The Vanity of Our Thoughts

The Spirit of the Lord urges us to open our hearts and minds to the Word of God. Let us turn our attention to the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16, where we will read verses 21 to 23. In these verses, the Lord Jesus prepares His disciples for the events about to take place in Jerusalem, where He will suffer, be killed and rise again on the third day.

Peter, one of His disciples, rebukes the Lord Jesus, saying: *"Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee."* In reply, the Lord Jesus corrects Peter with these words: *"Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men."*

Peter had spent a great deal of time with the Lord Jesus and had witnessed many teachings and miracles. Yet despite that closeness, even he was open to the influence of the evil one, as the Lord Jesus's rebuke shows. He is not calling Peter himself *"Satan"*; He is rejecting the evil influence that was speaking through him. This exchange shows us that human thoughts can often run contrary to God's thoughts, and that we must be watchful in discerning where our thoughts come from.

The Lord calls us to reflect on the nature of our thoughts: how many we have in a day, whether they are few or many, and whether they are in line with God's will or shaped by the evil one. To go deeper into this theme, let us turn to Genesis, chapter 6, verses 5 and 6, where we read that *"God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart."*

These verses remind us that our thoughts can have a profound effect on our relationship with God and on the world we live in. Thoughts are the inner activity of the mind, where reasoning and decisions take place, and where desires and worries take shape.

Inside us, in our thoughts, lie our lusts as well. In the words of the Lord Jesus, *"out of the heart proceed evil thoughts"*. Good thoughts are held to come from God, while man can be inclined towards evil, as it is written that *"every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"*.

This is the nature of fallen man, of the spiritually dead man, who thinks both good and evil. But those thoughts are not visible on the surface; they are known only to God. The Lord Jesus, knowing people's thoughts, spoke to them directly, as He did with Peter when He said to him, *"Get thee behind me, Satan"*.

In Genesis chapter 8 we are told that the Lord resolved not to curse the ground any more for man's sake, *"for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done"*. This reflects an acknowledgement of human nature, which is prone to evil from youth.

Proverbs, in chapter 6, from verse 16, lists the things the Lord hates, among them *"a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief"*. These are expressions of wicked thoughts, and the Lord hates them.

In this context, "wicked" refers to the person who has evil thoughts: not good thoughts, but thoughts that devise evil. We learn that thoughts can fill a world full of injustice, where a person moves and lives, whether he has money or not. Every person lives in this world of thoughts.

Reading from Proverbs chapter 14, verse 22, we find: *"Do they not err that devise evil? but mercy and truth shall be to them that devise good."* So there are people who think good, or even think as God thinks. Those who think evil go astray, and the New Testament tells us that to those who did not receive the love of the truth, God sends strong delusion.

In Proverbs chapter 24 we learn that wisdom is too high for a fool; he openeth not his mouth in the gate. He that deviseth to do evil shall be called a mischievous person. The thought of foolishness is sin. It is essential that we know what is inside us, our own hearts, because out of the heart come evil thoughts, and we must have our hearts changed.

Moving on to Isaiah, chapter 59, we read from verse 7: *"Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace."* Amen. So our thoughts can be evil and lawless when there is no law to guide the mind.

Jeremiah, in chapter 4, gives a lesson for us too: we must not think that only the people of the past had trouble with their thoughts, but recognise that we face the same struggles. We must reflect and turn our thoughts away from sin. In chapter 4, verse 14, we are told: *"O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved. How long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee?"* Amen.

Even though Peter was at the Lord Jesus's side, he had wrong thoughts in his heart. He wanted the Lord to be spared from death and from falling into the hands of the scribes, the priests and the elders, as if he were saying: *"God forbid that You should die. God forbid that You should be delivered into the hands of the scribes, the priests and the elders."* Yet those thoughts were not inspired by God; they were human thoughts, from Satan.

In Isaiah 55, verse 7, we are told: *"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."* This verse urges us to give up unrighteous thoughts and to return to the Lord for mercy and forgiveness.

It is important to understand the word *"unrighteous"* not merely as a negative label, but as a description of a person who does not follow God's law and direction, who does not have God as the guide and goal of his life.

What should we do with these unrighteous thoughts? We must change course and turn back to God, who knows our hearts and our thoughts. Isaiah 66, verse 18, confirms this: *"I know their works and their thoughts."* God sees not only our deeds but also our unrighteous thoughts, as was the case with the Pharisees and the scribes, who were well thought of by people but had unrighteous thoughts in their hearts.

