

## To Know our Thoughts as Thoughts (Part One)

*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”*

Reflection 6 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

These are stressful times and with so much controversy in Washington these days here at the beginning of a new administration it’s very hard for that stress not to find its way down into our families and extended families, our friendships, and even our churches. It’s my hope then, my vision, that church might be a place where people who maybe seriously disagree with one another about politics and such, maybe even doctrine, can still respect one another and worship and work and care for those in need together in love. This world really, really needs such places.

And so I see our church family as a kind of experiment, a very necessary experiment, where people inspired by the love of Christ can learn to live with one another in our differences, extending to one another the right to express ourselves freely but still seeing the greater goodness in one another even when we disagree. If we can do this, we can model this for the world. Goodness knows, our world needs this now more than ever.

I also know that we must all take care to express ourselves kindly and considerately and to not make dark assumptions about one another. And we sometimes fail in this. It’s pretty hard to always get this right. I struggle with this. What I try to do is remember that I have a private and a public side. And then I have this wild, wacky hybrid Facebook side.

Privately I may have strong feelings about controversial matters which I’m free to share with family and friends, and in personal conversation and correspondence. But as a minister, I have a public responsibility to say things that are kind and respectful, that assume the best about those I disagree with, and that address issues and moral principles (as I must) without being directly political or partisan. Of course that means that I must always watch my soul, and watch what I’m even thinking in private lest any less worthy impulses bleed into what I say in wider circles like Zuckerberg world. None of this easy. But church, I think, is where we all work together to encourage the better angels of our nature. And we slip and fail. And we forgive one another. And we learn from our mistakes and we try to be kinder and more trusting, while still being honest and truthful. And all this is part of the process of learning to live a life of love.

And that’s what we’re doing here because that’s what we all need – a church that helps us to live a life of love. And it’s what our neighbors and the people we work with need. It’s what everyone needs. And everyone, on a little thought, knows they need this. They may have given up on church. But they’re going to be intrigued by a place that helps them live a life of love, that teaches all of us: how to manage conflict, how to admit failure and weakness, how to express hurt and disappointment, how to extend to others the grace we know we need ourselves, how to win and lose graciously, how to differ graciously, how to ask for help when we need it, how to get along with even very difficult people, how to

love people who are very different from us, how to help one another when we wander away from the way of love, how to forgive those who have really wounded us. And amazing things will begin to happen when people know that certain churches are just that – schools where love is learned, where “the curriculum” is learning all the many, many skills that go into really loving.

So now in our series on “The Last Great New Command” I draw on a text in Jeremiah 17:5-9 to learn that a life of love becomes a whole lot easier if we come to know our thoughts as thoughts. And that’s what’s helpful to know: that we’ll become much more loving if we come to see our thoughts as just that – thoughts. With first this needed clarification. I believe in truth. I love facts. I don’t think it ever help when people don’t know stuff. I devote my life to the pursuit of truth. I also believe, however, that on many questions truth is larger than I am ever able to know, larger, in fact, than any group or religious heritage or political party is able to know. And so what truths we hold are provisional and partial, and for that reason we must – we have to – reach out to others, and especially to those who do not think exactly what we think, so that we might grasp more comprehensive truth, larger truth, truth that is less partial. And all of this takes humility. It takes discipline. And it takes soul work. But it’s doable. And it’s connected to facts. The more facts you know, the closer you likely are to truth.

But having said that, we’ll become much more patient and kind, flexible and forgiving, and much more understanding if we come to know a whole lot of our thoughts as thoughts, and not as the cold hard facts we dream them to be. We assume that what we think are just the facts. Or more to the point, what I think is just the facts; what you think is an entirely different matter, and certainly if you disagree with me, not the facts. We all know people like that, right? What they think is simply the way things are. And they’re unbending and inflexible. And you can’t talk to them. And no one really enjoys those kinds of people. Well, let’s not be that kind of person. And it begins with realizing that many of the things we think are simply the things we think. And that’s great good news because many of the things we think are making us miserable. But they’re just our thoughts, and sometimes they’re only loosely connected to the way things are.

This is wisdom the East knows. The West is always classifying and labeling, and pigeonholing (or shoe-horning) life into neat little boxes, but of course the truth is: the real world is not “neat,” and labels are just that, just labels, and often thoughts are just thoughts. Well, here’s a fascinating thought often forgotten: Jesus was himself a person of the East, and he knew our thoughts are just that, and that’s why he told us not to judge. He knew that a life of love depends on our seeing our thoughts as thoughts.

– Dale Pauls

*Part Two (of two) next week*