

## Pursuing Holiness: Holiness in Spirit

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Last Sunday we look at the need for holiness in our bodies. This evening I want to look at the need for holiness in our spirits. We looked at this idea in quite a bit of depth a year ago when I was preaching on the Beatitudes and on the rest of Matthew 5, but it's something we need to be constantly reminded of. It's not just our outward conduct that we need to be worried about. We need to be just as concerned about our thoughts. Not actually committing a murder and not actually committing adultery don't get us off the hook, because we're just as guilty when we dwell on anger and hate in our minds and when we indulge in lustful looks and fantasies.

The Navigators send their speakers out to make circuits of major universities and colleges. I don't know if they still do this, but one of the things that every one of their speakers used to talk about was our thought life, and they would make their point this way. They'd always 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." Those are some sobering words. I think that's not only true for Christians, but even for the non-Christians – like the wild and crazy frat boy or sorority girl – who doesn't seem to have the slightest bit of shame.

We need to bring our thought lives into obedience with Jesus Christ just as much as we need to with our bodies. In fact, St. Paul warns us about our motives here. In Colossians 2:23 he warns those who have misguided and wrong motives for controlling their bodies and who leave their thoughts lives out of control. It is possible to do that. We curb the natural and sinful appetites of our bodies – maybe easily, because we know that indulging them might destroy our reputation, or our career, or mean the loss of family and friends, or even put us behind bars – but we let our minds go wild and engage in all sorts of mental and spiritual defilement.

That's dangerous. Scripture tells us that our thought lives, in a lot of ways, are even more important than what we do with our bodies, because our thoughts define our character. Solomon wrote in Proverbs, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (KJV). Some of you may have heard an old poem that makes the same point:

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

That's actually pretty sobering to think about. Thought leads to character – to who we really are. That's why Paul says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things*" (Philippians 4:8).

Christians are called not to be conformed to the world, but to be renewed...in our what? That's right. In our *minds*. If we have holiness in our heads, it works out into our actions. If we have *unholiness* in our heads, that's going to work out in our actions too. That's why it's so important to pay attention to what we're exposing ourselves.

The sorts of things we watch on TV, the movies we watch, the books and magazines we read, the stuff we surf on the Internet, the music we listen to, and even the conversations we have and the people we socialise with, all those things mould and shape our thoughts. So we need to think about the effects that these things have on us. Using Philippians 4:8 as a standard is a good way to do it. Are the thoughts stimulated by what we expose ourselves to *true*? Are they *pure*? Are they *lovely*? Are they *admirable*, *excellent*, *praiseworthy*?

As Christians who have been called to new life in Christ, we need to face the very real fact that the world constantly seeks to draw us back and to conform us to its mould. It seems to be doing a pretty good job. It was less than a century ago that most Christians just plain didn't go to see movies. When I was a kid it was okay to see "G" rated movies, but nothing else. Then "PG" movies and then "R" movies became okay. I'm not meaning to say that we need to be legalistic about this sort of thing, but I do think we need to ask how

much the culture has pulled us into its mould. I've heard more than one Christian couple say that their Christian "counsellor" told them that watching X-rated movies might be a good way to kick start their sex life. And when I hear that I have to control *my* thoughts, because I'd love to go use my fists to knock some holiness into "counsellors" like that.

Music does the same thing – maybe more subtly – because so often we don't even pay attention to the words that are being put into our minds when all we're really looking for is background noise or when what we really like and are paying attention to is the tune.

St. Paul gives a clear warning against suggestive and dirty stories and jokes. They aren't a new problem! He wrote to the Ephesians in 5:3-4: "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. *Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking*, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving." The NIV that first phrase as: "Let there not even be a hint of immorality among you." That doesn't leave any wiggle room when it comes to "suggestive" talk – it's all outside the bounds of holy living.

We need to be careful of lustful looks, especially in a culture where an awful lot of marketing is aimed at taking advantage of our lust. Jesus said it's no good claiming that you haven't committed actual adultery if all along you've been indulging your eyes! Job made a covenant with his eyes (31:1), but David's lingering look at Bathsheba was almost fatal to his spiritual life (2 Samuel 11:2). And not only do we need to guard our eyes, but we need to make sure we're not being a temptation to others. We need to take reasonable precautions to see that we dress and behave modestly – men and women both (1 Timothy 2:9, 5:2).

But Philippians 4:8 deals with more than just *purity* in our thoughts. It also says they need to be true, lovely, and praiseworthy. We can be guilty of murder in our hearts just as much as we can be guilty of adultery in our hearts.

