

BACK TO BETHEL

Separation from Sin, and Fellowship with GOD

by

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"Old Testament Heroes," "Meet for the Master's Use," etc.

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE RULE OF OUR THOUGHTS

I have explained that you might expect to be tempted to the end of your life, that the nearer you live to GOD, the more you will be tempted. The presence of temptation in your life is not a proof of deterioration, but the contrary, for the more you know of GOD on the one hand the more you will know of Satan's temptation, on the other hand.

If you desire to be kept from yielding to temptation, you must be very careful of your thoughts, and it is about the necessity of guarding your thoughts that I am going to speak now.

KEEP THY HEART CLEAN

First, let us look at Proverbs 4:23, where the wise man says: "**Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.**"

You keep your wealth, you keep your home, you keep your health, you keep your character, but above all these things keep your heart. Why? Because out of it are the issues of life.

When Bunyan depicted the character of Ignorance, he made him say:

"I think my heart is as good as anybody's heart,
and as for my thoughts, I take no notice of them."

He shows at once that he does not know himself, and that he is exposed to every temptation that crosses his path. If you have never before noticed your thoughts you will find before I am done that the first suggestion of wrong comes through the doorway of the mind.

Turn again to Proverbs 23:7, and read: "**As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.**"

The thoughts lay down the tram lines upon which presently the tram car makes its way. Just as the tram car will pass up and down the rails in a great city, so does the act follow along the track

of the thought.

I know there are men who say, "I must not do that act, but I may indulge the thought of doing it." There are those who dare not act impurely, but during the hours of darkness they allow their thoughts to wander where they will, and such men and women think they have escaped wrong; but let them understand that those thoughts are all noted by GOD, and they will have to account for them at the day of judgment.

Let them also know that the thoughts they have entertained in their hearts will find an issue, and there will be some act in their life, perhaps ten years hence, as a result of these unholy thoughts. Sometimes it seems rather terrible that a life should be blasted by one act, and you may be disposed to pity the man and say that it is hard for him to be judged and crippled for the rest of his life by the passionate act of a single moment. But remember that an act is never alone.

It really sums up trains of unholy thought in which the man has been indulging, and therefore you do not judge him for the one act, but for the process of which it is the result. The tree was eaten through before it crashed to the ground in the storm.

THE WICKEDNESS OF MAN

The Word of GOD tells us, in Genesis 6:15: **"God saw that the wickedness of man was very great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."**

Away back in the days of Noah the trouble GOD had with man was in his thoughts. The whole trend of the Bible is to get our thinking right.

As a contrast to that verse in Genesis, I quote Philippians 4:8: **"Whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report, think on these things."**

Up to the doorway of your heart are always coming hundreds and thousands of thoughts, and you must be careful to reject the evil ones and let into your soul only those that are of good report. If these are the tenants of the inner life, you need have no fear about your character. I am prepared to say that if you think right, you need not take much care about your life.

Butler in his Analogy says there are three steps in the formation of character - act, habit, character. The act makes the habit, the habit or the bundle of habits form the character. Thackeray amplified this saying thus:

"Sow a thought, reap an act;
sow an act, reap a habit;
sow a habit, reap character;
sow character, reap destiny."

I illustrated this not long ago to an audience of children by showing a thread, and attached to it a piece of twine, then a rope, then a chain, and padlock. I tied the thread around a boy, and he

broke it easily. But I gradually wound the twine and rope and chain about him to show the power of habit. The thread was the thought leading to the act, the rope was the habit, the chain was character, ending in the padlock of destiny.

Our Lord announces the same truth in Mark 7:21: **"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts."** Then He names some of the sins adultery, fornication, murder, thefts, covetousness. They all begin in the evil thoughts. In Ephesians 2:13 we are told: **"Among whom also we all had our conversation in time past in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind."**

Desire is not in itself wrong. The affections and propensities of our nature are not wrong in themselves. GOD gave these to us to pull along the chariots of our lives. He put within us all manner of appetites and propensities which are His own beautiful gifts. The wrong comes in in two ways: if we desire too much of the right thing, and if we desire gratification in a wrong way. Whenever desire oversteps the bounds, or seeks ratification in a wrong way, it becomes lust.

You cannot help the bad thoughts coming. As one of the Puritans said: "You cannot help the birds flying over your head, but you can keep them from building their nests in your hair."

