

UPDATED TO MODERN ENGLISH



THE VANITY OF THOUGHTS

BEING AN INSTANCE OF THE ABOUNDING SINFULNESS IN ONE FACULTY OF THE SOUL

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By Thomas Goodwin

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Introduction

How long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee?—JER. 4:14.

In these words, the comparison is made between the heart and a popular gathering place, resembling a house with numerous spacious rooms designed to accommodate and host a multitude of guests. Prior to conversion, all the futile, frivolous, lascivious, irreverent, and dissipated thoughts that traverse the world, much like your own thoughts, freely and openly enter this heart, which graciously and gladly welcomes and entertains them. It accompanies them, traversing the entire world in search of the most delightful pleasures to indulge them with. It lodges and shelters them, and there they, like unruly gentlemen and revelers, stay and revel day and night, defiling the rooms they occupy with their repugnant filth and vomit. "How long," asks the Lord, "shall they stay there," while I, with my Spirit, my Son, and my train of graces, "stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20), unable to gain entry? All of this filthiness, and so on, must be cleansed from the heart, this house. "Wash your heart from wickedness." It must be washed, not merely swept of gross evils, as in Matthew 12:43, where the house that the unclean spirit re-enters is said to be swept of loose and superficial evils, but washed and purified from those defilements that cling more closely and become ingrained within the spirit. And those vain and unruly guests must be evicted without any warning. They have stayed there long enough, too long. "How long?" And "the time that has passed is sufficient," as the Apostle says. They must no longer lodge there. The house, the soul, is not to be demolished through conversion, but only these guests are to be expelled. Although they cannot be kept out entirely, as they will still enter while we inhabit these mortal bodies, they must not be allowed to stay. If thoughts of anger and revenge arise in the morning or during the day, they must be expelled before nightfall. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26), as doing so may result in allowing an even worse guest to lodge in your heart alongside them. "Do not give a foothold to the devil," for it follows that he will "bring seven worse with him." If impure thoughts attempt to join you in bed when you lie down, do not allow them to lodge with you. In conclusion, it is not the nature of the thoughts that reside in your hearts and pass through them, but rather the lodging they find, that distinguishes your repentance.

Many righteous thoughts and inclinations may transiently pass through the heart of a wicked person, just as countless frivolous thoughts may use a believer's heart as a thoroughfare, causing disturbances in their righteous duties through interruptions and intrusions. However, they do not lodge there; they are not nurtured or harbored.

My aim in our usual discourse is to uncover the inherent wickedness and emptiness of the human heart. Currently, we are only exploring its superficial aspects, such as the understanding and its impurities, which need to be cleansed. In my fragmented approach, the next impurity I intend to address is the one specified here: THE VANITY OF YOUR THOUGHTS. I selected this text as my foundation solely for the purpose of uncovering this aspect. It is the main focus of my discussion, a topic that, I admit, encompasses a vast expanse. To meticulously examine the vanities in our thoughts, to traverse the entire creation, and to assess and report on the abundance of vanity present in all creatures—this was the task undertaken by the wisest of men, Solomon. It represented the pinnacle of his studies and efforts. However, the multiplicities of vanity within our thoughts are far greater; this little world contains more variations of vanity than the larger one. Our thoughts have subjected the "creatures to vanity" (Romans 8:20), thus making themselves even more susceptible to vanity. In addressing this, I will demonstrate the following: 1. The meaning of thoughts. 2. The concept of vanity. 3. That our thoughts are indeed vain. 4. The nature of this vanity, both in general terms and specific instances.

What is Meant by Thoughts?

1. Firstly, let us clarify what is meant by thoughts, particularly since they are the main focus of this discussion, which necessitates setting some boundaries in such a vast subject.

(1.) In the Scriptures, thoughts encompass all internal mental activities of a person, regardless of the specific mental faculty involved. They include reasonings, deliberations, intentions, resolutions, purposes, desires, and concerns of the human mind, as distinguished from external words and actions. For instance, in Isaiah 66:18, all acts are divided into these two categories: "I know their works and their thoughts." Thoughts refer to what takes place within the mind, while works pertain to the manifestations and outward expressions of those thoughts. Similarly, in Genesis 6:5, it is stated that "every imagination of the thoughts"—that is, every idea, purpose, desire, etc. conceived within the mind (as noted in the margin)—is evil. Here, thoughts encompass everything that "comes within the mind," as the phrase is used in Ezekiel 11:5, and this is how we commonly understand and use the term. For example, to "remember" someone is to "think" of them, as seen in Genesis 40:14. When we have planned something, we say, "I thought to do it." Taking care of a matter is described as "taking thought," as in 1 Samuel 9:5. The reason why all these mental activities can be called thoughts is that all emotions, desires, and intentions are aroused, generated, and nurtured by thoughts. Every thought elicits some form of emotion, such as fear, joy, concern, grief, and so on. However, while the term is used broadly here, I do not intend to address the vanity of thoughts in such a comprehensive sense at this moment. I must confine myself, as strictly as possible, to the vanity of what is more specifically referred to as the act of thinking, contemplating, and considering, which resides in the understanding or spirit of man. This is the specific topic I am addressing; thoughts, in this sense, are not merely contrasted with actions but also with purposes and intentions. In Hebrews 4:12, the soul and spirit are contrasted with thoughts and intents. Likewise, in Job 20:2-3, "thoughts" are attributed to the "spirit of understanding." Furthermore, I am focusing more narrowly, specifically on the musings within the speculative realm, within the understanding, and not on all thoughts in general or the reasonings and deliberations related to our actions.

