

Take Heed of Sinning in Thought

by Ralph Venning

Sinning in thought is just as sinful as actual sin, and it can defile a man even if it is not acted upon.

Duration: 30:38

Scripture: Exodus 2:23-24, Psalm 51:10, Psalm 119:11, Matthew 6:33, Romans 2:16, 2 Corinthians 10:5, 2 Timothy 2:16

Topics: "Audio Books"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of turning away from vanity and avoiding evil. He explains that what we see and hear can greatly influence our thoughts and actions, and that indulging in vain objects and speeches can lead to ungodliness. The preacher highlights that the gospel's purpose is to bring our thoughts into obedience to Christ, and that it has the power to transform our hearts and minds. He warns against idleness and being easily swayed by temptation, urging listeners to guard their thoughts and words. The sermon concludes with the recommendation to humbly seek God's help in cleansing and renewing our hearts.

Transcript

The following are excerpts from a book by Ralph Venning, printed in 1669, entitled *The Sinfulness of Sin*. I caution and beseech you then to take heed of living in any sin, whether in thought, word, or deed. Take heed of sinning in thought.

Seeing that sin is so sinful, it is evil even to be a thinking sinner, or a sinner though only in thought. It is too commonly said that thoughts are free. They are indeed free in respect of men who cannot judge us for them, but God can and will.

Many people who seem to be modest and sparing as to evil words and deeds will still make bold with thoughts, and as the saying is, pay it with thinking. Such are speculative, contemplative sinners. There are some who are so wise as not to say with their tongues, yet such fools as to say in their hearts that there is no God.

There are some who do not actually murder, yet by anger and envy are murderers in heart or thought, as Joseph accused his brethren in saying, you thought evil against me. There are thought adulterers who perhaps never were or durst be adulterers in actual deed. There are blasphemers in heart who do not speak it with their mouths but are like those who heard Christ forgiving sin and thought in their hearts that he blasphemed, and so they themselves blasphemed him.

Some talk of the world and declaim against it as a vanity, but they think vainly in their heart that their houses shall endure forever. Psalm 49 11 Like the rich man who said within himself, Thou hast much goods laid up for many years, as if he thought these things his happiness. But it is said of the former that this, their way, is their folly.

Psalm 49 13 And of the latter, Thou fool. Luke 12 20 For the thought of foolishness or the foolish thought is sin. Proverbs 24 9 Therefore it is said, take heed that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart.

Deuteronomy 15 9 That is, that there be not a wicked thought in thy heart. It is true that all thoughts of evil are not evil thoughts, just as all thoughts of good are not good thoughts. A man may think of evil and yet his thoughts may be good, and a man may think of good and yet his thoughts be evil.

A man thinks of evil with good thoughts when he thinks of evil to grieve and repent for it, to abhor and forsake it. And a man thinks of good with evil thoughts when he thinks of good to neglect and scorn it, to call it evil and so to persecute it. But thoughts of sin may be sinful thoughts with respect to sin past or sin to come.

When men please themselves in the thoughts of their past sins, when they chew the cud and lick their lips after it, or as is said in Job 20 12 and 13, they hide it under their tongue as if it were a sugar plum, then they do the sin over and over again by thinking of it, although they do not act it. In this sense some interpreters understand the scripture, she multiplied her whoredoms in calling to remembrance the sins of her youth. Ezekiel 23 19 She acted it over again in her memory, in new speculations of her old sins.

On the other hand, some men, perhaps the same persons, think sinfully of the sins they have not done, grieving it and regretting they had not taken such and such opportunities, and embraced such and such temptations as they had to sin. Also, with respect to sins to come, men think sinfully in plotting, contriving and anticipating what sins they will do, although they do not do them. Against this we are charged to make no provision for the flesh.

Romans 13 14 The word is do not plan and cater for the flesh. Do not lay in fuel for such fire. Do not lie in bed and plan to fulfill the lusts hereafter, which you cannot practice at present.

I would make mention of certain considerations that you may see the sinfulness of evil thoughts. 1. SINFUL THOUGHTS DEFILE A MAN This they do, although they never come to words or deeds, and are never uttered or practiced. Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, etc., and these defile the man.