Some are part of us by heredity. Then the papers and books we read, the pictures which are exhibited in store windows and in art galleries, the conversations we overhear, all around us there are many things exciting and appealing to us, and we are having unholy desires constantly presented to our mind. But we must not fulfill them. We may have the temptations to lust presented to us, but there is a vast difference between that and having the lust gratified. The evil thought may come to your door and knock, and you may keep your door locked. You sin when you open your heart and let the thought in and gloat over it. Then desire becomes lust.

In James 1:14, 15 we read: **"Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lusts, and enticed. For when the lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin, and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."**

Let me illustrate by the use of botany. You know that flowers have their sex, and the bees gathering honey in one flower carry the pollen to another, and the result is flower and fruit. Precisely in the same way the heart of man is always open, and bees of all kinds seem to bring the pollen of unholy thoughts; when these are sown in the desires of our nature, there is at once the result of which James speaks. As soon as you allow the evil thought to mingle with your nature, it bringeth forth the act of sin, and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

I am not speaking now of the sinful state which we have inherited from Adam, but of the act of sin. Lust, when it hath conceived, bringeth forth this child of sin, and its grandchild, which is death. There you have the parent, child and grandchild.

Now we may say that bad thoughts fly about like microbes. Our system of surgery has been entirely transformed in Great Britain by the recent discovery of the influence of microbes. We are now taught that the air is filled with microbes. The surgeons always keep their instruments in a solution of carbolic acid, so that when an instrument makes an incision in the flesh it will not

carry microbes with it. This is to prevent suppuration, which is only the multiplication of microbes in an open wound.

What microbes are to the body, bad thoughts are to the soul.

As you have to use antiseptics to check microbes, so you must live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, who is the antiseptic to bad thoughts. These thoughts come from Satan. "**Lest Satan should get an advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices**" (II Corinthians 2:11). We are not ignorant of his thoughts. Satan is always starting evil thoughts.

To use a simile that anybody can understand, the soul is like a castle with a great gateway. Many people leave the gateway of their soul open, so that every vagrant, truant evil thought may come pouring in and do as it likes. At the gateway of your soul there are many thoughts apparently innocent, but really great traitors. If you keep your gateway unguarded, unsentinelled, these thoughts pour in and out, backwards and forwards, and presently blow up your whole soul with passion.

Therefore, in dealing with our thoughts, two things are necessary: First, discernment; and second, keeping power.

We read in Isaiah 28:15, 6: "**In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate.**" The Lord of hosts shall be two things: first, a spirit of judgment, and secondly, strength. Are not these what we need?

DISCERNMENT

First, we want to be able to sift out bad thoughts from good thoughts; to know the traitor, however well he is dressed, and keep him out.

We need discernment. Why? Because "**the god of this world hath blinded the minds,**" that is, the thoughts, "**of them that believe not,**" that is, the unregenerate (II Corinthians 4:4). Man is blind. He sits at the gateway of his soul, hearing the tread of many feet, but unable to discern the bad from the good; blind, so that all thoughts are much the same, and he lets them all in, to his own undoing.

Next, we find the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of GOD through ignorance (Ephesians 4:18). It is twilight to the soul, and even though the man tries to see he cannot, because in the dim twilight bad thoughts and good thoughts come in alike, and he does not distinguish one from the other. I lived years of my life ignorant of the true nature of my thoughts, because I was blind and lived in twilight. Those who live near to GOD are keen to detect these thoughts.

The men of Israel once asked their fleeing foes to say "**Shibboleth,**" and they said "Sibboleth" (Judges 12 :6). They could not say "sh," and Israel caught them and slew the traitors. We need some test like that at the heart gate to catch the evil thoughts. If a thought cannot pronounce the

name of CHRIST right, cast it out. Question it, "Can you say JESUS?"

"He that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man" (I Corinthians 2:15). I suppose one mark of the spiritual man is his quickness in discerning. For my part, I used not to see sin until it was against my face, but now I can see it coming two or three fields away. You get keener and subtler to discern. It is a mistake to wait until your enemy is face to face. Pray to be quick to discern.

In Hebrews 5 114 is a verse that has helped me much: **"Even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."**

By reason of use you get keener. I go with the savage through the wilds, and notice that he looks at that bent twig, at that grass brushed down across the path. He starts and says:

"A man has been along here."

