

SERMONS VIII and IX

by

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"And bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." 2 Corinthians 10:5

Sermon VIII

The religion of the cross lays a broad and uncompromising claim to the obedience of man's entire nature. Unlike all the systems of heathen morality and of false religion, Christianity extends its province over *the secrets of the heart* and aims to purify and control the currents of hidden *thought*. The former's goal is only to make "*the outside of the cup and platter clean*" (Luke 11:39), but the cardinal maxim of Christianity is to "*make the tree good, that its fruit may be good also*" (Matt. 12:33). And this is in exact accordance with the true philosophy of our nature. The religion of the gospel commences its process of transforming human character in the right place, from *within*, in the deep thoughts of the soul. From there they work outward and manifest themselves in the life and actions. The power of thought is the power that sways man. "*As a man thinks in his heart, so is he*" (Pr. 23:7).

Now Christianity recognizes this as a fact in our moral constitution and therefore mercifully furnishes us means for the government of our thoughts. In the verses preceding our text, Paul speaks of these means under the metaphor of weapons of warfare, mighty through God in the "*pulling down of strongholds*" (vs. 4) This is a most expressive metaphor that denotes their power to remove *external* hindrances to our salvation. But can these weapons effect nothing more? What is to be done with wayward imaginations and hidden thoughts of pride? Paul answers, in our text, that these weapons are not only mighty for pulling down strongholds, but that they are mighty for casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, "*bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.*"

It is obvious from this passage that the right control of our thoughts is not effected by the direct or arbitrary power of God. Were it so, then the language here employed would be contradictory, for we read of "warfare" and "weapons," weapons surely not for God but for us. He furnishes us with the means of a right government of our thoughts and gives them their efficiency.

From this text I propose to look into what is implied in a right government of our thoughts.

I.

First, it implies self-inspection, that is, noticing carefully what is going on secretly within one's mind. This habit of closely scrutinizing the secrets of the soul is by no means easily acquired. This first step will be a painful effort, and I fear that it is a step yet to be taken by many professors of Christ.

It is truly astonishing to notice how little reflection, how little direct effort to inspect the multitude of our secret thoughts, is made by those who have professed entire subjection to the law of Christ. This is an age of *outward shows*, when even the most serious books addressed to the understanding, the reason, and the moral sentiments must have pictorial illustrations. The attention of man must now have some visible or palpable object on which to focus. Material things engross and monopolize his notice. Attention to things present and the remembrance of similar things in the past constitute almost the entire use of his mind. And yet these material things furnish only a small part of the innumerable thoughts which pass through the mind, for a countless multitude of other thoughts flow on daily in a deep undercurrent of the mind.

This may surprise you, but it is nonetheless a well authenticated fact that every night when you retire you have utterly forgotten at least two-thirds of the whole number of thoughts that have passed through your mind during the day and evening. We know of nothing so busy and preeminently active and rapid in its movements as the human mind. Each day it creates for itself a little world of secret thoughts.

The man who would govern his thoughts aright must fix his attention on *all* that is going on within his own mind. He must exercise a close discriminating observation on what is passing there so as to enable him to detect their real character. And by this habit of rigid self-inspection he will make another equally astonishing discovery: his thoughts are *rebellious ones*, often violating the law of conscience and of God. They are wild outlaws that must be *captured* and tamed by the dexterous use of the weapons of Christian warfare, a work for which he needs the strength of the Lord of hosts.

Second, one must try to ascertain the causes that arouse the various trains of thought in his mind. If a physician does not find and understand the immediate cause of disease, how can he intelligently prescribe or perform a cure? And if we will not reflect and examine ourselves and make an effort to ascertain the causes that excite our trains of thought, how is it possible for us to engage intelligently in the solemn imperious duty of bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ?

When thoughts are once in the mind, they cannot be banished by a wish or mere act of the will. The very attempt to "will them out" keeps them there. The great if not the most important part in governing our thoughts consists in *prevention*. Now in order to prevent anything from taking place in our thoughts, we must know and remove the causes that produce it. On one occasion

Jesus taught the Jews that they could commit a most criminal act in their secret thoughts by the use they made of the outward eye (Matt. 5:28). Such being the case, will it require any great wisdom, then, to find that *companionship* is a definite cause for unwholesome thoughts? The language, manners, spirit and character of those with whom we associate not only influence our mind while we are with them but continue to do so long after we are separated from them.