And thus, I can explain them to you in no other way than this: Those initial, simpler notions, perceptions that arise, those imaginations, meditations which the understanding, aided by imagination, forms within itself about things—those on which your minds reflect, ponder, and contemplate—these are what I mean by thoughts. I refer to those conversations our minds have with the things we know, as the Scriptures describe it in Proverbs 6:22. I mean those interactions, encounters, and dialogues that the mind has with the things that enter it, with the things we fear, with the things we love. Our minds make companions of all these things, and our thoughts engage in discourse with them, having countless notions and ideas about them. This is what I mean by thoughts. Besides the power of reasoning and deliberation, through which we constantly ask ourselves, "What shall we do?" and engage in logical discussions—which is the more internal chamber, the secret council of the heart—there is also a more outward chamber, the presence-chamber, which welcomes all who come, which represents the thinking, meditating, musing power within humans. This power suggests matters for deliberation, consultation, and reasoning. It holds objects until we examine them, and it entertains all those who come to communicate with any of our emotions.

(2.) I also add, "which the mind frames within itself." This is how the Scriptures present their origin and how they arise. In Proverbs 6:14, it says, "Frowardness is in his heart"—fabricatur—"he devises mischief," like a blacksmith shaping iron. And thoughts are the materials for this frowardness within us. When presented with various things, the mind generates thoughts, imaginations about them. Just as lusts are conceived, thoughts are also conceived (James 1). Isaiah 59:4 says, "They conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity, and hatch cockatrice eggs and weave spiders' webs." The passage goes on to mention "thoughts of iniquity" because our thoughts are spun from our own hearts. They are the eggs we lay ourselves, even though the external stimuli may come from outside.

I include this distinction to separate them from thoughts that are solely injected and imposed from outside, which are offspring of another's creation and are often rejected: such as blasphemous thoughts cast in by Satan. If the soul is merely passive in receiving them (as the term "buffeting" implies in 2 Corinthians 12:7), they are not your thoughts but his. It is as if a person is in a room with another individual who is swearing and cursing, unable to escape from their presence. Such thoughts, if they are solely "from without," do not defile a person. As Jesus said in Matthew 15:18-19, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person." However, thoughts that the heart has conceived upon them by the influence of the devil—such as thoughts of impurity—although he may be the father, the heart is the mother and the womb. Therefore, they affect the heart accordingly, just as natural children do. We can distinguish them from the former when we have a tender heart, an inward affection towards them, so that our hearts embrace the child. Then, they are our thoughts. Or when the heart broods over those eggs, then they are our thoughts, even if they originate from outside.

It should be noted that even those thoughts in which the soul is passive, and which are cast in by Satan, thoughts that we in no way embrace, where he violates the heart rather than begets them within us (if there is no consent on our part, then it is akin to rape, as the law describes it), I concede that these thoughts are often punishments for neglecting our own thoughts and allowing them to wander. Just as Dinah, because she ventured out cunningly to "see the daughters of the land," was taken and violated—though against her will, it was a consequence of her curiosity. Alternatively, they may be the consequence of neglecting the good promptings of the Spirit, which, when resisted, grieve Him. And so, He deals with us as we do with our children, allowing us to be frightened by imaginary threats and troubled by Satan, so that we may learn the consequences of neglecting Him and embracing vanity. Finally, I add, "which the mind, by itself or with the aid of imagination, produces and entertains," because there are no thoughts or images of

things in our imagination without those same thoughts being simultaneously reflected in the understanding as well. It is like when two mirrors are placed opposite and close to each other; whatever image appears in one is also seen in the other.

What is Vanity?

2. Secondly, let us explore the meaning of vanity. In all its connotations, it holds true that our thoughts are vain.

(1.) Vanity is understood as unprofitableness. As stated in Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, "All is vain" because "there is no profit in them under the sun." By nature, our thoughts are unhelpful; even the wisest among them will not provide assistance in times of need, temptation, distress of conscience, or on the day of death or judgment. As stated in 1 Corinthians 2:6, "All the wisdom of the wise comes to nought." Proverbs 10:20 says, "The heart of the wicked is of little value," not worth a penny for all their thoughts. In contrast, the thoughts of a godly person are their treasure. They bring them forth from the good treasure of their heart, minting them as their riches. As expressed in Psalm 139:17, "How precious are they!" The psalmist speaks specifically about thoughts of God as the object of those thoughts, saying, "Your thoughts [referring to thoughts about God] are precious."

(2.) Vanity is also understood as lightness. The phrase "lighter than vanity" is used in Psalm 62:9, and it refers to people. If anything in them is lighter than anything else, it is their thoughts, which float in the uppermost parts, skimming the surface like scum. When all the best, wisest, deepest, and most profound thoughts of Belshazzar, a prince, were weighed, they were found to be too light (Daniel 5:27).

