

To Know our Thoughts as Thoughts (Part Two)

**“The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure”**

Reflection 7 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

I've had all sorts of thoughts in my life. Twenty-five years ago, I knew my son Lucas was the greatest soccer player in the world. Of course, that's the story behind every psycho soccer dad screaming his lungs out on the sideline: his son or his daughter is the best in the world. For the record, Lucas never thought that, but I did. But there are all sorts of thoughts that we have: that we cannot be happy unless such and such happens; or that if such-and-such were to happen, it'd be the most embarrassing thing in the world, or the most awful thing in the world; or that it's completely unfair (or unkind, or thoughtless) for so-and-so to have done such-and-such, and we'd can't rest content until justice is done.

But almost always these kinds of thoughts are just that – thoughts, and they would look entirely different if we were seeing them from another perspective. Caroline Simon in her book ***The Disciplined Heart*** talks about fiction-making. And, in fact, we do this all the time. We see people as we want to see them, or we see them as our genetics, our upbringing, our culture and our prior experiences shape us to see them. But in the end, they're just thoughts.

Jeremiah is making this point in Jeremiah 17:5-9. This crusty old late seventh-century prophet lives during maybe the darkest hour in spiritual history, certainly Judeo-Christian history. The countdown to the destruction of God's holy city Jerusalem (in 587 BC) has begun. And Jeremiah is trying to make sense of this great national calamity, and he ends up urging the people to simply trust God and not keep taking matters into their own hands. They do it so poorly. They think that what they see is the way things really are. But Jeremiah writes (in 17:9), “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” He is saying your thoughts are simply thoughts and are quite far removed from the way things really are.

In fact, this is the consistent testimony of Scripture. Isaiah speaking for God in Isaiah 55:8-9 declares, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” This is the whole point really of the Book of Job. At the end of the book, beginning in 38:1, God challenges Job, “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” Paul will grant in Romans 7:14 - 8:1, “I do not understand what I do.” And he will remind the Corinthians in his great ode to love in 1 Corinthians 13, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” (and for the record mirrors back then weren't great). And it's no coincidence that he links love and the recognition that our thoughts are often just thoughts. We can't over-emphasize how important it is to grasp this. If we do not know our thoughts as thoughts, we keep making all sorts of mistakes. And then maybe there's this fierce alienating certainty in our eyes, and that is always the death of love.

This is the lesson the Psalmist has learned in Psalm 131: “My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things that are too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.” Yes, there are always questions we cannot answer. There are always problems we cannot solve. There are always people we cannot understand, and sometimes they are our closest friends, or our wives or our husbands, our sons or our daughters, our fathers or mothers. Over and over again, we are mystified by the mind of another person. What in the world is going on? How could they have possibly decided that? Done that? Thought that? Said that? Wrote that on Facebook? Can’t they see the consequences? And then I remember how confused I sometimes am by my own mind. So I stand in awe and wonder and acknowledge the mystery, and admit that they are things too wonderful for me. I can only still and quiet my soul. And only then will I find the way to love.

It begins, as wisdom always does, with stopping and looking and seeing. Just sit sometime and watch your thoughts. Just watch them. Watch them rise as impulses in your mind and then fade away. See that they have a life of their own. They are not you, but just your thinking. You do not have to be ruled by them. Your worst fears are just thoughts. Your biggest worries are just thoughts. Your dislike for someone, or your frustration with someone, is when all is said and done just a thought.

So see what happens when you label someone. This especially happens with parents and maybe teachers, maybe preachers. “Jack is lazy.” See how just thinking that keeps you from seeing all the other aspects of who Jack really is, and keeps you from connecting to him in any meaningful way. See how this makes real love impossible. To love someone is, first, to grant their inner mystery and accept it.

This is the truth illustrated by the movie *A River Runs Through It* (1991). It’s set in the midst of the glorious streams, forests, meadows, and mountain peaks of Montana at the turn of the twentieth century. It’s the story of a solid Scotch Presbyterian minister and his wife, and their two sons coming of age. Norman, the older one, is studious, responsible, reflective. Paul (played by Brad Pitt), the younger, is charming, brash, adventurous, and lives out on the edge, takes risks and plays with fire; finally drinking binges and risk-taking gambling lead to his being killed. His father works hard for years to understand. And finally he grasps it. In a sermon, he observes, “It is those we love and should know who elude us. But we can still love them. We can love completely without completely understanding.” That’s the point. There are all sorts of things we do not completely understand, but we still know what to do: to follow the ways of trust and forgiveness, to know our thoughts as thoughts, to grant that there is a deeper wisdom that eludes us maybe for a season, maybe for a lifetime, but we can still love completely without completely understanding.

What if there were a movement of people, disciples of Jesus, committed to learning these things and teaching them to others and to the generations to come? What if there are places devoted to help us live a life of love, organized around that objective, with Jesus as our inspiration being a place devoted to learning how to love: 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?

Ask whatever questions you like. Press them as far as you can. Respect facts. Resist the kind of thinking that denies facts. For sure. Seek truth. Solve whatever problems you can. Do you best to understand the people God has put in front of you. But sooner or later you come to great matters, things that are too wonderful for you. And you can only still and quiet your soul like (as the psalmist says) a weaned child in a mother's arms. Can you picture it? A three-year-old in a mother's lap, resting quietly, just content and satisfied and happy to be there. That's how it can be between you and God, and this will open for you a life of love.

What if you knew your life would work out beautifully – even if things aren't going as you wanted them to go? Even if your closest friends confound you? Even if the whole world seems to you off-kilter? What if you knew that your life will work out beautifully anyway? And now: See your thoughts as thoughts. Trust God. And let's commit ourselves, from this time forward, to learning a life of love.

– Dale Pauls