

Introduction

I like to ask you two questions. First, how many of you crack your knuckles? And second, does cracking your knuckles cause arthritis?

I assumed for most of my life that it does. That was a problem though because my son Moses, growing up, routinely cracked his. And every time I heard him, I told him to stop it or he'd get arthritis. And every time he replied he wouldn't. I've since then researched the issue and guess what I found. Cracking knuckles doesn't cause arthritis, which means all of that concern, annoyance, and disagreement for nothing.

I learned two lessons from that experience of mine. One is the power of ideas. The other is the absolute necessity of changing ours that are false. And that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Ideas

In Job 4:7, Job's friend Eliphaz asked him two rhetorical questions. The gist of both was this. Do righteous people suffer? The implied answer was **"No!"** Righteous people don't suffer. Only the wicked do. Eliphaz went on to claim in verse 8 that there are no exceptions to that. He then used an analogy in verses 9-11 to clinch his point. Beasts of prey may terrify the earth for a while but God's angry breath punishes and eventually destroys them all. In the same way, He punishes and eventually destroys all the wicked. That necessarily meant, Eliphaz told Job, that he lost all of his children, wealth, and health because he was wicked and God was punishing him.

In John 9:1, Jesus and His disciples met a man who was born blind. The disciples immediately asked Him a question about that. Whose sins caused his blindness? Was it his own prenatal sins, a Jewish idea at the time, or was it the sins of his parents? Was God punishing him for his sins or the sins of his parents?

That explanation reveals that Eliphaz and Jesus' disciples had something in common. It was an idea – that where there is suffering,

there is sin. They assumed that when people are suffering, it's because they're wicked and God is punishing them.

That illustrates what ideas are. They're assumptions we have about reality. They're beliefs we have about what is real or true. Or to say it differently, they're ways we have of thinking about things.

I saw a young man, with tattoos all over his neck and arms, wearing a t-shirt that said, "**Inked is awesome.**" That is an idea. It's a way of thinking about tattoos. They're body enhancing and cool. Let me ask you a question. What do you think about tattoos?

My point is that all of us have ways of thinking about countless things like tattoos, makeup, organized sports, divorce, success, instant credit, sex, texting, dress, the Bible, and discipleship to Jesus to name a few. All of us have ideas about those things and countless more.

True and False Ideas

But are they true?

Let's go back to the idea that Eliphaz and the disciples had. When we're suffering, it's because we've sinned and God is punishing us. People still believe that. I once visited a cancer patient who asked me, "**Why does God hate me? What did I do wrong?**" What she assumed is clear. God gave her cancer to punish her for something she did.

But is that true? Our texts help us answer that. With regard to Job, listen to how God described him in Job 1:8, "**For there is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.**" Job was the most righteous man on earth. With regard to the blind man, listen to what Jesus said about his blindness in John 9:3, "**It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents.**" He wasn't blind, in other words, because anyone sinned. What God and Jesus said refute what Eliphaz, the disciples, and the women with cancer assumed is so. Where there is suffering, there is sin.

That illustrates that every idea is one of two things, true or false. True ideas are assumptions about reality that are so. What we believe is

real or true is. False ideas are assumptions about reality that aren't so. What we believe is real or true isn't.

When I was practicing law, a client of mine came home from work one afternoon and found a note from his wife on the kitchen table. She was leaving him, she wrote, and never coming back. Her explanation was that she had to "**find herself**" and Arizona is where she apparently went looking because that's where we eventually located her. False idea: The self is found. It's an essence waiting to be discovered through introspection. True idea: The self is formed not found. It's an essence waiting to be conceived and shaped by how we think and act.

Stop for a moment and think about all the ideas you hold. The sobering fact is that each and every one of those is either true or false.

The Power of Ideas

They're also powerful. Simply put, they govern our lives. Listen to what famed economist John Maynard Keynes wrote in his book *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*: "**The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. It is ideas which are dangerous for good or evil.**" He was right on two counts.

First, ideas rule the world. Consider these two competing ideas for instance. One is that liberty is more valuable or beneficial than economic equality is. The other is that economic equality is more valuable or beneficial than liberty is. European nations, generally, embrace the second of those ideas. America, historically, has embraced the first. That is in fact to what the term "**American exceptionalism**" refers. By the mid-20th century, it was the only developed nation in the world in which no strong socialist movement had taken root. That first idea is now being challenged by the second. And as Keynes correctly observed, which one prevails will rule America - determine its destiny and fate.

Keynes was right on a second count. Ideas are dangerous for good

or evil. We know from history (the gulags of Russian – the killing fields of Cambodia) that false ideas are dangerous for evil. They're detrimental to countries and cultures. They lay them low. Conversely, we know that true ideas (the Declaration of Independence) are dangerous for good. They're beneficial to countries and cultures. They raise them high.

