

Over the past few weeks I have become aware of a number of ministers who have been really struggling in their ministry, but it's not just ministers who are struggling. Everyone is so busy and has too much to do, folk are struggling with illness and everyone has difficulties to face, so I want to take this opportunity to talk about what we can do to find help in difficult times.

What we think matters. It matters more than we imagine. You see, our lives move in the direction of our strongest thoughts. Whether or not you are aware of it, your life is moving in the direction of your strongest thoughts. If your thoughts are full of faith, full of God's truth, you are becoming more like Christ every single day. If your thoughts are negative, toxic, polluted, then you will not live in victory.

Romans chapter 8:5-6 5 Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.

These verses really should impact the way we think about thinking. Our lives move in the direction of our strongest thoughts.

Our inner dialogue matters so much. I don't know how many of you talk to yourselves. How many of you would say that you actually talk to yourself? I talk to myself all the time and sometimes, my inner dialogue is pleasing to God because I'm focused on him and on what he's called me to do. Other times, my inner dialogue can be very destructive because it's focused on me. That's when the selfish, negative thoughts appear. Does that make sense to you? Does it resonate with you?

Let me give you a couple of different scenarios to help you think about it. Is your life, your thought life, is it more God-centered, or would you say it is more self-centred? When you wake up, is the common direction of your mind during the day this, "My God is with me, my life matters, I've got a great calling, I'm full of faith, my mind is full of life and peace, I've got divine energy to do everything that God has called me to do, I'm excited about this day, today I'm going to make a difference for the glory of God?"

Does that represent something along the lines of your thinking, or do you kind of wake up and think, "I'm tired. Where's the coffee? Who's that kid pulling on me at the edge of the bed? Here we go again. It's a tough week, too much to do, wish I had an extra day in the week. Tired, go to my stupid job, work with stupid people. Life's overwhelming."

Now obviously, I'm exaggerating a little on both sides, but if you're really honest, what would typify the general dialogue that you have with yourself in your mind? I want to make a statement and I'm going to ask a question. I want you to really think about this. The statement is this: *your life is moving in the direction of your strongest thoughts.*

Question, *are you excited about the direction your thoughts are taking you?* Let me say it again. Your life is moving in the direction of your strongest thoughts. Are you excited about the direction that your thoughts are taking you?

As I was preparing for today, and thinking about these verses, I found that I don't like my inner dialogue. What I found myself saying over and over and over again was, "I've got too much to do. I can't get it all done. I don't know how long I can keep this up. I can't meet everyone's expectations." This is what I said over and over and over again. I'm not proud of it, but that was my inner dialogue. What I recognized is that I needed God to help change my thinking. This is not just think positive thoughts and everything will be great, that's not what I mean, and I don't believe that for a minute. There will still be struggles but if God could change my thinking, that could change a lot about me.

Romans chapter 12:2 *Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

Let God transform you into a new person by – giving you money, making you even more handsome, blessing you with a Ferrari NO, by changing the way you think!

What I love about this is this is not me changing me. This is God changing me by renewing my mind, by stopping the negative lies and replacing them with Godly truth. This isn't me working harder or having to put in more effort to be better. This is me working to align my thoughts with God's thoughts and when I think God thoughts, God transforms me. Let God change you into a new person by changing the way you think because like it or not, so much of life isn't about what happens to you, but so much life is how you think about what happens to you.

We are all different and we all react differently to circumstances we face. Where one person will surrender, another will flourish. Some of it will have to do with your personality but so much has to do with the way you think about things. When you are

under attack you can believe the lie the devil tells – you think “I’m rubbish”, “I’m hopeless”, “I’m worthless” – whatever it is, or you can turn to God and seek his help. What you think matters.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*

I love the way that Paul unpacks this: I've got spiritual weapons that have spiritual power. The weapons that we fight with are not the weapons of this world. We fight with prayer. We fight with fasting. We fight with tithing. We fight with the word of God. We've got the sword of the spirit. We've got the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith. We've got the helmet of salvation. We've got the belt of truth, the shoes prepared with the gospel of peace. We don't have normal weapons BUT our weapons are powerful. They demolish what Paul calls strongholds. The Greek word that's translated as stronghold is the word Ochuroma. This word, it's like if you can imagine a castle with a dungeon. It's a prison and a very literal translation of this is a prisoner locked by deception. What is a stronghold? It's someone who is in a prison and deceived believing there is no way out. It's a wrong mindset. It's a spiritual trap.

I think that's exactly what some of us are. Satan has got you convinced that you can't, you won't, you never will, you're not good enough, you don't know enough. He's got you so convinced, you don't have the faith to reach out and grab what could be yours. Why? Because you believe the lie. It is a stronghold of the evil one and the good news is that you have divine power to demolish strongholds. How do we do this? The text goes on. It says, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God." How do we do this? "We take captive every thought and we make it obedient to Christ."

I love the way the New Living translation illustrates this verse. The writers say this, that "We capture the rebellious thoughts and we teach them to obey Christ." I like that. If you've got a rebellious thought, what do you do? Capture it! You've got a negative thought, something says, "You can't, you never will," you capture it. You capture that rebellious thought. Say, "Shut up and sit down. I'm going to teach you the word of God," and you take captive every thought and you make it obedient to Christ.

