

**Sermon for Sunday, May 20, 2012**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Caring for the Mind**  
**Ephesians 4:17-24**

*Eph. 4:17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. 20 You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your mind.;*

*Rom. 12:2a Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

### 1. What is the mind?

In our series "caring for" we come to care for the mind. And our minds need care. Our thoughts wander when we want to concentrate, doubts overtake us without reason, and worries flood us when we prepare to sleep or arise in the morning. So how do we care for our minds? We should begin by defining the term, for we use the term "mind" in two distinct ways.

First, "mind" labels the human capacity to think, feel, perceive, judge, reason, remember, and ponder. "Mind" can mean the rational capacity, cool and analytical, the element of human nature that stays far from emotions like love, hatred, fear, remorse, or bliss. The mind solves problems in math, logic, engineering. No matter our age, gender, or mood, no matter the place or time, there is a correct answer to certain problems and the trained mind finds them. Plato: the mind exists before we are born and after we die. For Descartes it is the opposite of the body, the material part of a human.

We also think of the mind as the silent cogitative process that goes on inside our heads. When we don't speak, we think. If we are silent for a while, someone may ask, "What's on your mind? What are you thinking?" We turn things over in the mind, make up our mind, and change our mind. The mind feeds on data from the five senses, from words we read and hear, from numbers, and draws conclusions or form opinions.

But the mind is more than a thinking machine. In Scripture "mind" is one way to refer to the inner person as a whole. Mind, heart, spirit, and soul are four words for our thoughts, loyalties, convictions, and feelings. So Jesus says we should "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37). Heart, soul and mind essentially mean the same thing. In many passages heart and mind are interchangeable terms for the core of our being. For example:

- Job 38:36 God "endowed the heart with wisdom and gave understanding to the mind."
- Psa. 26:2 "Test me, O LORD... examine *my heart and my mind*."
- Pascal: "If we submit everything to reason, our religion will be left with nothing supernatural. If we offend the principles of reason our religion will be absurd, ridiculous." So the believing heart and sound mind, or reason, need each other.

## The mind at creation

In the beginning, God gave us minds as well-shaped tools for life in the world. Our senses perceive, our minds organize and analyze the information that comes from eyes, ears, nose and mouth. God prepared us to detect causes and effects, so we can develop the riches of creation. Mankind soon rebelled and that affected the mind, but there are two views about that.

During the Middle Ages many Christians thought the human mind suffered no damage in the fall. They considered philosophers – especially Aristotle, the noble pagan who conceived marvelous arguments for God's existence. If even a pagan could reason his way to God, then the mind must be intact.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The mind is darkened

Apostle Paul taught the opposite. In Romans 1, he said godless men "suppress the truth by their wickedness." Creation declares God's existence and power, but they don't want to see it. They know, but don't want to know. "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools." They worshipped idols that they devised (Rom 1:18, 21-22).

More, although God wrote his law on every heart, we ignore it, and follow our desires. He concludes "Although they know God's righteous decree... they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (1:32, cf. 2:14-15). Finally, Paul says, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (8:7).

Paul describes the secular mind four ways in Ephesians 4:17-19. First it is futile or vain. That is, we devote ourselves to things that don't deserve supreme devotion, therefore vain. Second, their understanding is darkened. Third, their ignorance alienates them "from the life of God." Fourth, their hearts are hardened. They refuse the light and stubbornness makes them calloused or insensitive -- "depraved" (1 Tim 6:5).

If we work with loud machines and don't protect our ears, hearing falters. Likewise, if we ignore God's word long enough, we eventually cannot hear his voice, cannot feel grief over sin. Secular people ignore God's warnings. They blow them off as judgmental, opinionated, unsophisticated. Eventually they hear nothing.

So they "have given themselves over to sensuality... with a continual lust for more" (4:19). Let's focus on the second half of this – not the problem of sensuality, but the lust for more. The problem with vain desires and false gods is this: they never fully satisfy. Vain gods *do* give pleasure. They offer something; that's why people pursue them. But they don't offer enough. They leave people half empty.

The potato chips and chocolate taste good, but leave you thirsty and malnourished. Adventure travel is exciting, but there is a lot of wasted time; surely there is a better trip. Someone asked a young woman how motorcycle racing hooked her: "It's the next best thing to love... It's second best and it's hard to get enough."

