

## Managing Your Thought Life

### Romans 8:5

Richard Tow 3-15-15

Our text this morning is Romans 8:5. I'm reading from the New International Version.

*“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.”*<sup>1</sup> We have talked a lot about what it means to “live according to the sinful nature” versus what it means to “live in accordance with the Spirit.” We have seen in Romans 7 the struggle that Christians often experience because of the influence of the sinful nature versus the influence of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian deals with the battle between the flesh and the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Today we talk more specifically about how to win that battle.

In our text in Romans 8:5 we are given a crucial key to victory. That key is found in the phrase “*have their minds set on.*” The Greek word is *phroneo*. It is in the Present Indicative<sup>3</sup> Active tense, so it is something we are actively involved in doing on an ongoing basis. The active voice means it is not just something that is done to us. It is something we do in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. The present tense means it is not something we do one time; the action is continuous.<sup>4</sup> So to walk in the Spirit, we must set our minds on what the Spirit desires. To consistently live in victory, I must learn to manage my thought life. What do I need to know from Scripture to do that? Here are four biblical principles for managing your thought life:

**I. You have a choice.** God has given us a free will. And He gives us the right to choose what we will focus our thinking on (something implied by our text). There are two sources of thought flowing into our lives. On the one hand, the Devil uses our flesh to send sinful signals to our brain. An unholy thought flashes into your mind. You did not intend for that to happen. It happened so quickly, so unexpectedly that you wish it had not come and you don't really understand exactly why it came. It came from the sinful nature. That thought is not a sin. Let me repeat; that thought is not a sin.<sup>5</sup> It is an impulse from the sinful nature. It only becomes a sin if you embrace it and dwell on it.<sup>6</sup> The moment that thought comes, you have a choice. You can dismiss the thought or you can embrace it and dwell on it. Once you receive the thought and nurture it, then sin occurs. In 2 Cor. 10:5 Paul describes spiritual warfare in these terms. *“Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ”* (KJV). NIV says, “...we take captive

---

<sup>1</sup> All scripture quotes are from the New International Version unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> However, God intends for us to move into the victory described in Romans 8 rather than wallow in the struggle described in Romans 7. The potential for falling back into that struggle is always there because our practical victory is based on the exercise of faith (Heb. 10:38-39, Gal. 5:1)

<sup>3</sup> Indicative mood is used to state a fact in contrast to subjunctive primarily used for stating possibilities and imperative used to state a command.

<sup>4</sup> Our theology that celebrates the initial experience of being born again and the exalted position that places the believer in, must be made complete with an understanding of how those benefits of grace are brought into the believer's practical experience by the exercise of faith in their daily lives.

<sup>5</sup> In Luke 4:3, 6-7, 9-11 Jesus experienced thoughts contrary to the will of God. He was without sin (Heb. 4:15). The initial thought is a temptation rather than a sin. This passage also indicates that Satan can speak the temptation directly without simply inciting the sinful nature, for Jesus did not have a sinful nature. However, the more common experience is for the thought to proceed from the sinful nature (James 1:14).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther reportedly said something like this. “You can't stop a bird from flying over your head, but you can stop it from building a nest in your hair.”

*every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*” So there are on the negative side, thoughts that spring from our sinful nature or flesh. On the positive side, there are thoughts coming to us from the Spirit of God within us. We have a choice concerning those thoughts as well. Will we hear that still small voice? Will we cultivate a sensitivity to what He is saying? When He speaks will we receive that and do what He is telling us to do? Have you ever been in the process of saying something and suddenly in the pit of your stomach, the Holy Spirit was saying “No, don’t say that?” It’s really awkward because we feel like we need to finish our sentence; but, we also feel the grieving of the Holy Spirit. The best thing to do is stop immediately. You may be able to just move to another subject or you may have to say, “I’m sorry, but I probably need to move on to something else.” The more we obey the voice of God, the easier it is to hear Him. The more we ignore Him the duller our hearing becomes. We have a choice as to what we will do with the impulses and thoughts that come from our sinful nature. We have a choice as to what we will do with the impulses and thoughts that come from the Spirit. The choices we make at that level are crucial.