Matthew 15 19 20 Not only murder and adultery, but the thought of murdering and committing adultery defiles the man, as this text says, and our Savior says the same in another text. Matthew 5 22 28 Thus Job made a covenant with his eyes that he might not think lustfully of a maid. Job 31 1 So should we take heed to our ways, that we may not offend, not only with our tongues, but in our thoughts.

For thoughts are the words of our hearts and their deeds, and all the words of our mouths and the acts of our lives come from our hearts. Therefore, above all keepings, keep thine heart. Proverbs 4 23 2. SINFUL THOUGHTS ARE AN ABOMINATION IN THE SIGHT OF GOD God has a special eye to the thoughts of men's hearts, to those of good men, Malachi 3 16, and to those of bad men, Genesis 6 5. In good men God very often accepts the will for the deed.

If the will is present with them, though to do they have not the power, if they are as willing to do as to will the deed, God accepts the will for the deed, although they cannot do it. 2 Corinthians 8 12, Matthew 26 41. Similarly, when men will and think wickedly, God takes their will for their deed.

Just as He takes the good man's will for the deed with acceptance, so He takes the wicked man's will for the deed with abomination. For the thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord. Proverbs 15 26.

Their wicked thoughts are like filthy vapors and smells in the nostrils of God. Sin is a filthiness, and sinful thoughts have their filthiness as well as sinful actions. Therefore it is said, O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved.

How long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee? Jeremiah 4 14. The very remedy tells of the disease. If they must be washed, then surely they were filthy, for sweeping will not serve the turn.

And what was the wickedness of their heart? It follows in the text, the vain thoughts which were there, and these must be washed, or they could not be saved. So abominable in the sight of God is the villainy and vanity of thoughts. 3. Thought sins are root sins, and the roots of all other sins.

They are the mother's sins, actions being their issue. Proverbs 4 23. Evil deeds are the offspring and children of evil thoughts, the branches and fruit which grow out of this root.

Thoughts are the firstborn of the soul. Words and actions are only younger brothers. They are the oil that feeds and maintains the wick, which would otherwise go out.

Life sins receive their juice and nourishment from thought sins. St. James speaks as if our thoughts were the belly and womb where sin is conceived. James 1 15.

Now when men would curse grievously, as Job did, they cursed the day and place of their birth, the womb that bore them. So should you curse sin even in the very womb that bore it, laying the axe to the root of the tree. The wickedness of men's lives is charged upon their thoughts, that it has its roots and rise there.

Murders, adulteries, etc. all come out of the heart as out of the belly of a Trojan horse. Genesis 6 5. Matthew 12 35.

15 19. One would wonder, as do at some birds, where they nest all winter, to see so many flocks and herds of wickedness. One would wonder from what corner of the world they come.

Why, they all come out of the heart, the rendezvous of wickedness, the inn where lodge all the thieves and traveling lusts that are in the world and that do so much mischief in it. All the unclean streams flow from this unclean fountain, this ocean and sea of sin. Holy David says, I hate vain thoughts.

Psalms 119 13. That is, any thoughts that are against thy law which I love. We all hate that which is against what we love.

But why does David hate the thought of sin? Because evil thoughts beget evil words and evil words corrupt good and beget bad behavior. Vain imaginations beget vain conversations. It is hard for those who think well to do ill and harder still for those who think ill to do well.

For as the root is, so is the fruit and by that tree is known. Matthew 7 17. 4. If we had no other sins to be pardoned, yet we must beg pardon for sinful thoughts.

A man may think himself to hell if the sinfulness of his thoughts is not forgiven him. Saint Peter said to Simon Magus, repent of thy thought wickedness and pray if perhaps the thoughts of thine heart may be forgiven thee. Acts 8 22.

If God were to pardon all our word sins and evil deeds and leave only our thought sins unpardoned, we would be undone forever. Indeed, blessed David was so afraid of sin that he begs God to cleanse him from his secret sins which lay lurking in his heart and were indiscernible there. Psalm 19 12.

Even if such thoughts do not increase to more ungodliness, which they will attempt and too easily affect, yet there is impiety and ungodliness enough in them to ruin us everlastingly. I wish that those who make light of vain thoughts and even of evil thoughts, as if they had no evil in them, would think of this. 5. It is the great design of the gospel to bring thoughts to the obedience of Christ Jesus.