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<sup>1</sup> Erickson, ST, 616-8.

Exactly! But don't tell the sports enthusiast he needs something else to be happy; he thinks he needs more basketball, golf, football. It brings pleasure, but not enough, so he seeks more of the same. He's headed in the wrong direction, but he doesn't want to listen to the warning. Jesus calls it spiritual adultery when we devote ourselves to gods such as power and reputation (Matt 16:1-4).

Scripture shows three paths, three ways to darken the mind. First, serve false Gods. Second, follow the crowd. Third, refuse correction and justify yourself.

### **The crowd**

Humans tend to follow the crowd, whatever the crowd says or does. Moses warned in Israel, "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong... do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd" (Exod 23:2). (At the end of his trial, the crowd called for Jesus' execution Matt (17:17-20). Time and again, crowds in Athens, Ephesus, even Jerusalem rose against the apostles and threatened to kill them.)

It's human nature to think that whatever is common is tolerable. More, we think that what's common is normal. And what's normal is good. Forty years ago, cohabitation outside marriage was scandalous – or proof of a low class. Today it's common. God says, "Don't follow the crowd!"

Eighty years ago, many American and British leaders belonged to Eugenics Societies: J. P. Morgan, Margaret Sanger, George Bernard Shaw, Neville Chamberlain, Julian Huxley, a son and grandson of Darwin. Many advocated sterilization of inferior people, even the erasure of inferior races. In short, they shared vital convictions with Hitler. Did they see the link? Did they see that racism can lead to murder? Apparently not. They followed the crowd.

Are you willing to examine yourselves, to see if you follow the crowd into something which is wrong. Perhaps you have doubts, you know, deep down that you do follow a crowd. You advocate something new – something most people in every age considered false or dangerous. Let's ask: "Is this novel in the best or worst sense? Is this progress or novelty? Do we ignore the wisdom of the historic orthodox faith?"

### **Refusing correction – self justification**

In Psalm 36:1-2, David describes "the sinfulness of the wicked" this way: "There is no fear of God before his eyes. For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin." And Solomon says, "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil" (Prov 3:7). That is, when we are wise in our own eyes, we neither fear God nor shun evil. He asks, "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (26:12).

Solomon called it "wise in his own eyes." We call it "self-justification." Do you have a reason for everything you do? If you get angry, do you always claim that you were provoked? If someone corrects you at work or doesn't choose you for a team, do you think "It can't be *my* fault"? Do you think "I'm the victim of those cruel, judgmental, prejudiced villains"? That's self-justification.

Suppose you're the boss and no one will disagree with you in meetings. Meanwhile you catch snippets of what people say when you're not there. You can say, "Those head-nodding sycophants. They court my favor at the expense of the good of the corporation." Maybe, but maybe you punish dissent. Maybe you greet challenges with stony silence. So....

When things go wrong, are you always the victim? Suffering from a villain? Able to tell a story that exonerates you? Or can you, do you, say, "I was wrong. I repent. Please forgive me. This is *my fault*. I caused this." If we know Jesus, we can give up the silly quest for self-justification. Jesus loves his children and justifies them.

### **Serving idols**

We know that unbelievers pursue idols; they really can't help it. But even disciples who serve God can have little idols on the side.

Deep into David's kingship, he became a lax father. He indulged his handsome, ambitious son Absalom and failed to correct him after major sins. Absalom rewarded his fawning father by plotting to rebel and murder David. Through the costly loyalty of his friends, David survived the rebellion. A battle between the armies of David and Absalom ended the rebellion and someone killed Absalom.

Afterward David didn't thank his allies for their sacrifices. He didn't praise his soldiers for their courage. No, when he learned that Absalom was dead, he wept like a baby: "O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son."

David's mountain of tears convinced his allies that the victory mean next to nothing to David. His general boldly rebuked him, "You would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead." Fathers should love their sons, but David's idolatrous love of Absalom blinded him to his duties as king. He couldn't even thank his faithful friends. So sin darkens the mind. But Jesus....

