

“Thinking Not Blaming”
Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9
James 3:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Jesus teaches that nurturing an “interior life” with God is essential. Let me introduce you to Bettye Tucker. At the time of this article about Bettye in the *Chicago Tribune* (September 2009), Bettye had been doing her job as a cook for forty-three years, twenty-eight of them on the night shift at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago, Illinois.

On one particular night around the time the article was written, Miss Bettye (as she is referred to by all who know her) served food to a mother whose three-year-old fell out of a second story window that morning, another mother whose seventeen-year-old was battling a rare form of leukemia, and a third mother whose eighteen-year-old had endured seven hours of brain surgery. Their stories break the heart of Miss Bettye, and—as one coworker interviewed for the article says, “that’s why she feeds every last one of them as if they had walked right into the ‘too-small’ kitchen of [the] South Side brick bungalow [where she lives].” A member of the hospital’s housekeeping crew adds this about Miss Bettye: “You need someone to bring you life, and she brings it in the middle of the night.” A picture of Miss Bettye that accompanied the article shows a woman with a beautiful smile. It’s hard to imagine how much that smile would mean to a suffering parent or child. She says, “When I ask, ‘How you doin’ today?’ and they say it’s not a good day, I say, ‘Don’t lose hope.’ When the nurses tell me it’s a bad night, I say, ‘I understand it’s a bad night. But guess what? I am here for you. I’m going to get you through the night.’” Another picture shows Bettye sitting down, head bowed, over a meal. “I’m a praying lady,” she says in the article. “I pray every night, for every room and every person in the hospital. I start with the basement, and I go up, floor by floor, room by room. I pray for the children, I pray for the families, I pray for the nurses and the doctors. . . . I say, every night while I’m driving in on the expressway, ‘Oh, Lord, I don’t know what I’ll face tonight, but I pray you’ll guide me through.’” The reporter behind the article, Barbara Mahany, offers these words about Miss Bettye: “Just might be, that divine helping on the side is the most essential item on Miss Bettye’s menu. The

one she stirs in every broth, and every whisper. The ingredient that makes her the perpetual light shining in the all-night kitchen.”¹

Critical thinking about hurting people compelled Bettye, a follower of Jesus, to be a living presence of hope to children, parents, and staff. Bettye’s interior life modelled the Greatest Commandment and the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25.

Critical thinking and self-examination determine our interior life and our impact on others for good. In this regard, Bobby Schuller in *Change Your Thoughts Change Your World* writes, “Nothing will stop you from achieving what God has called you to do except wrong thinking. All that a person achieves or fails to achieve is the result of his or her thinking.”² Let’s adapt this process about thinking and self-examination: Learn. Evaluate. Plan. Dream. Get back up after a fall. Press through the pain.³

From the Old Testament, Psalter, Epistle, and Gospel Readings, we discover that God asks us to examine the thinking behind why we do what we do. Song of Solomon 2:8, 10-11 reads, “The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.... My beloved speaks and says to me: ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.’” Psalm 45:1 reads, “My heart overflows with a goodly theme....” James 1:19 reads, “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger....” And Mark 7:6-8 reads, “He [Jesus] said to them [the Pharisees], ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their

¹Barbara Mahany, “Cooking up compassion,” *Chicago Tribune* (9-20-09), section 6. This illustration is found on www.preachingtoday.com.

²Bobby Schuller, *Change Your Thoughts Change Your World* (Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson Books, 2019), 32-33.

³Adapted from Bobby Schuller, *Change Your Thoughts Change Your World*, 33.

lips, but their hearts are from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Each of these texts speaks to the importance of critical thinking and self-examination.

In Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23, we learn that our ability to exercise critical thinking and self-examination matters. Critical thinking and self-examination are imperative for Christian discipleship. Mark 7 suggests we wise up in this regard. Yes, we need order, laws, and doctrines. However, order that loses an experience of God, laws that lose benefit for the common good, and doctrines that disconnect us from experiencing loving God and others miss the mark. The Pharisees were attempting to trap Jesus in the legalism of ritual cleansing. The disciples had not washed their hands before eating, thus the religious leaders questioned Jesus’ dismissing of the teaching of the elders. Jesus critiques the Pharisees for lifting their petty concerns over the divine command of loving God and loving others.⁴

We often behave like the Pharisees. Like the Pharisees, we misinterpret what is important to God. We, like the Pharisees, can lose our ability to think critically. Critical thinking and self-examination using Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” the words of the Greatest Commandment, and the words of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25 will produce outcomes of being more like Jesus and daily living that is life giving. How are you doing with critical thinking and self-examination

⁴In the two paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Song-Mi Suzie Park, Glen G. Scorgie, Martha L. Moore-Keish, Robert W. Wall, Laura Sweat Holmes, Sandra Hack Polaski, and Leanne Van Dyk in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 264-266, 266-268, 269-271, 272-274, 275-276, 277-279 and 279-281.

giving your life meaning and impact in many and varied circumstances and situations?

Regarding God's providence, John Piper writes,

Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ.⁵

Through critical thinking and self-examination, you can change the way you behave.

Consider what is in your thinking and heart that alienates you from God and others. Trust that God is with you in that process and every step you take forward and backward in Christian discipleship. It's a journey my friends. Think. Don't blame.

Believe, think, and behave like Jesus given his words that he is the way, the truth, and the life. Believe, think, and behave according to the teachings of the Greatest Commandment, the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25. You are loved by the Beloved and you are the Beloved's beloved. With God's help, critical thinking, and self-examination changes everything. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (In-Person with COVID-19 protocols and Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 29 August 2021
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⁵John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence* (Crossway Books & Bibles, 2010), 101-102.