(3.) Vanity is synonymous with folly. In Proverbs 12:11, "vain men" is equated with men "void of understanding." This is the nature of our thoughts. Among the various evils that are said to "come out of the heart" (Mark 7:22), foolishness is listed. This refers to thoughts that resemble those of madmen and fools—thoughts that serve no purpose, which cannot be utilized, and that seem to arise and wander without reason or purpose.

(4.) Vanity denotes inconstancy and fragility. Thus, vanity and a shadow are used interchangeably in Psalm 144:4. Such are our thoughts—fleeting and perishable like bubbles. As stated in Psalm 146:4, "All their thoughts perish."

(5.) Lastly, they are vain, meaning they are indeed wicked and sinful. In the text, vanity is linked with wickedness. "Vain men" and "sons of Belial" are equivalent terms (2 Chronicles 13:7). By nature, our thoughts are sinful. Proverbs 24:9 declares, "The thought of foolishness is sin." Therefore, one should humble themselves even for a proud thought (Proverbs 30:32), as "laying a hand on the mouth" signifies being vile in one's own eyes, as in Job 40:4.

Thoughts are Sinful

3. Since this is the main aspect on which I must focus when addressing the vanity of thoughts, and because people generally believe that thoughts are free from moral judgment, I will now prove to you, based on the sole doctrine presented, that thoughts are indeed sins.

(1.) The law judges them, as mentioned in Hebrews 4:12. It rebukes individuals for their thoughts, as seen in 1 Corinthians 14:25. Therefore, thoughts are transgressions of the law. Christ also

rebuked the Pharisees for their "ill thoughts" (Matthew 9:4), which demonstrates the excellence of the law in reaching even thoughts.

(2.) Thoughts are capable of forgiveness and must be pardoned for us to attain salvation, as stated in Acts 8:22. This highlights the abundant compassion of God, considering the infinite nature of thoughts.

(3.) Thoughts are to be repented of. Repentance is expressed as beginning with them, as in Isaiah 55:7: "Let the unrighteous man forsake his thoughts." A person is never truly and profoundly transformed, as mentioned in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, until "every thought is brought into obedience." This indicates that thoughts are naturally rebellious and contrary to grace. Furthermore, it showcases the power of grace, which can rule and subdue such a formidable force as our thoughts, ultimately commanding them all. This will be fully accomplished when we attain perfect holiness.

(4.) Thoughts defile a person, and only sin can cause defilement. In Matthew 15:18-19, it is stated, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts; these defile the man."

(5.) Thoughts are an abomination to the Lord, who detests nothing but sin. His "pure eyes cannot endure to behold any iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13). Just as good meditations are pleasing to the Lord (Psalm 19:14), by the rule of contrast, bad thoughts are abominable.

(6.) Thoughts hinder all the good we should do and spoil our best efforts. Vain thoughts draw our hearts away, so that when we should draw near to God, our hearts are "far off from him" due to our thoughts, as expressed in Isaiah 29:13. A person's heart is consumed with covetousness when they should be attentive to hearing, as the prophet speaks. Nothing else but sin can cause such separation, and what estranges us from God is sin and enmity towards Him.

(7.) Our thoughts are the initiators of all the evil within us. They set the motion in action and also bring the heart and the object together.

They act as facilitators for our lusts, holding up the object until the heart engages in adulterous behavior and commits folly. In the case of impure thoughts and other desires, they present images of the false gods we create, which the heart bows down to and worships. They present notions of fame, wealth, and attractiveness until the heart has worshipped them, even when these things are not physically present.

In What Does this Vanity Consist?

4. Now, let us turn to the specific aspects that reveal the vanity of the thinking and meditating power of the mind:

First, I will expose its inability and reluctance to engage in good thoughts, and secondly, its readiness to entertain evil and frivolous ideas.

Regarding the first point, this vanity is evident in:

(1.) A lack of ordinary and natural ability to generate holy and beneficial considerations and thoughts from everyday occurrences and situations. A heart that is sanctified and filled with genuine grace has the inclination to distill holy, sweet, and useful meditations from all of God's dealings, from the things observed and heard, and from every object that enters the thoughts. It does so naturally and consistently, to the extent that it is sanctified. Our Saviour Christ, for example, would draw heavenly meditations from the speeches of others, from various events and encounters, as can be seen throughout the Gospels. When passing by a well, he spoke of the "water of life" (John 4), among other instances. In his thoughts, he translated the book of creation into the book of grace. Adam's heart, in his innocence, did the same. His philosophy could truly be called divinity because he saw God in all things, which elevated his heart to

gratitude and praise. In a similar manner, our minds, to the extent that they are sanctified, will do the same. Just as the philosopher's stone turns all metals into gold, as bees extract honey from every flower, and as a healthy stomach derives nourishment from what it consumes, a sanctified heart, to the extent of its sanctification, converts and processes everything into spiritual and useful thoughts. This is evident in Psalm 107:43. The psalm recounts many instances of God's providence and His wondrous works for humanity, such as deliverance at sea and the liberation of captives. Throughout the psalm, the recurring theme is the call for praise and thanksgiving to the Lord for His wonderful works. The psalmist declares that the righteous see and rejoice in these occurrences, extracting comforting thoughts from them that bring joy. The wise person observes and discerns these things, drawing holy reflections and understanding God's goodness in all situations. Thus, their heart is lifted in thoughts of praise, gratitude, and obedience. Compare this with Psalm 92, composed for the Sabbath, when, in imitation of God who surveyed His works on that day, we are encouraged to raise holy and praiseful thoughts from His works to His glory. The psalmist accomplishes this, acknowledging the greatness of God's works and emphasizing that those lacking understanding fail to grasp their significance. They only perceive blessings as provisions for their own pleasure, lacking the art of extracting holy, spiritual, and useful thoughts from them due to their lack of sanctified wisdom.