God warns us that He will punish not only deeds but thoughts as well. We must keep watch over our thoughts and not let them lead us into temptation, lust and corruption. The thoughts of the fool are sin, and the fool cannot hold his head high; as it is said, he openeth not his mouth.

God asks us to forsake the unrighteous thoughts that feed our lusts and spread through our souls. In Isaiah 55, verses 8 and 9, we are reminded that God's thoughts are not like our thoughts, and His ways are not like our ways: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,"* saith the LORD. *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

This statement shows us the difference between God's thoughts and man's thoughts. It speaks of a spiritual and conceptual distance between the two, showing that God's thoughts are higher than man's and different from them.

In the life of faith, we need to bring our thoughts into line with those of the Lord Jesus, with those of God. To understand this better, let us turn to Corinthians, where we find wise counsel. Here we see an intense inner battle, one that very few people take up in order to stop the stream of thoughts that holds them back.

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 16, says: *"For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ."* Paul stresses that true children of God should share the mind of Christ. This leads us to the question: what thoughts does Christ have?

We often reflect that we could leave this earth at any moment, but what kind of thoughts would be in our minds? If we were to go today, would we be free of all of them, or would some unrighteous thoughts remain in our hearts? The human mind can wander and suddenly find itself with unrighteous thoughts. We won't go into the specific nature of these thoughts, which can vary in seriousness, but if they are not the thoughts of Christ, they are evil.

Let us ask ourselves: does God help us to stop these thoughts?

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 4, verses 9 to 12, we find answers about how to work at this and what to use to shut down the world of unrighteous thoughts. *"There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."*

This passage urges us to seek the spiritual rest God has promised, which allows us to step away from vain thoughts and come into line with God's will. The Word of God is described as powerful and able to discern the deepest parts of our being, including the thoughts and intents of the heart.

"Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." We have *the sword of the Spirit*, which is the Word of God. Who are we fighting? The devil. Does the devil come into the world of our thoughts, or doesn't he? God comes, and the devil comes too. Satan will keep coming to offer us his wares. This adversary, *"as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour"*.

He lures us with everything around us, with shopping malls and all sorts of things. All of it, the advertising and the rest, is designed to feed our thoughts. If we went to the seaside, unrighteous thoughts would be at work there too, bringing lust and sin.

"The fruit of the Spirit is ... temperance", and I would add, self-control over the thoughts that lead to lust. And the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, which is sharp, sharper than any two-edged sword.

If we let it, it will do its work. *"It is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."* Why? So that we may all have one feeling and one mind in the Word. No creature is hidden. If we let the Word judge us, it will certainly work on our thinking. When the Word judges us, it condemns unrighteous thoughts. The spiritual man must let himself be judged and must give up such thoughts.

This is an area no one can see. It is a closed room, and no one can get in there. No human being can enter. Only the Word and the Spirit of God can enter. Let us read 2 Corinthians, chapter 10, verses 3 and 4: *"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God...)"*

We must remember the verse in Ephesians 6:13: *"Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."* The whole armour of God. This shows us that the battle is fought in the mind. That is where we are attacked. If we are not watchful and we let the mind run with no control, no rules, we lay ourselves open to Satan. We face countless thoughts every day, but we must not let ourselves be led by our flesh, which urges us to give in to them. People's talk can carry these temptations, which is why we are told: *"Shun profane and vain babblings."* They attack the mind and the thoughts, feed them and give them free rein.

We must be aware of this and not be fooled. We have the power to cast down the imaginations of the mind, which are so often bent on evil. In 2 Corinthians chapter 10, from verse 5, the apostle Paul teaches us that we must be *"casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God"* and *"bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."* This takes constant, careful effort, given the sheer number of thoughts we face each day.

When we feel anger in our hearts, we must ask ourselves whether we mastered that thought or let it master us. Paul urges us not to set our minds on the things below and not to give them free rein, but to bring *"into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."* In verse 6 he says: *"And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled."*

So we are called to practise this obedience, to fight the thoughts that attack us and could overcome us, soiling and defiling us. We must find a way to take control of this realm of thoughts, as we are shown in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians, so that we keep our purity and spiritual integrity. Verse 3: *"But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."* Amen.

The apostle Paul then warns us about the possibility of spiritual confusion: *"For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received"*. This refers to the danger of being led astray. It is important to discern, so that we do not mistake the Spirit. *"Or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him."* These words warn us not to let our minds be corrupted by false teaching.

In Matthew 15, the Lord Jesus speaks about purity of thought: *"Are ye also yet without understanding? Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man."* Amen.