The same is true regarding the *books* we read. Books become powerful and all-controlling causes in arousing our thoughts. What long periods of musing, criminal imaginations, and wild and lawless thinking is produced in the mind of the reader long after he has finished reading an unwholesome novel. And do not *places* too become the means of arousing sinful thoughts? Let a man visit the tavern or indulge himself by watching a questionable play, and he will find that long after the tavern and playhouse have closed the remembrance, or even the sight, of those places will once again put in motion those tumultuous waves of unholy thoughts.

Third, obviously included in governing our thoughts is a constant watchfulness to avoid or remove those causes which prompt improper and sinful trains of thought. To wait until streams of improper thoughts are actually in the mind before engaging in battle to thwart them is running an imminent risk of being defeated in the struggle. It is like waiting till the foe is within the walls of the city, nay in the very citadel, before we attack and attempt to repulse him.

One of the methods of successful defense in literal warfare is to prevent the approach and entrance of the enemy by means of digging ditches and raising embankments. This art of prevention is a law of the mind. When a wrong thought is permitted to enter and lodge even once, a foundation is laid for its recurrence, with the entrance being easier the second time. And by avoiding the wrong thought in the first place we can avoid establishing those habits of association or suggestion of thought that will, from their very nature, bring unhealthy thoughts to mind.

Why is it that even at a distance the very sight of a signpost for the tavern will bring into the mind of the drunkard thoughts of indulgence until his whole mind is filled with the riotous scene and he is overcome with an unconquerable thirst for strong drink? The answer is obvious. He has established associations by going there; and now the sight of the place, by an irresistible law of his mind, must and will bring with it this abominable train of thoughts. Now let me ask why it is that the very same sign awakens a wholly different train of thought to the man who has always avoided it. We find his mind filled with benevolent regret and sorrow, for he knows of the revolting orgies of drunkenness that take place there and the wrecks of property and reputation that result from it. Now this also is the law of association or suggestion of thought, but happy is the man who with a divine earnestness and sleepless vigilance avoids all known causes of arousing improper and sinful thoughts.

Fourth, we must exert a constant watchfulness to avail ourselves of the influence of those causes that excite proper and holy trains of thought. A good control over our wayward and rebellious thoughts cannot be established by an idle wish or a mere arbitrary act of the will. We

must *wisely* adopt and *watchfully* apply the means suited to secure this end. There are "weapons" to be used if we would ever bring our thoughts "into captivity."

We will find that *holy companionship* is a means to having holy thoughts, just as wicked companionship is the opposite. The sentiments, language, manners and pious spirit of the communion of saints will not only influence our minds while in contact with them, but will also lay the foundation of long and profitable trains of thought after parting. The man who wishes to be successful in governing his thoughts will be very careful whom he selects as his companions and how he spends his social hours.

Reading pious authors will also promote holy thoughts. To the man who would succeed in governing well his own thoughts, this choice of authors is a matter of unspeakable moment. In their influence on the mind--for good or for evil--books have one advantage even over conversation and companionship. *They are our companions in solitude, when impressions made on the mind are always deepest.* There is no fear that the book, unlike a living companion, will suspect what is going on in the reader's mind. How many awakened sinners have wept in secret when reading "Baxter's Call" or "Alleine's Alarm," when they might have become defensive had the very same suggestions been addressed to them in conversation by pious companions. And how many a lady, shut up in her own room with the curtains of midnight drawn around her, has read novels that have aroused deep and agitating trains of thought that she would be afraid to entertain for a moment were she in the presence of others.

Now this is what gives books such a controlling power over our thoughts. They have the advantage of operating in silence and solitude, when the mind is least distracted and most unsuspecting, when the mind is most open to impressions. One must, therefore, read only the best of books in order to excite the most virtuous trains of thought. What streams of deep and holy thought, pious and exalted emotions have Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, Howe's *Blessedness of the Righteous*, and Payson's *Memoirs* given to men! And what shall we say of the Bible, God's book to man, speaking in man's own language to his inmost soul and proving a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart? The infinite perfections of Jehovah which it reveals--the doctrine of his omniscience and omnipresence, his scheme of providence and his stupendous plan of love and mercy through Christ, the infinite sorrows and immortal triumphs of the cross, the rules of man's actions with their eternal sanctions, the hell to avoid and the heaven to win--these are some of the exciting themes of thought contained in the Bible!

