

A Call To Thought Purity

An older proverb says, “You are not what you think you are, but you are what you think.” The statement is not merely an ancient proverb, but it is also a Bible truth. The Bible states that as a man thinks in his heart, so is he (Proverbs 23:7).

Satan attacks all of us in many ways, but perhaps his most vigorous assault is brought to bear upon our thought lives. Satan knows that what we *think*, eventually makes us what we *are*. He knows that our thoughts often lead to actions—and so he works on our thought lives. Each of us is responsible for what we welcome into our mind.

1. The Mind’s Capacity For Evil

The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of the capacity of the mind for evil thoughts. One may dwell upon lustful thoughts, wrong thoughts about some member of the opposite sex. Another may seethe in his mind with jealousy and envy toward other people. Still others are consumed with pride and with high thoughts about themselves. The “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5 is a long list of sins—many of which are sins of the mind.

The mind can easily be covered up (at least for a while), and so the mind is difficult to capture for Christ. We can retreat within the walls of our minds, and think about things that are known only to ourselves and God—and so it is difficult for others to detect what we are really thinking. We must remember however that God *does know* our thoughts, and He is concerned about them—and often they eventually do come out into the open.

In the European country of Italy nearly 2,000 years ago, there was a thriving town called Pompeii. It was nestled on the slopes of Mt. Vesuvius. One man who lived in Pompeii painted filthy pictures on the walls of one of the rooms of his house. He normally kept the door to that room shut. He thought no one would ever know. But in 79 A.D., Mt. Vesuvius erupted and buried the town of Pompeii. And in more recent years archaeologists began to uncover the city, and they found houses just as the owners had left them. The house with the bad pictures was discovered, and today, those who tour Pompeii find that the guide keeps the door to that room locked so that people will not walk in accidentally, and become embarrassed. His thoughts came out into the open.

The greatest area of sin in the believer’s life is not usually in the area of actions, but in the arena of the thought life. Pride, for example, is a sin of the mind. And so is lust and suspicion and discouragement. These are all sins of the mind. Because all of us contend with the old nature (even after we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ), all of us have trouble with undesirable thoughts popping into our heads. These thoughts can be surprising, sometimes confusing, and sometimes even condemning. Most of us would not want the thoughts that have gone through our minds during the past month to be flashed on a screen in front of a room for all to see. It could be kind of embarrassing, and perhaps even frightening.

The secret thoughts, however, that pop into our heads are not really an accurate barometer of our spiritual condition. It is what a person continues to think about, and what he *delights in*—that tells more

accurately what he is and where he stands spiritually. While we cannot ever completely get rid of the sin-nature here in this life, we can keep it in relative control.

2. The Mind's Occupation with the Good

The mind is like a garden which can grow beauty or it can grow ugliness. It can produce flowers or it can bring forth weeds. It must be tended with care and with diligence. It must be disciplined by conscious exercise. The mind must be exercised like the body—thinking on good and wholesome things.

The Bible says in Philippians 2:5, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” We must cultivate *spiritual thinking*, and the Scriptures give a list of worthy objects that we ought to be thinking about. The list is recorded in Philippians 4:8.

“Whatever things are true”—that is, reliable, in agreement with fact; the opposite of lying and deception. We must never let our minds dwell on every piece of gossip we hear, because it may not be factual (true). We must be willing to hear the other side of a story, and not hear only the one side. According to Ephesians 6:14, we are to have “our loins girt about with truth.” We are to think about truth, and to think about truth is to think about Christ and the Scriptures. Both are called the “truth” (John 14:6 and John 17:17).

“Whatever things are honest”—that is, whatever is earned or received by fair methods, not by cheating and falsehoods. For most of us, it is not the big things that test our honesty. We will likely never embezzle ten thousand dollars from an employer, but we must be careful about the dimes and quarters. We must guard against considering stealing towels from a motel room or accepting too much change from a store manager. Satan tells us, if we receive too much change in a restaurant: “That lunch really wasn’t very good; I’ll just keep this extra coin as a sort of refund.” By way of contrast, every Christian needs to think in terms of old-fashioned, second-mile honesty.

“Whatever things are just”—that is, things that are right and fair and impartial. It is right to give a customer full measure when selling merchandise in business. It is right to expose doctrinal error and false teachings when presenting the Word of God. It is right to play it fair-and-square in all our dealing. Parents must diligently seek to be fair with their children and treat them all alike. We should never plan in our thoughts to do anything that is unfair and partial.