Evil thoughts, thoughts that are not Christ's, are what defile a man, not only fornication and the other obvious sins. God's thoughts are pure, while human thoughts can be corrupt. What comes out of the mouth reflects the state of the heart.

Let us strive to lift up these teachings and apply them in our lives. In Psalm 119, verses 97, 98 and 99, we find an expression of love for God's law: *"O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day. Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation."* Amen.

These verses show us a method the Word of God offers for mastering the evil thoughts that have dogged us since our youth. We might ask whether there is a single young person who has never had such thoughts, which only underlines how universal temptation is.

The method offered is constant meditation on the law of the Lord: *"It is my meditation all the day."* This helps us to drive out wrong thoughts and replace them with God's thoughts. God's law contains His thoughts, which He expressed through His word. Our thoughts, once spoken, become words and then deeds, which can lead to sin.

God's commandments lead us to inner peace, as Isaiah 48 says. To gain wisdom, we must put ourselves in this posture of meditating on and contemplating God's law, however wise we may

think we are.

Turning to verses 92 and 93 of the same psalm, we see how important the law is as a source of delight; without it we would perish in our wretchedness, in our unrighteous thoughts. The law of the Lord must be our delight, as it is written: *"I will never forget thy precepts: for with them thou hast quickened me."* It revives us from within, in Christ, and allows us to have His mind.

Finally, there is only one way to get rid of unrighteous thoughts: to want to reject them and no longer let them into our hearts. Not every thought is unrighteous, but some can lead to unwanted results. If I sit and talk with someone from my younger days, what happens then? I ask myself whether I can control all the thoughts Satan sends my way. When I talk with an old school or university friend, I ask myself whether evil thoughts come or not. For example, if I talk with someone about lorries, about haulage and that sort of thing, I almost always dream that night about my past, that I'm working with the drivers again, and many things from my past come back to me.

Can we control our thoughts at night, or not? I don't know what it's like for you, but I've noticed, and others have told me the same, that when I dream I'm just a spectator; I'm not in control. But where do these thoughts in our dreams come from? From the abundance of our thoughts. They are there, and you can't control them, because the mind is asleep and isn't in charge. You can dream pure things, good things, bad things and so on. And you notice that you have no judgement there; you lack discernment. I've noticed that.

When I remember a dream, I realise that I wasn't really there, only in my mind. What should we do with these thoughts? The fewer there are, and the less we feed them, the rarer they become in our minds. Psalm 1 tells us: *"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."*

What happens if I turn to the news, to the counsel of the ungodly? Do those thoughts influence us or not? The risk is high that you won't be able to control them. Many say there's nothing wrong with watching the news because you find out what's going on in the world. But is it really harmless? What does the news feed?

All human thoughts are bent towards evil. And I go and take them in; I feed on the news. There is nothing wrong with the news in itself. It's often considered trivial. But the counsel of the ungodly is harmful and corrupts my thoughts, when I should be keeping my thoughts pure, meditating on the law of the Lord all day long and letting it revive my soul.

The soul is revived by the law of the Lord, while thoughts fed by the world bring other things into our minds that bring no revival. A brother told me how God delivered him during a hard day at work, when he was surrounded by cursing and road rage in traffic. Satan, so to speak, seems to offer ways for us to listen to the counsel of the ungodly, which feeds unrighteous thoughts. In this setting, the effort to stay close to the Lord becomes all the more important.

The Bible urges us to find our delight in the law of the Lord and to meditate on it day and night, as Psalm 1 says: *"But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day

and night."* Amen. This is the path anyone who wants to be close to God must follow. When we move away from evil thoughts, we draw closer to good ones. Reading the Bible is not an end in itself but a means of meditating and bringing our thoughts into line with Christ's.

In Psalm 119 it says: *"Thy word have I hid in mine heart"*, which underlines how important it is to keep God's Word in our hearts so that we do not sin against Him. Every unrighteous thought is against God and must be removed if we are to enter His eternal kingdom.

It is vital to be aware that God sees us from every angle and in every situation; this helps keep us from going astray. Verse 3 of Psalm 1 says of the one who delights in the law of the Lord that *"he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."* Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper, but only when you are in harmony with the law of the Lord. Whenever you are busy, your thoughts should still be turned towards the law. Day and night he meditates on His law. He finds his delight in meditating on His law.

"Unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction." When we do not delight in God's law, we feel our strength draining away. It cannot be otherwise. I keep the law because I have chosen to obey God, and that is what I want. If I find no pleasure in it, if God's law is a torment to me, then my thoughts remain nothing but unrighteous.

