

Wandering Thoughts

by Harmon A. Baldwin

The sermon discusses the nature of wandering thoughts and how they relate to holiness, emphasizing that while we cannot keep our minds completely free from wandering thoughts, we can have our hearts renovated by the blood of Jesus Christ to resist sinful thoughts.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:23, Matthew 15:19, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 10:5, Philippians 4:8

Topics: "Mental Holiness", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

Harmon A. Baldwin delves into the topic of wandering thoughts and holiness, addressing the misconception that a clean heart means never having wandering thoughts. He emphasizes the importance of presenting holiness realistically, without setting unattainable standards, to attract sincere seekers. Baldwin discusses the distinction between thoughts that wander from God, which stem from an unclean heart, and thoughts that simply stray from the current focus, influenced by mental rather than spiritual factors. He highlights the significance of monitoring and rejecting sinful thoughts, indicating the spiritual maturity and godlikeness of an individual.

Transcript

The question arises, How far are wandering thoughts consistent with the experience of holiness?

Some answer that if a man's heart is clean his mind will never wander. We do not hesitate to stamp this statement as untrue. Why do men persist in raising impossible standards, and holding people to an unattainable line of things? Holiness itself is a glorious experience, and, if presented in its actual light, free from all exaggeration on the one hand and looseness on the other, or as nearly so as the human mind is capable of definition, it will attract honest souls, but if the doctrine is surrounded with physical, mental and moral impossibilities or inconsistencies we can not blame our hearers for becoming discouraged and at times disgusted.

There is a saying that has been repeated so often that it has become threadbare, to the effect that we cannot keep the birds from flying over our heads, but we can keep them from building nests in our hair. We would suggest as a paraphrase: We cannot keep the unclean birds of earth or hell from presenting evil thoughts to our minds, but we can have our hearts so renovated by the blood of Jesus Christ that such thoughts will find no lodgment in us; yea,, more, we can have such clean hearts that they (our hearts) will not hatch, or originate one unclean thought, and will utterly despise the vile suggestions of the devil. And we would go one step further: The more godlikeness we possess the greater victory we will have over

wicked suggestions, and the less ability the devil will have to inject his trash.

This subject of wandering thoughts is not only interesting, but it is to the highest degree important. We have heard some very fine distinctions drawn which left the inquirer as much in the dark as he was before. For instance, there is a difference between evil thoughts and thoughts of evil. To be sure this is true, but the thing which puzzles the novice, and sometimes older ones, is to decide which is which, and he also wonders whether the birds are just flying over or have they commenced to build in his hair. You will remember that when Bunyan's pilgrim was passing through the valley of humiliation evil spirits whispered blasphemy in his ears, and the pilgrim thought it was his own heart that was blaspheming. Perhaps you never went through this valley. Some people have, and can testify to the truth of Bunyan's picture.

There are two sorts of wandering thoughts: those that wander from God and those that wander from the particular point in view. The former are sinful, the latter are not. (Note: In some of the positions taken in what follows we wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to Wesley's sermon on "Wandering Thoughts.")

Concerning thoughts that wander from God: These thoughts proceed from and are a sure sign of an unclean fountain. That man whose whole aim and study is the world and the things of the world -- what shall I eat, drink and wear, what shall I see, hear or gain, how shall I please myself, my neighbors, the world? -- this man's heart is far from God. The constant aim of the holy man is to occupy himself as little as need be with worldly pursuits and callings, and when this necessity is ended his heart rests in God. Because he is finite he may not always properly gage his necessities, but his heart is in God, all else is secondary.

All carnal thoughts, unbelief, doubtfulness of God's providences, all murmuring and repining, all proud and vain imaginations, all angry, malicious or revengeful thoughts, all desire for the sinful pleasures of the world -- all these are sinful and draw the heart from God. A secret delight to dwell in imagination on sinful pursuits or things is a sure sign of a carnal heart. For illustration: the enemy suggests a vision of past sinful indulgences, it may be with the thought of present possibilities. Thus far the heart may be clean. But if, after a short time the person thus attacked arouses to the realization that there is in the very inmost soul a something that has held to the sinful suggestion and has reenacted past events with a pleasurable feeling or an almost unconscious desire for present gratification, then there is proof positive that there is in the soul an unclean principle, a carnal fountain. A saved soul immediately rejects all known unclean or sinful thoughts, a sanctified soul has nothing within that clings to the sinful; when Satan comes he hath nothing in the clean man -- nothing sinful to agree with the enemy.