Here's where I need you to work with me. I'm going to give you two questions and I'd like you to write them down on your paper. The first one is this, **what negative thoughts are dominating your thinking?** What negative thoughts are dominating your thinking? I'm going to give you some ideas and I want you to write down two or three that are very real for you.

Here's some ideas. You might think, "I can't get it all done. I'm not a good enough parent. She brought homemade scones and I brought store-bought scones, hashtag I suck, whatever it is. I'm always going to battle with this, and I'm never going to win. I'm too inconsistent. I'm on-again, off-again with God. I'm undisciplined. I'm never going to learn to pray. I'm always going to struggle with my weight. I'm just not good enough with people. I'm just an average student. I couldn't tell anyone about Jesus." Whatever it is, think about quite honestly when your dialogue tips to the negative side, what is it that you're consistently telling yourself again and again because your life is moving in the direction of your strongest thoughts.

Take a moment to think about it and write down whatever is in your head. You are maybe wondering why I'm asking you to write it down and there are two reasons for it. First, right here, and right now, there is a spiritual battle going on. When we begin to understand that there are strongholds the devil has in our lives he panics. He doesn't want us to identify them, because when we identify them we can do something about them by asking God to help us overcome, and break them down. Right here, and right now you might be thinking I don't need to write anything down, but we're in a spiritual battle and writing them down is the first step on the road to victory. It also acts as an aide memoire, so that when you go from here you will remember what to pray about.

So take a moment, ask God to reveal any area you need to give over to him, where you have been consistently negative.

Now I want you to ask yourself, **what spiritual truth will demolish the strongholds in your life?** What spiritual truth will demolish those unhelpful, ungodly thoughts, and if you're maybe new to church, or if you're a new follower of Jesus, you may need some help with this. If that's you then I would recommend joining one of the home groups we have because we get together with other believers and talk around God's word and you will find help with this there. For today though there will be some people around at the end of the service if you'd like to talk to someone, or have someone pray with you.

As part of Path of Renewal the group is starting to look at spiritual disciplines – essentially learning habits and rhythms of prayer and study which will help us become more like Jesus.

Here is one I would encourage you to try: my discipline I call Words to Live By. What I want to encourage you to do is seek God first every day. I see the ‘here he goes again’ looks when I tell you how important it is to read the bible even for a few minutes every day – but if our lives move in the direction of our strongest thoughts, lets make those thoughts about God. If you put God first every single day and you spend time with him and you pray for just a few minutes, if you feed on His word and then you speak aloud what He says is true, that discipline, can completely change your thinking.

What I'm going to do before you write is give you some suggested statements, so that you see what I mean.

Maybe you're worried all the time. Your statement might be this. "Because of Christ, I'm not anxious about anything. I cast my cares on God because He cares for me." You declare that statement by faith.

Maybe you don't know God's will for your life and you want to know. Every day, you say this. "My life belongs to God. Daily I seek Him and daily He directs my step. I'm learning to know His voice and He leads me to His perfect will."

Maybe you lack confidence and so every single day, you're going to say this. "My confidence is in Christ and Christ alone. Because His spirit lives within me, I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me."

Maybe you're inconsistent in your time with God and you're going to say this. It may not feel true at first, but you keep saying it. You keep saying it until it does become true to you and you say this. "I love the living and dwelling presence of my good God. Praying is as important to me as breathing. God's word nourishes my soul. I depend on His presence every moment of every day." This may seem silly at first, but you say it over and over again and what happens? You are consistently speaking what is true and God is renewing your mind. He's changing the way you think.

I'll give you another kind of silly illustration, but I have ‘O’ Grade French. If we go on holiday to France I bring out a few words from the depth of my memory – but it’s

pretty much a disaster. When I hear someone speak in French, I translate it to English in my head. Then I try to speak in French. It is incredibly awkward. What I need is to learn enough to get to the point where it clicks and I begin to hear in French, think in French and speak in French.

Here's what I think will happen with us. We may think, "I'm not good enough. I don't have what it takes. I can't get through the day. Christ has given me everything I need. With Him, I can do all things." The more you say it, the more you'll renew your mind. One day, there will be a switch that takes place.

Here's my struggle and here's the solution from God's truth for me. I struggle with putting God first because there are so many urgent things to be done. I really struggle with choosing the important over the urgent. I would tell myself, "I can't seem to do enough at the church and I can't be the husband I want to be at home," and so I'd tell myself that. "I'm not good enough. I can't get it all done," and so that was a real struggle for me.

I am a dearly loved child of God. I exist to serve and glorify Jesus. My family are more important than my job. My calling is to love others and to nurture, equip, train and empower God's people for service. I long for God's presence in my life and am blessed beyond measure because the Holy Spirit dwells within me. The King loves me and I love him.

Take a moment to write your responses if you haven't already done that.

Declare it. Declare it. Again, again, again, again, again, again until I believe it. I'm the righteousness of God in Christ, Jesus. I'm called to make a difference in this world. I have the mind of Christ. I have the same spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwelling inside of me.

That's why with every bit of excitement, passion, and spiritual enthusiasm I have, I would love to invite you to join me in going before God and letting Him change us into new people by changing the way we think. Not locked in a closet by a lie, but set free by the truth. You know the truth and the truth will set you free. When you declare it over and over and over again, you might just get to the place where you believe it. Satan is a father of lies. Jesus is the author of truth and when you know the truth, the truth will set you free.