

Transforming Our Minds

Based on Romans 12:1-2 & II Corinthians 10:5

A Message Offered to FCUCC Gaylord by Toby Jones on 8/27/17

What if I told you that the biggest barrier to your own health and happiness was something inside you that you have the ability to get rid of? Would you get rid of it? Would you want to? And what if I told you that that same thing inside you that is prohibiting your own happiness is also prohibiting God's work and will in your life? Then would you get rid of it? That's exactly what I am going to talk about today – that barrier to happiness and health, that barrier to God having Her way with your precious life. You know what it is...? It's your mind. Not the content of your mind, not the 50-70 thousand thoughts that run through your mind in any given day, but the way your mind goes about processing what you experience every single moment.

We all know that our minds are overstuffed with all these swirling thoughts, but that's not the problem. The problem is that our minds, over time, create habits of thought or patterns of thought that eventually form a permanent filter, and once that happens, that filter controls how we perceive, experience, and process our entire lives. So I've recently come to believe that this filter, something each and everyone of us has, is the single biggest factor in determining whether we are happy or not. That thought filter - that the vast majority of us aren't even aware of - is the one thing more than anything else that Jesus wants to get his loving, healing hands on so that we can be truly and permanently transformed.

Shakespeare knew about this filter. In Act II, scene 2 of Hamlet, he wrote: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Shakespeare was making the point that every single person has a filter, a mental filter, and that everything we experience gets processed through. And it is that filter – NOT the experience itself – that determines whether we experience something as good or bad, positive or negative. No two people's filters are exactly alike. So, for instance, my wife and I might go to the exact same dinner party, participate in the exact same conversations, and yet still manage to come home with completely different impressions of what that dinner party was like. Our minds and their well-worn, habitual thought patterns filter everything we experience. And if we don't let God's Spirit get in there and clean out

our filters – or even replace them with new ones – we shall never know the Truth and we shall never be truly free.

Let's look at some real life examples of filtered or habitual, conditioned thinking. A young boy grows up in a home riddled with alcoholism. His father is drunk most every night and makes promises repeatedly to that son: "I'll be at your game tomorrow," or "I'll get you that new bike next Christmas," or even "I'll be home by nine tonight to help you with that homework." But the father never comes through on any of those promises. That boy grows up and gets married, and when his wife says, "I'm going out with the girls and will be home by 10." He says ok but entertains a small seed of doubt inside him. On and off throughout the evening, he finds himself wondering, "what if she's not where she said she was?" Then, when she doesn't get home until 10:45, he's irate. He grills her on where she's been and what she's been up to. His filter has gotten the best of him, coloring his current experience in the profoundly negative light of his past.

Here's another...A devoted member of the church went through some hard times in her personal and professional life. She got passed over for some promotions at work and found herself stuck in a mid-level position, where she really has no influence or decision-making ability. Meanwhile, at home, her kids had grown and didn't really listen to or attend to her anymore. On top of that, her marriage has dulled and her husband doesn't really listen to her or honor her opinions or wishes. Her entire life has changed, and it's changed in ways she does not like and isn't happy about. So she gets involved in the leadership of her beloved church, gets elected to various committees and boards. And there, she finds that she can wield power and influence once again. Whenever any decisions or initiatives come up, she plants herself firmly on the side that opposes change, because the changes in the rest of her life – at work and at home – have been so painful. Her filter is getting the best of her – even at church - convincing her that all change is scary and negative, and will only lead her to a place of loss and of sadness.

Our brothers and sisters in AA call this distorted, filtered thinking "stinking thinking." Dr. Mark Muesse, professor at Rhodes College, calls this "conditioned thinking" or "mindlessness" as opposed to mindfulness, and he cautions us that filtered thinking "comes at a very high cost, causing us *and those around us* to suffer greatly." The Buddha went even further, writing, "Whatever an enemy might do to an enemy

or a foe might do to a foe, the unexamined, filtered mind can do even worse things to you.”

