The Vanity of Thoughts

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"How long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee?" - Jeremiah 4:14

Introduction

In these words [our God] compares the heart to some house of common resort, one having many large rooms to entertain and lodge multitudes of guests in. And in this heart, before conversion, all the vain, light, wanton, profane, dissolute thoughts that fly up and down the world (as your thoughts do, running riot all the day) have free and open access; it gives them open house, willing, cheerful welcome. Yea, it goes with them, traveling all over the world for the daintiest pleasures to feed them with. This carnal heart lodges and harbors these thoughts, allows them to lodge and revel day and night, defiling all its rooms with their loathsome filth and vomits. "How long," says the Lord, "shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee," while I and My Spirit, My Son, and My train of graces, "stand at the door, and knock" and cannot find admittance?

This house, this heart must be washed of all this filthiness: "Wash thine heart from wickedness" (Jer 4:14). It is to be washed, not swept of only the gross evils (as in Matthew 12:44), it must be washed and cleansed of those defilements, which stick closer, which are incorporated and worked into the spirit. These vain and unruly guests, these thoughts, must be turned out of doors without any warning. They have stayed long enough, too long, for the Lord says, "How long," and, the time passed is "enough." In conversion, the house, the soul is not pulled down, but only these guests are turned out. And though we cannot keep them out (for they will ever be able to enter as long as we are in this house of clay,) yet we must not let them lodge within us any more.

If thoughts of anger or revenge come in, in the morning or in the daytime, they must be turned out before night, "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath" (Eph 4:26), for if you do so you may lodge an even worse guest in your heart with your wrathful thoughts. "Neither give place to the devil" (Eph 4:27), for it follows that he will bring seven worse with him (Mat 12:45). If unclean thoughts offer to come to bed with you, do not allow them to stay with you.

The conclusion is: it is not what thoughts are in your hearts, or what passes through them, but it is what lodging you give to them that makes the difference, that proves your repentance. Many good thoughts and motions may pass as strangers through a bad man's heart. And, likewise, multitudes of vain thoughts may make a thoroughfare of a believer's heart, disturbing him in good duties, knocking on his heart to interrupt him. These may break in upon the heart of a good man, but they will not be allowed to stay there, they will not be fostered or harbored there.

My scope will be to discover the wickedness and vanity of the heart by nature. This is for now, for we are yet in the upper parts of it, the understanding and the defilements of it, which are to be washed out of it. The next defilement which in my broken order I intend to handle is that which is our specified subject: The Vanity of Your Thoughts.

I chose this text as my ground only for discovery's sake, for my subject is, I confess, of an almost infinite vastness. To make an exact and particular discovery of the vanities in our thoughts, to travel over the whole creation and to take a survey and to give an account of all the vanity that abounds in all the creatures, was, as you know, the task of the wisest of men, Solomon. But the vanity of our thoughts cannot be compassed, there are so many varieties of vanities. Our thoughts made the creatures "subject to vanity," therefore they must be even more subject to vanity.

I will show: (1) what is meant by thoughts; (2) what by vanity; (3) that our thoughts are vain; and (4) in what that vanity consists, both in general and with some particulars.

I. What Is Meant by Thoughts?

First, by thoughts the Scriptures comprehend all the internal acts of the mind of man, of whatever faculty: all of those reasonings, consultations, purposes, resolutions, intentions, ends, desires, cares, etc. of the mind of man—as opposed to our external words and actions. In Isaiah 66:18, all acts are divided into those two, "for their works and their thoughts: it shall come."

That which is transacted within the mind is called the thoughts. Whatever manifests themselves, breaking out into actions, are called works. So we see in Genesis 6:5, "Every imagination of the thoughts"—that is, all that which the mind frames within itself, the purposes, desires, etc.—are "only evil continually." This is said of the things "that come into your mind" (Eze 11:5), and so we use it and understand it. So, to remember a man is to "think" of him; to have purposed a thing, we say, I "thought" to do it; to take care about a business is to "take thought" (1Sa 9:5). The reason these are all called thoughts is because indeed all our affections, desires, purposes, are stirred up by our thoughts—they are bred, fomented, and nourished by them. Never does a thought pass but it stirs up some affection of fear, joy, care, or grief, etc.

Although in this place (Jer 4:14) they are so largely taken, yet the vanity of thoughts in so large a sense cannot be handled at present. But our subject shall be that which is more properly called the thinking, meditating, considering power of man. In this sense, thoughts are not opposed only to your works, but opposed to your purposes and intentions. So as the soul and spirit (Heb 4:12), so thoughts and intentions seem to be opposed. And in Job 20:2-3, "thoughts" are appropriated to the "spirit of…understanding." And again, yet more strictly, for not all the thoughts in the understanding are to be handled here—not the reasonings or deliberations in our actions, but only those musings in the speculative part: those more simple conceits, apprehensions that arise; those fancies and meditations which the understanding (with help of imagination) frames within itself of things; those on which your minds ponder and pore and muse—this is what I mean here by thoughts.

I mean those "talkings of the mind" with the things that we know (Pro 6:22), those same interviews, chattings, which the mind has with the things that are let into it—with the things that we fear, with the things that we love. For our minds make all these things their companions, and our thoughts discourse with them, having a thousand concepts about them—this I mean by thoughts. We have a reasoning power, a deliberating power, by which we ask ourselves continually: What shall we do? By this we reason and discuss things, which is a more inward closet, the cabinet and secret council of the heart. But there is a more outward place, that presence-room which entertains all comers, which is the thinking, meditating, musing power in man. This suggests matter for deliberation, for consultation, for reasoning—this holds the objects until we view them, and entertains all that come to speak with any of our affections.

Secondly, "that which the mind frames within itself," for so the Scripture expresses their origin to us and their manner of rising, "Frowardness [perverseness] is in his heart" (Pro 6:14), and he is always forging mischief—like a smith, he is always hammering it out. It is the thoughts that are the materials of this perverseness in us. Upon all the things which are presented to us, the mind conceives some thoughts and imaginations. As lusts are conceived, so are thoughts, "They conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity" (Isa 59:4). In verse seven he instances in "thoughts of iniquity," because our thoughts are spun out of our own hearts; they are eggs of our own laying, though the things presented to us may be from outside us.

This is added to separate them from such thoughts as are injected and cast in from the outside, which are children of another. Such are blasphemous thoughts, which are cast in by Satan, in

which the soul may be merely passive (as the word “buffet” implies in 2 Corinthians 12:7); they are not of your thoughts, but they are his. It is as when one in [a different] room hears another swear and curse, but cannot get away from him—such thoughts, if they are only from without, do not defile a man. For nothing defiles a man but what comes from within (Mat 15), that is, that which the heart has conceived within it—as thoughts of uncleanness—in which, although Satan himself be the father of them, the heart is the mother and womb. These therefore the heart loves, as a mother loves her natural children. It is by that we may distinguish them from the others outside: when the heart is soft toward them, when there is an inward love for them, so that the heart kisses the child—then they are truly our thoughts. When the heart broods on those eggs, then they are surely our thoughts, even if they come from the outside.