If others harm us, what thoughts do we distil from those wrongs? Thoughts of revenge. We contemplate how to retaliate. However, observe how naturally David's mind distils different thoughts from Shimei's cursing. He says, "God has instructed him," and it might actually be a good sign of God's favour, as He may repay good for it. When we witness judgments befalling others, our minds are prone to generate severe thoughts of condemnation, just like Job's friends did. But a godly person, whose mind is deeply sanctified, raises different thoughts from such situations. They wisely consider and reflect.

Likewise, when outward blessings come our way, our immediate thoughts are inclined towards using our wealth to secure comfort, thinking, "I have goods for many years." And when calamities strike, we are filled with thoughts of complaint, fear, and worries about finding a way out. Yet, what were Job's initial thoughts upon hearing the news of losing everything? "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

A good heart is receptive to such thoughts that opportunities present, naturally generating them for its own benefit. The more barren our thoughts are, the more vain they become.

Furthermore, the vanity and sinfulness of the mind are evident in its aversion to entertain holy thoughts, to engage in contemplating God and matters related to our peace. It is as reluctant to do so as schoolboys are to open their books or engage their minds in lessons when they are preoccupied with play. Our minds are hesitant to delve into serious considerations, into somber and solemn thoughts about God, death, and other weighty subjects. People are as reluctant to contemplate death as thieves are to face execution, or to think of God as they are to think of their judge. Likewise, when it comes to reflecting on their own actions at the end of the day, examining the blurred script of their hearts and engaging in self-communion as David did (Psalm 77:6), people are as unwilling to do so as schoolboys are to analyze their lessons or correct the faulty Latin they have produced. In the book of Job, it is said, "Depart from us" (Job 21:14), as they speak to God. They intended it regarding their thoughts, for it continues, "We do not desire the knowledge of your ways." They would rather not think of Him or know Him willingly. Therefore, our minds, like a troubled stomach, feel repulsed by the very scent of good things and quickly reject them. Romans 1:28 states, "They did not like to retain the knowledge of God." Let us attempt to elevate our souls to holy meditations, to contemplate what we have heard, what we have done, or what our duty is, and we will find our minds slipping away like pegs of an instrument as we try to wind them up, and falling back down suddenly before we realize it.

Moreover, you will discover that we try to avoid anything that might lead to such thoughts, just as people steer clear of encountering someone they are reluctant to speak with. Some individuals dare not be alone, fearing that such thoughts might return. People often find excuses to divert their thoughts from what is good, while in pondering vain earthly matters, they believe time passes too quickly, clocks strike too soon, and hours slip away unnoticed.

If others wrong us, what do our thoughts produce but thoughts of revenge? We contemplate how to repay the harm done to us. However, observe how naturally David's mind generates different thoughts regarding Shimei's cursing. He acknowledges that God may have instructed him, and it could potentially be a sign of God's favour. When we witness misfortune befalling others, our minds are prone to raise severe thoughts of condemnation against our brethren, much like Job's friends did. But a godly individual, whose mind is deeply sanctified, generates different thoughts in such situations. They wisely consider, among other things, the reasons behind the events.

Similarly, when we experience outward blessings, our immediate thoughts tend to revolve around how to use our wealth to ensure comfort for many years to come. Conversely, when calamities strike, we become filled with thoughts of complaint, fear, and concerns about finding a way out. Yet, what were Job's initial thoughts upon receiving news of the loss of all his possessions? He acknowledged that God had given, and the Lord had taken away, and he blessed the Lord for everything.

A good heart is receptive to such thoughts that arise from various circumstances, instinctively generating them for its own benefit. The more barren our thoughts are, the more futile they become.

Furthermore, the vanity and sinfulness of the mind become evident in its aversion to entertain holy thoughts, to initiate the process of contemplating God and the matters pertaining to our peace. It is as

reluctant to engage in these thoughts as schoolboys are to open their books or focus their minds on their lessons, being preoccupied with playfulness. Our minds are similarly averse to engaging in serious considerations, to delve into sombre thoughts about God, death, and other profound matters. People are as reluctant to think about death as thieves are to face execution, or to think about God as they are to face their judge. Similarly, reflecting upon their own actions and examining the imperfect state of their hearts, communing with them at the end of the day (as David did in Psalm 77:6), people are as unwilling to do this as schoolboys are to analyze their lessons and the incorrect Latin phrases they have constructed. In Job 21:14, they say to God, "Depart from us," implying that they desire to rid themselves of such thoughts, for it is followed by "we desire not the knowledge of your ways." They do not want to think of Him or to know Him willingly. Consequently, our minds, like a troubled stomach, feel nauseated by the mere scent of good things and quickly reject them. Romans 1:28 states that they do not like to retain the knowledge of God. Let us attempt to focus our souls on holy meditations at any given time, to contemplate what we have heard or done, or what our duty is, and we will find that our minds slip away like pegs from an instrument as we try to wind them up, falling back suddenly before we even realize it. Moreover, you will discover that people actively try to avoid anything that may trigger such thoughts, much like individuals veering off the path upon spotting someone they are reluctant to engage with. In fact, people dare not be alone for fear of those thoughts resurfacing. They will readily find excuses and distractions to divert their thoughts from what is good. Conversely, when pondering frivolous earthly matters, time seems to pass too quickly, clocks strike sooner than expected, and hours slip away unnoticed.