“Whatever things are pure”—that is, free from anything that is tainted. Purity speaks especially about chastity in the realm of sexual relationships. It is very hard to live through a single day in our society without having the mind bombarded with sex in some kind of distorted form. Unclean thinking is stimulated by abbreviated dress, obscene pictures, and dirty stories. For this reason, the follower of Christ does not attend the movies, he carefully censors his reading material, and he avoids participating in a joke that is not noble and pure. Most television programs and television commercials are not acceptable to him. Whatever things are pure, think on these things.

“Whatever things are lovely”—that is, things that are beautiful, winsome, and pleasing. “Lovely things” are the opposite of the ugly and bizarre. The Christian should cultivate the traits of courtesy and

pleasantness. He should avoid the snapped answer, the harsh reply, and the sarcastic response. It is sad to see a husband who cannot answer his wife in gentle tones. Such things are not “lovely.”

We should think of things that call forth admiration—incidents of faithfulness and courage and loyalty. Paul Harvey, on a news broadcast, sometimes tells of a marriage that lasted 60 or even 70 years. That is a “lovely” kind of report to hear. By way of contrast, television programs and magazine and newspaper articles that emphasize stories about wife-swapping, child abuse, lesbianism, and crude violence—are ugly things that are the opposite of that which is lovely.

“Whatever things are of good report”—that is, things spoken in a kindly spirit; things spoken with good will toward others; things which are the opposite of gossip and the spreading of rumors. Courtesy to others, respect for parents, loyalty between husband and wife—these are always things “of good report.”

The word “think” means “to dwell upon” or “to focus attention upon.” Qualities such as kindness, loyalty, helpfulness—these are qualities we should seriously think about. Spirit-controlled thinking can lift our thoughts and bless our whole life. The Scripture passage which we have just analyzed (Philippians 4:8) suggests that the way to conquer evil thinking is not so much to fight the wicked thoughts, as to cultivate the good thoughts. Philippians 4:8 is a call to think upon good things.

3. The Mind’s Battle for the Right

Living the Christian life involves a daily battle. The Apostle Paul spoke of the great conflict that raged within him. He says in Romans 7:23, “I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” On the one hand, his mind was bombarded with solicitations to evil; on the other hand, there was the appeal of the Spirit of God, seeking to bring Paul’s mind under God’s authority.

Every one of us has had problems with wrong thoughts. Each of us has a responsibility in the realm of thought-control. God says, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts” (Isaiah 55:79). And again, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee” (Isaiah 26:3). But how does one go about conquering evil thoughts?

One method for defeating evil of any kind, is to **run away** from it. The Bible says, “Let everyone that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (2 Timothy 2:19). And again, “Flee youthful lusts” (2 Timothy 2:22). When Joseph was tempted by Potiphar’s wife, he fled and got away (Genesis 39:12). One way to conquer evil thoughts, is to stay away from situations that can stimulate wrong thinking and provide easy occasions to sin.

Another means of achieving victory over evil thoughts, is to **intentionally occupy the mind with wholesome things** in order to drive out the flood of evil that tries to enter. The devil walks about looking for vacancies in our minds and seeks to make entry. When evil thoughts pop into our minds, we must make it a practice to immediately pause and pray, to analyze a portion of Scripture, or to turn our

attention to some pleasant, exciting experience in the past—so that soon our minds will be absorbed with the pleasant memory—and the evil thoughts will more and more fade into the background.

A third means of victory over evil thoughts, is to **be alert to watch and pray**. We cannot keep Satan from injecting wrong thoughts into our minds, but we do not need to dwell on those thoughts. We cannot keep a bird from flying over our heads, but we can keep it from building a nest in our hair. We must continually be a policeman! Bring every thought into captivity, into obedience to Christ. The Bible says, “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God, to the pulling down of strongholds . . . and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). We must keep a watchful eye and sit in judgment upon every thought that flickers through our minds. When sinful thoughts pop into our minds—repeat aloud a Scripture verse; begin to sing a hymn; offer a prayer for deliverance. And slowly but surely (with God’s help) we can bring our thought lives into captivity.

If we give diligence to think upon those things which are lovely and honest and praiseworthy, we will experience growth in grace. May the Lord help us to guard our minds and give us power to reject what is untrue and unwholesome.

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