We believe and wish to impress the thought, that at the door of every clean soul there is a monitor, never off guard (called in one place the shield of faith; in another, He that keepeth Israel), which immediately, and it may be almost unconsciously, recognizes sinful approaches, and sets up an impassable barrier to their entrance. There may be a struggle, but if we trust God the victory is sure.

A man can judge his spiritual standing by the moral standard of the things his heart ponders with pleasure.

Now concerning those wandering thoughts which do not depart from God, but simply wander from the particular point in view. The ability to hold one's self to any particular line of thought depends as much or it may be more, on the mental make-up of the person than it does on his spiritual standing. Horace Greeley wrote some of his editorials which stirred the country, sitting on some person's doorstep or elsewhere in the streets of New York, and the crowds surging by never seemed to break the continuity of his thought, or the consistency of his argument. We read of a young man who learned a long poem in a specified length

of time, while his comrades did all they could, except touch him, to detract his attention. This is the power of concentration, and is a mental and not a spiritual accomplishment.

You have heard preachers who could not hold to one consecutive line of argument for five minutes by any possibility. You have heard people sitting and conversing on innocent subjects, and have noticed them jump from one theme to another, never holding long to one point. Two old people will bring up remembrances reaching all the way from old Indianny to sunny Californy; from their childhood in the backwoods to these days of airplanes and automobiles; from who married Jane Hawkins to who preached in the log schoolhouse in '59; barn raisings, husking bees, spelling schools, sleigh-rides, and what not, all come in for their share. We say this is a sign of the infirmities of old age, but possibly some signs might be found in the younger generation.

The understanding is immediately affected by a diseased body, and at such times consecutiveness of thought is extremely difficult. This wandering may range all the way from a passing fancy to temporary delirium or even raging madness. Nervous disorders are noted for their tendency to unsettle the mind and keep it from performing its legitimate functions.

The old Mystics made much of meditating on the passion of Christ. But with some it is impossible, without some tangible purpose in view, to keep their minds in one place for any length of time. In God's law the holy soul meditates day and night, but the weary brain may travel the wide world around.

Then the various things and circumstances with which we are surrounded have a tendency to detract the mind, and it is impossible for the holiest to become at all times thoroughly disengaged. A passing automobile, a ringing bell, a screeching train, a crying child, an impertinent mosquito, all call for their share of attention, and momentarily draw the mind from the most intricate thoughts.

Then, as Wesley suggests, sometimes our minds are too heavy, dull and languid to pursue long one chain of thought. Some preachers insist on filling in forty-five minutes or an hour with one heavy thought after another, and never relieve their discourse with some interesting illustration, and as a consequence the mental strain of the hearers is not relieved from beginning to end. Not one mind in ten (and that is quite liberal) is able to follow such a discourse through to its end. The mind is languid and stubbornly refuses to take it in. This may be a lack of mental capacity in the hearers, but it is surely not of necessity a lack of holiness.

Then, either pleasure or pain may cause the mind to wander from the point in hand. An aching head, a sour stomach, twitching rheumatism, the odor of a rose, the sound of beautiful music, will cause one to leave the point in hand, and he may never be able to recall that thought again.

These are some causes of wandering thoughts, and such thoughts are no more sinful than the motion of the blood in the veins.

To sum up the whole in the language of Wesley:

To expect deliverance from these wandering thoughts which are occasioned by evil spirits is to expect that the devil should die or fall asleep, or, at least, should no more go about as a roaring lion. To expect deliverance from those which are occasioned by other men is to expect either that men should cease from earth, or that we should be absolutely secluded from them, and have no intercourse with them; or that having eyes we should not see, neither hear with our ears, but be as senseless as stocks or stones. And

to pray for deliverance from those which are occasioned by the body is, in effect, to pray that we may leave the body. Otherwise it is praying for impossibilities and absurdities; praying that God would reconcile contradictions, by continuing our union with a corruptible body without the natural, necessary consequences of that union. It is as if we should pray to be angels and men, mortal and immortal, at the same time. Nay! -- but when that which is immortal is come, mortality is done away.

Rather let us pray, both with the spirit and with the understanding, that all these things may work together for our good; that we may suffer all the infirmities of our nature, all the interruptions of men, all the assaults and suggestions of evil spirits, and in all be 'more than conquerors.' Let us pray, that we may be delivered from all sin; that both root and branch may be destroyed; that we may be cleansed from all pollution of flesh and spirit, from every evil temper, and word, and work; that we may love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, and with all our strength; that all the fruit of the Spirit may be found in us, -- not only love, joy, peace, but also longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance. Pray that all these things may flourish and abound, may increase in you more and more, till an abundant entrance is ministered unto you, into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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