So, when we approach prayer, Christ instructs us to "watch to prayer" (Mark 13:33), meaning that we should station a guard at every entrance to prevent any disturbances or interruptions. However, how often does the heart grow weary, fall asleep, and wander into another world, much like people do in dreams! Indeed,

distractions come so naturally to us when we are engaged in holy duties that they emerge without our awareness, similar to how excrements may escape from weak and sick individuals. Worldly thoughts carry us away from the stream of goodness our mind was flowing in, leading us into unexpected byways before we even realise it.

Furthermore, the vanity of the mind becomes evident in its treatment of good things, for even when it does think of them, it does so at inappropriate times. Just as the goodness of speech lies in its timing and arrangement (Prov. 25:11), being "fitly spoken" like "apples of gold in pictures of silver," thoughts also need to be brought forth "in due season," like fruits and buds appearing at the right time (Ps. 1:3). Now, the vanity of the mind manifests in thinking about certain good things unseasonably. When you are engaged in prayer, not only should worldly thoughts be absent, but any thoughts unrelated to prayer as well. Yet, notions about or for a sermon may readily enter your mind. Similarly, while listening, you may have good thoughts that are unrelated to the topic at hand. And when you are about to kneel down in prayer, you may recall something you had forgotten when it should have been remembered, or something deeply affecting may divert your focus. This misplacement of thoughts, even if they are good, stems from the vanity of the mind. If those thoughts came at another time, they would be welcome. We find that our minds are more willing to expend thoughts on anything other than what God is calling us to in the present moment. When we attend a sermon, we discover that we could more readily direct our thoughts towards reading or perhaps examining our hearts, which at other times, when called to do so, we would be most reluctant to engage in. We would prefer to roam freely in the fields of meditation and diverse thoughts, even if they pertain to good things, rather than being confined to a specific task and confined to a predetermined path.

In Adam and Christ, no thought was misplaced; even though they were as numerous as the stars, they followed their courses and kept

their ranks. But ours dance within us like meteors, moving up and down without order. And this disorder is a vanity and sin, even if the thought itself is good. Not everyone who possesses the best part must therefore step onto the stage to act first, but rather take their rightful cue. In printing, even if the letters are perfectly formed, if they are not placed in the correct order and rightly composed, they will mar the sense. Soldiers should never break their ranks, and neither should our thoughts. Proverbs 16:3 promises the righteous that, as some interpret it, "his thoughts shall be ordered."

This concludes the discussion of the privative sinfulness in our thoughts concerning what is good.

Now, secondly, I will proceed to explore the positive vanity that appears in our thoughts regarding what is evil. It should not be expected, nor can any person accomplish it, to enumerate all the specific vain thoughts that pass through the human heart. I will focus only on more general observations, which can serve as examples of the rest.

Firstly, the vanity of these thoughts is revealed in what Christ calls "foolishness" (Mark 7:22), which refers to thoughts resembling those of madmen and fools. This foolishness is evident in the unsettled wantonness and restlessness of the mind while thinking. It is like quicksilver, unable to settle. As Solomon says, "A fool's eyes are in the ends of the earth" (Proverbs 17:24). They are restless, roaming from one end of the earth to the other, shooting and streaming like meteors occasionally seen in the air. Although the human mind is indeed nimble and capable of traversing from one end of the earth to another, which is its strength and excellence, God does not desire this agility and restlessness. Instead, He intends for our thoughts to be directed steadily towards His glory, our own salvation, and the good of others. He gave the mind its agility to turn away from evil and its first appearance. Just as we are called to walk in God's ways, every thought, as well as every action, is a step and should therefore be steady. The Apostle admonishes, "Make straight paths for your

feet" (Hebrews 12:13), not turning to the right or left until we reach the destination of the matter we are contemplating. But our thoughts, at best, are like playful spaniels who, though they accompany their master and eventually reach their destination, chase after every bird and recklessly pursue every flock of sheep they encounter. This lack of steadiness arises from the same curse that was upon Cain, causing the mind of man to become a wanderer after being driven from the presence of the Lord, and thus "men's eyes are in the ends of the earth."

