

Thoughts

“. . . take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Science doesn't even know what consciousness is; science certainly cannot explain it, and never will. How our mind is able to initiate thoughts is a deep mystery that no neurophysiologist can answer. But whatever the mechanism (if that's the right word), God holds us responsible for our thoughts. It was because the human mind continually harbored only evil thoughts that God had to send the great Flood (Genesis 6:5-7) to wipe out human life.

To us, our thoughts are private, because as far as we know, no one else knows them or can know them. But to God, our thoughts are things. He knows them, and He judges them just as He judges our deeds and our character. We do not have the freedom to think whatever we like, supposing that they are entirely personal. Our minds, our affections, our motives, our presuppositions and values, indeed, our entire inner being is transparent and open to God. He knows us better than we know ourselves.

We assume that holiness is merely refraining from doing heinous things, like murdering or committing adultery. We really don't understand holiness. There are sins of omission as well as sins of commission. We fail to do what we should do, and that's sinful; but we don't acknowledge whatever it is we didn't do as a sinful omission because we never even thought of it. So the acts of righteousness we ought to be doing don't get done and we aren't aware that anything is wrong with us. Same with the thoughts we should be having but don't, and we aren't even aware anything is missing. Or there's this possibility: We have wicked thoughts, fantasies perhaps, or thoughts of envy or covetousness, or greed or vindictiveness or lust, or censorious and critical thoughts; these are sins of commission because to God our thoughts are things and He knows them like we read or hear words. Our thoughts, all of them, must therefore be holy. God's demand for holiness is extreme. That's because He is extremely holy, and we must be holy to be in His presence. This is a radical concept, so let's discuss it.

At least one of the reasons (if not the main reason) that the cosmos exists is for God to deal with good and evil. God is good, and He must judge and dispose of all that's evil. Evil doesn't exist merely in the abstract. God created this physical world, time, space and matter, for the outworking of His great plan to defeat real, actual evil. We creatures are embodied and given a degree of moral freedom so that in this physical world we can choose God's goodness and eschew evil, or not. God is spirit; He transcends the physical world He created. He cannot be contained by time, space or matter. He pervades His entire creation. So our thought life is part of our embodied life, and is as open to God as our words and acts. (See, for just one example of this, Psalm 139:1-4.) Our thoughts enter into the great cosmic conflict between good and evil just as our deeds. Are our thoughts good, or are they evil?

“I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). The unbeliever has only wicked, vile, corrupt thoughts. He has no inclination toward God. His thoughts are ugly, full of hate and pride and sinful lusts and worse. All he can do is express his Adamic nature (see Philippians 3:19c). But if we're regenerated, i.e., “born again,” our thought life should be holy. We should be thinking good thoughts, thoughts that are pleasing to God. Paul's concern was that they're not. This verse raises the radical idea that demons can insert wicked thoughts into our mind. That may indeed be so. (See 1 Timothy 4:1.) But even apart from demonic influence, our persistent Adamic nature keeps sinful thoughts flowing like water from a fire hose. This is why Paul wrote, **“I beseech you brethren . . . to offer your bodies [that includes our minds] as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God . . . be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:1-2).** Our thought life has been shaped and molded by a life-time of exposure to the world and to its ungodly influences. But if our minds are renewed, we can know God's will and we can think God's holy thoughts. This renewal occurs by saturating our minds with the Word of God.

“Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will freely pardon. ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord” (Isaiah 55:7-9). Our thoughts are open to God for Him to judge them, and they are necessarily wicked thoughts – unless we deliberately think God's thoughts. When God writes, “My thoughts are not your thoughts,” what He is saying is, But they should be!!! He has given us Scripture so that we can know His thoughts and think His thoughts just as we can know how we should behave in life (“My ways”). Can the Spirit insert thoughts into our heads? Sure. The Spirit certainly gave Moses instructions, and the Spirit somehow superintended the writing of Scripture by the prophets. Jesus promised His disciples the Spirit would bring to their remembrance all that He taught (John 16:13-15). In

the early church, before there was a New Testament, the Spirit gave thoughts to those who had the gift of prophesy. Paul was certainly supernaturally given thoughts that he put down in writing. When Paul wrote, **“we have the mind of Christ”** (1 Corinthians 2:16b), he was referring to the Spirit inspiring spiritual truths as thoughts. But for us, we have one and only one sure source of godly thought, and that’s the Word of God. When Paul wrote, **“Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . .”** (Phil 2:5), he intends for us, believers, to be humble, selfless, and seeking the good of others regardless what it costs us in the same way that Jesus was. It’s only by knowing the Word of God that we know that’s how we’re to be.

