

“Think on These Things”

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, ... honest, ... just, ... pure, ... lovely, ... of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”
—*Philippians 4:8*

There is much in the Bible that emphasizes the importance of our thoughts and the necessity to properly examine our thinking. In the Book of Proverbs we are told that as a man “thinketh in his heart, so is he.” (Prov. 23:7) In other words, our character development is greatly influenced by the

thoughts we allow ourselves to dwell upon.

The Scriptures explain that “there is none righteous, no, not one,” because “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:10,23) All of us have inherited imperfection and sin that has been passed down from one generation to another as a result of Adam’s disobedience to God. The Apostle Paul states, “By one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” (Rom. 5:12) At the present time, our

imperfection affects us not only physically, but also mentally, including our thinking.

The Present Heavenly Call

At the present time there is a “heavenly calling” that God is sending forth. He is inviting individuals to give him their hearts and willingly offer themselves as living sacrifices that are holy, acceptable, and pleasing to God. (Heb. 3:1; Prov. 23:26; Rom. 12:1) They are exhorted, “Do not be conformed to this world, but continually be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may be able to determine what God’s will is—what is proper, pleasing, and perfect [Greek: complete].”—Rom. 12:2, *International Standard Version*

Realizing we are imperfect and part of the sinful human race, we might wonder if God could accept the offering up of ourselves to him. Paul reassuringly states, “Think about your own calling. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is ... insignificant in the world, what is despised, what is nothing, ... so that no one may boast in God’s presence.”—I Cor. 1:26-29, *ISV*

The Lord is not giving out punishments or other judgments upon those who do not hear or respond to the heavenly calling at the present time. These will have an opportunity in the kingdom that will soon come upon the earth, to “learn righteousness.”—Isa. 26:9

Focusing Our Thoughts

God is now working with the prospective members of the “little flock,” those who have answered the heavenly call. He appeals to their heart and

does not force anyone to do his will. The Apostle Paul writes, "It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."—Phil. 2:13

An important part of this work, for which each of us is individually responsible, is the proper focusing of our thoughts. The thoughts that we dwell upon must not be ignored, but rather we must learn to discipline and feed our thoughts with the pure and healthful spiritual food found in the Word of God. (Ps. 1:1-3; 119:11-18,103-105) The Lord knows us, not merely by our words and actions, but also by our thoughts. (Ps. 94:11; 139:2) Holy thoughts will lead us to have holy words and righteous behavior that will be pleasing to our Heavenly Father. Additionally, the more we commit our "works unto the LORD," the more our thoughts will be properly established.—Prov. 16:3

Wise King Solomon wrote, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." (Prov. 4:23) Throughout the Scriptures the heart is used to represent our will, intentions, and motives. These, which govern all our thoughts, words, and actions, must constantly be kept true and centered on God. Although our will is the controlling power within ourselves, it is also subject to influences. If our thoughts become impure, unjust, or unholy, the power of our will become more impaired. Hence, it is important to follow the admonitions of the Scriptures as to the character of the thoughts we allow ourselves to think upon.

God's Word, operating upon our hearts and minds, should lead us to scrutinize our thoughts. Every thought dwelt upon will have an influence upon our words and conduct. Consequently, the

Apostle Paul urges that our thoughts be the special objects of our concern, care, and watchfulness; and the necessity of “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”—II Cor. 10:5

Importance of a Right Heart

It is most important for us to develop a heart that is pleasing to God. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus gave a lesson on the importance of developing a good heart. He said, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.” (Luke 6:43-45) Our heart, the guiding principle of our mind and thoughts, is representative of our character; and our mouth and words are the outward expressions of that character.

The Lord’s followers who are renovating, purifying, and cleansing their hearts are referred to as “them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,” and to the “fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” (I Cor. 1:2,9) Having begun the work of transforming our heart to do the will of the Lord, it is crucial to daily examine our every thought, word, and deed.

Forgetting the Things Behind

Earlier in his letter to the Philippian brethren, Paul, speaking of himself, gives us a valuable example to follow, saying, “Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on. ... One thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto

the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:12-14, *Revised Version*) Paul tells us to forget the things that are behind, including our former earthly ambitions and hopes. Let us personally apply these statements to ourselves and “be thus minded.”—vs. 15

Jesus likewise gave an important lesson concerning the danger of “looking back” on former things. It was on the occasion when he had said to his disciples, “Follow me.” Several responded with a less than enthusiastic answer, to which Jesus replied, “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”—Luke 9:59-62

To put one’s “hand to the plow” was an expression that signified the undertaking of a particular work. When someone is literally plowing a field, it is vitally important to not be looking back, otherwise the plowing will quickly end up in disaster. Here Jesus uses the expression of looking back to indicate the danger in desiring or longing for any of the things that his followers had already committed to leave behind in order to follow him.

Before God destroyed the city of Sodom, he sent an angel to inform Lot and his family. The angel said to them, “Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, ... lest thou be consumed.” (Gen. 19:12-17) The next morning, as the sun was rising, the Lord destroyed the city of Sodom, but Lot’s wife disobeyed the message of the angel; she “looked back” and died. (vss. 23-26) Lot and his family were not accused of sharing in the evil practices of the Sodomites. His wife’s fault was that of having looked back. Here the word “looked” is a translation of a

Hebrew word that means to regard with pleasure, favor, or care.