I don't see any trace, I can't find any footmark; but in that snapped twig, in the impression on that grass the savage, by reason of use, has had his senses exercised to discern where man has gone.

Now, most of us never use our spiritual sense. GOD has given us a nose to smell with, eyes to see with, hands to feel with, a tongue to taste with. We are made in three parts body, soul and spirit. The soul has senses equivalent to those of the body, and the spirit behind that has a third set of senses which an unregenerate man has not commenced to use.

But if you are a spiritual man you will use these spiritual senses to discriminate the thoughts as they come to your heart. **"By reason of use"** you will have your senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

I remember once going back from the United States across the ocean, and getting my lungs full of ozone. On reaching England I went to a watering place to stay with some dear friends. They said:

"Isn't this a lovely place?"

I tried to think so, but as I went out on the door step I detected a very noxious smell. I said:

"I am very sorry, but I am not at all sure that this place is as healthy as you think it."

"Of course it is," they said; "it is swept by the wind from the North Sea."

I inquired and found that within about a mile of their house there was what is called a sewage farm, and a whiff from those fields neutralized all the benefit of the sea breezes.

My friends asked how I came to be so keen of scent, and I replied:

"You have come from London where you live in a vitiated atmosphere, but I have come off the Atlantic and am used to pure air, so can detect a bad smell where you cannot."

If you live in the midst of bad people, bad books and bad things, you lose your power of detecting bad thoughts when they come teeming about you like microbes. But if every day you spend an hour on GOD's mountains or upon the broad sea of the Bible, and get some of GOD's ozone into you, you will be able to detect things which are wrong, which other people, even Christians, pass without seeing as wrong.

You have heard me speak about bad pictures in stores or art galleries, bad novels and certain sorts of talk, and I can imagine a professed Christian lady saying as she passes out:

"Well, I call that being too particular. Why is it that he lays such stress upon the matter?"

She thinks I am drawing too fine a line.

Possibly that lady has lived in the midst of tittle-tattle and small talk, until her senses have become perfectly vitiated, so that she has lost the power of discernment. But I dare not touch these things, because I am learning to know when evil is in the air, and by the grace of GOD my senses are becoming quicker to discern good and evil.

KEEPING POWER

Suppose we see the importance of learning to discriminate between bad and good thoughts. But we find that sometimes for a whole day there will be knocking at the door of our heart, the gateway of our soul, bad thoughts which we know to be bad. They gather into a perfect crowd. We somehow do not seem to have the power to keep them out, and they force in, though we hate them and loathe them, and would do almost anything to be quit of them; and presently lead us to commit an act of sin. Many a good man understands that.

At this point let us turn to I Peter 4:19, where the apostle says: "**Wherefore, let them that suffer according to the will of God,**" because they are true to GOD's will, "**commit the keeping of their soul to Him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator.**"

"**Commit.**" That is the Greek word used by CHRIST on the cross when He said: "**Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.**" Just as JESUS commended His spirit to His Father, so do you, when you leave your room in the morning, commit the keeping of the gateway of your soul to Him.

"**As to a faithful Creator.**" Why call Him Creator here? Why not Redeemer, or Saviour? Because He made you; and is not the GOD who made you able to keep you? Is He who made you what you are, going to allow you unaided to drift before evil? He is a faithful Creator! He created you, and He is faithful to keep you, and He knows how to do it. The man who made the lock can unlock it. Reckon on His faithfulness.

THE PEACE OF GOD

I close with two texts that are like binary stars. Colossians 3:15: "**Let the peace of God rule,**" and the word means *arbitrate*. Leave it for the peace of GOD to say what you will or will not do. Group with that Philippians 4:7: "**The peace of God shall keep.**" The word there is *sentinel*. So that you have the peace of GOD ruling and sentinelling, keeping, governing. Think of the peace of GOD, armed like an angel of light, marching to and fro outside your heart, just keeping it!

I was talking one day to some people about emptying their hearts, and I illustrated by a glass of water. I can empty it either by pouring the water upon the floor, or by filling the glass with quick silver, which is heavier than water, and by its weight will force the water out. The glass is just as empty of water when it is filled with quicksilver as if I simply poured the water out. It is impossible to empty your heart by turning out the sin, but you may empty it by filling it with JESUS. Ask then the Holy Spirit to prepossess and preoccupy you with the presence of JESUS, that the devil may have no foothold.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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