

THOUGHT CONTROL

Romans 8:5-7

"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires, but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of the sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace, because the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so."

When a person becomes a Christian, God gives him a new life through the new birth (John 3). He becomes a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) and receives a new capacity of mind, heart, and will. Many Christians struggle along with their previous pattern of thinking and do not avail themselves of the new freedom and discipline available to them. By activating his new mind and following the scriptural pattern for thinking, a person will have the emotional freedom he seeks. This scriptural pattern is found in several passages.

In Eph. 4:23 Paul said to be renewed in the spirit of your mind. This is allowing the spirit of the mind to be controlled by the indwelling Holy Spirit. The spirit of the mind is that which gives the mind the discretion and content of its thought. The renewal here is basically an act of God's Spirit powerfully influencing man's spirit, his mental attitude, or state of mind.

Romans tells us Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind . . . (Rom. 12:2). This passage is talking about a renovation, a complete change for the better. The word renewal here means to make new from above. Man's thoughts, imaginations, and seasonings are changed through the working of the Holy Spirit. As Dr. Bernard Ramm puts it, "The Holy Spirit establishes the direct connection from the mind of God to the mind of the Christian."

How does one control his/her thoughts:

1. The first step in controlling your thoughts comes from the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life. This reflects, however, upon your own willingness to let the Holy Spirit work in your life and to stop trying to run your life by yourself. Renewal of the mind brings about a spiritual transformation in the life of the Christian.
2. The second step in the process is to consider the direction of your thought-life itself. What do you think about? As suggested by Proverbs 23:7, What a man thinks in his heart, so is he. As we build up storehouses of memories, knowledge, and experiences, we seem to retain and remember those things which we concentrated upon the most. We are largely responsible for the things we let our minds dwell upon.

We are told in Philippians 4:8 just what we think about. "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

3. The third step is to realize that the Christian does not have to be dominated by the thinking of the old mind, the old pattern. He has been set free. "God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. (2 Timothy 1:7) Soundness means that the new mind can do what it is supposed to do. It can fulfill its function.
4. The fourth step is to let your mind be filled with the mind of Christ. There are three Scripture passages that place definite responsibility upon the Christian in this regard. In Philippians 2:5 Paul commanded, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." This could be translated, "Be constantly thinking this in yourselves" or "Reflect in your own minds, the mind of Christ Jesus." The meaning here for the words "this mind be" is to have understanding, to be wise, to direct one's mind to a thing, to seek or strive for." The main thrust here is for the Christian to emulate in his life the virtues of Jesus Christ as presented in the previous three verses. "Complete my joy by being of the same mind . . . Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:2-4)

In verses 6-8, another example of Christ is given--that of humility. The humility came about through submission to the will of God. The mind of Christ knew God and submitted to Him. A Christian following Jesus Christ must give his mind in submission to God.

A second passage, 1 Peter 1:13, tells us to gird up your minds. The words refer to mental exertion, putting out of the mind anything that would hinder progress in the Christian experience. Thoughts of worry, fear, hate, jealousy, and unforgiveness are to be eliminated from the mind. Nowhere in Scripture does it say we are to get rid of these thoughts if we feel like it or tell someone else to get rid of them. The responsibility is upon the individual. It takes effort, determination, and a desire to be rid of these emotions or thoughts. When the desire is there, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is available to assist. Through the work of the Holy Spirit a person can exert his will over those thoughts that work against the Christian life.

Herman Gockel wrote in Answer to Anxiety about this process: "There is more to this whole business than merely getting rid of negative or unworthy thoughts. In fact, the concept of 'getting rid' is itself a sign of negative thinking.

We shall succeed in this whole matter, not in the measure in which we empty our minds of sinful and degrading thoughts, but rather in the measure in which we fill them with thoughts that are wholesome and uplifting.

The human mind can never be a vacuum. He who thinks he can improve the tenants of his soul simply by evicting those that are unworthy will find that for every unworthy tenant he evicts through the back door several more will enter through the front (Matthew 12:43-45). It is not merely a matter of evicting. It is also a matter of screening, selecting, admitting, and cultivating those tenants that have proved themselves desirable."

This is the pattern set forth in Philippians 4:6-8 which tells what to stop thinking about and what to begin thinking about. Many Christians fail to bring into their minds the proper thoughts. Others hold on to the old pattern of thinking while they attempt to bring in the new pattern of thoughts. The result is conflict.

A third passage, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, talks about casting down every vain imagination and bringing every thought captive. Imagination is the deduction of man's reason. Every thought that would be contrary to the Christian way of life is to be eliminated. Every thought should be brought into subjection to Jesus Christ.

5. The fifth step is this: In order to sustain the new thinking pattern, it is important for the Christian to fill the mind with those thoughts and resources which will help him. Scripture itself fills this need. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to Thy Word. With my whole heart I seek Thee; let me not wander from Thy commandments! I have laid up Thy Word in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee." Ps.119:9-11

We are also told to "desire the sincere milk of the Word, that you may grow." (1 Peter 2:2). The Word of God is the safeguard against sins of the mind.

Solomon said to "Commit your works unto the Lord. (He will cause your thoughts to become agreeable to His will) so shall your plans be established and succeed." (Proverbs 16:3) An attitude of yielding and dependence upon God is a first step. A person who reads, studies, and memorizes the Word of God will find it easier to think and act according to the pattern it sets forth, as Webb Garrison wrote in "The Joy of Memorizing Scripture": 'A mind set' is slowly molded by Scripture that is memorized and often repeated. Anyone who devotes as much as 15 minutes a day to this process for several years undergoes subtle changes. Most of them occur so gradually that he is hardly aware of them."

6. Strengthen our minds with prayer. (John 16:24; 1 John 5:14, 15)