This much must be added: that even those thoughts in which the soul is passive, when Satan casts in evil thoughts which we in no way own, in which he rapes the heart (for if there is no consent to them within us, then it is no more than rape, as it is in the Law)—even those thoughts are often punishments meted out to us because of our neglect toward our thoughts, because we have allowed them to wander (as Dinah did, for when she went out to view the daughters of the land, she was taken and raped against her will, but it was a punishment for her curiosity). Or they may be punishments for the neglect of good motions of the Spirit, for if we resist and grieve the Spirit, He may deal with us as we deal with our children. He may allow us to be scared by bugbears, or be grieved by Satan, so that we may learn what it is to neglect Him and to harbor vanity.

Lastly, I add “which the mind (by the help of imagination) conceives and entertains,” because there are no thoughts or likenesses of things at any time in our imaginations but at the same time they are also being reflected into it by the understanding. It is as if two looking-glasses were placed opposite and near to one another, whatever appears in one will also appear in the other.

II. What Is Vanity?

Taken in all the acceptable forms of vanity, it is true that our thoughts are vain.

A. It is taken for unprofitableness. So in Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, “All is vanity,” because there is no profit in them under the sun. Such are our thoughts, by nature. The wisest of them will not stand us in good stead in time of need, in time of temptation, in distress of conscience, in the day of death or of judgment: All the wisdom of the wise comes to “nothing.” The heart of the wicked is worth “little” (Pro 10:20). But the thoughts of a godly man are his treasure: “A good man out of the good treasure of the heart,” brings them forth (Mat 12:35). He mints them and they are laid up as his riches (Psa 139:17), “How precious are your thoughts,” he is saying.

B. Vanity is taken for lightness. “Lighter than vanity” is the phrase used in Psalm 62:9. It is spoken of men, and if there is anything in them which is lighter than other, it is their thoughts that swim in the uppermost parts, floating on top; they are the scum of the heart. When all the best, the wisest, deepest and most solid thoughts in King Belshazzar were weighed, they were found to be too light (Dan 5:27).

C. Vanity is put for foolishness. In Proverbs 12:11, vain men are said to be “void of understanding.” Such are our thoughts. Among other evils which are said to come “out of the heart,” foolishness is one (Mar 7:21-22). These foolish thoughts are such as madmen have, thoughts to no purpose—of which no use can be made. These are those thoughts whose origin is a mystery to the man who has them, nor does he know where they are headed.

D. Vanity is put for inconstancy and frailty. Vanity and a shadow are made synonymous (Psa 144:4). Such are our thoughts, flitting and perishing. Like bubbles, our thoughts “perish” (Psa 146:4).

E. Lastly, vain thoughts are wicked and sinful. Vanity in the text is yoked with wickedness. Vain men and sons of Belial[1] are all one in 2 Chronicles 13:7. Such are our thoughts by nature: “The thought of foolishness is sin” (Pro 24:9). Therefore a man is to be humbled for a proud thought (Pro 30:32). So the laying of the hand on the mouth is taken, as in Job 40:4, for being vile in a man’s own eyes.

III. Thoughts Are Sinful

This is the sense I will chiefly insist upon in handling the vanity of thoughts. Men usually think that thoughts are free, but the only doctrine to be treated here is this, Thoughts are sins!

A. The Law judges them (Heb 4:12), rebukes a man for them (1Co 14:25), and therefore they are transgressions of the Law. Christ rebuked the Pharisees for their evil thoughts (Mat 9:4), which argues the excellency of the Law, that it reaches even unto thoughts.

B. Thoughts are capable of pardon; they must be pardoned if we are to be saved (Act 8:22), which argues the multitudes of God's mercies, for thoughts are so infinite.

C. Thoughts are to be repented of. Yea, repentance is expressed as to begin at the thoughts, "Let the unrighteous man [forsake] his thoughts" (Isa 55:7). And a man is never truly and thoroughly wrought on until his "every thought" is brought into "obedience" (2Co 10:5), which argues that they are naturally rebellious and contrary to grace. And this also argues the power of grace, which is able to rule and subdue so great an army as our thoughts are, to command them all, now, as well as in the day when we are perfectly holy.

D. Thoughts defile a man. But nothing defiles except sin, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts" and these "defile the man" (Mat 15:18-19).

E. Thoughts are an abomination to the Lord. But He hates nothing but sin, His pure eyes cannot endure to "look on iniquity" (Hab 1:13). As good meditations are acceptable to Him (Psa 19:14), so, by the rule of contrariety, bad thoughts are abominable.

F. Vain thoughts hinder all the good that we should do; they spoil our best performances. Vain thoughts draw the heart away, so that when a man should draw near to God, his heart, because of his thoughts, is "far from" Him (Isa 29:13). A man's heart goes after his covetousness, as the prophet speaks, because his thoughts run that way. Now, nothing else but sin could separate from God, and whatever estranges us from God is sin; it is enmity to Him.

G. Our thoughts are the first movers of all the evil that is in us. For they make the motion, bringing the heart and the object together; they are panderers to our lusts, holding up the object until the heart has played the adulterer with it. So in speculative uncleanness, and in other lusts, the thoughts hold up the images of those gods which they create, which the heart falls down and worships. Our thoughts present praise, riches, beauty to the heart until it has worshipped them—and this even when the things themselves are absent!

IV. In What Does This Vanity Consist?

First, I will discover it in regard to thinking what is good—how unable and loath we are to good thoughts. Then secondly, it will be shown how ready we are to think of evil and vain things.

A. We Are Loath to Good Thoughts.

1. Loath to good thoughts in ordinary occasions

We ordinarily and naturally lack the ability to raise and extract holy and useful considerations and thoughts from all ordinary occurrences and occasions. But a heart which is sanctified, in whose affections true grace is enkindled, will out of all God's dealings with him, out of the things he sees and hears, will distil holy and sweet, useful meditations from them. And it does this by the divine nature which is in it; it is its nature to do so, so far as it is sanctified. So it was in our Saviour, for all the speeches of others, all the things He saw and experienced, raised up in Him heavenly meditations (as we see throughout the Gospels). When He came to a well, He speaks of the water of life (Joh 4). Many such instances might be given. He, in His daily thoughts, translated the Book of the Creation into the Book of Grace. And so did Adam's heart in his state of innocency. He saw God in all, and all raised up his heart to thankfulness and praise. So now, in the same way, our hearts and minds ought to do, so far as they are sanctified. As the bee sucks honey out of every flower, as a good stomach gets out the sweet and wholesome nourishment from whatever is put into it, so a holy heart converts and digests all into spiritual and useful thoughts.

This you may see in Psalm 107. That Psalm gives many instances of God's providence, the deliverances by sea, etc., but the foot of the song is, "Oh that men would praise the Lord for…his wonderful works to the children of men." Now after so many instances, he concludes that the righteous shall see these things and rejoice, extract comfortable thoughts out of all of them. "Whoso is wise…will observe these things," that is, he will make holy observations out of all these, out of a principle of wisdom he will understand God's goodness in all and his heart will be raised to thoughts of praise and thankfulness and obedience.

Compare this with Psalm 92, where we are told to view His works and to raise up holy thoughts out of them, to say, "How great are thy works!" etc. But a beastly man does not know, "neither doth a fool understand this." That is, he being like a beast, having no sanctified principle of wisdom in him, looks no further than an animal into all the works of God and the occurrences of things. He may look on all blessings as things provided for man's delight by God, but he seldom extracts holy, spiritual, useful thoughts out of it—for he lacks the ability and art to do it.