This foolishness, or ἀφροσύνη, is also evident in the disconnectedness of our thoughts; they often hang together as ropes of sand. We see this more clearly in dreams. But not only then, even when we are awake and attempting to be serious, our thoughts jingle and ring backwards! Like playful children who scribble broken words with their pens, our thoughts do the same. If you were to review the records of your thoughts, you would discover as much nonsense as you find in the speeches of madmen. This madness and disorder exist in the mind since the fall, though it may not be apparent in our words because we are wiser. If notes were taken of our thoughts, we would find them wandering aimlessly, without knowing how they enter, where they come from, or where they lead. But just as God does all things with weight, number, and measure, so does His image in us, to the extent that it is renewed. Due to the foolishness, instability, and independence of our thoughts, we often fail to reach any conclusion or perfection, but rather waste our time thinking about nothing, as the saying goes. Similar to ships tossed about at sea without making progress, our thoughts may have been tossed about a great deal but achieved nothing. The same can be said about thoughts in this regard. Just as when someone makes imperfect dashes and writes nonsense, we say they scribble and don't truly write, in these follies and disconnectedness, we lose ourselves and wander aimlessly. We don't truly think. But—

(2.) On the contrary, if a strong desire or intense passion arises, then our thoughts become overly focused and fixated on sinful objects.

They cannot be pulled away or diverted in any way, which is another form of vanity. Our thoughts and our rational faculties were intended to moderate, temper, and cool down our passions when they are in motion, to rule and govern them. However, now our thoughts themselves are subject to our emotions. They act as fuel underneath them, only intensifying their boiling. Although our thoughts may initially stir up our fears, joys, desires, and so on, once these emotions are stirred up, they chain, fixate, and hold our thoughts onto those objects. We cannot loosen their grip. Therefore, Jesus said to his disciples, "Why are you troubled, and why do thoughts arise in your hearts?" Because disturbances in our emotions cause thoughts to rise like fumes and vapours. Thus, if a fear is present, it conjures up a multitude of ghostly thoughts that we cannot dismiss or divert our eyes from. They haunt us and follow us wherever we go, as if a person is being pursued by their own thoughts. "The heart meditates on terror," as stated in Isaiah 33:18. Similarly, when sorrow is present, it makes us dwell on the cross that we bear. Forgetting it would bring relief to the mind, but our passions compel our thoughts to repeat and recite it over and over again, as if they don't want us to forget. When love and desire arise, regardless of the object of our affection, whether it be success, recognition, beauty, or wealth, our thoughts diligently examine every aspect and detail, observing its entire allure, as if we were painting a picture of it. When joy arises, we thoroughly contemplate the source of our happiness and repeatedly go over it, like reading a beloved book, carefully noting every detail. Our focus is precise. In fact, our preoccupation can be so excessive that it often prevents us from sleeping. Ecclesiastes 5:12 describes how an abundance of riches keeps someone awake with an overwhelming multitude of thoughts. It speaks of a covetous person. Thoughts trouble individuals like Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar in the world, as described in Daniel 4:19. Similarly, Proverbs 4:16 states, "They cannot sleep unless they have done wrong." If their desires remain unsatisfied, they disturb their thoughts, just as unruly children disturb with their cries. Thus, what many consider to be free, namely thoughts, can become the greatest bondage and torment on earth. They hinder sleep, which

nurtures our well-being, consuming the heart that birthed them, wearing down the spirits. Even when a person seeks comfort in bed, attempting to put thoughts and sad reflections aside, they continue to haunt and terrify. Thoughts cannot be discarded like a cloak. And when people die, these thoughts will follow them to hell and torment them even more there. Thoughts are among the greatest executioners in hell, the "worm that does not die."

(3.) The vanity of the mind is evident in curiosity, a strong desire and itch to be fed with knowledge and to think about things that have no relevance to us. Scholars provide a perfect example of this, as their primary work revolves around this pursuit. How many valuable thoughts are wasted in this manner! They indulge in a curiosity for knowledge, as rebuked by the Apostle in various instances, such as those who pursue "oppositions of science falsely so called" in 1 Timothy 6:4, 20, or "curiosities of knowledge of things they have not seen." Similarly, in Colossians 2 and 1 Timothy 4:7, he refers to the speculative ideas they obsess over as "old wives' fables," since these ideas please their minds like fables please old wives. They are driven by an insatiable itch, comparable to pregnant women who, in their cravings, are not satisfied with what is locally available or in season, but instead long for some unheard-of rarity that may be far-fetched or even unattainable. Similarly, men, instead of finding contentment in the wonders of God revealed in His Word and creation, venture into their own fabricated realm, sailing there with pleasure. This was evident in the speculations of many scholastics who expended their precious intellects in constructing intricate webs from their own imaginations.

Another example can be found in those who have leisure and intellectual capacity to read extensively. They should nourish their hearts with the Word of God and absorb the precious words, wisdom, and sound knowledge that can benefit themselves and others, building upon their own souls and equipping themselves to serve their community. However, their curious inclinations lead them to immerse themselves in playbooks, mocking pamphlets, romances,

and fictitious tales. These are the intricate products of idle minds, which adorn their heads with "apes and peacocks' feathers" rather than pearls and precious stones. One could say, as Solomon did in Proverbs 15:14, "The heart of the intelligent seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness." Foolish discussions and reading materials please their ears and eyes, serving as mere provisions to feed their thoughts. Like chameleons, they live on air and wind, consuming without substance.

To address another aspect: how many others, out of sheer curiosity to entertain and satisfy their thoughts, eagerly listen to all the news circulating in the world, eagerly consuming every trivial gossip that comes from the mouths of foolish people, and derive pleasure solely from talking, thinking, and hearing about it?