We must understand that true pleasure is found in keeping the law. Have you found that pleasure? People often find their pleasure in unrighteous thoughts. The rich man, for instance, counts his money and his property and finds his pleasure in them. In the same way, some find their pleasure in entertainment, banquets, parties and debauchery. But we should find our pleasure in the law of the Lord. If we don't, then we are on the opposite side.

Every imagination of man's thoughts should be directed towards the Word the Lord has brought, so that we find our delight in Him. Let us read Colossians chapter 3, verses 1 to 3: *"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. 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."* Amen.

Let us think about the things above, focus on them and not be distracted. By thinking about the things above, we will be freed from evil thoughts. Let us find our delight in thinking about the things above; let us find our pleasure in them. When an ordinary person has worked a whole year and summer, the usual holiday season, draws near, don't his thoughts turn to that long-awaited holiday?

As the holiday gets closer, his thoughts are more and more focused in that direction. If he has the money, he may plan an exotic trip or some other kind of holiday, and that is where he finds his delight and joy; that is where all his thoughts are focused, as he carefully plans every detail.

Let us think about these things too. How important is the Lord Jesus to us? How beautiful is He? What promises does He make us? Do we find our pleasure and delight in Him? If we don't find our delight in Him, we won't even keep to the speed limit. When God's Word is a torment to us,

we behave like everyone else, whatever speed we drive at. Many are tormented by God's law because it places limits on us. Should we find our delight in Him or not?

In practice, the mind is our command centre, the place where Satan tries to take control. If he manages to get in there, he can control the whole territory. We still do a few things and say: *"Look, I did that."* But he is in the command centre. If we are under his control, he lets us believe illusions, lets us be deceived, lets us think we are with God, that we are believers, that we are making an effort, that we are struggling and grieving our souls, forcing ourselves to keep the commandments, while all the time trying to fool God. And that is a great tragedy.

We also read in Philippians, chapter 3, verse 18: *"For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ."* They want to reach the kingdom of God, they want streets of gold, they want to suffer no more, but they are enemies of the cross of Christ. Their thoughts are unrighteous.

We read verse 19: *"Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things."* Not heavenly things. They find no pleasure in Him, they find no delight in His law. They repented out of fear of hell, or they repented for all sorts of reasons: wanting to get married, being drawn by someone's good looks, and so on.

Let us have in us the mind spoken of in Philippians, chapter 2, from verse 5: *"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."* It is important to cultivate this mind, because Christ Jesus, *"being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."*

The Lord Jesus submitted His thoughts, and He urges us to have the same mind that was in His life. We remember how He lived, because that revives our souls, brings us pleasure and joy, and helps us become more like Him.

Also in Philippians, we read chapter 4, verse 7: *"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."* This is a great promise. The peace of God, which passes all understanding, kept the heart of the Lord Jesus and will keep our hearts too, so that they are not troubled or afraid. God's law brings revival to the soul, peace and rest, things people search for but so often never find.

People may look for rest in material things, like an expensive car or a yacht, but true rest is not found in them. The evil spirit sought rest everywhere and found none. True rest is found in God, who guards our thoughts and keeps them at rest. Thoughts that are not guarded can unsettle us and rob us of peace, stirring up the impulses of the heart. Once we have thought certain things, the heart tends to carry those thoughts out.

Let us not live like the Gentiles, in the lust of concupiscence, which is the fruit of our thoughts and of what our eyes see. Our eyes and ears are exposed to temptation, and our earthly nature tends to chase the fulfilment of its desires greedily and forcefully. But if we don't give it the food

it craves, won't it stay quiet?

That is why it is said: *"Make not provision for the flesh."* But why? So as not to stir up the lust that lies quietly dormant. In the world of our thoughts it can easily be stirred up. That is where the centre of gravity of our battle lies. That is where Satan waits for his prey. He lies in wait, ready to tempt us even on a simple fifteen-kilometre trip across town, offering us enough distractions for the whole week.

We must be very careful in this world of thoughts, in their vanity. God often speaks to us about how important our thoughts are. There are many verses on this subject; I have chosen only a few. We live in a world full of wrong, a sinful world. The Lord, grieved that people are inclined only towards evil, sent the Lord Jesus to cleanse our hearts and turn them towards Him, so that we can find the peace and rest that come from Him.

May the Lord help you to work at this and to see it, because the adversary lies in wait for each one of us, for me and for you. Let us put on *the whole armour of God*, so that we may stand firm against the temptations of the devil. Amen.

Source: *The Vanity of Our Thoughts* — Unmodified Word
unmodifiedword.com/written-sermons/the-vanity-of-our-thoughts