For example, if others offer us injury, what thoughts do we have of these wrongs—thoughts of revenge? We meditate how to repay it. But see how naturally David's mind distils other thoughts of Shimei's cursing, "It may be that the Lord has said to him, Curse David." And then, "God may repay me with good." When we see judgments fall upon others, severe thoughts of censure are apt to rise up in our minds, as in the case of Job's friends. But a godly man, whose mind is much sanctified, raises other thoughts out of it, he "wisely considereth," etc. (Pro 21:12).

When outward mercies befall us, the next thoughts we are apt to have is to project ease by our wealth, "Thou hast much goods laid up for many years" (Luk 12:19), etc. When judgments come, we are apt to be filled with thoughts of complaint, of fear, of care about how we may wind ourselves out of it, etc. What then were Job's first thoughts when he heard news of the loss of all he owned? —"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord…In all this did not

Job sin" (Job 1:21; 2:10).

A good heart apprehends such thoughts as these (whenever opportunities come). But if our thoughts are barren, then they are also vain.

2. Unwilling to entertain good thoughts

The vanity and sinfulness of the mind appears in our unwillingness to entertain holy thoughts. We hate to begin to set our minds to think of God, to think of the things that belong to our peace. We are like schoolboys who hate to study those things which are for their good, to busy their minds about their lessons—for their heads are full of play. So our minds hate to enter into serious considerations, into solemn thoughts of God, or of death, etc. Men hate to think of death as much as thieves hate to think of execution. As a contrast, witness his delight as he pores over his plots. But now let the mind be occupied and busied about good things, things belonging to our peace, then how unsteady it is! These things should draw out the attention of the mind, for the more excellent the object is, the stronger our attention should be. God is the most glorious object that our minds could ever fasten upon, the most alluring. Thoughts of Him should therefore swallow up all other thoughts, as they are not worthy to be seen the same day with Him.

But I appeal to your experience, are not your thoughts of Him the most unsteady? Do you not have as much trouble holding your thoughts on Him as you would holding a telescope on a star with a palsy-shaking hand? It takes a long time for our minds to focus on Him, to place the eyes of our minds upon Him—and when we have, O how our hands shake! how often we lose sight of Him! So while we are in the most serious talk with Him, when all other things should be kept out, yet how many chinks there are in the heart, at which a flood of other thoughts come in! Our minds leave God and follow them: their heart goeth after covetousness," as the prophet says (Eze 33:31). And when we are hearing the Word of God, how easily our minds again and again run out of the church, come in again, go out again, hearing only half of what is said. So when we are at our businesses, which God commands us to do with all our might (Ecc 9:10), our minds, like idle truant children, like negligent servants (however serious the business at hand may be), will go out of the way to see any sport, will run after every hare that crosses the way, will follow after every butterfly buzzing about us.

It is seen best when we come to pray, where Christ bids us to "watch and pray" (Mat 26:41), when we ought to set a guard at every door so that none may come in and disturb us. How often the heart nods, falls asleep, runs out into another world, as men in dreams do! Yes, distractions are so natural to us when we are busied about holy duties, we are like sick men who find excrement coming from them before they know it—so do worldly thoughts come out of us before we know it, when we are carried out of that stream of good that our mind is running in, into some muddy creek.

3. Good thoughts at the wrong time

The vanity of the mind appears in regard to thoughts of good things. If it does think of them, it does so at the wrong time. It is with your thoughts as it is with your speeches, their goodness lies in their placing and order. As a man is to bring forth good actions, so good thoughts also in "due season." Now the vanity of the mind appears in thinking of some good things at the wrong time. When you are praying, you should not only have no worldly thoughts come in, but you ought not to have any thoughts but praying ones. But then perhaps some notions of a good sermon will come readily in. So in hearing, a man shall often have some good thoughts that are foreign to the things in hand. When he is at prayer, a good thing that a man has forgotten to do will be remembered, or whatever may affect a man much comes in to divert him.

This misplacing of our thoughts, even good thoughts, is a vanity of the mind. We find our minds

ready to spend thoughts about anything rather than what God at present calls them to. If we go to a sermon, we find ourselves thinking more willingly about reading; or we will find ourselves searching our hearts instead of listening—but when called to these things at another time, we are most unwilling to do them. We are content to run wild through the fields of meditations and miscellaneous good thoughts, rather than to be tied to the task at hand.

But in Adam and in Christ, no thought was misplaced. Though their thoughts were as many as the stars, yet they marched in their places, they kept their ranks. But our thoughts dance up and down in us like meteors. This disorder of our thoughts is a vanity and sin, however good they may be in matter. Not everyone, even he who has the best part, must step up on the stage to act, but he must take his right cue. In printing, even if the letters are beautiful, they must still be placed in their right order, else they mar the sense. Soldiers should not break their ranks, neither should our thoughts. As some read Proverbs 16:3, there is a promise to a righteous man if his "thoughts shall be established [ordered]."

B. The Positive Vanity of Our Thoughts to Evil

1. Foolishness

The vanity of them discovers itself in that which Christ calls "foolishness" (Mar 7:22), that is, the kind of thoughts that madmen have. This foolishness is seen in the unsettled wantonness, the wavering of the mind in thinking. Solomon says the "eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth" (Pro 17:24), they run up and down from one end of the earth to the other, shooting and streaming. And though the mind of man is truly nimble and able to run from one end of the earth to the other, that being its strength and excellence, yet God would have this strength and nimbleness put to a steady directing of our thoughts toward His glory, our own salvation, the good of others, etc. He gave our minds nimbleness to turn away from evil even the first appearance of it. As we are to walk in God's ways, so every single thought, like every action, is a step and ought to be a steady one. "Make straight paths for your feet" (Heb 12:13), turn not to the right or to the left until we come to the journey's end of that business we are supposed to be thinking of.

But our thoughts, at best, are like wanton spaniels, they indeed go after their master and come to their journey's end with him, but they run after every bird, they wildly pursue every flock of sheep they see. This unsteadiness is from the curse on the mind of man, like Cain who was driven "from the presence of the Lord," (Gen 4:16) our minds are vagabonds, our eyes are in the end of the earth.

This foolishness is also seen in the independence of our thoughts—they often hang together like ropes of sand. We see this in dreams. But not only then, for when we are awake, even when we set ourselves to be most serious, how often our thoughts jingle and run backward! As wanton boys sometimes scribble broken words which make no sense, so our thoughts sometimes are—and if you could but read over what you have thought, as you can what you have written, you would find as much nonsense in your thoughts as you will find in madmen's speeches. This madness, this distemper is in the mind since the Fall (though it may not appear in our words), so much so that if notes were taken of our multitude of thoughts, we would find our thoughts to be so vagrant that we would wonder how they came in, from where they came, and where they were attempting to go.

But God does all things in weight, in number and measure, and so His image in us will also do, so far as it is renewed. Because our thoughts are unsettled, and because they are so independent of one another, our thoughts often have no issue, gain no perfection. We wilder[2] away our time in thinking of nothing. As Seneca[3] said of men's lives, that they are like ships tossed up and down at

sea, so it may be said that our thoughts have tossed much but sailed nowhere.