## **II. The thoughts you embrace drive your behavior.**

People who typically say, “I cannot help myself” are usually indicating that the emotions are so strong that they lose control and then right off the tip of my tongue, I say that angry, or cuss or lust or go into depression or whatever the case may be. If you wait until the last minute to deal with lust, to deal with anger, to deal with self-pity—you will probably lose the battle. The emotional momentum may very well take you places you did not intend to go. But the secret is to not wait until the last minute. First understand that thoughts drive emotions. The way an emotion is provoked is by thinking on something and in ways that incite that emotion. You control your emotions by managing your thoughts. You cannot directly access your emotions. You do that by controlling the thought life. If you have a problem with anger, the solution is found in the way you think and what you think about. The solution is not to just grit your teeth and try to not be angry. That will not work. The emotion of anger builds in me when I begin to think about what Jim did to me yesterday; then by association I remember the stunt he pulled last year; then the way other kids treated me when I was a kid; and Dad did something like that to me when I was 10 years old—and before you know it I’m in a rage. Any little thing will set me off. Archibald Hart calls that chaining.<sup>7</sup> My thoughts move from one related event to another and my emotions build. I have to learn how to break that chain. But the main point we want to understand right now is this. Thoughts drive emotions. Thoughts and emotions drive behavior.

Your mind is the control tower. Thoughts are flowing from your sinful nature. Thoughts are flowing from the Spirit within. External influences are exciting one or the other. We have to decide what input we will turn on and what input we will turn off. Some TV programs need to be turned off. Some music needs to be turned off; some music needs to be turned on. Some conversations need to be disengaged; others need to be pursued. It’s not a perfect illustration but let me give you a concrete picture of what I’m saying. Suppose I have a huge water tank with two faucets pointed into it. The source of one faucet is dirty, polluted water. The source of the other faucet is pure, clean Rocky Mountain spring water. I can choose which one of those faucets I turn on. And when it’s all said and done the tank will be full of the water I put in it. I have a responsibility to fill my mind with wholesome, healthy things. I have a responsibility to think on good things and dismiss the evil. This is primarily where the battle occurs.

What I set my mind on is not visible to anyone else directly. But it eventually becomes visible through my actions and the results of those actions.

There is Eve living in Paradise with Adam. She has a perfect environment, a loving husband, provision for everything she could ever need, close communion with God, and access to the Tree of Life so that it

---

<sup>7</sup> I think it was in his book, *Unlocking the Mystery of Your Emotions*, that I read this. However, I do not have that book to check the page number. Archibald Hart has written several books and I highly recommend his teaching.

could go on forever. But she sets her mind on something else. There was only one thing God forbids her to take. That was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And that is what she set her mind on. That is what she pursued. Focused on what she could not have instead of what God had given her. Be careful when your focus turns to what you cannot have. If you focus on what you have, you become thankful. If you focus on what you cannot have you become discontent. And “*godliness with contentment is great gain.*”<sup>8</sup> Anyway, Eve set her mind on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. She entertained the wrong thoughts. Her thoughts led to action and this action led to death.

King David was about 50 years old<sup>9</sup> when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband. 2 Samuel 11 tells us David was lounging around in his palace one evening when he looked out the window and saw Bathsheba bathing. He set his mind on that which was forbidden. We know that because he inquired about her and eventually committed adultery with her. Adultery didn’t happen in an instant. It was the fruit of his thought life. Whatever gets your attention will eventually get you.