The diligent, humble, prayerful student of the Bible will find that the great and difficult work of governing his thoughts can be effected by *meditating* on the word of God. And the habit of committing to memory a verse or two every morning cannot be too highly commended. A portion thus treasured in the mind will not only give direction to the flow of our thoughts during that single day on which it is committed, but it will prove the prolific seed of thoughts in many subsequent years of life. This duty requires a daily, prayerful perusal of the Bible as the great moving cause of godly streams of thought and as an indispensable means of successful

rule over our spirits.

Certain *places* too will bring good and pious trains of thought. The sanctuary and the more familiar places of social worship will excite many a sweet remembrance, many a long and pleasing train of thought after the voice of prayer and praise has ceased. When a man has learned to keep the Sabbath holy, when he has established and carefully observed definite hours for secret prayer and meditation, he will find his mind sweetly turned to thoughts of God and divine things even amid all the external confusion of a crowd of noisy passengers.

It may be added that certain *actions*, those that spring from right thoughts, will in turn prove the fruitful sources of profitable thinking. Visits of mercy to the poor, to the sick, and to the dying together with your sympathies, prayers, and aid are acts in their very nature adapted to becoming the moving causes of numerous happy trains of thought long after they have been performed. Your efforts to promote the edification of Christian brothers, to convert sinners, together with your contributions to send the message of the gospel abroad, will do the same. Will not memory revisit those places and prompt your prayers in their behalf? Will not the perishing sinner to whom you have witnessed claim many a thought and prayer after your first, and perhaps your only, conversation with him? Be assured, my dear hearers, that one of the greatest facilities of governing the thoughts is to be constantly employed in beneficent action.

And in this regard, let me warn you against sloth and indolence. Beware of those hours in which you propose nothing definite to be done, because your mind, in its very nature, continues to be active. If you are not aiming in any way to furnish your mind with some definite and proper employment, rest assured that during such intervals the "world, the flesh, and the devil" will be delighted to furnish them for you!

Fifth, the right government of our thoughts means governing all of them. God has not left it optional with us to select that class of thoughts which we may regard as easiest and most agreeable to govern. He will have the *whole heart*, or he will leave us to utter disappointment and failure in our partial efforts. Aim at a noble, sweeping universality. Those mighty weapons of your warfare indicate that you are to struggle for the victory you hope to attain. God will accept nothing less at your hands. Now this may seem hard. You may halt and well nigh faint in the great and prolonged effort necessary. But God will help you. He will strengthen you with fresh courage by speaking into your souls his own word, "bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

Sixth, we must acknowledge at the start that this is an arduous and mighty work. We put forth effort and apply a power in exact proportion to our views of the magnitude and difficulty of the work to be done. If we wrongly estimate the weight of a beam of timber, we shall certainly fail in our first effort to pick it up, for we have applied less power than what was necessary.

Now this principle is just as applicable to moral endeavors as physical. An undervaluation of

the real difficulty and mightiness of the work will render all attempts at governing the thoughts unsuccessful. The number of our thoughts is appalling, running on during our waking hours in one continuous stream, succeeding each other with the speed of lightning, the busy soul throwing out a thought at every moment, in the twinkling of an eye; and yet we are required to watch and give directions to them, to sway and control them all as God demands them to be governed! Then reflect on the subtle nature of thought, how it originates in that purely spiritual part of our nature, how silently and secretly thought after thought arises there! How faint is our own consciousness of their number and character as they occur. How soon some of them seem to vanish and are utterly forgotten by us, but not by that Omniscience who sees even our *secret thoughts afar off!* (Ps. 139:2). Take into consideration too what a world of turmoil and confusion there is to divert our attention. All our senses are constantly assaulted by external things--the hustle and bustle, the noise and tumult of ordinary pursuits. And then there is the still more formidable difficulty of that dreadful bias of the fallen mind--the natural, deep-rooted dislike of having our thoughts governed as God demands.