2. Strong desires

But on the contrary, if any strong lust or violent passion is up, then our thoughts are all too fixed and intent—they run in so far on sinful objects that they cannot be pulled out again, or even diverted. This is another vanity. For our thoughts and our understanding part was ordered to moderate, allay, and cool, to take off our passions when they are running over—they are to rule and govern them. But now our thoughts are themselves subjected to our affections, they are like fuel put under our lusts, they make them boil the more. And although our thoughts do at first stir up our fears, joys, desires, etc., yet these once stirred up come to chain and fix and hold our thoughts to those objects, so that we cannot loosen them again. That is why Christ said to His disciples, "Why are ye troubled, and why do thoughts arise in your hearts" (Luk 24:38)? For disturbances in the affections cause thoughts to ascend like fumes and vapors. If a passion of fear is upon us, how it does conjure up multitudes of ghostly thoughts that we cannot cause to go down again! They haunt us; they follow us up and down wherever we go; we are pursued by our own thoughts: "thine heart shall meditate [on] terror" (Isa 33:18). So when sorrow is upon us, how it does make us study the cross that has been put upon us (which would be an ease to the mind to forget). But a man's passions make his thoughts study it, to say it by heart, over and over again.

So when love and desire are up, whatever the thing may be that has attracted us (it may be preferment, praise, beauty, riches), it sets our hearts to work to search the thing from top to toe, to make it amiable to us. So when joy is up, we look and look at the thing we rejoice in; we read it over and over; we mark every little bit of it; we do not forget. Yes, we are so inordinate in it that we often cannot sleep for thinking of it. "The abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep" for the multitude of thoughts in his head (Ecc 5:12), Solomon writes of the man who is covetous. How the thoughts of the Belshazzars and the Nebuchadnezzars of the world do trouble the world! As in Proverbs 4:16, "They sleep not except they have done mischief." If their desires remain unsatisfied, they disturb their thoughts, like naughty children crying and crying.

These thoughts, which most men think are free, often prove the greatest enslavers and tormenters in the earth to their owners. They hinder sleep, the nurse of nature—they eat out the heart that bred them; they weary the spirits. A man cannot lay them aside as he does his coat. When men die, these follow them to hell and torment them even worse there. Your thoughts are the greatest executioners there, even the worm that never dies (Mat 9:44).

3. Curiosities

The vanity of the mind appears in curiosity. There is a longing and itching to be fed with and to know the things that do not concern us at all; there is a delight in thinking of them. Take a trial of this in scholars, whose chief work lies in this shop: How many precious thoughts are spent in curiosity! There is a curiosity of knowledge, as appears by those the apostle often rebukes, that can be called "oppositions of falsely-named science"—curiosities of knowledge, "those things which he hath not seen" (Col 2:18). In Colossians 2 and 1 Timothy 4:7, he calls such issues of men's brains "old wives' fables," because, as fables please old wives, so these please their minds. This itch which they have in them makes them like a woman with child; they long after things they do not have; they are not contented with what the place or the time affords; no, they must have some unheard-of rarity, something far-fetched, something which may not even be possible to have. So men, not contenting themselves with the wonders of God which He discovers in the depth of His word and works, will launch out into another sea, another world of their own making. There they sail with pleasure, as many of the schoolmen[4] did in some of their speculations, spending their precious minds, framing curious webs out of their own bowels, like a spider.

Take the matter of reading, for many have leisure and ability to read much. They should ballast their heart with the Word of God; they should take in those precious words, that precious wisdom, in order to profit themselves and others. They should be building up their own souls, but what do their curious fancies carry them to? What are they versed in? Why, they know playbooks; they know romances, all the curious needlework of idle brains; they load their heads with "apes and peacocks feathers," instead of pearls and precious stones. As Solomon said, "The heart of him that has understanding seeketh knowledge; but the mouth of fools feedeth on foolishness" (Pro 15:14). Foolish discourses please their eyes and ears; these are the purveyors of food for their thoughts—like chameleons are said to do, men live on air and wind.

Leaving this sort, we find others who out of mere curiosity listen for all the news that flies up and down the world; they skim off all the froth that floats in foolish men's mouths. They please themselves only with talking, thinking, and hearing it. Not all are to be condemned in this. Some can make good use of it, as Nehemiah did when he inquired how things went at Jerusalem—he wanted to rejoice with God's people, to mourn and pray with them, to know how to fashion his prayers. But that curious itch which is in many, who merely want to please their fancies, who are delighted with new things (even if they do not concern them), is to be condemned. Such the Athenians were (Act 17:21). Some men long all week until they have events and issues; they make it a part of the happiness of their lives to study the state more than they do their own hearts, or even their own proper businesses. Yet these do not lay to heart the miseries of the church of Christ, nor do they help them with their prayers.

There are those who are curious to know the secrets of other men, secrets which would do them no good. These study men's actions and ends, not to reform them or do them good, but to know them and to think and muse about them with pleasure. This is curiosity, properly a vanity of the thinking power. It is truly a great sin when much of men's most pleasing thoughts are spent on things that do not concern them. The things that we ought to know, those which concern us, are enough to take up all our thoughts—we would not have any to spare. Thoughts are precious things, they are the immediate fruits and buds of an immortal nature. God has given us power to coin thoughts, lay them out in things that concern our own good, our own neighbor's good, and His own glory. And if we do not spend them on these things, it is the greatest waste in the world.

Examine the corn you put in the grinder, for God should have His share of all. "He that deviseth to do evil shall be called a mischievous person" (Pro 24:8), i.e., a master of wicked thoughts. It is not the one who does a wicked thing, but also the one who plots it, who aggravates the sinful action by his thoughts, for "the thought of foolishness is sin" (Pro 24:9), and a combination and conspiracy of wicked thoughts is much more.

4. Fulfilling our inordinate desires

There is still a worse vanity than this, one that is intimated in Romans 13:14, taking thought "to fulfill the lusts" of the flesh—i.e., making projects for it. For thoughts are the caterers for our lusts, they lay in all their provision. In our thoughts we look out for the best markets, the best opportunities for sinning of any kind, the best bargains for our praise, for our ambition, for our riches, etc.

For example, does a man want to "get ahead"? Then his thoughts study the art of it, framing the ladder for climbing up, inventing ways to do it—though often they, like Haman, are only building their own gallows (Est 7:9). Or perhaps they want to be rich. Then what do they study? They study all the cheating tricks on the cards, as I may speak. They study all the cunning tricks of the world, all the ways to oppress, to defraud, to go beyond their fellows. They learn to pack things in all their dealing so that they themselves will be the winners, so that all who deal with them will be the losers. "He

deviseth wicked devices to destroy the poor with lying words" (Isa 32:7).

Does a man want to undermine his opposite, one that stands in his light, who keeps him from getting all the credit? Then he will dig with his thoughts, with his engines in the night. He will dig a pit, as the Scripture says, he will dig deep to hide his counsel, to blow him up in the end. He will learn to hurt him.

This is worse than all the former vanities. The more devising there is in sin, the worse it is. That is why the fact about Uriah, not so much that of Bathsheba, is objected against David, because he took thought for it, whereas in the matter of Bathsheba, his thoughts took him (2Sa 11).