It is far easier to reform men's manners than to renew their minds. The laws of men may do the former, but it is the law of God which does the latter. Many men, even though they had no other company, could live along with the sins of their hearts and thoughts, pleasing themselves and blessing themselves too in their own vain imaginations and acting sins in their fancy.

Indeed, they will more easily surrender the sins of their tongues and hands than their heart sins. Now the gospel comes to throw down these strong towers, to cast down imaginations, to conquer whole armies of thoughts, to reduce these straggling and thievish highwaymen into good order and obedience. This is the glory of the gospel, beyond all the philosophy in the world, that it has such a great influence on the hearts and thoughts of men.

2 Corinthians 10 4 5 6. Conversion begins, is carried on, and is completed in the hearts and thoughts of men. It begins there, for while men are dead in sins, they do not consider or regard what is in their heart and thoughts. But when the grace of God comes in power, and they receive it in truth, they begin to think and consider, what shall we do to be saved? Men are in a great quandary in their thoughts.

They begin to be disturbed, and their bowels are turned within them. For this reason, regeneration is called the renewing of the mind, and repentance is a change of mind. The heart becomes a new heart, and when the heart is gained, all the rest follows.

If the wicked forsake his thoughts, he will quickly forsake his ways. Isaiah 55 7. The first turn is in the thoughts. I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies.

Psalm 119 59. The thoughts go before, and the feet follow after. The first movements of the prodigal were in his thoughts.

When he came to himself, he said within himself, I will arise and go to my father. While he was thus thinking, it is said, while he was afar off, just taking the first step, his father saw him and had compassion on him. Not only is conversion begun in, but it is carried on in the heart and thoughts especially, though not exclusively.

When others, like the Pharisees, study only to make the outside look fair and beautiful, the godly man is employed about his inside to keep his heart clean. The prayers of godly men are chiefly taken up about

their hearts. Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me.

Psalms 51:10. And as one excellent writer puts it, in what lies the difference between sincere hearted Christians and others, but in the keeping of the thoughts, without which all religion is but bodily exercise? Papists may mumble over their prayers. Hypocrites may talk, but this is godliness.

As conversion begins and is carried on in the thoughts, so it is completed, finished, and perfected in them. It ends there. For when a godly man comes to die, his chief and last employment is about his thoughts.

He is done with works. He has made his will and concluded all outside him. Perhaps his speech fails him, and then his main work and the conclusion, the shutting up of the whole matter, is in his thoughts.

So that when he comes into the new world of the regenerate, while he continues there, and when he is going into the world to come, his main employment is about and in his thoughts. There he began, and here he ends. 7. God keeps an account of, and will call us to account, for thoughts as well as for words and actions.

He has a book of remembrance written for them that think on his name. Yes, and for them who think on their sins too with sinful thoughts. There is no thought hid from him.

All things are naked and open before him with whom we have to do. Hebrews 4:13. Or as the words may be read, before him to whom we are to give an account. God knows our thoughts afar off.

Psalms 139:2. Long before they come out into words or actions. Deuteronomy 31:21. So the father saw the prodigal, while he was still afar off, and only thinking to return. Indeed, he searches and tries the heart to this very end, that he may give to every man according to his ways.

Jeremiah 17:9,10. God will judge righteous judgment, not according to appearance, as men do. As the man thinketh, so is he, and so shall he be judged. Men judge our inside by our outside, our heart by our work, but God judges our outside by our inside, our works by our heart.

It is for this reason that we should fear God and keep his commandments, because God will bring not only every work, but every secret thing into judgment, whether good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12:13,14. When the Lord comes, he will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart, that is, all the secret designs and projects of it. He will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, as our gospel teaches.

Romans 2:16. Think then, that for thoughts you must be judged, and therefore make conscience of them. For not only God's knowledge, scientia divina, but man's conscience, conscientia humana, will be one of the books opened as witness in that day, according to which men shall be judged. Well then, what do you say, or what shall I say to you? Have you thought evil? Lay your hand upon your mouth.

Proverbs 30:32. Not only if you have done foolishly, but if you have only thought evil, lay your hand on your mouth, that is, be humble and abased. The vanity and vileness, the folly and filthiness of our thoughts should make us ashamed. And lay your hand on your mouth for prevention also.