The Christian, who sets his mind on personal indulgences, will have personal indulgences. David got his indulgence; but there was a whole lot of baggage that came with it that he did not want. It cut him off from the sweet communion of the Holy Spirit, instead of peace he experience turbulence in his soul.<sup>10</sup> I can set my mind on the things of this world that I want, pursue selfish ambitions and become a greedy, covetous, selfish person. Or I can think about God’s goodness, His plans for me, what He desires to do in me, mediate on His word, get my focus and worship on Him, center my fellowship with others around our relationship with Him—and I will find myself walking in the Spirit. I will find myself empowered by the life of Christ in me. I will experience His love and joy and peace in a practical, day-to-day reality. The precursor to Spirit-filled living is Spirit-filled thinking: right choices about the focus of our thought life. Feed what you want to grow, and starve what you want to die.<sup>11</sup>

**III. With your thoughts you cultivate desire**—whether it be good desire or bad desire. You are cultivating something in the garden of your mind. Everybody has a garden to cultivate and seed to sow. You can sow thoughts of love, joy, and peace or you can sow thoughts of anger and discontent. Something is growing in the garden. The person who feeds himself thoughts of self-pity will become accustomed to that pattern of thinking. He will develop a victim mentality that will sabotage his future. The person who meditates on God’s faithfulness and provision will tend to think in those terms. David had courage when he heard the threats of Goliath because he immediately thought about God’s faithfulness in the past. That response was a reflection on the patterns of his thought life. “A bear came out one time to devour my flock, and God enabled me to take him out.” That’s not victim mentality; that’s victor mentality.” A lion attacked, but God was there to help me. You can count on Him. I will count on Him in this situation.” Here’s what we must understand—the response of the moment did not happen in a vacuum. David was not standing there trying to muster up faith for the moment. He had cultivated faith in his thinking long before that.

You can cultivate greed by setting your mind on having more. You can cultivate lust by setting your mind on lustful thoughts. You can cultivate anger by setting your mind on offenses and injustices. On the other hand, you can cultivate peace by setting your mind on the faithfulness of God. You can cultivate love by dwelling on the love of God and His grace in your life. You can cultivate joy by meditating on God’s goodness to you. What mindset are you cultivating? Are your thoughts consistent with God’s thoughts and His plans for you?

---

<sup>8</sup> 1Tim. 6:6 KJV

<sup>9</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of David in Two Volumes*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, p. 20).

<sup>10</sup> Ps 32:3-5; 2Sam. 12:14-18.

<sup>11</sup> A sentence I once heard T.D. Jakes say.

In Genesis 15 God met with Abraham, who had become discouraged. The promises God had given him earlier were not happening and Abraham had just fought a hard battle. He was thinking pretty negative when he said to the Lord, “*O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless....?*” God did two things to help Abraham get his thoughts back on track. First, He spoke words of assurance and affirmation to him, words that corrected the way Abraham was thinking. Then He took Abraham outside his tent, directed his attention toward the stars in heaven, and gave them as concrete reminders of what God would do. “Abraham, I am going to bring my promises to pass. But first I’ve got to get you to thinking right. Your journey is a journey of faith and that is not unrelated to your thought life. So as you proceed on your journey, every night look up to the heavens in remembrance<sup>12</sup> of what I have told you. That will help you maintain the right focus and orientation.

The Greek word in Romans 8:5, *phroneo*, is more of a mindset than a single thought. It is the direction of thinking you assume.<sup>13</sup> What are you pursuing in your thoughts? This is the word Jesus used in his rebuke of Peter in Mark 8:33. Jesus had just shared with the disciples the rejection and suffering he would endure at the hands of the religious rulers. He had just told them of his pending death when Peter took him aside to correct him. You would think by now Peter would know better, but he takes it upon himself to correct Jesus. He doesn’t want to do it in front of the others, doesn’t want to embarrass Jesus,<sup>14</sup> but he takes him aside to set him straight. No, Jesus, that’s not a good plan. You need to ride in on a white horse and conquer these people, not be slain by them. Jesus’ response to Peter in KJV is “*Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of man.*” The word translated “*savourest*” is *phroneo*. NIV is a clearer translation. “*You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.*” In other words, Peter, you have set your mind on the desires of the sinful nature not on the desires of the Spirit. That story serves as a commentary on what it means to set our minds (*phroneo*) on the desires of the flesh. Peter had in mind an earthly kingdom in which he would be one of the big shots. God says in Isaiah 55:8-9 “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” All Peter had to do in order to miss it, was to rely on his own thinking rather than listen to what God had to say about the matter.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Jesus said, “*This do in remembrance of Me*” (1Cor. 11:24-25). He gave the ordinance of Communion/Eucharist with concrete elements to help His followers keep the main thing as the main thing. Regular partaking of the Lord’s Table is essential to keep us focused on the Lord and His great work of salvation. There are many good things that must not ever take the place of Jesus as the center of it all.