The remains of the natural man, who receives not the things of the Spirit, are still here to seduce the thoughts from their allegiance and foment rebellion. All the passions and appetites of the flesh war against the right government of the thoughts. We also have the temptations, the wiles, the power and malicious policy of a mighty fallen spirit, who doubtless has modes of access to our minds and means of influencing our trains of thought for evil, and of which we can form no adequate conception. And with all this fearful array of difficulties, contemplate for a moment the *kind* of government we are to exercise over our thoughts. It is a *universal* government, from which no thought can be excused or excluded. What a standard of obedience! He who would successfully perform this work must carry with him the undying conviction that it will call for the undivided energies of his whole being.

And hence I remark, ***lastly, this duty implies that we earnestly seek and humbly depend on the influences of the Holy Spirit to control our thoughts.*** Our efficient help is in the Lord God of Hosts alone. It is by a prayerful seeking of the Holy Spirit, and by a humble, gracious confidence in his influence to control our thoughts, that we connect ourselves with the only power in the universe that has a supreme and absolute command over the whole empire of thought. The human mind, with all its secret springs and susceptibilities, is a perfect transparency, always "*naked and open*" (Heb. 4:13) to the gaze of the Spirit's omniscience. The Holy Spirit is infinitely benevolent and takes a most deep and sympathizing interest in the difficult and mighty task of governing our thoughts. He will smile upon us and give us his almighty aid in the feeblest effort sincerely made to perform this arduous work. It is his office to "*search all things, yea, the deep things of God*" (1 Cor. 2:10). and reveal them to us.

To inspire you with an unshaken confidence in his absolute control over our thoughts, let me remind you how irresistibly he influences the convicted sinner's mind. In that case there is all the enmity of the carnal mind warring against every right thought, all the power of cherished and fortified habits, the pleadings of all the depraved passions and appetites of man's fallen nature, and his own voluntary and desperate resolve to shake off all religious impressions.

What then cannot the Spirit effect for the believing soul who *seeks* his aid, humbly *depends* on his influence to guide his thoughts aright? Oh, seek him with all your heart, confide in him, yield your whole soul to his divine control, live perpetually in his presence. Then that presence will form a wall of fire to guard every avenue to your minds from the intrusion of unprofitable thoughts, while at the same time his divine teachings and direct influences will awaken a ceaseless succession of holy thoughts that will continue until every thought shall be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and that shall be laid as a sanctified offering at his feet.

Sermon IX

Now, the preceding discourse (Sermon VIII) was confined exclusively to *inquiring what is implied or included in the duty of governing the thoughts*. I ask again for your serious attention while I present some considerations to enforce this duty.

First, our thoughts are part of our moral accountability; we are responsible for them and will have to answer for them at the bar of God. God is to "*judge the secrets of men's hearts*" (Rom. 2:16). The idea that our outward acts as they appear to the world are to constitute the only items in our final account before God is utterly preposterous. The *entire workings* of the busy spirit of man here in God's world and under the schemes of providence and grace are to be developed and accounted for at the judgment of the great day.

Is not the mind *voluntary* in all its thinking? Does not the quality of right or wrong attach to secret thoughts as well as to those of sinful or holy actions? And if so, what can be more manifest than that our thoughts are a part of our moral and accountable workings for which we shall be judged, and either condemned or acquitted. Not only will our thoughts be a part, but they will be by far the greater part of our final accountability to God.

Reflect for a moment how small is the sum of what we actually do compared with what we think every day. As to numbers, our actions dwindle into insignificance in comparison with the multitude of our thoughts. Is it safe, then, to neglect the government of our thoughts, to leave this great sphere of our accountable activity to be filled at random, its movements unnoticed, unchecked, and uncontrolled?

Second, the thoughts which you habitually cherish will exert a controlling influence in forming your moral character and in shaping your course of outward action. No one will doubt that Solomon had a deep practical knowledge of human nature. Indeed, the accuracy and precision with which he traces the operation of those causes that form moral character and influence outward action is a striking peculiarity of his writings. Now under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit this wisest of men has uttered a profound maxim in the philosophy of human nature: "*as a man thinks in his heart, so is he*" (Pr. 23:7). The truth so obviously disclosed in this maxim is that our thoughts, even our *most secret thoughts*, exert the controlling and

decisive influence in forming our moral character and shaping our actions.