5. Acting out sin in our imaginations

A fifth kind of vanity in our thoughts appears when we are acting-over sins in our thoughts and imaginations. In this we personate those sinful pleasures by our imagination, because we cannot at present enjoy the reality. So we feign and imagine ourselves to act those sinful practices which we have not opportunity outwardly to perform. Divines call it speculative wickedness. That this performing of wickedness in the imagination is possible is evident to you by your dreams, when, as the prophet says, the imagination makes us believe that "when an hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty" (Isa 29:8). But I do not mean to speak of the power and corruption of it, as in our dreams. It were well if this speculative wickedness were only "in the night." But corrupt and distempered affections cast men into such dreams in the daytime, when they are awake. To borrow the apostle's expression, there are "filthy dreamers" (Jude 8) that "defile the flesh"—yes, even when they are awake. For when their lusts are idle, their imagination erects a stage for them, and their thoughts are set to work to entertain their filthy and impure desires with shows and plays of their own making. And so reason and the intention of their minds sit as spectators all the while to view with pleasure, until their thoughts inwardly act over their own unclean desires, their ambitious projects, or whatever else they have a mind to do. Can anyone cast a stone at those who do this (Joh 8:7)?

Yea, the heart of man has become as empty as this—so impatient are the desires and lusts when interrupted in their pleasures; so sinful and corrupt are they!

(a) They are vain and empty in this, for take note of all the pleasures of sin when they are never so fully, solidly, and really enjoyed—they are then only shadows, a mere outside and figure, as the apostle calls the world. It is the opinion of imagination that casts that varnish of goodness on sinful pleasures, for it is not truly in them. But now this speculative enjoying of them only in imagination (which many men's hearts take so much pleasure in), the pleasing of ourselves in the bare thoughts and imaginations of sinful acts—this is but a shadow of these shadows. That the soul should, Ixion-like,[5] embrace and commit adultery with clouds only, this is a vanity beyond all other vanities. This makes us more vain than any other creature, who though "subject to vanity" (Rom 8:20), yet are not subject to such vanity as this.

(b) It argues our desires to be impatient when they are detained from or interrupted from their pleasures. When the soul shall be found to be so greedy that when the heart is barred or held back from those things it desires, when it lacks means for opportunities to act out its lusts, then it will at least enjoy them in imagination, and in the interim set fancy to entertain the mind with empty pictures of them drawn in its own thoughts.

(c) In this way they appear also to be exceeding sinful and corrupt. An outward act of sin, as you may know, is but an act of whoredom with the creature when it is really enjoyed. But this committing of adultery in our imaginations is pure incest! When we defile our souls and spirits with these imaginations and likenesses which are conceived in our own fancies, being the children of our own hearts, this is incest!

C. Men's Hearts Are Full of Speculative Evil

There is much speculative enjoying of sinful pleasures, much acting-over of sinful acts; the mind of man is full of it, as will appear in many particulars.

1. We proudly rehearse our endowments.

Whatever comforts men may have at present in their possession, whatever excellencies or endowments they may have, they love to be alone to study and think of them. When they are separated from the present use of them, they will still be recounting and casting them up in imagination, surveying their happiness in them, applauding their own hearts in their conditions. Just as rich men love money, love to be always looking at it, counting it over, so men love to be always summing up their comforts and privileges, those that are lacked by others especially: as how rich they are, how great, how they excel others in parts and gifts, etc. O how much of that precious sand of our thoughts runs out this way! So the man in the Gospel keeps an audit in his heart, "Soul," he said, you have "much goods laid up for many years" (Luk 12:19). So Haman took an inventory of his honors and goods, talking of all "the glory of his riches…and all the things wherein the king had promoted him" (Est 5:11). So Nebuchadnezzar, as it may seem, was alone walking and talking to himself like a fool, saying, "Is not this great Babylon…that I have built by the might of my power, for the honor of my majesty?" (Dan 4:30).

And it is not only upon their comforts, but they also do this in regard to their excellencies, as their learning, their wisdom, etc. Men love to stand looking upon these in the mirror of their own speculation, as fair faces love to look often and long into glass mirrors. This all comes from the self-flattery in men, they desire to keep their happiness still fresh and continued in their eye. But these thoughts—when they do not raise up in the heart thankfulness to God, when they are not used for that end—are the bellows of pride. They are vain and abominable thoughts in the eyes of God, as would appear from God's dealing with those mentioned before. For to the man in the Gospel, He says, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee," etc. (Luk 12:20). And to Nebuchadnezzar, while "the word was in the king's mouth," giving him no further warning, God struck him with madness and beastliness (Dan 4:31). As for Haman, you know that he was like a wall that swells before it breaks and falls into ruin and decay.

2. We rehearse our future desires.

This speculative enjoying of pleasures, this acting of sins in our imaginations, appears in regard to things to come also. For men view them afar off, their hopes going forth to meet them in their thoughts. They take much contentment from entertaining their desires with such vain promisings and expectations beforehand. Those in Isaiah wound up their hearts to a higher pin of jollity in the midst of their cups, for their hearts thought and promised them that "To morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant" (Isa 56:12)! So those in James 4:13 say to themselves, "We will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain." The promise of this, the thoughts of it beforehand, feeds them and keeps up comfort in their hearts. When men rise up in the morning, they begin to think ahead with much pleasure about the carnal pleasures which they have the promise of for that day or week (as that they shall go to such a company, that they shall be merry, that they shall enjoy the satisfaction of such and such lusts, that they shall hear good news, etc.).

Godly men live by faith in God's promises: "By these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit," said Hezekiah, even what God has "spoken" (Isa 38:15-18). [In the same way,] carnal men live much upon the promises of their own hearts and thoughts beforehand. For it is to this head of vain thoughts that these promisings are to be reduced, "their inward thought is that their

houses shall continue for ever" (Psa 48:11), and this thought pleases them. Is there any pleasure which a man makes much account of but he acts it over first in private, in his own thoughts? And in this way men foolishly take their own words and promises, and so fool themselves in the end (Jer 17:11). They take up beforehand in their thoughts, upon trust, the pleasures that they are expecting to enjoy. Even as spendthrifts spend their rents, as heirs spend their inheritances before they actually get them, so when they indeed come to enjoy the pleasures they expected, either they prove to be but "dreamers," or they find their "souls empty," or they find the enjoyment so much under their expectation, so stale, that there still proves to be more in the imagination than in the thing. This comes from the vastness and greediness of men's desires, which is the cause of it. So it is written, he "enlargeth his desire as hell, and is as death, and cannot be satisfied, but gathereth unto himself all nations, and heapeth unto him all people" (Hab 2:5)—he swallows them up in his thoughts. So it is with an ambitious scholar, who swallows up all the preferments that are in his view.

3. We rehearse the past.

a. How rehearsing of the past works in our minds.

This speculative wickedness is also exercised toward things that are past. It recalls and revives in our thoughts the pleasure of sinful actions that happened in the past. The mind runs over the passages and circumstances of those sins which were long ago committed, taking new and fresh delight in thinking of them. Men raise their dead actions, long since buried, in the same likeness they were transacted in—and they parley with them as the witch and Saul did with Satan in Samuel's likeness (1Sa 28). And when they should draw cross lines over them, when they should blot out these things through faith in Christ's blood, they would rather copy and write them over again in their thoughts, and with the same contentment.