Here’s the good news today, folks: Jesus came to liberate each and every one of us – including me – from stinking thinking, from conditioned thinking, from mindlessness. Are we going to let him do that? Or are we going to choose, instead, to keep living in a prison of our own making – the prison of our conditioned, habituated minds? Make no mistake: that filter can distort and ruin everything if you aren’t careful, if you don’t let Jesus in there real soon to clean it out and replace it.

So what, then, do we do? How, practically speaking, do we go about ridding our minds of these damaging, invisible, and unconscious filters? How do we let the healing spirit of God transform our minds?

Well, like any other problem, we must begin by admitting we have a problem. And that problem is our filter, our habitual thought patterns. They’re making us fear and resist change and miss out on some wonderful opportunities in the present.

Once we admit to having this unconscious filter, we go about the business of replacing it. We try to learn and practice the disciplines that will replace our *mindlessness* with *mindfulness*. We seek to rid our minds of that old filter that colors everything in all kinds of negative ways. And we do that through the practice of *mindfulness*. (Time out for a brief advertisement...Your Reaching In team is planning to offer some sort of course in mindfulness this winter.) But for now, I’ll just say that one of the first steps in the practice of mindfulness is learning *not* to judge every experience, conversation, or encounter we have. This practice of non-judgment is a critical part of mindfulness. If we want to be happy, if we want to have our lives reflect the life of Jesus, we must first learn NOT to judge and evaluate our every experience, but rather to be fully present with the experience, just as it is. You can practice this posture of non-judgment right now, right here, as you listen to this message. Your filtered mind – even at this very moment - wants you to judge and evaluate everything I say. Your conditioned, filtered mind will naturally want to decide whether you like what I’m saying or don’t like what I’m saying, whether you agree or disagree. That’s how the filter works; it subtly robs you of the opportunity to experience this sermon by leading you, instead, to judge and evaluate this sermon. The transformed mind, the Spirit-filled mind is characterized by openness, receptiveness, and inquisitiveness. The mind of Jesus says, “I want to be here, fully present in this moment. I don’t want to miss or waste any of

this experience because I'm too busy measuring, judging, or weighing it against my expectations or beliefs. That is why Jesus could be so comfortable and so happy sitting at meal with prostitutes and tax collectors and other sinners. His mind had been relieved of the filter of judgment and evaluation, so he could just enjoy the moment, no matter who that moment was spent with.

Paul the Apostle and the great founder of 7 churches affirmed the mindfulness he saw in Jesus. That's why he told the Roman church, "Don't be *conformed* - or trapped - by your typical patterns of thought. Instead be *transformed* by the renewal of your minds." Paul would later urge the Corinthian church to "test every thought...to take every thought captive - or prisoner - and make it obedient to Christ," *not* obedient to your particular filter. Do you grasp what Paul is saying here? He's telling his early congregations - and us - that we will never grow if we let our typical, habitual thought patterns - our filters - influence our decisions. We have to take whatever thoughts we have and give them over to Christ Jesus, to the one who not only *knows* the Truth but IS the Truth.

Here's what I think, brothers and sisters. I think that for far too long, we Christians have misunderstood sin as rule breaking, as doing "bad" things like swearing or lusting, or giving into our other vices. But the far greater sin is living for decades with a faulty filter in our minds, one that we weren't even aware of, that distorts the truth and robs of us of the present moment and of genuine non-judgmental experience.

I firmly believe that Jesus came to transform our minds, for no other transformation will amount to a hill of beans, if our minds continue to filter and poison everything we experience, if we're weighing and judging and measuring everything according to our warped and filtered view of reality.

We all know that thousands of churches are closing their doors, because they've been rendered irrelevant and out of touch. One of the reasons this is happening is that we church people are painfully unaware of our own filters, our outdated habits of thought and of judgment that the rest of the world just won't put up with anymore.

We know how good it feels to take a completely cluttered and crap-filled closet and de-clutter it, so there's actually room in there to move around, to use the closet again productively and positively. Can you imagine how good it would feel, the difference it could make, if we let the Holy Spirit do that to our minds?

Paul said it so well...“Don’t be conformed by this world but be transformed by the renewal of your minds.” When Jesus said, “Behold, I make all things new,” he was talking about what he wanted to do with our minds.