But it isn't just countries and cultures is it? It's the individuals who make them up as well. Our ideas govern us. The assumptions we have about reality profoundly affect us for good or ill. They determine both the quality and contribution of our everyday lives. We will live poorly or well, now and forever, depending on the ideas that are directing us.

True idea – Success is the approval of God. False idea – Success is the approval of others. I read about a young woman who is a world class violinist. She plays in America's highest ranked symphony orchestra and performs private concerts for some of its most important people. Yet, she's a troubled person who considers herself an abject failure. Why? It's because her father wanted her to be a surgeon and is deeply disappointed in her that she isn't one. The false idea, success is her father's approval, is ruining her life. The true idea, success is God's approval, would redeem it.

That young woman demonstrates the power of ideas. True ones govern our lives for good and false ones for evil.

Changing Ideas

So let's make our ideas true ones. That's our call and here's how we answer it – by doing four things.

First, we identify the ideas that are running our lives. We ask and thoughtfully answer the question, **"What do I assume is so about life's important matters?"**

About 10 years ago, for instance, I asked that question about sports and answered it, **"Sports is a special realm to which some Christian principles don't apply."** That idea governed my life for 53 years.

We do a second thing - study and learn reality. We concentrate on

and analyze the details of the Bible, our world, and life in that world. That in turn reveals what is so about the matters those details address.

So, having studied the Book of Proverbs, I learned that *all* Christian principles apply to literally *every realm* of life, including sports.

There's a third thing we do. Assess our ideas in light of the reality we've learned. We stack them up against that reality and determine if they're consistent or inconsistent with it.

Going back to my idea about sports, I stacked it up against what the Book of Proverbs teaches. I recognized when I did that it's inconsistent with what Proverbs teaches and thus, a false idea.

Finally, we do a fourth thing. Replace false ideas with true ideas. We make and carry out the decision to think, feel, and act according to the true ones and not the false ones, whether we like it or not.

I remember pulling the old hidden ball trick in a high school baseball game years ago. I was able to hide the ball in my glove and tag the runner out at second as he led off. Notice what I did. I purposely deceived the runner, knowing he would be humiliated as a result. In 1 Peter 2:1, Peter wrote, "**Put aside all deceit.**" In Luke 6:31, Jesus said, "**Treat others the same way you want them to treat you.**" I knew both verses, but because of the idea I had, would have thought it absurd to apply them to the hidden ball trick. Now though, I would. I don't play baseball anymore, but if I did, I wouldn't pull that trick. That's because I replaced the false idea I had with a new and true one.

Anyway, that's our call – make our ideas true ones. Identify, learn, assess, and replace.

The problem is that's easier said than done and here's why. It's because of a common phenomenon called "**idea grip.**"

Our texts together help us understand what idea grip is. The Book of Job was written at least 800 years before the disciples lived. That implies, and history confirms it, that the idea, where there's suffering there is sin, dominated Jewish thought, teaching, and life for at least that long. The disciples' families, their friends' families, the people in

their synagogues and towns, and almost everyone else in Jewish society accepted and articulated it. As the disciples grew up, therefore, they simply equated that idea with reality. They assumed it to be so without any evidence that it was. They were in its grip in other words.

And so are we – not that one probably but certainly others. The truth is that our idea systems grew up with us from our earliest childhoods. They came to us from the teachings, expectations, and behaviors of our families and communities. Certain ideas, like the one I had about sports, are so fervently taught, clearly expected, and obviously modeled for us that we equate them with reality. We don't recognize them as ideas. We think they're natural truths instead. So, we don't require others to explain them and we ourselves don't give them any serious thought. We're in their grip in other words.

Several factors strengthen that grip of theirs on us. One is the status quo. We find security in the status quo, which changing ideas threatens. Another factor is ego or pride. To change them means to admit that we were wrong, perhaps for most of our lives.

As a result of all of that, changing false ideas can be one of the most painful and difficult experiences in life, which is why most people don't change them. They protect them instead, and become defensive, angry, and even hostile if anyone challenges them.

I shared my idea about sports, for instance, with a Christian family member who rejected it without giving it a second thought. He even seemed annoyed when I suggested Christians shouldn't use the hidden ball trick. That tells me he's in the grip of his ideas about that.

Conclusion

The moral of the story is clear. Break free from the grip of false ideas and replace them with true ideas, beginning with this one. Jesus is the greatest and best and worthy of surrendering our persons and lives to. Embrace that idea and live it out. You'll experience the most powerful of all ideas, for good, if you do!