

THOUGHTS

Proverbs 23:7, Romans 1:32

By Raymond White

A fellow Christian once told me that good intentions will not save you but bad intentions will damn you. I suppose that's true. And what are intentions but the thoughts of the heart, our deep down, core desires. It could well be that the whole purpose of life is to drill down to that core us and expose what we truly are to the universe.

The bible has a lot to say about what we ought to do and ought not to do. But it also has plenty to say about what we ought to think and ought not to think. Here then is some thought advice from the bible.

[1] WRONG THOUGHTS MAKE YOU WRONG WITH YOURSELF

Proverbs 23:7 For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.

Proverbs 4:23 Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

Matthew 15:8 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man.

What is this "thinketh in his heart"? We think with our brain, don't we? That's basic biology. Of course. Then what is heart thinking all about?

Thoughts come into your mind like junk mail comes into your mailbox. There, you can consider it, read it, evaluate it, then keep it or toss it. But thoughts also come into your heart. And once a thought arrives there, it is joined to your soul, it becomes you.

Those "thoughts in your heart," if they are wrong thought, can make you someone that God doesn't want you to be.

It's not that bad thoughts are sin if they arrive in your brain and bounce off. But they become sin if they penetrate down to your heart. It's not what a man "thinketh in his brain" that does the damage but what he "thinketh in his heart." Those thoughts are what you are.

[2] WRONG THOUGHTS MAKE YOU WRONG WITH GOD

Proverbs 24:9 The thought of the foolish is sin.

Proverbs 15:26 The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord.

Matthew 9:4 And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?

God can read our minds too. Those "thoughts in your heart" do not go unnoticed by God. He's aware of who you really are, that inner-you that you think you have hidden. But God will find you out and use that to judge you.

Not just our deeds condemn us, but also the evil intent of our hearts even though the intended sins are never actually done. There might be many reasons why an evil person backs away from doing an evil thing: cowardice (the fear of getting caught) is one, lack of opportunity is another. Of course not doing the bad thing for whatever reason is good. But still, the intent and the longing lingers.

[3] ARE WRONG THOUGHTS DAMNING?

Doing bad things is sinful, that's clear enough. But what about thinking bad things? Is it really so bad to think something bad now and then? If the essence of sin is injury, what harm can a bad thought possibly do? Yielding to temptation is a sin, but is being tempted also a sin?

Thoughts flit in and out of your mind all the time, like junk mail in your mailbox. The question about bad thoughts is, are they really a part of you? Have they invaded your soul? Are they in your heart? A thought that you think in your heart is there to stay, you have allowed it to fuse with you and it will be the devil (pun intended) to get rid of it.

But that soul penetrating evil thought is not the kind of thought that most Christians fret about. Some Pharisee types will insist that if you think a naughty thought at all, even though you get rid of it quickly, that thought is evidence that you are not right with God because people who are right with God never think anything amiss.

If that is true, then we are all damned. So I will give you strong evidence that that is not true. That evidence is that Jesus was tempted — first with food, second with vanity, and third with power.

***Matthew 4:3** And when the tempter came to him, he said, if thou be the Son of God, command that these be made of bread. **:5** Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, **:6** And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: **:8** Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; **:9** And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.*

So how could Jesus reject a sin if he haven't at least listened to the devil's offer to understand what the sin was so that he can say no? Isn't it a bit like opening junk mail to see what's in it before you toss it, so you know it's something to be tossed? If you toss everything you'll probably lose some important stuff, like bills.

Jesus did not sin, yet he heard the devil's offers before rejecting them. Therefore sinful thoughts, *some* sinful thoughts, are not sin per se but are just the unavoidable wafting in and out of our brains of our daily "what ifs" that are an unavoidable part of being human.

We believe that Jesus was sinless, so that conversation that he had with the devil, those thoughts he was evaluating, cannot have been sinful even though he really did think about them.

Being tempted is not a sin. If the mere temptation is a sin, then Jesus is a sinner, and we believe he was not. So, how can there be sin in thought?

***Proverbs 19:21** There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.*

All kinds of things flit in and out of our minds all the time, "many devices." But that doesn't mean that we are condemned for every mis-thought. What does matter is that we do the counsel of the Lord and that it is always our intent to do so. However bad your thoughts are, do what God tells you to do and don't let the worst of your thoughts drill into your heart.