<sup>13</sup> See Strong’s definition (3) “to direct one’s mind to a thing, to seek, to strive for”. Context helps us understand the author’s use of the word and in Rom. 8 this seems to be the primary connotation.

<sup>14</sup> It strikes me as humorous that Peter would take Jesus aside like this and correct him. Maybe his success in Mark 8:29 (Matt. 16:16-19) spared a little pride in this all-to-human disciple.

<sup>15</sup> How do I know whether I am thinking in the Spirit and walking in the Spirit or thinking in the flesh and walking in the flesh? Those two courses will manifest different fruit. Galatians 5 gives us a clear picture of each one. Verse 19 “*The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” If my life is characterized by sexual immorality, or idolatry, or hatred, discord, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition or the like—then I am not walking in the Spirit. I am living a carnal, fleshly life that is going to rob me of the good things God has for me in His kingdom. What does my life look like if I am thinking and living according to the Spirit? Gal 5:22-23 “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control....*” I’m kind to other people; I give them the benefit of the doubt; I’m not judgmental; I’m not self-absorbed. I’m patient. I manage my emotions; I have self-control; I don’t sulk. I encourage and support others. I spread joy and peace; I love my neighbor as myself.

*Phroneo* is also the word Paul used in Phil. 2: 5 “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*” KJV actually makes that clearer, “*Let this mind (phroneo) be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But made of himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. 9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heave, and things in earth, and things under the earth; 11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father.*” That is a picture of a mind set on the desires of the Spirit. Jesus came to do the will of the Father. His mind was set on what the Father desires and He pursued that even at great personal cost. The mind set on the flesh is selfish, self-centered, and self-willed. The mind set on the Spirit is yielded to God, sensitive to His desires, and in pursuit of His will. Paul had a mind set on the desires of the Spirit when he said in Phil. 3:7-15 “*But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. 15 All of us who are mature should take such a view of things....*” This is the way we ought to be thinking.

#### **IV. Personal transformation occurs as the mind is renewed.**

Rom 12:1-2 “*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your spiritual act of worship. 2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will.*”

So here is a contrast: “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but (in contrast) be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” There is a pattern of thought, a way of thinking that prevails in the world; it is inspired by the god of this world (Satan). It basically says, “Look out for number one (me), take all you can get and give as little as possible in the process.” It is a consumption mentality. And there are plenty of pressures around us to conform to that way of thinking. Our own sinful nature agrees with it. The lust, greed, materialism, idolatry of the culture screams its political correctness. But God says to His people, My kingdom is not of this world. You are on an altogether different pursuit. You are being groomed, equipped and prepared for the age to come. Your pursuit is transformation (*metamorphoomai*)<sup>16</sup>. Your goal is to be conformed to the image of Christ.<sup>17</sup> And the way that happens is “*by the renewing of your mind.*”

There has to come a reconstruction of the way you think, the desires you cultivate, the goals you pursue. Have you ever remodeled a kitchen? There are things that have to be torn out and there are new things that have to be put in place. There are old patterns of thinking that have to go and there are new ways to

<sup>16</sup> The Greek word from which we get our English word, metamorphosis.

<sup>17</sup> Romans 8:29.

thinking that have to be established. It is a lot of work; it is a process. It doesn't happen overnight, but the end result is good.