Jesus admonished his followers, “Remember Lot’s wife.” (Luke 17:32) In other words, we are to set our desires and goals upon heavenly things and not upon the things of the earth. Concerning this, Paul wrote, “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” (Col. 3:2,3) If we are faithful unto death, we “shall be satisfied,” when we awake in the glorious first resurrection. (Ps. 17:15; Rev. 20:6) Therefore, let us not look back on former earthly goals or ambitions, but instead be “reaching forth unto those things which are before,” the heavenly things.—Phil. 3:13

Thoughts Guided by Prayer

The necessity for prayer as a guide to our thoughts is also emphasized by the Apostle Paul. In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.” (Phil. 4:6) Jesus assured us that, “Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.” (John 16:24) We simply desire to give thanks, realizing that we have already received more than what we deserve at the Lord’s hands. Yet the apostle assures us that we may, nonetheless, receive “exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.”—Eph. 3:20

Thus, our requests should be increasingly for grace, wisdom, opportunities for serving the Lord and the brethren, and for assistance in developing our character into the likeness of God’s dear Son. With such thoughts, we can fully trust that the promised “peace of God, which passeth all understanding,

shall guard [our] hearts and ... thoughts in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:7, *Revised Version*) The more the “peace of God” dwells in our heart, the more we will be assisted in keeping out of our mind the worry and turmoil of the world. Even when surrounded by difficult conditions, we will have a peace that rests upon God’s superior wisdom and power.

Testing Our Thoughts

With the “peace of God” ruling in our hearts, we must then test all our thoughts. How easy it is to allow our fallen, imperfect, natural mind to assert itself. When this happens, it can quickly allow thoughts of envy, busy bodying, backbiting, malice, strife, pride, or vainglory to enter our minds, absorbing our time and attention. These all need to be continually repelled. Rather, we should invite into our minds righteous and pure thoughts. If these fill our mind, they will effectually bar the way and hinder the reentering of evil thoughts.—Ps. 63:5-7; 143:5

Just as we provide literal food for our physical body to maintain its health, we must give our thoughts spiritual food, to direct our mind in a proper and healthy direction. Such spiritual food is vital for the development of a heart and character that would be pleasing to the Lord.

Is It True?

In our theme text of Philippians 4:8, Paul explains how we should test and judge our thoughts. He begins by stating, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true.” The first question we should ask ourselves regarding a thought that we may harbor is, “Is this true?” Love for that which is

true lies at the very foundation of a righteous life. If we sympathize with or dwell upon falsehoods or exaggerations, we are to that extent defiling our heart. Conversely, if we have our “loins girt about with truth,” our hearts and minds will be prepared to render acceptable service to God.—Eph. 6:14

The Lord’s people should be so in accord with righteousness that everything that is false or untrue in word, thought, or act would be offensive to us, causing us pain. Truthfulness, then, must be the first test to apply to any matter before we allow ourselves to dwell upon it in our mind. We should not waste our time and attention chasing imaginary matters, errors, fiction, or hearsay. Such is unprofitable and can cause great harm both to others and ourselves.

Having truthful thoughts will apply in a general way to everything in life. It will promote a love for the right and the true, and a heart opposition to all that is adulterated. This principle is especially applicable to our spiritual food—that is, what we believe. Along this line, our first inquiry should be, Is this a belief founded upon the Word of God, or is it to any extent contaminated with “traditions” of men, calculated to “making void the word of God?”—Mark 7:13, *RV*

The psalmist, referring to God, wrote, “Thou desirest truth in the inward parts”—that is, sincerity of heart. (Ps. 51:6) Let us cultivate a love for that which is true, and at any cost. Let us take time to prove, with the Bible, everything we accept as fact. The psalmist also tells us that God’s “truth shall be thy shield and buckler.”—Ps. 91:4

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(Continued from page 31) **Is It Honest?**

In our theme text, Paul mentions a second test of our thoughts: “Whatsoever things are honest [Greek: venerable or honorable].” We must scrutinize our thoughts as they present themselves and refuse to dwell upon those that are dishonorable for members of the body of Christ to harbor. Things may be true that are not honorable, and their truthfulness must not give them a resting place in our minds if they will not stand this second test. For example, in the daily news, many crimes are reported that are true, oftentimes given with graphic details. However, we should not allow our thoughts to dwell upon and sort through all these details.

Rather, let our minds be fastened upon the promises that in the kingdom, “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain,” or kingdom, and that “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” (Isa. 11:9; Rev. 21:1-5) How much more honorable are these thoughts from God’s Holy Word.

Is It Just?

The third category of thoughts Paul urges us to have is, “Whatsoever things are just,” or equitable. Some thoughts might be true and honest as far as principles are concerned, and yet not be just or equitable to others. For example, someone might tell us something about a third party that is true and even expressed in an honorable manner. Yet it might reflect unjustly, inequitably, against the

third party. If so, we should not dwell upon this thought, nor repeat it to someone else. Instead, we should repel it immediately by applying the injunction, “Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”—Rom. 13:10

Is It Pure?