### **By contrast, Jesus redeems and enlightens the mind**

Ephesians 4 says the believer has a renewed mind. What might that mean? Paul doesn't say the Ephesians learned about Christ, they (literally) "*learned Christ*." They "know Christ" (4:20). That spells the end of the ignorance and hard heart of unbelief. The believer knows the truth, taught by Christ. A new nature brings a new mind. To some extent, the change has already taken place, yet there is more to come, to claim. So believers must "put off your old self" and "your former way of life" which was corrupted by deceitful lusts. We must "be renewed in the spirit of your minds and... put on the new self (4:22-23 English Standard Version (ESV)). How does that happen? It starts with the knowledge of Jesus. When we join Jesus, we belong to a new crowd, a crowd of One, Jesus. Then since he justifies us freely, we are open to correction.

Romans 12:2 says, **God transforms us by the renewal of our minds.**

He says, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." There are two great points here. First, the forces of this world or age constantly push us to conform to the age.

Take the recent statements from Vice President Biden, then President Obama, in favor of same sex marriage. Public statements by a president change things. There is growing pressure to conform to an emerging consensus. We hear from our gay friends: This is who I am. I no more chose my orientation than I chose the color of my hair or skin. They say orientation is part of ordinary human variation, like skin color or height. We call it prejudice, racism when we discriminate based on skin or other superficial traits. If orientation is the same, how can we discriminate?

Some speak of rights. They say, "Surely everyone should have the right to get married. How can you or the government refuse the legal rights and benefits that husband and wife receive?" If the issue is rights, like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, it's now beyond debate. No one wants to be called a racist or prejudiced, a homophobe or to deny human rights! But in some circles and settings, anyone who opposes same sex marriage is called – judged – judgmental or bigoted.

Traditionalists can be oppressive too. Jesus says, "Love our neighbor as yourself." Peter says, "Honor everyone." We owe honor to everyone, even if we think their views and practices are dangerous. Do we do that? More, people on either side of the debate can speak very harshly. Let's not justify ourselves.

Whatever the issue, whenever we're in the minority, the pressure to follow the crowd, to agree with the consensus, can be enormous. On the issue of same-sex marriage, some of us probably want to say: "I oppose it personally. I'd never choose it for myself, but I want to listen, be sensitive, and affirm my friends as they are."

Paul says we must resist the pressure to conform to the thinking of the age. We must let God's truth transform us. Listen: every age has points where they have false, even dangerous consensus. Most cultures agreed that slavery should be legal. "I would not want a slave myself, but I believe in your right to hold slaves." Or polygamy, "I don't want multiple wives, but it works for some families and I'd never interfere with your right to marry as you wish – including several wives. Some men can afford it and some women will never marry without that option."

Every culture has false consensus in some areas. So we must be ready to resist false consensus. How? Two ways. First, we need the right input, the right mental food. We read Scripture, meditate on it. Take time to contemplate, turn things over in the mind. Remember what Luke said about Mary. After Jesus' birth, "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." She believed the truth, loved the truth, and pondered it long for a long time.

That's how things enter the mind. J. Gresham Machen said, "When any new fact enters the human mind it must... make itself at home; it must introduce itself to the previous denizens of the house." That's thinking.

Lay aside the question of pressure to conform to our peers, how should we think about same-sex attraction and marriage? For 2,000 years, the historic church has had a consensus view of biblical teaching. After long study I share that consensus.

Jesus said, "At the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female... 'For this reason a man will be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh'" (Matt: 19.4-5). God designed marriage as a union of one man and one woman. God designed marriage for love, companionship and for procreation. Nature itself teaches that procreation occurs a certain way. God designed marriage as a complementary relationship, not a mirror relationship. In marriage we love one who is similar, not the same. This is God's good plan and design.

Some will say, "Yes, that is God's design, but the world is fallen. Many people simply aren't made that way. They experience same sex attraction and nothing else. Surely we should treat them with compassion. Surely same-sex marriage is better than loneliness or chaotic relationships. It may not be ideal, but neither is divorce and we tolerate that..., so why not this?"

The difference is that the Bible says divorce can be a tragic necessity at times, but calls homosexual acts sinful, degrading, shameful. A key text, Rom 1:18-27, adds that people who so live receive "in their own persons the due penalty for their error." As you may know, the passage begins with idolatry. Scholar Robert Gagnon explains: Romans 1 says sin is more rampant in cultures where people turn from the living God to worship the idols they devise. When people turn their back on God and worship absurd statues, God gives them over to additional foolish desires. When they suppress the truth about God, they also suppress the truth about God's creation, including his order for marriage and family. The Bible speaks with one voice in this – from Moses to the apostles to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). Law of Moses: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman. That is detestable" (Lev 18:22, 20:13).