You must be aware that in order to form the mind to any particular moral character, certain objects must first be present to the mind. If no such objects were within the cognizance of the mind to arrest its attention, employ its activities, and interest its affections, they could not exert any influence whatever on his character. Now if objects of contemplation must be before the mind in order to influence and form its character, then the more constantly and intimately they are present the more powerfully and decisively will be their influence. And what objects can be so constantly and so intimately present to the mind as its own thoughts?

It is a capital mistake to think that outward circumstances mainly form the character, for a little reflection should convince you otherwise. The mind can only focus on external things for a comparatively short period. These external things would, therefore, exert little to no influence on a man's character if it were not that he had the power of remembering and thinking of them afterward. Favorable or unfavorable external circumstances, then, are to be sought or avoided not because they can be kept constantly before the mind so as to seriously influence its character, but because they are the exciting causes of streams of right or wrong thinking prosecuted by the mind at a later time.

How manifest, then, must it be that those thoughts which we habitually cherish decide our moral character and actions. They can be called the family circle of the mind, dwelling in deep, affectionate, and secret intimacy. The closest privacy is here, the mind yielding itself to the most unrestricted communion with its thoughts without fear that its secrets will ever be betrayed to anyone else. They form a little internal world and incessantly hold up their objects--bright or dark, pure or polluted--to the eye of the soul.

When, therefore, you see a man exhibiting the traits of a lofty moral character, a stern integrity, an inflexible adherence to truth, a Christ-like forgiveness of injuries, a conscience faithful to the whole compass of Christian duty and a spirit of deep devotion to God, you may be assured that such a character was not formed by chance nor merely by outward circumstances. It is the product, the legitimate effect, of a strict government over the thoughts. That man has experienced a tremendous secret conflict in taking captive his thoughts and reducing them to obedience. He has had his hours of retired meditation by which he has imbued his mind with the love of what is right and true. He has had his seasons of silent, deep communion with his own heart, in which he has long and patiently held up before it objects of benevolence, the beauty of holiness, and the charms of an unreserved and self-sacrificing consecration to God. His thoughts have formed his character; and this seems to be what the Saviour means when he says, "*by their fruits ye shall know them*" (Matt. 7:20).

And when you see a man displaying a signally depraved moral character, a lack of principle, a lack of truth, a lack of charity, a supreme selfishness intent only on his personal gratification, a malicious temper, a reckless disregard of the claims of God, you may know with certainty that such a character has not been formed by chance but is the legitimate effect of a total neglect to

govern his thoughts. That man has silently yielded without a struggle to streams of evil forbidden thoughts. He has had his hours of retired meditation too, when he has cherished thoughts of the seeming advantage of dishonesty and falsehood. So has he had his seasons of silent, deep communion with his own heart, when he has held up before it objects of supreme selfishness, plans of personal gratification, pictures of revenge and murderous retaliation of injuries. These unholy thoughts are silently cherished until they blunt the sensibility of conscience, blind the mental eye, and warp the judgment even before the man can have the courage to perpetrate them in overt acts.

Third, a strict government of your thoughts will free you from the secret impulses of sinful passion and thus fortify you against the power of temptations from without. It is an erroneous supposition that we escape the guilt and misery of depraved passions by merely preventing them from breaking forth in external action. The "hidden man of the heart" is often agitated, preyed upon, and his strength and beauty consumed by fires of sinful passions that do not burst forth and blacken the "outer" man. But these fires are the more consuming because they are concealed and burn in the dark.

Now what supplies the fuel for these flames within the soul? Ungoverned wrong thoughts. No passion of our nature can be excited and urged into action until the mind first *thinks* of the object of that passion, forms distinct conceptions of it, dwells on those conceptions, and holds up exaggerated views of the pleasures of indulgence.