I do not condemn everyone in this regard. Some have good intentions and can make good use of such information, just as Nehemiah inquired about the state of Jerusalem to rejoice with God's people, mourn with them, and pray for them, adjusting their prayers accordingly. However, I condemn the curious itch that drives them, when it is done merely to satisfy their whimsical desires. They are greatly delighted by novelty, even if it does not concern them. The Athenians were known for such curiosity, as mentioned in Acts 17:21. How some individuals eagerly await events and news throughout the week, making it a significant part of their happiness to study the affairs of the state more than their own hearts or the matters of their own professions. They take actions of the state as their subject of study, seeking to decipher their meaning and preach about them wherever they go! I am referring to those who do not truly take to heart the sufferings of the church of Christ or support them with their prayers when they occur.

Similar curiosity is observed in many people who desire to know the secrets of others, even though such knowledge would not benefit them. They study the actions and motives of others not to bring about reform or do good for them, but simply to know them and

indulge in solitary contemplation and pleasure. This is curiosity, and it is a true vanity of the thinking mind, which it greatly delights in. It is indeed a grave sin when a significant portion of one's most pleasing thoughts is spent on matters that do not concern them. We have more than enough things that we ought to know and that do concern us, which should occupy all our thoughts. We will not have any spare thoughts. Thoughts are precious things, the immediate products and buds of our immortal nature, and God has granted us the power to utilize them, to invest them in matters that pertain to our own well-being, the well-being of our neighbours, and the glory of God. Thus, failing to utilize them in such a manner is the greatest waste in the world. Consider what grain you put into the mill, for God deserves a portion of it all. Proverbs 24:8 states, "He that deviseth evil shall be called a mischievous person," referring not only to those who carry out malicious actions but also to those who devise them. Furthermore, verse 9 accentuates this point by stating that every thought is sin. Therefore, a combination and conspiracy of wicked thoughts is even more egregious. But—

(4.) There is a worse vanity than what has been mentioned, as indicated in Romans 13:14, "Taking thought to fulfil the lusts of the flesh." It means making deliberate plans for it. Thoughts serve as the caterers for our lusts, providing all their provisions. They scout out the best markets and opportunities for sinning in various ways, seeking the best deals for gaining credit, seeking advancement, accumulating wealth, and so on. For instance, if someone desires to rise in status, their thoughts study the art of it. They construct their own ladder to climb, inventing ways to achieve their goals, although it often turns out to be their own downfall, like Haman's gallows. If they desire wealth, what do they study? All the tricks and schemes of the world, all the cunning methods of oppressing, defrauding, and outsmarting their fellow human beings. They manipulate their dealings so that they become the winners while those who engage with them become the losers. In Isaiah 32:7, it is said that "the instruments of the churlish are evil, and he deviseth wicked devices to destroy the poor." If someone wants to undermine their opponent,

someone who stands in their way and hinders their reputation, they will secretly plot and scheme with their thoughts, using their cunning devices in the darkness of night. They will dig a pit, metaphorically speaking, and dig deep to conceal their intentions, ultimately causing harm without the other person even knowing who hurt them. This deliberate, calculated wickedness is even worse than the previous forms, where sin is devised and schemed. The more planning that goes into sin, the worse it becomes. That is why the sin concerning Uriah, rather than Bathsheba, is particularly condemned in David, because he used his intellect to plot it. He "took thought for it," whereas in the matter of Bathsheba, the thoughts took hold of him.

(5.) The fifth form of vanity is when we mentally represent or act out sins in our thoughts and imaginations. We imagine ourselves engaging in pleasures that we currently do not experience in reality. We pretend and envision ourselves carrying out sinful practices that we do not have the opportunity to perform outwardly. Theologians refer to it as speculative wickedness. You can observe the power of imagination in dreams, where fancy plays a prominent role. To borrow a phrase from the prophet, it makes us believe that "we eat when we are hungry, and drink when our souls are thirsty" (Isaiah 29:8). However, I do not intend to discuss the power and corruption of imagination in dreams. It would be better if, as the Apostle speaks of drunkenness, this speculative wickedness were confined to the night. But corrupted and disordered affections lead people into such daydreams, even when they are awake. There are, as the Apostle Jude puts it, "filthy dreams" that defile the flesh, even when one is awake. When their lusts lack opportunities for expression, their imaginations construct a stage for them. They set their thoughts and imaginations to work, entertaining their impure desires with self-created shows and performances. Reason and intention sit as spectators, deriving pleasure as their thoughts inwardly reenact their own unclean desires, ambitious schemes, or whatever else they fancy.

So vain and empty has the human heart become. Our desires and lusts are so impatient, unable to tolerate any interruptions to their pleasures. How sinful and corrupt we are!

Firstly, our vanity and emptiness are evident in this: consider all the pleasures of sin, even when they are fully, solidly, truly, and substantially enjoyed. They are nothing more than shadows, mere illusions and superficialities. The Apostle aptly describes the world as such. It is the power of imagination that gives them a false veneer of goodness. Like the pomp and splendour of Felix and Bernice, it is termed "polyphantasia." However, indulging in these pleasures solely in our imagination (which brings much pleasure to many hearts), finding satisfaction in the mere thoughts and fantasies of them, is but a shadow of these shadows. It is a vanity surpassing all other vanities, making us more vain than other creatures. While they may be "subject to vanity," it is not to the same extent as this.

