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As A Man Thinks

By

Rev. Leonard J. Capobianco

Hymns:        Love Divine  
                  O Jesus I Have Promised  
                  Higher Ground  
                  Lord Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing

ISAIAH 55:6-9

SEEK THE LORD WHILE HE MAY BE FOUND, CALL UPON HIM WHILE HE IS NEAR:

LET THE WICKED FORSAKE HIS WAY AND THE UNRIGHTEOUS MAN HIS THOUGHTS:

LET HIM RETURN TO THE LORD, THAT HE MAY HAVE MERCY ON HIM,

AND TO OUR GOD FOR HE WILL ABUNDANTLY PARDON.

FOR MY THOUGHTS ARE NOT YOUR THOUGHTS, NEITHER ARE YOUR WAYS MY WAYS,  
SAYS THE LORD.

FOR AS THE HEAVENS ARE HIGHER THAN THE EARTH, SO ARE MY WAYS HIGHER THAN  
YOUR WAYS AND MY THOUGHTS THAN YOUR THOUGHTS."

Is this true? Are Gods ways higher than ours? If we believe that – then we'd be pretty foolish to live life differently than what the Bible teaches. I've never read, or seen, or heard, or known of any person on earth whose life would not have been improved if they had followed God's thoughts and not their own.

But – alas – even as Christians we're tepid and only partway obey His will – We fill our minds with lots of thoughts and only a few of those are about what God wants us to do. It seems then only 2 persons know what's in your deepest thoughts, you & God.

That is what my message is about – aligning our low thoughts with Our Heavenly Father's High Thoughts.

Mark Twain picks up on Isaiah with this observation: "What a wee little part of a person's life are in his acts, his real life is in his head, and is known to none but himself. All day long the mill of his brain is grinding and his thoughts, not those other things, are his history. These are his life, and they are not written and cannot be written. Every day would make a

whole book of 80,000 words – 365 books a year. Biographies are but the clothes of the man – the inner and real biography can not be written.”

We may conclude from Mr. Twain that what a person really consists of is hidden on the inside. To divert slightly, I suppose diet is part of the formula because what good we place inside ourselves can affect our development.

A politician saw one of his student interns lunching on soda and potato chips. He advised the young man to eat more nutritious meals. “What you put in your body helps make you what you are. After all, you are what you eat.” Just then the politician’s wife called to let him know what time he should be home for supper. Wanting to impress the young man he put the call on the speaker phone and asked his wife, “What’s for supper tonight dear?” She answered: “Rump Roast.”

There is some truth to “we are what we eat” but what we put inside our minds is far more important.

When you’ve made a mistake – Did you ever have anyone say to you: “What were you thinking?” and when you reproach yourself haven’t you ever said: “What was I thinking?” Well – What were you thinking and why don’t you change your thoughts?

It all begins with a tiny thought crawling in and trying to take root in the back of our minds.

William Ellery Channing understood this when he wrote: “Characters are determined not by the opinions we speak but by those on which our thoughts habitually fasten which recur to them most forcibly and which color our ordinary views of God and Duty.”

And I would add to that, they color our views of ourselves, for when wrong thoughts enter our minds, we can begin to doubt that we are even fit for heaven.

I used to think because I had some wrong thoughts I was not a “good enough” Christian. But such thoughts don’t equate to the negation of the totality of a life. They must be isolated and seen for what they are. Besides, all human beings no matter how good they seem have had to deal with bad thoughts and sinful temptations. No one is perfect. The Scriptures tell us: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” But thankfully, our Lord is FAMOUS for his mercy and forgiveness. Always keep THAT in your thoughts.

One modest example would be the story of two sisters who lost their parents. The older sister, Mary, had to raise and care for her younger sister, Liz. Well, Liz was a handful. Back then in the 20’s Liz was what was known as a flapper – for those who remember that term. She shameless rolled down her stockings, danced the Charleston, drank bathtub gin out of a hip flask and led a wild life with many different boyfriends.