So an unclean person can study over every circumstance which passed in his unclean act, seeing in his thoughts the person with whom they were committed. And likewise the vainglorious scholar repeats in his thoughts an eminent performance of his, all those passages which he thinks were most elegant. And men chew the cud upon any words of commendation which others have uttered about them. Just as a good heart recalls and repeats good things that have been heard and read, remembering what liveliness of the spirit resulted, with what affections they were warmed when they heard them (or, as when Hezekiah recalled with comfort the actions of a well-passed life, "Lord, I have walked before thee…with a perfect heart," Isa 38:3), so, on the contrary, do wicked men usually recall and revive the most pleasing sinful happenings in their lives, trying to suck new sweetness out of them.

b. Why this rehearsing of the past is so evil

Nothing would argue more hardness or wickedness of heart, nothing provokes God more, than this recalling and reviving of sinful acts with as much or more pleasure than in the original happening. For,

(1) It argues much wickedness of heart to do this. And if this is ordinary with a heart to do this, it is not compatible with grace. For in Romans 6:21, the Apostle shows that a good heart does not usually repeat or desire the fruit of past sinful actions, "What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed?" The saints can reap and distil out of those flowers nothing but shame and sorrow. When Ephraim remembers his sin, he "was ashamed" and repented (Jer 31:19). Can you, then, in your thoughts, reap a new crop, a new harvest of pleasure from them, again and again?

(2) It argues much hardness of heart. Nothing can be more opposite to the truth and practice of

repentance, for the foundation of repentance is to call to mind the acts and thoughts of sin with shame and sorrow, and to recall it with more grief than ever there was pleasure in the committing of it. It is the property of repentance to hate the very "appearance" of sin (1Th 5:22), to inflame the heart with zeal and revenge against it. Therefore it provokes God exceedingly when our hearts become soaked with a new guilt from the remembrance with pleasure of old acts of sin, for it provokes God to remember it also, with a new detestation of it, and so He sends down new plagues. But if we recall the sins of the past with grief, this is to "remember [it] no more" (Jer 34:30; Heb 10:17).

(3) To delight in past sins is to rake in those wounds which we have already given Christ. To view the sins of others with pleasure is made more than to commit them (Rom 1:32). How much more to view and revive our own with a fresh delight! Know this, that whatever delight you may take here in repeating your old sins to yourself, yet in hell nothing will gall you more than the remembrance of them. Every circumstance in every sin will then be as a dagger at your heart. This was the task and study given to the rich man in hell, to remember the "good things" he had received" (Luk 16:25), and his sins committed in the abuse of them. And if godly men here are made to "possess the sins of their youth" with horror (as Job, Job 13:26), and to "have them ever before" them (as David, Psa 51:3), then how will wicked men in hell escape from the frightening memory of them? In Psalm 50:21, the Lord sets this forth to us in part, "These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes."

(4) The fourth way in which the speculative vanity appears is in the acting of sins upon mere imaginary suppositions. Men pretend to themselves, contriving a supposition to themselves in their own thoughts both of what they want to be and of what they want to do. Men create fool's paradises to themselves, and then they walk up and down in them. They say to themselves, "If I had money enough, what pleasures I would have! If I had such and such an appointment, then how well I would carry myself!" To allude to Scripture, Absalom said, "Oh that I were judge in the land," I would do this and that, etc. (2Sa 15:4). Men do this with a great deal of pleasure, almost as much as those that really enjoy them.

This may well be the meaning of Psalm 50:18, which pictures a hypocrite who outwardly abstains from gross sins, but God says, "When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers." That is, in his heart and in his imagination, supposing himself to be with them, he desired to be doing what they were doing. Take the case of one who is naturally ambitious, his nature, parts, and education have made him but no more than a bramble, never to rule over the trees (Jdg 9), he is one who is fixed in a lower sphere, incapable of rising higher or being greater, even as the earth can never become a star. Yet this ambitious man will take the part of a great man in his own heart, pretending and supposing himself to be so. He will build and sit upon a throne, and he will think within himself what he would do if he were a king or a great man. Or, take the case of a man who is unclean, one now grown old, a dry tree, one who cannot act his lust as he once did. Yet this unclean old man will supply what is lacking in his strength and opportunity; he will make his own heart his procurer—brothel, whore and all. In the case of the man who is a lover of pleasures, but lacks the means to buy them, yet his inclinations will please themselves with the thoughts of what mixture and combination of delights he would have. He will even set down his bill of fare, what he would have if he could have what he wanted. So it is also with the man who is vengeful, yet who lacks a sting; this man will please himself with thoughts and wishes of revenge—he will always be making invectives and railing dialogues against the one he hates. And the man in love will in his imagination court his absent partner in love, he will

by his imagination make her present with him, and he will frame the words which he will speak to her.

In a word, whatever the inclinations and dispositions of a man (let the impossibilities and improbabilities be never so great against what he desires), in his fancy and thoughts he will make all things to be what he wants them to be. Men will always be drawing maps of their desires, calculating their own inclinations, cutting out a condition of life which suits their hearts, and they please themselves with such things. And there is no surer way to know a man's natural inclination than by this.

4. Summary

a. This is foolishness: [in it men are] imitating children. For is it not childish to make clay pies and puppets (what else are such fancies as these?) and to be acting the parts of ladies and mistresses, as children often do? Yet such childishness is in the heart of man.

b. This is a vanity also, because a man is setting his heart on something that does not exist. The things are worthless in themselves; "Wilt thou set thine eyes on that which is not?" (Pro 23:5). They are of no value even if a man has them. But to please himself with mere supposition is much worse indeed.

c. The greatest condemnation of such vain thoughts, however, is that men desire in their thoughts and hearts to put themselves into another condition than God has ordained for them.

V. Applications

A. Uses: The Good of Knowing the Vanity of Thoughts

Use Number 1: Be humbled by the vanity of your thoughts.

Having discovered the vanity of your thoughts and your place by them, be humbled for them. I ground this upon Proverbs 30:32, where Agur teaches us to humble ourselves for thoughts as well as for actions, "If thou hast done foolishly in lifting up thyself, or if thou hast thought evil, lay thine hand upon thy mouth." Now as "smiting on the thigh" is put for repentance, shame, and sorrow in Jeremiah 31:19, so is laying the hand on the mouth put for greater and deeper humiliation, arguing full conviction of one's guilt, as in Romans 3:19, "Every mouth" must be "stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God." To lay your hand upon your mouth is to have nothing to say; it is to plead guilty, not excusing yourself because thoughts are supposed to be free from guilt, on the grounds that it is impossible to get free from them. As it is in Ezekiel 16:63, we are to "remember, and be confounded, and never open" our mouths any more; or, as it is in Job 40:4, to be vile, not to answer again—this is what it is to lay your hand on your mouth. It is to humble yourself.

And truly there is much cause to humble yourself for your thoughts. For your thoughts are the first-born, the eldest sons of original sin; they are the strength of it. Yea, they are the parents and begetters of all other sins; they are the plotters and contrivers, the Ahithophels, in all the treasons and rebellions of our hearts and lives (2Sa 17). Our thoughts are the bellows and incendiaries of all inordinate affections; they are the panderers to all our lusts, they take thought to provide for the satisfying of our lusts. They are the disturbers in all good duties, for our thoughts interrupt and spoil all our prayers, making them stink in the nostrils of God.