As people lay their hand on their mouth when they cough, lest any unsavory or unseemly thing should come from them, so do you. For what we say in our hearts we shall soon say with our lips, if we do not lay a hand on our mouth to stop the issue of vain thoughts from flowing out into and infecting our lips and

lives, our words and actions. This hive of drones will swarm if you do not lay your hand on your mouth.

This cage of unclean birds will be opened and they will take their flight. Your thoughts will run waste like water beside the mill if you do not keep a strong hand over them. In relation to this, take the following directions for your help and assistance.

One. Humbly make your address and supplication to God. Your heart is in His hands and to Him alone heart work belongs.

He only can search, cleanse, new make and keep the heart. Pray to God not only that past sins may be forgiven but that there may not be future ones needing forgiveness. Beg Him to new make your heart and to create a clean one in you.

Would you be rid of sinful thoughts? Pray against them. Lift up a prayer and cry out as Saint Paul did against the messenger of Satan. Pray without fainting that even if they are not removed His grace may be sufficient for you.

Cry out as a virgin would do in a case of rape and God will hear the cry of the oppressed and of them who groan. Call God to your relief. Tell Him you cannot stand before these troops and armies that defy Israel and Israel's God and beg Him to vindicate His own name by His own power as He can easily do.

Two. Hide the word of God in your heart that you may not sin against Him. Do as Holy David did that you might be more holy.

Psalms 119 11. Apply the plaster to the sore place. The heart is the seat and center of sin.

Apply the word there. Lay it up and it will rout and root out these Canaanites and daughters of the land who are a grief of heart to you. Sin is in the heart.

Hide the word there as if it were an ambush to cut off sin upon its first appearance. The word of God is the sword of the Spirit and there is nothing like it to wound and kill sin with. It is one of the weapons of our warfare which is mighty through God to cast down and cast out wicked imaginations.

Second Corinthians 10 4 and 5. Put on therefore this and the whole armor of God that you may be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Ephesians 6 10 to 17. He is a God who works wonders even in this matter and of this kind by His word and spirit.

Hide this word then which is the sword of the Spirit and that by which He achieves such glorious conquests over hearts and thoughts. Three. Begin the day with thoughts of God and good things.

Do not let fancies and vain imaginations get the start of you in the morning. Fancy was our playfellow for many a year before we knew what reason and understanding was. Our childhood and youth was vanity.

You know that many times school fellows and playfellows get such an intimate acquaintance and familiarity with us that it is hard to break it off. But fancy and imagination, these childish things which still have a strong hold of and strong holds in us, must be cast off before our thoughts can become obedient to Christ as the Apostle tells us. Second Corinthians 10 15.

Therefore, mount up with the lark, begin with God, think much and often that He sees and observes you. It was said by the Romans, Watch yourself, for Cato sees you. God's watching should awe you as Cato's did

them.

Psalms 44:20 and 21. And so it did David. Psalm 139:17 and 18.

If vanity gets possession in the morning, it will strive to keep it all the day. What a dish is first seasoned with, it keeps the flavor of for long after. Take, as it were, a good drought of the word in the morning to prevent the windy vapors of vain thoughts.

As soon as you wake, there are many fiddlers at your bedroom door to sing you wanton songs, but do not listen to them. Tell them and all the suitors and clients who solicit you that you are otherwise engaged and have business of consequence to mind. Do not listen to any sirens.

Stop your ear against all such charmers, no matter how pleasingly they sing and charm, for it can never be wisely nor to advantage. Thus, if when you awake, you are with God in meditation, you are likely to walk with God in your whole behavior and to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long. For, if this will not suffice, chide and check vain thoughts.

If they still haunt you and, like flies are beaten off, return again, use severity and sharpness. Alas, we are all too indulgent, courteous and gentle to these bold intruding travelers, for so they are called, 2 Samuel 12:4. There came a traveler to a rich man, a lust to David in the case of Bathsheba, for it refers to that, and he killed another man's lamb for this traveler, this lust. If he had only examined it, he would have found it to be a spy or a vagabond, which should not have been feasted, but sent to the whipping post.