Poor Mary. She never married, denied herself, worked hard to support her little sister and tried to teach her right from wrong, but Liz just wouldn’t listen. Liz moved out of the house to get away from Mary and then gave into every tempting thought that crossed her mind.

In her 90<sup>th</sup> year, Mary went to church as she always did. During the service, the Church doors opened and in came Liz. She walked all the way up and kneeled at the altar where she confessed her sins in front of the whole congregation. The priest bent over to help her up and said, "Don't be afraid, your sins are forgiven."

After church Mary took the priest aside and said: "Wait a minute. I went to church all my life, and worked hard to resist temptation and walk the straight and narrow. Liz never went to church, or worked a day in her life, and led a wild sinful life. How can she be forgiven just like that?"

The priest answered "Well, sometimes the greater the sinner, the greater the saint." Mary replied: "Now you tell me!"

In seminary I was interested to read Martin Luther's writings where I learned of his struggle with "Black Thoughts." Saint Augustine wrestled with evil thoughts and even gave into immoral behavior. Saint Paul himself admitted that "he did the very thing he hated."

There are two factors in the stories of Luther, Augustine and Paul. First, they all overcame their inclinations to sin. Second, such inclinations are not exclusive to them. This is what 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 10:13 observes: "There is no temptation taken that is not common to man."

But we can change. In fact, we are encouraged to by our Lord. Romans: 12:2 makes this very point when it teaches: "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." In other words, by own thoughts we can be made anew.

Many have been confused by the term "born again." When we sincerely ask God's forgiveness for our past errors and accept his cleansing touch, when we strive to become better persons, when at our core we change the way we think and look and act in this world, then we form a new spiritual center. We become re-born.

The devil wants you to be successful and happy right? Of Course Not. He wants to destroy any goodness in you. He wants you to think the worst of yourself. He wants you to dwell on your weaknesses. He tells you, "See, you've had an evil thought that means you're not such a good person after all. So why fight it? Give in and do what you feel like doing."

Your Heavenly Father, on the hand, really does want you to be happy. He doesn't flatter you by saying you're perfect. But he does ask us not to dwell on our imperfections. He tries to help us understand that just because we have a sinful thought doesn't mean we have to give into it, Jesus himself was tempted by the devil, but his answer was "get the behind me Satan."

God wants you to concentrate on the best in you. But he won't do everything for us. He allows us to think and act as we choose. This is free will. It is part of God's plan that we choose to follow him of our own accord and not because of coercion.

And all our choices begin with a seemingly insignificant, tiny little fledgling of a thought.

While writing this sermon I realized a very important principle: An act cannot precede a thought. At some point in the past you had to entertain a thought – if only for a brief moment – before you could act on it. The chances of your carrying out the actions is directly correlated to the amount of time you dwell on the thought.

That's why our thoughts, no matter how small or "harmless" they first seem are so important. Because small thoughts accumulate and gain momentum putting us in a certain mind-set which ultimately moves us dangerously near to acting them out.

In criminology there's the term "crime of opportunity." In other words, people were going about their daily activities when an opportunity presented itself resulting in criminal activity. I recall the sad case of a teenage girl who was driving home from working at a burger stand where she was earning money for college. She had a flat tire and two young men drove by and saw her stranded alone on a dark road. They dragged her into the woods where she was violated and killed.

They couldn't have committed the crime if they didn't previously fantasize about it. They had no police record for violent crime – only petty theft. But they did admit to reading a lot of pornography and watching so-call "adult films." When the opportunity presented itself, they were primed with lustful thoughts and could not resist.

Just think of the difference that night if the young men had concentrated on Godly thoughts and had been primed instead to do good – to protect and rescue those in need.

By the way, I've seen statistics that show most sex offenders interviewed confess to viewing a steady diet of pornography leading up to their crimes. And who says pornography isn't harmful?