The next category of thoughts Paul counsels us to have is, “Whatsoever things are pure”—that is, chaste, clean. Many things might be true or just, but which are not pure in intent. Such thoughts are strictly barred according to this inspired rule.

For example, a thought should be considered impure if there is any selfishness or pride in it, or if there is any envy, jealousy or malice manifested, regardless of it being true, honest, and just. If we allow ourselves to dwell upon such impure thoughts, the more they will dominate our heart and impair our judgment of matters.

In order to determine whether a thought is pure or not, we should measure it against the Word of God and the principles taught therein. It is repeatedly stated in the Scriptures that the wisdom, words, and commandments of God are pure.—Ps. 12:6; 19:8; 119:140; Prov. 30:5; James 3:17

Pure, holy thoughts will produce in us holy words and will greatly assist in developing righteous behavior. On the other hand, if we allow our thoughts to be impure or unholy, the ability to speak and act properly will be weakened. We must endeavor to bring our thoughts into subjection and train them along the lines that will transform us more and more into our Lord’s glorious character likeness.—I Cor. 9:27; Rom. 12:2

Is It Lovely?

Paul continues, "Whatsoever things are lovely." Does that which we think upon promote the god-like quality of love? Our thoughts should give preference to the lovely and loveable, which will lift us up spiritually. The more our thoughts dwell upon the noble lives of individuals recorded in the Bible and the noble efforts of those around us, the more like God we will become. The supreme example of a "lovely" and noble life is that of our Lord Jesus. He is our "beloved, ... chiefest among ten thousand. ... He is altogether lovely." (Song of Sol. 5:10-16) By strictly and completely resting our thoughts upon topics that are "lovely," we will become a closer copy of Jesus.

Is It of Good Report?

Paul continues his testing of our thoughts, saying, "Whatsoever things are of good report." "Good report" means well spoken of, or reputable. In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, the lives of faithful men and women who lived during the time of the Old Testament are described as being those who obtained a "good report." (Heb. 11:2,39) They were commended, not for having had perfect works, but for their faith in God and his promises, which was demonstrated by their works. The Bible record of their experiences and faith should be a continual source for our thoughts to dwell upon.

A "good report" commends itself to the Gospel message. The Gospel is "good news," "good tidings of great joy." (Luke 2:10) The Prophet Isaiah, speaking prophetically of the Lord's followers during the present Gospel Age, wrote, "O Zion, that bringest

good tidings [Hebrew: to announce glad news].” (Isa. 40:9) The “good tidings” of the kingdom that will soon come for the blessing of all mankind should be an important part of the thoughts we dwell upon and what we share with others.—Matt. 6:10; 24:14

Is There any Virtue or Praise?

Paul concludes our theme text by admonishing us, “If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” The word “virtue” has the thought of moral goodness or excellence. We should scrutinize our thoughts and only dwell upon those that are virtuous and praiseworthy to God. This implies much more than merely abstaining from untrue, dishonest, unjust, or impure thoughts.

The psalmist describes the one who has developed this virtuous, higher standard as “the one who lives with integrity, who does righteous deeds, and who speaks truth to himself. The one who does not slander with his tongue, who does no evil to his neighbor, and who does not destroy his friend’s reputation. ... who keeps his word even when it hurts and does not change.” (Ps. 15:1-5, *ISV*) The Apostle Peter admonishes that we have been called to “glory and virtue,” and that “giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue.”—II Pet. 1:3,5

Our Standard and Goal

We cannot hope to attain perfect control of our thoughts in this life, but we can make that our standard and constant goal. In proportion as we view this standard and daily strive to measure up to it, in that same proportion we will find ourselves

strengthened in mind, making progress in “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience [compliance and submission] of Christ.”—II Cor. 10:5

Our subjection to God and to Christ is a willing subjection, inspired by our love, gratitude, confidence, and trust in their superior wisdom. Our chief delight should be in learning and doing the will of God. It is much more than merely following a fixed set of rules, such as “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” It is striving to see things from God’s standpoint, to personally apply God’s principles, and to love God supremely. (Mark 12:30) Heart loyalty to God requires effort. This should be our first and constant duty.

Even the most devoted ones of the Lord’s people, the most developed in character, will need the merit of Christ’s righteousness imputed to them until they are made perfect in the first resurrection. Only in our minds, in our wills, have the “old things” begun to pass away and “all things are become new.” (II Cor. 5:17) This great change will only be fully accomplished when “this mortal shall have put on immortality,” when this corruptible shall be raised in incorruption—raised in glory, in power, as a divine, spirit being.—I Cor. 15:53,54

Meantime, in order to be counted worthy of “glory and honour and immortality,” we must demonstrate our willingness of mind and our earnest desire to be all that the Lord would have us be. (Rom. 2:7) In no way can this be better demonstrated to the Lord and to ourselves, or proven helpful to others, than by keeping a strict surveillance of all our thoughts. Let this be our daily meditation. ■