

WITH ALL YOUR MIND

A lawyer stepped forward to put a question to Jesus. *“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”*

It is a good question. We all ask it. How can I make it? How can I succeed? What is the right course to take? What is the true requirement of life? What is the survival kit?

It is also a trick question. Is it really a matter of what we humans do as individuals? Or does it depend upon how the whole society behaves? Or beyond that, maybe it’s all up to God. But even if it does depend upon individual human choice, does anybody really know the answer?

Apparently Jesus did not find it a trick question at all. He turned the man to the core of Jewish tradition and teaching. *“What is written in the Torah?”* And the man knew, of course. Everybody knew the words: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”* And Jesus said, *“You have answered correctly; do this, and you shall live.”*

So it was not a trick question. It was a trick answer. How many of you have figured out how to worship the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind – and your neighbor as yourself? Yes, it is the right answer. But who knows how to use it – how to put it into full effect? It is one of the “endless answers.” That is, no matter how far we track it, it keeps opening out before us. No matter how much we live by it, it keeps suggesting and requiring more. Only after much experience and pain and frustration do we begin to realize that all the “right” answers – all the true answers – are like that. How could it be an appropriate reply to the question of eternal life if it did not have this “endless” dimension to it? You can keep applying this answer for a hundred lifetimes and more, and it will not wear out on you or leave you with nothing else to do.

There are five categories to this answer. Each one is imperative, and worth a study all its own. Yet all five must be in balance together. You would think this would form the core of all our educational systems. What could we possibly want our children to know and practice and

study and work at more than this right answer to the meaning and purpose of life? But to teach the children, we have to know it ourselves. And as we have just said, to know it ourselves takes endless lifetimes. To some, this might sound discouraging. Yet all it means is that we have to keep working at it, earnestly but patiently, a little bit at a time, every day.

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So let's talk about censorship. It is not everybody's favorite subject, but we have to start somewhere. We are not really sure when censorship started, but it has been a major item from earliest times. Some people think it was around the time of Moses, when Israel decided it was wrong to marry outside Judaism and wrong to be friendly with people who worshipped other gods. But most folk say it actually started in the Garden, when God told Adam and Eve that they had to stay away from the fruit of one of the trees. From that day to this, we have had a lot of trouble with censorship.

How do we worship the Lord our God with all our minds? Does that mean we study and consider everything, but always bring it back to allegiance under God? Or does it mean we think and look at only those things that are "godly" – approved by God? And if so, who decides ahead of time what is approved and what is "ungodly," since God has created all things?

In any case, despite the problems, censorship has always been a necessary part of every serious spiritual path. We do not always think of it in just that way. In the early church, some of the regional bishops began to make lists of the writings they had found most beneficial to their own prayer and study. Just as you tell your friends about a book you particularly like, so they were telling their friends about the books they found most helpful. The practice caught on and turned into a process that eventually decided which writings would be included in the New Testament and which would not. To choose *anything* eventually turns into a rejection or exclusion of that which is not chosen. And this is the principle of censorship.

When the church puts some books on a recommended list and others on a banned list and leaves the rest without special comment either way, we tend to get scornful. We say things about "freedom" and "oppression" and being "open-minded" or "narrow-minded." We do not very often comment about the church trying to be helpful.

I remember some of my own scathing comments, when I was young, about fundamentalist churches that tried to forbid their members to dance, see movies, or read some of the books I thought were terrific. It was years before I realized that they were only trying to be helpful. Most of their church members were not experiencing oppression; they were encouraging their church leaders to give them guidelines, to help steer them through the maze of possibilities.

The greatest censorship of all is TIME. We do not have time to experience everything, watch everything, read everything. How I sometimes *wish* we had a more trustworthy censorship program in the UCC. If I could read, watch, and participate in only the top-quality books, plays, television programs, movies, events, etc. and avoid all the trash, what a boon that would be! Of course, with my training, I would not believe it if it were offered. Neither would most of you.

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It's time I was getting to my point, if I am ever going to. And my point is this: Nobody else will do it for you, in our tradition. You have to develop your own censorship program, or you are overwhelmed. The purpose of this sermon is to persuade you to go home and develop a proper diet for your mind. And the reason is: *You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.* It is one of the five primary obligations – one of the five primary secrets – for moving out of death into Life.

The mind is the key (not the source, but the key) to our attitudes, our expectations, our way of processing information and making decisions. That is no surprise to any of us. It is nonetheless worth emphasizing that the way we feed, discipline, and use our minds is critical. It affects everything!

1.) What input does your mind get each week to nourish it on its spiritual path and in its spiritual disciplines? The mind must have nourishment to grow and stay healthy. We all know this. Twenty minutes to an hour (depending on your attention span) once a week is not going to keep the mind focused on God. *You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.* If not, then you will not inherit eternal life. Translated, that means the quality of your life will not be very good. It will not be what you need, what you hoped for, what you were designed for.

2.) What is your mind's function as worshiper? That is: How does the mind worship? Do you worship with your mind by excluding all things that do not seem godly? Or do you worship with your mind by studying all things until you discover how they are godly? In either case, how do you adjust and correct for the facts that your own time is so limited and your own mind is inadequate to deal with all things?

After all, it is the mind that questions the existence of God, just as it is the mind that sometimes concludes, "*Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee ...; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done.*" (Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42)

We come from the wing of Christendom that is not afraid to doubt. We do not censor things because we are *afraid* of them – at least that's not supposed to be the reason; we censor things because they have proved to be unhelpful, a waste of time. As a result, many of us go through periods of dark doubts. And we trust God to be patient and even approving of our journeys into darkness and despair. And that is because when we come out, our faith is no longer mere theory. Nor is it a product of group pressure or approval.