That doesn't mean we can't appreciate God's creation in the beauty of the human body. Billy Graham warned, "You men, don't worry if you see a pretty girl walking down the street and look at her. That's part of God's plan to have men and women be attracted to one another and marry. You're only human, you can't help that first look. But it's that second look and second thought which turns to lust and can harm you."

Norman Vincent Peale also understood this concept when he wrote: "There is one great lesson I've learned and I wish I found out earlier in life. Whatever thoughts you decide to concentrate on will eventually influence your future actions."

Let's not be so quick to think we're different, we can control it and just dabble in something for a "little bit." It's the same as with drugs. We've all heard the old tale of woe from drug addicts who confess with bitterness that when he or she first tried drugs, they "thought they could handle it."

This is what the old folk saying means: Never open the door to a little vice lest a greater one enters in. Or – never open your mind to a little thought because a greater and more sinister evil may follow. Frank Outlaw wrote:

Watch your thoughts they become words.

Watch your words they become actions.

Watch your actions they become habits.

Watch your habits they become character.

Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.

Now we begin to understand what Proverbs 23:7 is trying to teach us when it states: AS A MAN THINKS IN HIS HEART, SO HE IS." I chose this verse for my sermon title because the axiom AS A MAN THINKS is so comprehensive it reaches to every condition and circumstance in our lives.

A man/a woman is literally what he or she thinks. Our character being the complete sum of all our thoughts. James Allen said it well when he wrote: "As the plant springs from, and could not be without, the seed, so every act of a man springs from the hidden seeds of his thought, and could not have appeared without them. This applies equally to those acts called "spontaneous" and "unpremeditated" as it does to those which are deliberately executed. Man is made or unmade by himself. In the armory of thought he forges the weapons by which he destroys himself and he also can fashion the tools with which he builds for himself delightful mansions of joy, strength, and peace. By the right choice and true application of thought, man ascends toward the divine."

Discernment of thoughts is most important. We must be able to clearly and consistently differentiate whether the source of a thought is good or evil.

One way is what you're doing right now. You're attending church. You're putting yourself in a position to praise God, hear His word, and associate with other Christians.

Another way is through reading the Bible at home. There are also many modern religious authors who can be help such as Dr. Dobson and C.S. Lewis. There are even some secular films and books that have a sound moral basis and message.

Another way is to be cautious about the influence others person thoughts have on you. Don't be so easily swayed by foolish advice – even though such views may be thought of as acceptable in modern society.

This is especially true for you younger persons. Please don't be so quick to be swayed by others your age. They have a limited view on life and their wisdom is likely to be equally limited.

To help yourself become stronger and gain more wisdom, choose your friends carefully. I know how peer pressure can intimidate people – especially younger persons – to do things that you might not do on your own. But don't fall for it. This is what 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians warns: "Do not be deceived, bad company ruins good morals."

It's an interesting contradiction to me that some kids think they're being adult or independent by defying their parents yet they readily do what other kids ask or dare them to do. How to dress, how to speak, how to act, to try drugs, or cut school, or worse.

If any younger persons really want to be more adult and independent, then think for yourselves.

Compare what your parents and the Church are trying to accomplish for you in the long run, to what other kids are trying to get you to do for a little excitement in the short run.

Step back and weigh everything very carefully. Who you choose as friends and how much you allow them to influence your thoughts can literally affect your whole future.

One of the best ways to help in discerning right from wrong is prayer. The New Testament advises us to pray without ceasing. This does not only mean formal and lengthy prayers, it means to focus our thoughts throughout the day on God's will.

I was watching a Tina Turner interview a few years ago and she proudly told how she converted from Christianity to Buddhism and how Buddhism changed her life through daily chanting. I found myself talking to the TV saying, "Tina, why did you desert Christianity? Because that's exactly what prayer does for you."

By performing a disciplined ritual of daily chanting she was blocking out the world. Not allowing negatives to enter her mind. She could find some temporary peace and then start focusing on positives while resuming to chant.