Quite a few times Paul lists the acts of the sinful nature. Some of them are things that defile the body: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, drunkenness, orgies, and things like that. But there are

other sins in those lists that defile the spirit: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, and so on. We need to purify ourselves from gross sins of the body, but we also need to purify ourselves from these more “acceptable” sins of the spirit. (We talked a lot about this last summer.)

And this is probably the place where Christians fall the most often and fall the hardest. We have a tendency to focus on our particular group’s list of do’s and don’ts, while we ignore our inner lives where envy, pride, bitterness, and a critical and unforgiving spirit may rage unchecked.

Think back to the older brother in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son. He’s a classic example of someone who led an exemplary outward life, but who was consumed on the inside by envy and self-righteousness. He could make the claim that he’d never disobeyed his father, yet his jealousy and anger over his father’s joy in the return of his prodigal brother marks him to this day as a bad example.

Think of King Saul. Envy was at the root of his struggle with David. When they first met, Saul thought the world of David and put him in charge of his men of war. But then, after one of David’s more outstanding victories, Saul heard the women of the city singing a song about Saul having killed thousands but David having killed *tens* of thousands. Saul became jealous of David’s status and popularity. He became dissatisfied with what God had given him and wanted what David had and Scripture says “Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on” (1 Samuel 8:9 NASB).

As I’ve been saying on the past few Sunday mornings: God has given each of us a special place in the Body of Christ and even placed us where we are in life for a reason. God assigns a more high-profile position to some people and a lower-profile position to others. He gives wealth to some and poverty to some. He allows some to have an easy life and others to have to struggle. And for that reason – regardless of where God has placed us – we’re often tempted to be envious of where God has put someone else. Think about the prodigal son’s older brother. He was set to inherit all of his father’s wealth, but he was still jealous of

the banquet thrown in honour of his brother’s return. Saul was king over all of Israel, but he couldn’t stand the fact that someone got more praises than he did.

The cure for envy is to find our contentment in God. A man named Asaph wrote Psalm 73. He was envious of the wicked as he saw them prosper and started to feel like all his efforts at holy living were in vain. It was only when he was able to confess to God, “There is nothing on earth that I desire *besides you*” (73:25), that he was delivered from the sin of envy.

I mentioned *bitterness* earlier. Bitterness is what we get when we don’t trust in the sovereign rule of God in our lives. If there’s anyone in Scripture who had a “right” to be bitter, it was Joseph. Sold into slavery by jealous brothers, falsely accused and sent to prison, then forgotten by the men who said they’d help him get out. But in all that, Joseph never lost sight of the fact that God was in control. In the end he could say to his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive” (Genesis 50:20).

We can be bitter against people or against God. Asaph was bitter against God because he didn’t think he was getting a fair shake. Job was bitter because he felt like God wasn’t acknowledging his righteousness. He said, “It profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God” (34:9). We’re bitter against people when we harbour an unforgiving spirit. Someone’s wronged us, either in fact or even just in our view of things, and we refuse to forgive them. We refuse to forgive because we refuse to recognise that God has forgiven us far greater wrongs. We’re like the servant who was forgiven a debt of ten thousand talents, but had his fellow servant thrown in prison over a debt of a hundred denarii – a gazillion dollars verses a few thousand.

And when we don’t deal with our bitterness, we foster a spirit of retaliation. Even if we don’t retaliate physically, we do it in our minds. When David was running away from the insurrection led by his son, Absalom, in Jerusalem, Shimei, one of Saul’s relatives, came out to curse David and to throw rocks at him. One of David’s men wanted to kill Shimei, but David held him back and said, “Leave him

alone, and let him curse...It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today” (1 Samuel 16:11-12).

St. Paul wrote, “Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” (Romans 12:19). Peter wrote about Jesus saying, “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). And that’s the key to cleansing ourselves from a spirit of retaliation: to put ourselves in the hands of him who judges justly and who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.”

And maybe the worst of these attitudes that defile us is the *critical spirit*. A critical spirit is rooted in our pride. Because we have the plank of pride in our eye, we have no business trying to deal with the speck of something else in our brother’s eye. We’re like the Pharisee who was completely oblivious of his own sins and stood up in front of everyone to pray, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11). We’re too often quick to see and to speak about the faults of others, but we’re slow to see our own shortcomings and failures. How often do we *enjoy* talking critically about someone else – even sometimes when we know we don’t know all the facts. We forget that “a man who stirs up dissension among brothers” by criticising 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’re just as bad as gross immorality, drunkenness, and debauchery. For that reason we need to work hard at rooting these sinful attitudes out of our minds. We need to be careful too, because a lot of the time we’ll justify these attitudes under the guise of justice and righteous indignation. So 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 purge them from our minds and replace them with thoughts that are pleasing to God.