Maybe some of the results of that are deeper wounds than we should have and more individualism than is good for us. But it is our WAY. The questions remain, after we get through such nights of doubt: How do we then turn to worship God with all of our minds? What portion of any given week do we dedicate to adoration, gratitude, contemplation, intercession, obedience, dialogue?

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Since we have no censorship in our wing of Christendom, it means we must each become our own censors. Surely we cannot conclude that we have no need of discrimination and discipline. Some people just let their minds do anything at all: think about anything they want to, for as long as they want to; go flitting from subject to subject; get stuck on some pointless object for weeks, months, or even years. We know the results. There is no way we would want such a fate for ourselves or for anyone we care about. *You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.* So the purpose of this sermon is to persuade you to go home and rework your diet for your mind. In our tradition, nobody else will do it for you. We are each responsible for our own spiritual disciplines, for our own spiritual path. The price of freedom is always heavier responsibility.

What do you eat with your mind? What do you let it nibble on? Do you also train it constantly for its primary task: to worship the Lord your God?

Consider specific things: how much television, and what programs; how many books, and what kind. The principle of censorship is not just a forbidding. It is an effort to improve the fare. According to your time and your identity, your fare cannot be the same as another's, even if you are both totally faithful. But it is true that if you spend an hour a day reading a newspaper, it is robbing you of a book a week, and vice versa. And also remember (because few do today) that sometimes the mind needs time to think and digest what it is taking in. Speed is not the answer to our limitations. For some people, speed-reading only means their minds are inundated with more and more trash. Even if you speed-read Plato, Kierkegaard, Brunner, or most of the Bible – and even with high comprehension – you still need at least twice as much time to think about it as you took to read it, or it might as well have been trash.

Along this same line: How much time do you take each week to sit and think? *You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.* That cannot mean just input – just what we read, watch, see, hear from others. The mind needs time to produce its own thoughts, to contemplate the information and the experiences coming through. There is supposed to be a difference between a computer and a human mind. A computer holds only what has been entered into its memory; nothing comes out except that which went in, and it usually comes out the same as it went in. You are supposed to have thoughts of your own, creative ideas, and new ways of perceiving things. That takes time: time to sit and think; time to contemplate; time to go over things and draw conclusions and ponder possibilities, scary as that is.

Finally, do not forget about unofficial time. In some ways, that may be the most important of all, in terms of character formation. I am talking about all the odd moments through every day when we go off and leave our minds running, without really noticing it. Driving time, walking time, shaving time; time in the shower or doing dishes or gardening; time when we are alone, doing anything habitual. The mind is always busy at such times. It daydreams, or it goes over recent conversations, adding in all the comments it might have made. It thinks about victories that eluded us, encounters we might have had, money we wish we had, or people we wanted to admire us.

At such times, our own minds seem only half aware of what they are picturing. But we are also getting set up for our real attitudes and expectations and choices. That is not time off. We are still supposed to be worshipping the Lord our God with all of our minds.

I remember, with chagrin, going through one of those “phases” a couple of years back. It seemed like it lasted forever, but it lasted at least six months. My mind kept imagining scenes of great wealth. In my right mind, I know I am already wealthy, but these were day-dreams of millions of dollars. Every time my mind was not occupied with a task, if I did not interrupt it with strong demands, it would return to endless scenarios of how it would be to have lots of money. Some of it was instructive, some was pleasant and imaginative, some was very entertaining. But clearly, I was way off track.

For a month or two, I did not give it much notice. Some of us are asleep enough to suppose that our private thoughts are nobody’s business, including our own. Then I heard myself say aloud some things that were foreign, and I realized I meant them. So the alarm finally went off: This is not who I am, how I want to live, what I care about, or what I have dedicated my life to. So I started struggling with my mind, and found I had let things go for far too long.

I started tracking where all this trash was coming from. It was not evil, it seemed. I wanted to help some people. That’s what got it started. And I pictured what I could do if I had lots of money. And then I saw it: I wanted to help people with money instead of with faith. They needed bucks, not God. After years of knowing better, it had been so long since I went through the ABCs that my inner self had forgotten. In the end, it did not escape me who I was imagining would get the credit for all this “help.” So it was evil after all, right at the core of where true evil really comes from: wanting to play God.

Understanding all of that still did not break the grip of my greed. The thoughts kept recurring at every careless moment, until the simplest, fundamental principle finally came back into focus: I was shifting from trusting God to trusting money for my security. That broke it! My heart started laughing, and all the scenarios looked as dull and pointless as they really were. They finally faded away and left me in enough peace to go back to life. Do you ever go through stuff like this? The greed thing is not bothering me at all, lately, but I wonder what my mind is working on now that will turn out to be

a dumb sidetrack a few months hence. After all, the mind is like a spoiled child. If we do not train it constantly, it gets into all kinds of mischief.

We cannot control all the subjects and scenes that cross our minds. The mind is made to process information and to be curious and imaginative. The mind will consider anything. Sometimes that embarrasses or worries us. We cannot control all the subjects and scenes that cross our minds. But we *can* decide what we will dwell on; what we will hold in focus; what we will mentally nourish, hold onto, keep, and give our minds permission to work on. If the mind does not dwell on God, it dwells on something else.

This sermon hopes to persuade you to consider and then set up a serious and well-balanced diet for your mind. In our culture and in our wing of Christendom, nobody else will do that for you. You have to do that for yourself or be overrun with trash. If we wish to LIVE – to inherit eternal life, to be disciples of Jesus – we seek always and in all ways to remember: *You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.*