We need seek no other explanation of a matter so plain in the experience and observation of every Christian who has battled with the world, the flesh, and the devil. An unwholesome secret state of mind must ordinarily precede every instance of falling before the power of outward temptation. Why did the Son of God so triumphantly baffle all the wiles of the devil and remain unshaken when tempted for forty days and forty nights? Because he had a perfect government over his thoughts, never having harbored even one solitary sinful conception. In his holy mind there was no tinder to be kindled in a moment by a spark from the fiery darts of the wicked one that flew so thickly and fell so harmlessly around him.

Fourth, the proper government of your thoughts will promote your highest present happiness. It is truly surprising that after ample experience and observations to the contrary, we still find men under the delusion that happiness primarily depends on favorable outward circumstances. Even Christians sometimes think that their spiritual enjoyment is dependent on external causes, and hence they indulge vain wishes that they were in a different situation. But happiness of any kind is almost exclusively dependent on the internal state of the mind itself. The mind has an empire all its own and wholly separate from outward circumstances. This is the empire of thought and emotion. To govern this well is a greater achievement than to rule a nation and constitutes our highest present happiness.

How the right government of the thoughts secures this result is neither a mystery nor a marvel. The very *consciousness* of obeying God in this matter, and of being successful in gaining the

mastery over our own spirits, inspires a noble exultation infinitely superior to the tumultuous joy of the greatest military conqueror. Peace of conscience and a sense of acting agreeably to enlightened reason are two great elements of spiritual happiness, for conscience is restored to the throne and reason to its appropriate place and functions. Conscience is thus guarded from wounds and reason from perversion and wrong decisions.

We know by sad experience that the very thing which is a cancer at the root of all spiritual enjoyment is wandering thoughts together with the time expended in battle with them. Yet this is the natural, legitimate, and *necessary* consequence of not governing our thoughts at other times. If men allowed their thoughts to be continuously diverted from their ordinary pursuits as they do from their religious duties, they would find but little relish in them. To neglect a habitual and rigid government of the thoughts in our earthly duties and yet expect to be free from distraction in our spiritual duties is as preposterous as a parent expecting his children to behave properly on the arrival of visitors when they are insubordinate and unruly the rest of the time.

Lastly, a successful government of the thoughts is the great secret of advancement in the divine life and preparation for heaven. If such a government of the thoughts exerts a powerful and determining influence on our moral character and course of action, if it frees us from the secret impulses of sinful passions and fortifies us against all the forces of external temptation, then most manifestly it sweeps out of our way the chief and greatest obstacles to advancement in the divine life. At the same time it secures the supremacy of conscience, leading us to obey its dictates. But more than this, we have seen that it makes all our religious services a delight. When the performance of duty is our most delightful employment, when the joys of God's salvation roll in from the partaking of all divine ordinances, when the soul is glowing with love and delight in its communion with God, then does it mount as on eagle's wings to pursue its upward, onward flight to the consummation of the divine life.

Now as I have noted, our holy religion is very much a religion of *secret thoughts*. However, no small part of our preparation for eternal bliss consists in the proper government of that multitude of thoughts which crowd the mind during our ordinary pursuits and recreations of life. And as these are by far the greater periods of our time, and as they will deeply influence the hours which we spend in religious services, a steady and habitual government exercised over our thoughts will prove the great efficient means ordained by God for our advancement in the divine life and our suitableness for the kingdom of heaven.

Look up, professing Christian, to yonder bright eternal world, and let faith enter within the veil to the holy of holies there. Catch a glimpse of the glories of God and the Lamb. Look around on objects of infinite beauty and deep repose--walls of jasper, gates of pearl, streets of gold, the sea of glass before the throne. Behold the myriads of sinless inhabitants in which they move like stars, unhasting yet unresting. Contemplate their progress in knowledge, their increase and perfection in holiness, the joys of ceaseless communion with the Lamb of God. Do you kindle and glow now with widening aspirations to be one of the number who shall be clothed in white

with palms in their hands? Then resolve to govern well your thoughts here, because the degree of one's vital piety can be accurately measured by the extent to which he habitually governs his thoughts.

Sermons VIII and IX from *Sermons and Addresses on Various Subjects*, by Rev. D. L. Carroll, D.D., Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston 1847. **Note:** These two sermons have been condensed and lightly paraphrased. You can read the original full sermons on [OpenLibrary.org](https://openlibrary.org).