

"Idea Grip"
Job 4:7-11; John 9:1-7

INTRODUCTION

Earlier in the service, I read two passages of Scripture, Job 4:7-11 and John 9:1-7, and asked you a question about them, *"What do Eliphaz and Jesus' disciples have in common?"* Can anyone tell me? That's right. Eliphaz and Jesus' disciples were in the grip of an idea.

That's something to which all of us can relate isn't it? That's because all of us, like they were, are in the grip of certain ideas and that's what I'm going to preach about today – idea grip.

WHAT IDEAS ARE

Let's start with what ideas are.

In Job 4:7, Job's friend Eliphaz asks him two rhetorical questions. The gist of both is this. Do righteous people suffer? The implied answer is "no." Righteous people don't suffer. Only the wicked do. He goes on to claim in verse 8 that there are no exceptions to that. He then uses an analogy in verses 9-11 to drive his point home. Beasts of prey may terrify the earth for a while but God's angry breath punishes and eventually destroys them. In the same way, He punishes and eventually destroys the wicked. So, he tells Job, you've lost all of your children, wealth, and health because you're wicked. God is punishing you.

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

You can see that Eliphaz and Jesus' disciples held the same idea. It's the idea that wherever there is suffering there is sin. If we're suffering, it's because we've sinned and God is punishing us.

That illustrates what ideas are. They are general assumptions about reality. They are ways of thinking about things.

How do you think of success for instance? When Dennis Kinlaw was president of one of America's finest Christian colleges, Asbury, he often

asked the Christian parents of his students this question. What would make you most proud of your child? Their answers, he says, were almost exclusively in terms of wealth, power, and prestige. Those answers reflected an idea system about success. Success is making money, wielding influence, and being held in high regard.

Success is just one of countless subjects about which we hold ideas. The fact is that all of us hold thousands of ideas. All of us have thousands of assumptions about reality.

WHAT IDEAS DO

Now that we know what ideas are, let's take a look at what they do. They govern our lives. In one of his books, famed economist John Maynard Keynes argues that ideas are *"more powerful than is commonly understood . . . Indeed the world is ruled by little else."* He's right. Ideas rule the world and our own individual lives as well. They do so in that they determine what we feel and do. They also determine how we perceive, interpret, and respond to experiences and events. They truly do govern or rule our lives.

Let's go back to the idea that wherever there is suffering, there is sin. I read about interviews with cancer victims. The interviews showed that many cancer victims believe that they are being punished. They think God afflicted them with cancer because they're despicable people who deserve suffering and pain. Some are even ashamed to tell others they have it because they'd then know that God despises them. It's clear. The ideas that they have about suffering and sin determine how they perceive, interpret, feel about, and respond to their disease.

What are your ideas about suffering and sin, the criticism and praise of others, success, work, sex, technology, education, discipleship to Jesus and more? Whatever they are, they govern and control your life.

TRUE AND FALSE IDEAS

Now, there are two kinds of ideas in that regard, - false and true.

False ideas are assumptions about reality that aren't so. The reality isn't what we assume it to be. False ideas are destructive. They diminish our lives. They rob them of the fundamental conditions of love, peace, and joy. Those cancer victims are a case in point.

True ideas are assumptions about reality that are so. The reality is what we assume it to be. True ideas are constructive. They enhance our lives. They cultivate the conditions of love, peace, and joy.

For most of my life, for instance, I had false ideas about my identity. One of those was that I am what I am before people. I am what they perceive me to be. That false idea conditioned how I felt. It placed upon me the crushing burden of people's opinions. It also conditioned what I did. I found myself saying and doing things to get people's approval and praise. But I now have true ideas about my identity, one of which is this. I am what I am before God, nothing more or less. That true idea conditions how I feel. It released me from the crushing burden of people's opinions. It also conditions what I do. I now say and do things to get God's approval and praise, not people's.

I've learned a fundamental truth of our existence. The very first step toward a life of pervasive love, peace, and joy occurs in our minds. We must change ideas. I mean by that - we remove false ideas that are governing our lives and replace them with true ideas.

IDEA GRIP

The problem is that is a whole lot easier said than done. Nothing in life is more painful and difficult than changing ideas. One reason for that is that changing ideas threatens both our egos and our status quo. But the biggest reason for it is what Dallas Willard calls "idea grip."