And if their heinousness will not move you, consider their number—for our thoughts continually being sinful, this makes our sins to be more in number than the sands of the sea. The thoughts of Solomon's heart were as the sand, and so are ours—there is not a minute when more thoughts do not pass from us than the sands that go through hour-glasses. Even supposing them to be the smallest and least of your sins, yet their multitude makes them more and heavier than all your other sins. Even if they are not to be compared to gross defilements, yet because the mint never lies still, whether you are sleeping or waking, therefore they make up the greatest part of that treasure of wrath which we are laying up for ourselves (Luk 12:21). And know that God will count every one; in your punishment He will not remit a stroke for even one vain thought.

And we know that God looks upon our thoughts in this way, for we see the indictment He brings in against the old world (Gen 6). When He pronounced that heavy judgment, the destruction of all the world and its inhabitants, does He allege their murders, adulteries, and gross defilements as the chief cause? No, but He accuses them that "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." It was their thoughts that were so many and so continually evil, and this provoked Him more than all their other sins!

Then go down into your own heart, consider well your thoughts—for this will humble you, it will make you vile in your own eyes. Let your spirit, the lamp of the Lord, search the innermost parts of your belly (Pro 20:27). Consider them in order to humble you, but for all their multitude do not let them discourage you. For God has more thoughts of mercy in Him than you have had thoughts of rebellion. You only began to think thoughts of rebellion against Him as yesterday, but His thoughts of mercy have been "from everlasting," and they reach "to everlasting" (Psa 103:17). But rather remember what God has said in Isaiah 55:7, "Let the wicked man forsake his way, and the

unrighteous man his thoughts," and God will have mercy upon him. And because this objection of the multitude of evil thoughts might come in to discourage men from hopes of mercy, He purposely adds that "he will abundantly pardon," or multiply to pardon. This is to assure us that He has thoughts of mercy which will outvie ours of sin, and He is careful to state that "My thoughts are not [as] your thoughts...for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are…my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9).

Use Number 2: Consciously control your thoughts.

Forever make conscience of them. So Job did, "I made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?" (Job 31:1). Solomon gives us a special charge, "Keep thy heart with all diligence" (Pro 4:23).

(1) We are to keep: "the Lord's day holy," ourselves "unspotted from the world," our brother, and all the commandments (Exo 20:8; Jam 1:27; Deu 13:4), but above all we are to keep our hearts—and in it our thoughts. For as in the same commandment where murder is forbidden, a malicious thought is also forbidden (Mat 5:21-22)—let it be remembered it is so with the other commandments.

(2) Out of the heart "are the issues of life" (Pro 4:23). Thoughts and affections are the spring, speeches and actions are the steam. As our thoughts are, so are our affections, for the thoughts are the bellows of the affections. So also it is with our prayers, and all other things; the thoughts are in the soul as the spirits in the body, they run through all, move all, act all.

(3) If you look to God, our thoughts are that spot of ground which He proclaims Himself to be sole Lord. He makes it one of His greatest titles, that He knows the thoughts and judges them. Kings attempt to rule your tongues, to bind your hands and rule your actions, but only God can rule your thoughts. By them we chiefly sanctify Him in our hearts, and by them we walk with God. And shall we not make conscience of them?

(4) If you look to the work and power of grace, in what does it lie but in the "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2Co 10:5)? This is the glory of our religion above all others in the world. In what does the difficulty of the Christian religion lie? What is the strictness of it? What makes Christian life so hard? It is the observing and keeping of the thoughts in bounds. The difference between sincere-hearted Christians and others is in this keeping of our thoughts. Without this, all religion is but "bodily exercise." Papists may mumble over their prayers, hypocrites may talk, but this is godliness.

(5) If we look to things we must be careful of, we must be careful of our speeches, because Christ has said that we shall answer for every "idle word" (Mat 12:36). But why not also, and for the same reason, be careful of our thoughts (which are the words of the mind, lacking only a shape to be audible to others, which the tongue gives them)—for you must answer for thoughts as well as for words (Heb 4:12; 1Co 4:5). If you are careful what companions you have, of all that you may take into your house, of those who lie in your bosom, then much more you should be careful what thoughts you lodge in your heart (for it is God's house, built for Himself and for Christ and His Word to dwell in). Since the things you think of have the most intimate fellowship and conversation with you, you should be most careful what they are.

We are told in Proverbs 6:22, that when we think of God's Word, it will talk with us. If you are careful of what you do because of your constitution, etc., then be most careful what you think, because thoughts can either upset or feed your soul. God's words "I did eat," said Jeremiah, speaking of meditation on them (Jer 15:16).

(6) If you look to the issue of things, what shall be the subject of that great inquest at the Day of Judgment? The Lord will "make manifest the counsels [the thoughts] of the hearts" (1Co 4:5). After

the Day of Judgment, a man's thoughts will prove to be his greatest executioner. They are the cords with which God will lash you throughout all eternity. Your own thoughts will accuse you; you will study over every sin; "Thine heart shall meditate terror" (Isa 33:18). The hypocrite's torment is to meditate terrors: to study God's wrath, the saint's blessedness, and their own sins and miseries.

B. Remedies against Vain Thoughts

Remedy 1: Furnish your heart with knowledge of spiritual truth.

First you must get your heart furnished and enriched with a good stock of sanctified, heavenly knowledge in spiritual and God-given truths. A "good man" has a "good treasure" in his heart (Mat 12:35). That is, a good man has all graces, so many precious truths, which are as gold in the ore. And his thoughts, as the mint, coins this gold, which then is brought forth into words. "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things." But if there are no mines of precious truths hidden in our hearts, it is no wonder if our thoughts do not coin anything more than dross, frothy and vain thoughts. We are then lacking the materials from which the mind is to be fed. A wicked man, says Solomon, is always forging, minting, hammering out wickedness and evil (Pro 6:14).

If a man has a store of natural knowledge, but lacks useful spiritual knowledge, he may bring forth some very good speeches in company with others, but when he is alone his thoughts will not run on good things. Take a place in Scripture, Deuteronomy 6:6-7, which shows that laying up the Word in the heart, and being made conversant in it, and getting knowledge out of it, is an effectual means to keep our thoughts well-exercised when we are alone. For it is said that the reason why those of the Law are to be laid up in the heart, is that we might teach them to others (Deu 11:18-20). But note this also, that it is so that we might have them with us when we are retired and alone, "these my words" shall be with you "when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." When a man is riding, or walking, or lying down, or rising up (which are often and usually our most retired times for thoughts and are wholly spent in them), yet then, He says, you shall talk of the word. And since he that is alone cannot be said to talk, therefore the talking there meant is not an outward conference with others (though intended as occasion of talking with others is given, as with your bedfellow, your companion, etc.). But if you have no companion with you, then talk of the word to yourself, for the thoughts are the talking of the mind. So, comparing Proverbs 6:22 with this place, it appears that Solomon exhorts us to the same duty of binding the word to the heart with this motive, which is the fruit of it, that when you awake, it will talk with you—that is, by your thinking of it, it will talk with you when you and it are alone. You shall not need a better companion; it will be putting in and suggesting something to you all the time.

