

DELIVERANCE FROM DESTRUCTIVE IDEAS¹

Our text today is a simple phrase that comes at the zenith of Paul's magisterial statement of the faith. After he lays out his vision of God's work in Jesus he gives us a shattering "therefore..." "Therefore, present your bodies to God, don't be molded by the world but be transformed by, (what?) The renewal of your mind." The renewal of our minds is what I want to talk about today, because having good ideas and accurate information about life is one of the most powerful tools God has to shape us into the people he yearns for us to be. "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind."

Think about it. Isn't it in the realm of our ideas that evil has a stronghold? When evil made its entrance into the world it was when Eve got the idea from the snake that maybe God couldn't be trusted and that she had to act on her own to insure her well-being. The serpent didn't hit Eve with depression or a sickness, or bereavement. He drew her in with a wrong idea.

Think of the array of ideas that work as the foundation of your being. The idea of what God is like; the idea of what we're here for; the idea of what a good person is like; what growing up is, what we deserve, how we relate with others, what happiness is, and on and on.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on June 8, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, GA.

You see, what we hold to be true—our ideas—always seep out in our behavior. What we secretly reverence in our hearts, what we know to be true, what we think is good and worthwhile cannot stay hidden. It always shows itself. What we think is who we are.

Now, when our array of ideas is distorted or based on partial information—well, what we think is still who we are. There's a school of thought in psychology called cognitive therapy. CT holds that depression, together with other disorders, is significantly rooted in mis-information. "Stinking thinking," as they call it in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Let me give an example. Let's say I'm clinically depressed and it's ten o'clock on Saturday morning. Where am I? That's right, I'm in bed. And I can't move. What am I thinking? "I feel terrible, I'm exhausted, I've got to mow the lawn and there is no way I've got the energy to do that. Then I need to go to a get-together tonight and I have absolutely no interest in that activity. Oh...I just can't move."

Sounds depressing. What the cognitive therapy people have noticed is that that cycle of thought is laced with mis-information. In fact, starting a chore like lawn mowing actually creates a little burst of energy. While you may not feel like running a marathon, there's a fair probability that

you just might be able to finish the grass. Same thing with the party. Instead of the predicted bad time, one is likely to have an okay time. If the depressed person could substitute more accurate information into his thoughts while lying in bed he may be able to get moving.

The political theorist, George Orwell wrote what is probably the most influential science fiction/political fiction ever in his futuristic 1984. Nineteen Eighty-four coined phrases like "Big Brother" as a term for totalitarian government. One of the ways that Big Brother kept people in its service was to manage truth. Civil servants worked continuously to re-write news and history with the purpose of keeping people from discovering what really was and what had been going on. Evil manipulates truth in the same way to keep you and me in the bondage of faulty ideas.

In pre-marriage counseling with a sophisticated couple, I recommended forgiveness in the manner that the father forgave the prodigal son. It was soon clear that neither of these two had ever heard of the story of the Prodigal Son. So like a story-teller I told it to them. They listened with rapt attention. They were surprised at the ending. But think about growing into adulthood, going to college, and working in a responsible job—as was the experience of this engaged couple—and

not knowing even the most fundamental rudiments of Christian faith. What would you build your life upon? Where would the information and ideas come from?

Now, ideas do not change easily. There is some mechanism in human thinking that causes us to think that the way we think is pretty much the truth about life. Aren't you glad that we—of all people in history—have pretty much got it right? We look at ancient peoples sacrificing to their gods and think how ignorant they were. We wish that the millions in Africa and elsewhere would listen to reason and improve their lives by becoming like us. We love our parents, but we notice that good as they were, they missed the boat on certain things that we've now corrected. We wish Muslims and communists and people living under dictators would snap out of it and, well, become like us. Now, I'll tell you a secret. Most people think that they pretty well live in truth and enlightenment.

The mechanism I'm talking about is some societal-intellectual process that causes us to see our own truth as true or normal or objective truth. It follows that it is very difficult to change our minds.

I ran into an ardent church-going woman once who was so focused on the return of Jesus to the world that she was manifesting psychological symptoms. I thought she was a victim

of faulty theology and a cult-like congregation. She was convinced that Presbyterians were lost in laxness and confusion. We hold so tightly to our ideas because they seem like they're so true and good and normal.

What does our faith say? "Be transformed by the renewal of our minds." Basically, God calls you and me to be on a continual hunt for greater truth and greater light. We're called to repent, which in the original Greek means "changing our minds." Truth is so important to who we are that we can't simply rest on a vague sense we all feel that we've already arrived at truth. What is called for is an endless quest for information and truth. Or as our old Westminster Confession of faith put it—repentance unto life. There's a grand idea. "Repentance unto life." Or as the Shaker song, "Simple Gifts" puts it: "Turning, turning till we come round right."

How do we do that? How can you and I be on a life-quest to move more and more into truth—God's truth?

Here's where the Bible is a marvelous resource. God has given you and me a fair sized library of writings that powerfully deliver us from the bondage of destructive ideas. One of the great privileges of being a minister is that my job simply requires me to be reading and studying the Scriptures. So, in contrast to many, I've lived with and in this book my

whole adult life. Week after week, year after year, of living in the world of the Bible, I find that big themes—ideas I never anticipated—emerge in my thinking. I'm pretty convinced that God really wants to set us free. I believe that Jesus' life in this world was unimaginably significant—so much so that it changes everything. I think that God deeply loves everything he made.

What I'm driving at is that the Bible is a powerful resource for the shaping and re-shaping of our minds. Get into it! You'll become a different person.

Walking away from obvious falsehood has got to be a part of the transformation of our minds. The Book of Proverbs invites you and me to actively pursue wisdom and even if it hurts our ego to be glad if someone corrects us with something we really need to hear. Wow, actively pursuing wisdom. That means it's 9:30 p.m. and you're tired. But nevertheless you read Purpose Driven Life or New Kind of Christian or My Utmost for His Highest, or Celebration of Discipline.

Put differently, we don't give mediocrity a lot of time. I don't think that endless hours in front of the TV, listening to some popular music, viewing advertising, and so on pass the proverbs test.

Finally, prayer can be a powerful source of truth. How about spending half an hour in God's company jotting down your core ideas. First tell God that you desire the mind of Christ. Then write. What drives your behavior? What are your working values? Ask God help you with the list. Be brutally honest. Then ask God which ones are false values. Which ones are destructive or based on insufficient information.