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Holiness in Spirit

THEREFORE, HAVING THESE
PROMISES, BELOVED, LET US
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GOD.

2 Corinthians 7:1, NASB

A number of years ago in campus evangelism, we used an illustration calculated to make our collegiate audiences vividly aware that they were personally sinners. We would say, "If I could flash on a screen before us tonight all of your thoughts of this past week, you would have to leave town." This remark not only made the point, but always drew a laugh. But for the Christian such a charge is no laughing matter. Our thoughts are just as important to God as our actions, and are known to God as clearly as our actions (Psalm 139:1-4; 1 Samuel 16:7).

Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount that God's commandments are intended not only to regulate outward conduct, but inner disposition as well. It is not enough that we do not kill; we must

also not hate. It is not enough that we do not commit adultery; we must not even entertain lustful looks and thoughts.

Just as we must learn to bring the appetites of our bodies under control, so we must also learn to bring our thought lives under obedience to Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul warns us against misguided and wrongly motivated attempts to control the body that leave our thought lives unrestrained (Colossians 2:23). It is possible to curb the natural appetites of the body outwardly and yet be filled with all manner of inner defilement.

The Bible indicates that our thought lives ultimately determine our character. Solomon said, "For as he thinks within himself, so he is" (Proverbs 23:7). An old well-known verse puts it this way:

Sow a thought, reap an act;
Sow an act, reap a habit;
Sow a habit, reap a character.

It is because of the importance of our thought lives that Paul said, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things" (Philippians 4:8).

As Christians we are no longer to be conformed to the pattern of this world but we are to be renewed in our minds (Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:23; 1 Peter 1:14). Holiness begins in our minds and works out to our actions. This being true, what we allow to enter our minds is critically important.

The television programs we watch, the movies we may attend, the books and magazines we read, the music we listen to, and the conversations we have all affect our minds. We need to evaluate the effects of these avenues honestly, using Philippians 4:8 as a standard. Are the thoughts stimulated by these various avenues true? Are they pure? lovely? admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy?

The world around us constantly seeks to conform our minds to its sinful ways. It is earnest and pressing in its endeavors. It will entice and persuade us (Proverbs 1:10-14). When we resist, it will ridicule and abuse us as "old-fashioned" and "puritanical" (1 Peter 4:4).

Too many Christians, instead of resisting, are more and more giving ground to the world's constant pressure. A few years ago sincere Christians were quite selective about the movies they attended, if they attended them at all. Today the same movies that were avoided are being shown on television in the livingrooms of Christians across the nation. A friend of mine told me of a young couple in full-time Christian work who came to him wanting to know if it was wrong to attend X-rated movies! That the question should even be entertained illustrates the degree to which the world has infected our minds.

The music we listen to often carries the message of the world, and the world uses the medium of music to squeeze us into its mold. And a Christian cannot help being gradually influenced if he continually listens to the world's music.

Perhaps it should go without saying that

Christians are to abstain from indulging in or listening to suggestive stories and jokes. But Paul could not take this for granted among the early churches, and neither can we in the 20th century. Listen to Paul's clear warning on the subject: "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving" (Ephesians 5:3-4). "Not even a hint of immorality" places any suggestive speech whatsoever outside the bounds of a holy walk.

Another stimulus to impure thoughts we must be alert for is what our eyes see. Jesus warned against the lustful look (Matthew 5:28). Job made a covenant with his eyes (Job 31:1). David's wanton look was almost fatal to his spiritual life (2 Samuel 11:2). Not only must we guard our own eyes; we must be careful that we are not the source of temptation to others. For this reason, modesty of dress and actions is required among both men and women (1 Timothy 2:9; 5:2).

But Philippians 4:8 speaks to more than just immoral and unclean thoughts. Our thoughts must not only be pure — they must also be true, lovely, and praiseworthy. Just as we can commit adultery in our hearts (Matthew 5:28), so we can also commit murder in our hearts (Matthew 5:21-22).

In one of his letters Paul listed some acts of the sinful nature. These included defilements of the body — sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. Others in the list

defile the spirit: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, and so on. We must purify ourselves not only from the gross sins of the body, but also from the more "acceptable" sins of the spirit.

Alas, here again we Christians have so often failed miserably. Focusing on our particular group's list of do's and don'ts, we neglect the inner life where envy, pride, bitterness, and a critical, unforgiving spirit may reign unchecked.

The elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) is a classic example of one who led an exemplary outward life but who was consumed by a spirit of envy and self-righteousness. He could claim never to have disobeyed his father's commandments; yet his jealousy and anger over his father's joy in the return of his prodigal brother marks him to this day as an example to be shunned rather than followed.

The spirit of envy was the root of King Saul's unrelenting warfare against David. Initially Saul was highly pleased with David and set him over his men of war. But one day Saul heard the women of Israel singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). Saul was very angry that they had ascribed ten thousands to David and to him only thousands. And the Scripture says, "Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on" (1 Samuel 18:9). God has placed each one of us in the body of Christ as it has pleased Him (1 Corinthians 12:18), and has assigned to each of us a place in life (1 Corinthians 7:17). To some God has assigned a place of prominence, to others a

place of obscurity; to some a place of wealth, to others a place of daily struggle to make ends meet. But regardless of our station in life or place in the Body, there is always the temptation to envy someone else. The elder brother would one day inherit all his father's possessions; yet he became jealous over a banquet to celebrate his brother's return. Saul was king over all Israel but could not stand someone else receiving more praise than he.

The cure for the sin of envy and jealousy is to find our contentment in God. Asaph in Psalm 73 was envious of the wicked as he saw their apparent prosperity (verse 3). He felt his pursuit of a holy life was in vain (verse 13). Only when he was enabled to say to God, "Besides Thee I desire nothing on earth" (verse 25), was he delivered from the sin of envy.

Another defilement of spirit that has shipwrecked many Christians is *bitterness*. Bitterness arises in our hearts when we do not trust in the sovereign rule of God in our lives. If ever anyone had a reason to be bitter it was Joseph. Sold by his jealous brothers into slavery, falsely accused by his master's immoral wife, and forgotten by one he had helped in prison, Joseph never lost sight of the fact that God was in control of all that happened to him. In the end he was able to say to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

We can become bitter against God or against other people. Asaph was bitter against God because he felt God was not giving him a fair shake in life (Psalm 73:21). Job was bitter because he felt God

was not recognizing his righteousness, and even came to the place where his attitude was described as, "It profits a man nothing when he is pleased with God" (Job 34:9).

Bitterness toward people is the result of an *unforgiving spirit*. Someone has wronged us, either apparently or actually, and we refuse to forgive that person. Instead we harbor thoughts of bitterness toward the person. We refuse to forgive because we will not recognize that God has forgiven us of far, far greater wrongs. We are like the servant who, having just been forgiven a debt of several million dollars, had a fellow servant thrown into prison over a debt of a few dollars (Matthew 18:21-35).

Closely akin to bitterness is the *spirit of retaliation*. When we are wronged, the tendency is to retaliate — often in our minds if not in actions. When David was fleeing the insurrection of his son Absalom in Jerusalem, Shimei of the family of Saul came out to curse David and throw stones at him. One of David's men wanted to retaliate by killing Shimei, but David restrained him with these words: "Let him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him. Perhaps the Lord will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day" (2 Samuel 16:11-12).

Paul wrote, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is Mine to avenge, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Peter said of our Lord, "When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges

justly" (1 Peter 2:23). This is the way to cleanse ourselves from the defiling spirit of retaliation: to entrust ourselves to Him who judges justly and who said, "It is Mine to avenge, I will repay."

One of the most difficult defilements of spirit to deal with is the *critical spirit*. A critical spirit has its root in pride. Because of the "plank" of pride in our own eye we are not capable of dealing with the "speck" of need in someone else. We are often like the Pharisee who, completely unconscious of his own need, prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like all other men" (Luke 18:11). We are quick to see — and to speak of — the faults of others, but slow to see our own needs. How sweetly we relish the opportunity to speak critically of someone else — even when we are unsure of our facts. We forget that "one who spreads strife among brothers" by criticizing one to another is one of the "six things which the Lord hates" (Proverbs 6:16-19).

All of these attitudes — envy, jealousy, bitterness, an unforgiving and retaliatory spirit, and a critical and gossiping spirit defile us and keep us from being holy before God. They are just as evil as immorality, drunkenness, and debauchery. Therefore, we must work diligently at rooting out these sinful attitudes from our minds. Often we are not even aware our attitudes are sinful. We cloak these defiling thoughts under the guise of justice and righteous indignation. But we need to pray daily for humility and honesty to see these sinful attitudes for what they really are, and then for grace and discipline to root them out of our minds and replace them with thoughts pleasing to God.