Remedy 2: Preserve spiritual affections in your heart.

Endeavor to preserve and keep up lively, holy and spiritual affections in your heart. Do not let them cool. Do not fall from your first love, fear, or joy in God. Or if you have grown remiss, endeavor to recover those affections again. For as your affections are, so your thoughts will be, and they incline the mind to think of such or such objects that will please them. That is why David says, "O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psa 119:97). It was his love which made him think of it so frequently. So those who "feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name" are joined together (Mal 3:16). For what we fear, we often think and speak of. It is added, they spoke "often one to another," because fear made them think much of His name, and thinking of it made them speak of it. It is true that thoughts and affections are the mutual causes of each other, as it is written, "While I was musing, the fire burned" (Psa 39:3)—the thoughts are the bellows that kindle

and inflame the affections. And then when they are inflamed, they cause thoughts to boil. Men newly converted to God, having new and strong affections, can with more pleasure think of God than any.

Remedy 3: Saturate your mind with God's attributes.

Get your heart possessed with deep, strong and powerful apprehensions and impressions of God's holiness, majesty, omnipresence, and omniscience. If any of our thoughts have the power to fix and draw in our minds, they are the thoughts which we have of Him. Why do the saints and angels in Heaven never have a vain thought, no, not in all eternity? His presence fixes them; their eye is never off Him. Even wanton, loose-spirited man will often be held in the presence of a feared superior. Job was careful not to look awry, because, he said, "Does not he see my ways, and count all my steps?" (Job 31:4). This drew in and fastened David's thoughts (Psa 139:1-17). That is why we have found by experience that we can avoid distractions in prayer by enlarging our thoughts beforehand, by considering God's attributes and relations to us. It will and it does make us serious.

Remedy 4: Commune with God each morning.

Especially determine to speak with God when you first awake, as David did, "When I awake, I am still with thee" (Psa 139:18). To prevent vain, windy, frothy thoughts from taking possession of your heart when you first awake, first fill your heart with thoughts of God. Observe it, if you will, when you first open your eyes in the morning, many suitors will be attending upon you. Like clients waiting at lawyer's doors, many vanities and businesses will be seeking to rush into your thoughts. But you must speak with God first; He will say something to your heart that will settle it for all that day. Do this before the crowd of businesses come in upon you. Some heathen, it is said, worship as their god that which they first see in the morning. So it is with the idols of men's hearts. Let God be first in your thoughts!

Remedy 5: Guard your heart all day long.

Have a watchful eye. Guard your heart all day long. Though they crowd in, yet observe them; let them know that they do not pass unseen. If a man wants to pray aright, he must watch who comes in and who goes out. Where a strict watch is kept, where the officers are diligent to examine every vagrant person, you will have few vagrants there. So it is with the swarms of vagrant thoughts which will come upon him who does not keep a strict watch against them. Then if they pass through anyhow, yet you should complain of them, whip them, etc.

Remedy 6: Limit vanities.

Be careful not to please your fancy too much with vanities and curious sights. This engenders vain and worthless thoughts. That is why Job said that he "made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?" (Job 31:1).

Remedy 7: Focus on your calling.

Be diligent in your calling. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" (Ecc 9:10). Put to it all the intention and strength of your mind. Let all the stream run about your mill; the keeping of your thoughts to that channel will keep them from overflowing into vanity and folly. Those that do not labor are apt to be busybodies (2Th 3:11). Those that are called idle and wandering in 1 Timothy 5:13, are not only called idle because they were not busy about the things that they should do, but they are also called idle because they are busy about the things they should not do. If you let ground lie fallow, what weeds will there soon be growing on it!

God has given us our callings to entertain our thoughts, and to find work for them in the interims between the duties of His worship—because the spirit and thoughts of men are restless and must be

busy some way. Kings keep those men with active spirits in continual employment, lest their heads should be working and plotting amiss. And God appointed (even in Paradise) that man should have something to keep him busy. God hedges in a man's thoughts in this way, sets them in a narrow lane, knowing that if they are unconfined they will be like wild asses snuffing up the wind (Jer 14:6). But be careful not to encumber your mind with too much business, more than you can grasp. It made Martha forget that "one thing…needful" (Luk 10:42). This breeds cares which distract the mind, divides it, causes wandering thoughts, so that the mind is not itself. This weakens it, enervates it–you will be as Jethro said to Moses, You will fade away like a leaf (Exo 18:18). Even the juice which should be left for good duties will be exhausted. As dreams come through multitudes of business (Ecc 5:3), so do a multitude of thoughts come from a cumber[6] of business.

Remedy 8: Commit all your ways to God.

In your calling and in all your ways, commit your ways to God. "Commit thy works [ways] unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established [or, ordered]" (Pro 16:3). Keep back from that confusion and disorder, those swarms of cares, which others are annoyed with. A few thoughts of faith would save us many thoughts of cares and fears as we go about our business. And such thoughts are vain, for they do not forward the business we intend. When such thoughts toss the heart and stir it up into turmoil, when the winds of passion are up, then a few thoughts of faith will calm the heart and fix it upon the Anchor of the soul once more.

About The Author

Thomas Goodwin (1600-1679): Possessing a tender conscience from the age of six, Goodwin's parents strove to prepare him for the ministry by their own example and by providing for the best education they could. At twelve he entered Christ's College, Cambridge, known as a "nest of Puritans" in those days. The God of all grace and mercy brought Goodwin to a profound conviction of sin and genuine conversion on October 2, 1620, shortly after his twentieth birthday. Following his conversion he aligned himself with the Puritan theological tradition of such preachers as William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, and John Preston. His preaching was earnest, practical, experimental, pastoral and above all, Christ-centered.

Goodwin, an Independent, who was appointed to the Westminster Assembly, is said to have been "the most decisive figure and the great disturber of the Westminster Assembly," due to his continual promotion of the Independent view of church government. Records of the assembly covering 243 sessions held from August 1643 to December 1644 indicate that Goodwin gave more addresses than any other divine—357 in all! During the early 1650s, he and John Owen shared a Sunday afternoon lecture for the students at Oxford, and both were chaplains to Oliver Cromwell. He was also assisted in drawing up the confession of faith for the Independents known as The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order. During the period when many godly pastors were ejected from their pulpits because of strict demands of conformity, God's mighty overruling providence permitted Goodwin to continue preaching throughout the years of persecution by Charles II. Most of his major theological writings were the fruit of his mature years and published after his death. Goodwin's works, which are presently reprinted in a twelve-volume authoritative edition, were James Nichol's first choice in what would become known as the well-edited and highly regarded Nichol's Series of Standard Divines.

Notes

[← 1]
sons of Belial – Old Testament term for worthless persons.

[←2]

wilder – to cause to lose the way.

[←3]

Seneca, Lucius Annaeus (c. 4 BC-AD 65) also Seneca the Younger - Roman philosopher, statesman, and orator; Rome's leading intellectual of his day.

[←4]

schoolmen – a term for the teachers of philosophy and theology in the Middle Ages. Also known as scholastics, examples would be Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) and John Duns Scotus (c. 1265-1308).

[←5]

Ixion – Greek mythology: a king who murdered his parents and was bound to a perpetually revolving wheel in Hades as punishment.

[←6]

cumber - burdensomeness.