As I talk about all of this, one thing has to be kept in mind. We are actively involved, but we cannot bring it about. We actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit from beginning to end. "*Without faith it is impossible to please God*" (Heb. 11). Everything is done in reliance upon the Holy Spirit. We're not talking about behavior modification. Psychologists have learned that behavior can be changed by changing the thinking. You may have heard of Pavlov's dog. Ivan Pavlov got his dog to associate eating with the ringing of a bell. By that association the dog later would salivate just by the ringing of the bell. Behaviorism can get some positive results because it is based on some of the principles we've been talking about. But that will only take you so far. We're not talking about positive thinking or any of those self-help techniques although being positive seems to be a better way to live than being negative. What we're talking about is our active cooperation with a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. We're talking about being transformed (not just conditioned) by the renewing of the mind. Behaviorism can help with modifying some behaviors, but it does not change the basic motivations of the heart. That only happens as God pours out His love into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). That only happens as God supernaturally writes His laws in our hearts and minds (Heb. 10:16). But it does not happen without our cooperation in faith. We can't do it without the Holy Spirit (John 15:5) and He won't do it without our participation (2Pet. 1:5).

Next week we will talk about some practical action we can take in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Today we want to make sure these four principles are understood: (1) You have a choice about what you will set your mind on (2) The thoughts you embrace will drive your behavior (3) With your thoughts you cultivate desire and (4) Personal transformation occurs as your mind is renewed. With those four principles in mind, we manage our thought life in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. The question we must continually ask ourselves is this: Am I setting my mind on the desires of the sinful nature, or am I setting my mind on what the Spirit desires? How about last week? How about this week? Let us pray.

## OUTLINE

### **Intro:**

(1) Text: Rom. 8:5 (NIV)

*"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."*

(2) Key to Victory = phrase "*have their minds set on.*"

-Greek: *phroneo* is in Present Indicative Active

-To live in victory, I must learn to manage my thought life.

(3) Five principles for doing that:

### **I. You have a choice.** Two sources of thought flowing into our lives.

(1) Flesh sends sinful signals to our brain.

Can embrace or dismiss.

2 Cor. 10:5 "*Cast down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*" (KJV).

(2) Holy Spirit prompts thoughts according to will of God.

We have a choice concerning those thoughts as well.

The more we obey the voice of God, the easier it is to hear Him.

### **II. The Thoughts you Embrace Drive your Behavior.**

- (1) Emotion is provoked by our thinking.
- (2) External influences excite thoughts. We decide what input we turn on or turn off.
- (3) Thought life is not visible to anyone else directly.  
Examples of Eve and David
- (4) The precursor to Spirit-filled living is Spirit-filled thinking—right choices about the focus of our thought life.

### **III. With your Thoughts you Cultivate Desire**—whether it be good desire or bad desire.

- (1) You can cultivate greed by setting your mind on having more.  
You can cultivate joy by meditating on God’s goodness to you.
- (2) *Phroneo*, is more of a mindset than a single thought. It is the direction of thinking you assume.  
Mark 8:33, Phil. 2:5 “*Let this mind (phroneo) be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus*” KJV.

### **IV. Personal transformation occurs As the Mind is Renewed.**

- (1) Rom 12:1-2 “*...Do not conform... to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*”
- (2) We actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit from beginning to end. “*Without faith it is impossible to please God.*”  
This is transformation, not just behavior modification (Ivan Pavlov).

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Do you think Christians have the power to choose their thoughts? Why or why not?  
What has been your experience in attempting this?
2. Do you think thoughts drive emotions? Why or why not?  
Do you think our thought life drives our behavior and thus the course of our lives? Why or why not?
3. How do external influences (TV, friends, etc.) affect our thought life? How do you manage this?
4. If thoughts cultivate desires, how do we cultivate hunger for God and righteousness?  
How do we avoid cultivating lust, anger, greed, etc.?
5. How do we actively participate in this process without developing a “works” mentality?  
Why can’t we just be passive and let God do it all? Will it happen if we neglect our responsibility?