point to ways we're clinging to the old way of life. Do you get hooked into gossip sessions at work or at school? Do you build yourself up by being critical, even in jest, of other people? How do you speak to or DO you speak to the people who live in the margins of your world; the parking attendant, the server in the restaurant, the clerk at the store, the custodian in your office, the driver of the bus or the train, the person who delivers your mail?

Anger is a very healthy emotion. It protects us. It means we have a sense of fairness...of right and wrong. Being angry is one of the normal emotions of human life. But **living** in anger is not normal. And it is a sign we are clinging to the old way of life. Sometimes our anger issues are very obvious...we know and everyone else knows we are an angry person. Others are experts at hiding it...most of the time. They just explode at unpredictable times, or with certain, unfortunate people.

Kay read one time that if you want to know if you're an angry person ...consider how you treat the cows. Let's move out of agriculture and into our urban life. How do you act when you're in heavy traffic? What are you saying to the people who cut in front of you? After a long day at the office or at school how do you treat your family? Your pets?

Now I've intentionally used very non-threatening behaviors in helping us look at our lives to see if we're clinging to the old ways. Another way you'll know that you are... is if you've rationalized any or most of these behaviors. If you can't look honestly at a tendency to exaggerate, or speak irritably to people in your world....what chance is there that you will be willing to probe whether or not you are caught in the grip of an addiction?

Try a little experiment. At the beginning of a day, ask God to bring to your attention any misstep you are about to make, just before it happens. I'm finding that if I listen.... when I'm about to say something unkind, or inappropriate about someone, I get a warning in my mind, in my spirit...and then I have an opportunity to choose.

This brings us to the third choice, which is implicit in Paul's admonition to get rid of the old way of life and that is to **make choices that honor God, honor others and honor you.** In another of Paul's writings he puts this choice so beautifully; "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 these things."

Some Christians act as if they are helpless victims of their own thinking, as if they can't stop certain fantasies, infatuations, negative thinking, fears, or hateful prejudices. This simply doesn't square with what Paul is suggesting. Of course we may have to start with making small choices before we can make the more difficult ones...and we won't ever have a perfect record in making choices...but through the power of God's spirit we can make choices that honor God, others and ourselves.

\*\*\*\*\*

To illustrate let me tell you a story about a relationship...which can just as easily represent some other obsession or addiction in our lives.

Sally was leaving church when Kevin pulled her aside. "Have you heard?" he asked. "Mark's back in town." "Mark?" she said. She tried to act casual, but just hearing his name made her feel more alive. That man – that angel, that monster, that karma with feet – was the love of her life. They had been together several times over the years. Each time it was a disaster. But each time when she'd run into him again after a separation, a tiny voice in her head would chime, "Maybe this time we could make it work."

In a matter of minutes she had the hotel name and location where Mark was staying. While her friend was still chattering at her, Sally was already figuring out how she could run into Mark. I could call him. Or I could go sit in the lobby and read magazines waiting for him to leave. It wouldn't be stalking. More like strategically placing myself.

Sally drove home, entered her apartment, and then paced the floor. For some reason she didn't understand, it always felt like she had compelling unfinished business with Mark. That's because you haven't let go; said the still small voice of reason. You keep hoping and praying he'll be someone he's

not. Shut up, she whispered back to subdue this sane voice within. You don't understand. We've been doing this dance for so many years. It's true love; the real thing.

The length of time you've been doing the same stupid thing doesn't add up to love, the voice of reason replied, It just means it's taking you a long time to learn. Sally stared at the phone; stared at the car keys. Then instead of calling Mark or driving to his hotel, she sat down at her desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out a letter. It was one she had written to herself.

Dear Sally:

I'm writing this letter because I care about you, I really do. And every time you get involved with Mark, it hurts you and it hurts him. Remember what happened last time? The fighting, the crying the insanity that went on for weeks and months? I want you to really remember how it felt to be with him instead of walking down a selective vision memory lane. What you experience when you think of Mark aren't your true memories. It's euphoric recall. It's not real.

I know if you're reading this you're probably feeling excited to see him again. Each time you think that if you do something better or different, you can make it work. You can't. Instead, each time the arguing and insanity gets worse. Chances are pretty good that if the same thing happens 100 times, it'll happen again the 101<sup>st</sup> – no matter how much time has elapsed.

Please take a moment before you see him. Feel what you really feel, instead of just feeling excited to see him again. He tells lies, but he tells them so well he believes them and so do you. He brings you down. He plays with your mind. He makes you feel crazy and afraid. You've worked hard to get where you are. Do you really want to trade your peace for another roller-coaster ride with Mark?

She didn't go! It had taken a long time, but she had learned that she could change her future by making a choice that honored God, that honored others and that honored her. <sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

Paul is very clear...that the new life to which we are called is "a God-fashioned life"... a life renewed from the inside, and eventually working itself into our conduct...as God reproduces God's character in us. This makes the fourth choice of which Paul writes perhaps the easiest. We have work to do, but we are not responsible for fashioning the new life. In fact we CANNOT be responsible. If we attempt to make the adjustment from the outside...on our own power...we are doomed to fail.

The good news here is that when Paul insists we reject the old way of life...and take on a God-fashioned life...the requirement is simply to be willing to have God transform us from the inside out. For twelve-step recovery folks this is steps six and seven. "We were entirely ready to have God remove all our defects of character...and we humbly ask God to do so." This is the fourth choice of which Paul speaks.

Eventually, this is a yielding of our will to God's. It requires letting go of behaviors and "things" which, destructive and deadly though they may be...have represented security or the means of survival to us. But all that is required in this critical moment of decision...is that we be willing to let God transform us.

One friend of mine, clinging tightly to an addictive behavior told me that he didn't want to give up the behavior even though he knew it was killing him. So he couldn't even go quite so far as to ask God to remove it. All he could say was that he wanted to want to...he wanted to want to give up the addiction. Over and over he offered that little bit to God...and God took it...and used it...until the day when my friend was able to choose to allow God to transform his life.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>2</sup> Melody Beattie, *Choices: Taking Control of Your life and Making it Matter*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003

We've been protecting ourselves, numbing our pain, using society's bankrupt morality as our grid for making choices, chasing the wrong dreams and looking for meaning in the wrong places for a long time. It's not the life we want; it's not God's design for us. Facing the truth about our lives...giving up the old way of life....stopping the cycle of self destruction is a major endeavor; and in one sense it will be as difficult as anything we have ever done.

But the good news is... the really hard work of transformation, is God's work...not ours. And that transformation begins very simply, when we choose to accept Jesus' invitation to new life.