The reason why we have so many peddlers coming to our doors is because we buy and take their trifles, and the reason why so many of these beggars and wandering gypsies knock at our doors is because we give them alms and lodging. If we only frowned on them and executed the law upon them, we should probably have none or less of their company. 5. Turn your eyes from beholding vanity.

Avoid occasions and appearances of evil, for the world is cheated by appearances and shows. Men become thieves when opportunity is offered them, who without it perhaps would not have thought of being so. Just as the heart inflames the eye, so the eye affects and inflames the heart.

Curiosity to see and hear the silliest pictures and wanton songs has often induced persons to think such thoughts and do such things as otherwise they would scarcely have dreamed of. Vain objects and vain speeches engender vain fancies and imaginations, and so proceed and increase to more ungodliness. 2 Timothy 2:16. Therefore the apostle warned Christians not to tell stories of fornication, uncleanness, or covetousness.

They should not be so much as named or mentioned. Ephesians 5:3. Such stories, even though only romances, leave bad impressions on men's fancies. We need to keep a strict watch over eyes and ears if ever we would preserve our hearts and thoughts pure and chaste, lest we tempt the tempter to tempt us and to make our hearts worse by opportunity and custom than they are by nature.

This made King David beg God to turn away his eyes from beholding vanity. Psalm 119:37. And good Job was so much afraid of himself that he made a covenant with his eyes, lest he should think unbecomingly of a maid. Looking produces lusting as lusting puts on looking.

Matthew 1:28. 6. Beware of idleness. Every man should have a calling to follow, and follow his calling, which is an excellent preservative from evil thoughts. Idle people have no business but to sin, and they

who follow their calling have no leisure to sin.

Their thoughts are too intent to be diverted. Time lies heavy on some men's hands for want of employment, and therefore they become busybodies, gaiting and wandering about as their fancy or the devil like the wind drives them, or like a decoy draws and allures them. 1 Timothy 5.13-15. Indeed, these idlers or busybodies are joined with evildoers, thieves and murderers.

1 Peter 4.15. They know that their time is passing away and will pass away, but they do not know how to pass it away, so that whatever temptation comes they seem to be ready. The wink of an eye or the holding up of a finger prevails with them. They follow the devil's whistle and dance to his tune.

They spend their days like vagrants, and their life is a mere diversion from that which is the business of it. They cannot endure to be with themselves, and therefore trifle away their very precious time and adventure the loss of their precious souls by becoming sinners for company. Our thoughts are so active and restless that they will be doing something or other, and like unruly soldiers, if others do not employ them well, they will employ themselves ill.

God has therefore in mercy appointed us callings to take up our thoughts, that they may be not only innocent, but profitable to ourselves and others. Paradise had employment, and heaven also will not be without it. Idleness is an hour of temptation, and we can have no excuse to stand idle in the marketplace when God himself offers to employ us.

The best way to rid our ground of weeds is to till it, and the best way to free our hearts from evil thoughts is by good employment. Only remember this, that your particular calling must not jostle out nor infringe upon your heavenly calling, nor should your being a tradesman make you forget that your conversation, your trading, must be for heaven. It would be bad for you to mind what is convenient and forget what is necessary.

Let Mary's one thing be preferred before Martha's many. 7. Love God and His Law Much In so doing your thoughts will be much upon Him and it. The love of God will find your heart work enough to do.

He who delights in God and His law will find opportunity enough to meditate therein, and pleasure enough in meditating therein day and night. Psalm 119.97 Your soul will be where it loves, and where your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will be. Matthew 6.21 Set your affection on things above, and when once your love is settled, your thoughts will center and dwell there.

Love will make you watchful and fearful, lest you should offend the Beloved of your soul. It will make you angry with and cause you to hate all the sinful thoughts that would attempt to withdraw you or to divert you. It will make you like a tree planted by the riverside, exceedingly and beautifully fruitful, for so will you be in your season.

It is meditation that is there likened to the watering of the river, and that meditation flows from delight, and that from love, as you may see. Psalm 1, 2, 3. Thus you will grow up and prosper, so much so that your leaf shall neither fade nor wither. Verse 3. Thus I have endeavored to show the sinfulness of sinful thoughts, and have endeavored to prevent them.

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