In Scripture, the “mind” is closely related to the “heart.” In Hebrews 8:10, the two terms are used synonymously. Also, compare Matthew 15:19 with 16:23. But when God said, **“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”** (1 Samuel 16:7), “heart” there includes values, affections, attitudes, desires, willingness to obey, etc., as well as thoughts. “Mind” refers to one’s inmost thoughts, where and how we think. Yet both can refer to a spiritual disposition, good or bad. Both also can refer to our ability to understand something spiritual. (**“The fool thinks in his heart, ‘There is no God,’”** Psalm 14:1). Both refer to what goes on in our inner person. I discuss these terms because God knows what’s in our hearts and minds. Both are wide open and transparent to His gaze. (See Luke 9:47, where Jesus knew the thoughts of His disciples; see also 16:15. Also, see 1 Corinthians 4:5, where Paul reveals that Jesus will expose everyone’s motives when He returns.) **“God tests our hearts”** (1 Thessalonians 2:4) to see if we’re trying to please Him or not. He also can move sovereignly in our hearts to fulfill His will. (Notice Ezra 1:1 and 1:5; 2 Corinthians 3:14 and 4:6; and see *especially* Acts 16:14b, where the Lord did for Lydia what He does for all of us or no one ever would be saved.) It’s in the heart that the Holy Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 1:22 and Galatians 4:6). And it’s in the heart where great spiritual conflict occurs (1 Peter 3:15), whether we yield to the Spirit to obey Christ, or we quench and grieve the Spirit so that, by default, our sin nature expresses itself.

Epistemology is the science of knowing what’s true. Most people (even many philosophers and too many theologians) don’t really know their epistemology. We think we “know” something . . . but it’s not really true. **“The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know”** (1 Corinthians 8:2). We too easily substitute the phony “knowledge” that we hold in our minds for love. We fill our minds with all kinds of nonsense: opinions, assumptions, suppositions, speculations and outright lies, instead of relying on the truths of Scripture. And we then live our lives based on what may be nothing more than counterfeit truths, false beliefs, ideas that we *think* to be true but aren’t. Or with matters utterly irrelevant to God and His will for us. In humility we need to acknowledge the limits of what we know – and what we ought to know – so that our thoughts are true, and allow love to control us, especially love for God, instead of proudly trying to appear all-knowing.

We have to guard our thinking! And so the Word of God instructs us what to think. **“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things”** (Philippians 4:8). We’re to **“live in accordance with the Spirit, having our minds set on what the Spirit desires”** (Romans 8:5; see also Colossians 3:2, **“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things”**). We do not have the liberty to think anything we please in the supposition that our thoughts remain in the privacy of our own mind. This is radical. God is not audacious in demanding that He control even our thoughts. He is holy and He demands holiness – extreme holiness – from us. But God isn’t arbitrary. Let’s understand that God is good and in infinite goodness He desires for us the best; and the best is to eschew evil, even evil thoughts, and express only goodness, including good thoughts. That way we glorify God, and there’s nothing better we can do in life. It’s why we exist. The battle with sin is won or lost in the mind of the believer.

But what about when we fail? And in this matter, fail we will! Daily. Our sin nature isn’t merely opposed to God, it is in defiance of God. And that sin nature still is there inside us, seeking to express itself if not control us. That’s why we need all the benefits of Christ’s atoning work. We need all that Jesus accomplished for us at Calvary, as well as to acknowledge to God that we failed. It’s the only way we can go on with life.

Dear Reader: When we pray silently, we do it in the (subconscious) belief that God knows our inner-most thoughts. Yet, we carelessly indulge ourselves with ungodly thoughts too, all the time, every day. This must not be! And consider this: If Jesus were physically in the same room as you, I’d bet you’d be very careful with your speech. But Jesus’ thru His Spirit is even more intimately with us, He’s in our hearts. So we need to use the *utmost* care with our thoughts. Our thoughts are to be holy thoughts, pure thoughts, spiritual thoughts. This is something we need to be aware of and work on it. Our sanctification depends on it. Pleasing God requires it. God’s glory demands it.