As a Christian, you could be driving or walking down the street and set off a small prayer. It could only last a few moments, but you would have been in touch with the Heavenly Holy Spirit and Eternal Infinite Power. In the Scripture reading this morning God tells us: "My ways are higher than your ways." So when we pray and focus on our Lord's will, we begin to view things from the highest point of view. This changes our whole perspective from our worldly finite limitations to the infinite unlimited possibilities of God's Eternal Kingdom.

When we connect ourselves with this life-changing power we put our thoughts, and ourselves on the high ground. When we walk on this higher ground it doesn't mean we're "holy rollers" who wear sackcloth and ashes and must lead austere cloistered lives. Au Contraire.

The word "joy" is mentioned several hundred times in the Bible. God's way leads to real happiness while we're here on earth and certainly later in the life to come.

But unfortunately, the secular world doesn't see this. Today's values are not much better than in Roman Times.

To prove my point, I'll bet my new super deluxe 9" titanium driver that if you watch the next dozen movies on HBO – especially at night – the majority of them will be about free

sex with whomever, drugs, alcohol, parties, and getting your hands on lots of money anyway you can.

There's an old saying, "A joy, whereof the end is sadness, is no joy." And we all know the outcomes of seeking and getting those subjects flaunted by Hollywood in modern movies.

Yes, we Christians think about ways to have fun. But we want to focus our thoughts on ways that give us true lasting happiness – and not the kind where you wake up on Monday morning finding there's a higher price to pay for a weekend's temporary physical pleasure.

I am reminded of a piece of a poem by E.E. Cummings, "Two men looked through the prison bars, one saw mud and one saw stars."

We're not going to find lasting joy in Hollywood's muddy morose concept of morality. We must set our sights higher.

The beginning of the search for true happiness starts with concentrating our thoughts on higher ground.

When we feel bitterness toward another – we can think of Jesus's sacrifice that atoned for our sins, for our mistakes, our shortcomings. Then we can forgive others or at least temper our anger, and the bitterness begins to leave us.

When a loved one passes on, we are comforted by thoughts they are safe now in our Heavenly Father's loving care.

At work or home, when trouble comes into our lives, we have an anchor which will hold and keep us from being tossed about by every foul wind that tries to knock us off course...

When temptation comes our way, we have a rock to hold onto until the evil passes.

Then we sleep more soundly at night. Then our hearts find solace and rest. And you know, this is exactly what Isaiah 26 promises: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee."

Here's a good summation of this morning's message: It has been written that "A noble and strong character is not a thing of chance, but the result of continued effort in right thinking, the effect of a long association with Godlike thoughts. Human beings are given the ability to be masters of thought, molders of character and shapers of condition, environment and destiny. Made in God's image, we contain within ourselves a transforming and regenerative spirit given us by His Grace to use or not to use according to our own thoughts." (Anon.)

In closing, I would like to share this short story. A college professor of Native American studies took a vacation out west to visit an Indian Reservation. By talking with local townspeople near the reservation he heard about a wise old Indian Chief of exceptional character and integrity living in the nearby mountains. He hired a guide to take him there.

They travelled all day and when he arrived at the mountain, he had to leave the car and walk up the rest of the way to the lone adobe hut. When he saw the Chief, the Professor asked if he could sit and talk with him. The Chief agreed and offered some cool water to drink while they talked.

The questions centered on the tribal history which the Chief knew a great deal about. And after making his notes the Professor closed his book and said, "Do you mind if I ask you something personal?" No, the Chief replied. "Everyone around here, Indian and white people all speak so well of you. They say you are a man of wisdom, integrity and great character. Can you tell me how you have developed into such a respected person?" The Chief replied that it wasn't always that easy. "What do you mean," asked the Professor?

The Chief explained this: He felt there were two dogs inside him. One was an obedient, faithful loving dog – and the other was a vicious, selfish, dangerous dog. And the two where inside him always fights for control.

"Which dog usually wins" asked the Professor?

The Chief replied, "The one I feed the most."

"AS A MAN THINKS IN HIS HEART, SO HE IS."

AMEN