

CONQUERING THE SINS OF THE THOUGHT-LIFE

During one of my all-night trips between Chicago (where I work) and St Petersburg (where my parents live), I fell asleep at the wheel. For almost an hour I had been struggling against the nods, and I finally decided to go ahead and close one eye for a while. The ensuing bliss was violently interrupted by my shrieking passenger, who demanded to know if I was sleeping. “Of course not,” I gasped, trying to steer the car back onto the pavement.

One seldom walks away from such an experience unscathed, and the same holds true in our spiritual lives. When we begin to let down our guard and drift into sin for a season, we leave ourselves open to defeat That’s why Solomon explained, “Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls” (Proverbs 25:28).

Consider for a moment the root of any sinful habit or tendency. Does not the root always lie in the mind? In a recent report on the dangers of fantasy role-play games, the author explained, “These games are practiced mentally, then spoken, and I think it is only a matter of time before they are practiced in real life.” This reasoning is consistent with biblical teaching. Throughout Scripture we are exhorted to “gird up” or “renew” our minds, and to “think on these things,” “meditating on His Word day and night.”

The fruit of our lives grows from the soil of our thought-life. When we are born again, we are given both pure seed and good soil. The fruit of this seed should yield love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Sometimes, however, we let our attention become diverted. And while our guard is down, fleshly seed is sown. Lust, envy, bitterness, covetousness, sensuality, anger, pride, an unforgiving spirit. All of these and more can blight our experience, causing our lives to be miserable and unproductive.

It doesn’t need to be this way. If we will focus our attention on obeying the most simple, basic teachings of the Bible, we can conquer the sins of the mind. Then our lives will be more fruitful and abundant.

Where to begin may be different for every person. One thing that will help, though, is to be honest with ourselves. Because the thought-life is easy to conceal, many of us never let on that we struggle with it. We don’t murder, rape, or rob gas stations, and our Sunday conduct has the glossy tone of polished fiberglass.

Christ wasn’t fooled by social performance. He persistently drew out the spirit of the Law. “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27,28). The same applies to murder, divorce, breaking vows, and other sins.

When the desires of the flesh infect our minds, we find ourselves living sad, defeated lives. Victory in Jesus is forgotten amid habitual failure. In that condition, the best starting point is to cry out humbly to God for His mercy and help. Psalm 130:1 through 6 is a beautiful expression to be used for this occasion. It reaches deeply into the pit of despair and applies to us the balm of hope.

The next stage is to begin saturating the mind with pure things. Pick up a Bible and make friends with it. Get to know it like the *TV Guide* or *Time* magazine. Absorb the large, easy-to-read portions first, like Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, the gospels, and Acts. These books contain volumes of truth about God, and they're easy to swallow at the start, like milk.

To make room for spiritual feeding, bad influences will need to be pruned from daily schedules. Some times the best principle to remember is to "make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Romans 13:14). For that very reason I don't own a TV, and the tradeoff has been more than worth it. Few hungry people would instantly choose meat over a Milky Way bar - but in the long run it's important to make the right choice.

Once we establish the pattern of spending time in the Word, the Holy Spirit begins to structure our thought-lives around it, and that fosters pure growth. The gospels lose their "Sunday school story" flavor and begin to stir up questions like, "How would Christ respond to this?" and "What did Christ say?" We begin to take God's side in the daily arguments against fleshly impulses, and we begin to feel as He does. Natural fruit develops, and we see the futility of pious pretense.

When we accept the gift of salvation, we accept with it the call to renew our minds. Far from the limited benefit of earthly disciplines, this commitment carries with it fulfillment and abundance. In Matthew 11:29 Christ said, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

by Paul Santhouse