Let's go back to the disciples' idea in John 9. Wherever there is suffering, there is sin. The revealing question is, "Why did they think that?" That Job's three friends, including Eliphaz, believed that helps us answer it. The book of Job was written at least 800 years before the disciples lived. That tells us, and history confirms it, that this idea

dominated Jewish thought, teaching, and life. 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 they grew up, therefore, they simply equated that idea with reality. They assumed it to be so. They were in the grip of that idea in other words.

And so are we! Not that one probably but certainly others. The truth is that our idea systems grew with us from our earliest childhood. They came to us from the teachings, expectations, and behaviors of our family and community. Certain ideas 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 that need no explanation or thought. So, we don't require others to explain them and we ourselves don't give them any thought. We're in the grip of those ideas in other words.

Let me take a little survey of 5 questions. #1 - Should people tithe 10% of their money to God? #2 - Should children up to the age of 16 be forced to go to school? #3 - Do Christians sin in thought, word, and deed everyday? #4 - Should children be rewarded for non-performance (get a trophy for simply participating for instance)? And #5 - Can people be Christians but not disciples?

If you're like most people, the ideas that you have about those things came to you from the teachings, expectations, and behaviors of your family, friends, community, and culture. You equate them with reality and embrace them with very little or even no thought at all. You're in the grip of those ideas in other words. And because you are, you're not likely to change the ones that are false. You'll just go on believing them to your detriment and harm.

Some years ago, I counseled a prosperous Christian who is in the grip of a false idea - that generosity is measured by how much we give. Since both our culture and the church fervently teach and model that idea, he equates it with reality. But I advised him otherwise and showed him what the Bible clearly teaches about that. God measures generosity

by how much we keep not give. But he wouldn't even consider the possibility of that. He said, *"I give away \$100,000 a year and there's no way you can convince me that's not generous."* The result is that he's deceived. He's materialistic but thinks he's generous.

The moral of the story is this. Changing ideas, removing false ones and replacing them with true ones, is a painful and difficult thing.

CHANGING IDEAS

But the good news is that we can do it. We can do it by carrying out a four-step process and here it is.

First, we must identify the ideas, especially the critical ones, that are running our lives. Most of us aren't aware of the ideas that are running their lives. But we need to be and can by seriously considering why we think, feel, and act the way that we do. We ask and carefully answer the question, "What is the idea or ideas that cause me to think, feel, and act the way that I do?"

The second step in changing ideas is to study reality. We study the Bible first of all and our world and life in it second of all to discover the way things are. We do that objectively and fervently, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us as we do. We seek the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

There's a third step in changing ideas. Assess the ideas we've identified, step 1, in light of the reality we've learned in our study, step 2. This is a matter of stacking our ideas up against reality. Are they contrary to or consistent with what we've learned to be so?

Finally, the fourth step is to replace any false ideas we have with true ones. We firmly make and carry out the decision to think, feel, and act according to the true ideas and not the false ones.

Many years ago, I counseled a Christian whose job was killing him. He was a garbage collector but hated it and came to see me because he did. My approach in counseling is to get to the ideas that are behind people's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and responses. So that's what I

did with him. I went through the four steps that I just shared.

First, we identified the ideas that were running his life in this context. I found out that his sister was an attorney and that he felt completely inferior to her. And the reason that he did was a whole set of ideas he had about work and success. One of those was that there is such a thing as menial jobs and that his is one of them. Being an attorney, he thought, is a whole lot more prestigious and noble than being a garbage collector.

Second, we studied reality. I read two of the Bible's five slave passages to him – Ephesians 6:5-8 and Colossians 3:22-25. Those passages teach us the truth about work. There's no such thing as a menial job. God collects the garbage through him and practices the law through his sister. The one is just as necessary as the other is. Collecting garbage, therefore, is as God glorifying and prestigious as practicing law is. That isn't just nice talk. It's the objective truth.

Third, we assessed his ideas in light of the passages I read. We stacked his ideas up against Paul's in those passages. We found that if the Bible is true, which it is, then many of the critical ideas that are running his life are false.

And fourth, I encouraged him to firmly make and carry out the decision to think, feel, and act according to the true ideas and not the false ones. I challenged him – to the best of your ability, think, feel, and act as if collecting garbage is as honorable as practicing law is.

CONCLUSION

That shows us what we have to do to change ideas – to remove false ones and replace them with true ones. The problem is that if we're like most people, including Christians, we won't do it. We'll just stay in the grip of the false ideas that are governing our lives instead. But don't be like most Christians. With the Holy Spirit's help, change the ideas that need changed. You'll be glad and God will be glorified if you do!