I know this is not a welcome word. Gays attend this church; I'm glad they do. I've had gay classmates, teammates, students and friends. I hear their stories. Wesley Hill, a celibate homosexual disciple, says his great challenge is loneliness. So, with Machen, let's put that fact in our mind and introduce it to other facts and be true and loving friends of those who struggle with same sex attraction.

Let's remember that all of us suffer from unruly desires, from desires we wish we did not have. The great message of the Bible is that all sin, all need the gospel, all hope in Christ and Christ alone. We are *all prodigal sons*, running from God. We all hide dark sins. There is no difference in that. But there is redemption. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul runs through a list of sins: adultery, theft, slander, drunkenness, homosexual practice. He adds, "That is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

There are thirty sin lists in the Bible. When I read them honestly, I generally plead guilty to most of them. Not all, but most. My hope, your hope is God's grace, not our morality. That's true for everyone who has ever lived. That's why we confess sins!

The Bible also says that change ought to follow redemption. Let's be clear here. The Bible says holiness is possible. It says we can resist desires, change our behavior. Sometimes sinful desires fade away, sometimes they don't, but we're always responsible to resist them. To illustrate:

John Donne was a great 17<sup>th</sup> century courtier, poet and, later, pastor. As a young man, he loved many women, sinfully so. Then he married and converted. For 16 years he loved one woman. They had 12 children. Then she died and Donne, forty and a pastor, resolved to live in celibacy the rest of his life. He did so. His desires did not change, but by God's grace the way he acted did. The same for us.

You may think we have left our topic. Not so. My point is that we must apply our minds to the issues of the day. We must search Scripture and think – not follow the crowd, not justify ourselves, not follow the idol of our preferences.

Paul says he aims to "take captive every thought to obey Christ" (2 Cor 10:5 ESV). That means we must think about every issue. How? We must listen to those who take the opposite view. Read their best essays, listen to the stories of others one on one. Understand their passions and arguments and represent them fairly.

It's very tempting to avoid big issues – any big issue - because people will disagree, sharply. They will have arguments that surprise you and put you on the defensive. You may feel defeated. Fine! Go back and study with others. Solomon says, "Two are better than one... Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves" (Ecc 4:9-12). This applies to quest for the truth. Therefore we cultivate wise friends, listen to good teaching, read histories of the church and its heroes. But now I must return to my first point:

Care for the mind is also care for the heart. We won't think right unless our heart is right with God. Two examples:

**David's battle with Goliath** shows that he loved God with his mind. You may recall that Philistine and Israelite armies faced off in a long stalemate. Goliath offered to fight a hero from Israel and led man-to-man combat substitute for full battle. Of course, he had a slight size advantage. Seeing this, Saul promised great rewards for a successful warrior - his daughter's in marriage and release from all taxes. But no one came forward because dead men don't get married or pay taxes.

Because they had no faith, Saul's men weren't thinking well. They kept asking, "Who will dare to fight the giant?" But when David arrived, his faith led his mind to think differently. He turned Goliath's question on its head. Not, "Who will dare to fight the giant. But "Who is this Philistine that he should defy... the living God?" (1 Sam 17:26). That was the root, the start of David's victory.

Or take Daniel. One day he heard of a royal decree: anyone who prayed to any god or man but King Darius would be cast into a lions' den. He heard and did what he had done daily, three times a day, for the decades of his life in Babylon. He opened his windows, got down on his knees and prayed to God. His foes saw, as he knew they would, and threw him into the lions' den. We blanch: "What was he *thinking*? Surely he knew he was courting disaster." Yes, he knew. And he was thinking. His mind and heart thought together. And he drew the right conclusion.

How then do we care for our mind? By caring for our heart. For the mind is not a thinking machine. It is linked to and directed by the heart. Like all our faculties, the mind is fallen. By itself it is dark and suppresses the truth. Therefore we need the light of Christ and his gospel. We follow the crowd of one, Jesus, rather than the crowd of humanity. Then his truth becomes our dominant influence. When we follow the Lord the idols, that lead us astray, start to fall away. When we give up self-justification, because we know Jesus justifies sinners who but ask, then we can face, even welcome to our mind the hard truths about ourselves.