[4] SO THOUGHTS ARE NOT HARMFUL AFTERALL?

Not so fast. The message so far is that it's okay to have a conversation with the devil now and then, but it's not okay to open a negotiate with him.

There is a whole class of thoughts that are sinful in and of themselves.

Romans 1:32 *Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do.*

There is nothing surprising in the “they which commit such things.” Doing sin is sin. Obviously. The surprise is in the “have pleasure in them that do.” Here we find guilt by osmosis. The idea is, “I don't want to sin but I do enjoy watching someone else sin.” Well, guess what. That is sin. You are a participant by proxy. You are actually taking someone else's sin into your heart, and that's a risky thing to do.

And that's what this issue is really all about. Did that naughty thought flit through your mind and from there into your mental trash bin, or did it settle into your heart where it joined with your soul?

I saw a wonderful cartoon decades ago (I wish I'd kept it). Two guys were in hell surrounded by demons and fire. And one said to the other, “When I think of the sins I could have committed ... “

That's the idea. Those sins were always in his heart. That he did not directly participate did not make him not a participant. It was the thoughts in his heart that got him in trouble because it was those thoughts that defined him.

Matthew 6:21 *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

[5] HOW DO YOU CLEAN UP YOUR THOUGHTS?

So, there is the challenge; namely, to keep the worst of our thoughts as far from our hearts as possible and to get them out of our minds as quickly as possible. To do that we probably need help. After all, even the apostle Paul had his continual struggles.

Roman 7:14 *For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. :15 For that which I do I allow not: for that which I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. :17 No then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. :19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. :24 O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*

Who indeed. This problem that Paul struggles with is the problem we all struggle with. And if doing right is a constant challenge, then thinking right is much more of a challenge.

This sort of sounds like that typical guilt transference trick, “the devil made me do it.” An “I can't help it” excuse. If this were a lesser man, that might be true. But this is Paul. And while others are his equal (Peter, etc.) no one has given more (except Christ) for the truth than Paul. So

we ought not to doubt him. Sin *does* dwell in us and competes for our attention almost constantly and without relief.

What's the solution? Here are some bible thoughts.

[5.1] TRUST GRACE

Romans 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit.*

Always remember that it is a holy walk we are on and not a holy arrival. What we walk toward, what we seek after is the spirit and not the flesh. That does give us liberties, not to turn and walk in the wrong direction, but to accept that we are not yet where we want to be. But we are on the way.

[5.2] PRAY

Psalms 51:10 *Create in me a clean heart, O God...*

Want a clean heart? Ask for it. God really does intervene, but only on request. If we think it is entirely up to us, then it is a hopeless battle that we fight.

[5.3] COMMIT

Job 31:3 *I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?*

Whose in charge anyway? You or your eyes? The age old excuse, "I couldn't help it" is utter nonsense. You do what you choose to do. Your eyes are not like a ring in your nose dragging you to where you don't want to go. It really does come down to free choice. Make yourself a promise and keep it.

A device that helps some people is to make a daily vow, or a weekly vow (I won't smoke *this week*). A monthly vow would be great but might not be keepable. Then just make another vow and so on for the rest of your life if necessary.

[5.3] STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

Psalms 119:9 *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word.*

What God says, matters. You can't make it up as you go along. What is right and wrong might not be what you think it is. But it is certainly what God says it is.

[5.4] RESIST

James 4:7 *Resist the devil and he will flee from you.*

2 Timothy 2:16 *Shun profane and vain babblings; for they will increase unto more ungodliness.*

Simply resisting goes a long way to reducing the devil's influence over you. As the mantra says, "just say no," and the temptation really does subside. Like a burglar who is looking for an open window, the devil will only spend so much time with a resisting target then will move onto an easier mark.

[5.5] LOVE GOD MORE

Matthew 6:21 *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

If you want to be less attracted to evil, be more attracted to good. Your attention will be pointed to somewhere, if you don't like the direction you're facing, then turn. Point another way. Focus on what you want to be focused on and you'll have less time to dwell on things you shouldn't be thinking about.