Secondly, this demonstrates the impatience of our desires, their inability to endure being denied or interrupted in their pursuit of pleasure. When the heart is forbidden or separated from the desired objects and lacks the means or opportunities to satisfy its lusts, it seeks solace in imagination. It creates empty images of those desires within its own thoughts to entertain the mind in the meantime.

Thirdly, this reveals the excessive sinfulness and corruption within us. Engaging in outward acts of sin is comparable to committing adultery with the creature when it is genuinely enjoyed. But what we do with our souls and spirits, defiling them with these imaginations and likenesses that originate in our own fancies, is akin to incest. These thoughts and images are the offspring of our own hearts.

Yet, my brethren, the mind of man is filled with such speculative enjoyment of pleasures and the reenactment of sins, as will become evident in many specific instances.

First, consider the comforts that people possess and have readily available to them. They love to be alone, to contemplate and think about these comforts. Even when they are separated from the immediate use of them, they repeatedly recount and evaluate their happiness in having them. They applaud their own hearts for their favorable circumstances. It is akin to how wealthy individuals, who have an affinity for money, enjoy gazing at it and counting it. Similarly, people sum up their comforts and privileges, reveling in what they possess that others lack. They take pride in their riches, their greatness, and their superiority in abilities and gifts. Oh, how much of our precious thoughts are consumed in this manner! Just as the individual in the gospel keeps an internal account, saying to his soul, "You have goods laid up for many years." Haman, in the Book of Esther, takes stock of his honours and possessions, boasting about "all the glory of his riches and all the ways in which the king had promoted him." And Nebuchadnezzar, as it seems, walks alone and speaks to himself like a fool, saying, "Is this not the great Babylon that I have built by my mighty power for the glory of my majesty?"

Not only do people dwell on their comforts, but also on their excellencies, such as their learning, wisdom, and abilities. They enjoy observing these attributes in the mirror of their own contemplation, just as beautiful faces often and longingly gaze into mirrors. This tendency arises from the self-flattery within people and the desire to keep their happiness constantly fresh and present in their minds. However, when these thoughts do not lead the heart to gratitude towards God and are not used for that purpose, but rather serve as bellows for pride, they are vain and detestable in the eyes of God. This is evident from God's dealings with those previously mentioned. To one, He says, "You fool, this night," and to another, "while the words were still in his mouth" (giving no further warning), He strikes with madness and brutishness. As for Haman, he resembled a swelling wall before its collapse and ruin.

Secondly, this indulgence in imagined pleasures and the acting out of sins in one's thoughts is also evident in relation to future events.

When people have these events in view or anticipate them, their thoughts eagerly embrace their desires. They engage in vain promises and expectations of the pleasures that lie ahead, filling their minds with anticipation. Just as those mentioned in Isaiah raise their spirits to a higher level of merriment amidst their cups, as their hearts think and assure them, "Tomorrow shall be as today, and much more abundant." Similarly, in James 4:13, individuals say to themselves, "We will go to such a city, and stay there for a year, and gain profit." The promise of this and the thoughts preceding it nourish and sustain their hearts with comfort. When people wake up in the morning, they begin to anticipate with great pleasure the carnal pleasures that they have the claim to and promise of on that day or week. It could be attending certain company and enjoying merriment, embarking on a delightful journey, indulging in certain lustful satisfactions, or hearing exciting news, and so on. Thus, just as godly individuals "live by faith" in God's promises (Habakkuk 2:4; Isaiah 38:16), and as Hezekiah says, "By these men live, and this is the spirit of my life," relying on what God has spoken (verse 15), so do carnal individuals rely heavily on the promises made by their own hearts and thoughts in advance. These vain promises can be classified under the category of vain thoughts, as mentioned in Psalm 49:11, "Their inward thought is that their houses will last forever," and this thought pleases them. There is hardly any pleasure that holds great significance to a person without first being mentally acted out and promised. In this foolish manner, individuals place trust in their own words and promises, and in the end, they deceive themselves, as Jeremiah says in chapter 17, verse 11. They eagerly anticipate the pleasures they are to experience, similar to spendthrifts who spend their rents or heirs who spend their inheritances before reaching the appropriate age. However, when they finally come to enjoy the anticipated pleasures, they often find them to be mere illusions or falling short of their expectations. The experiences prove to be lacking, leaving them feeling empty, as Isaiah 29:8 states, or even stale, with little substance. It turns out that there is often more in their imagination than in the actual thing, which arises from the insatiable and voracious nature of their

desires. Their desires cause them to devour everything at once. As mentioned in Habakkuk 2:5, "He enlarges his appetite like Sheol, and he gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples." In a similar manner, an ambitious scholar covets all the promotions that are within view.

Thirdly, this indulgence in speculative wickedness is also directed towards past events. It involves recalling and reliving in our thoughts the pleasure derived from past sinful actions. The mind runs through the passages and circumstances of those same sins, committed long ago, with a renewed and fresh delight. People resurrect their long-buried actions, conversing with them as the witch and Saul did with Satan in Samuel's likeness. Instead of drawing lines across them and blotting them out through faith in Christ's blood, they choose to copy and rewrite them in their thoughts, finding the same satisfaction. An immoral person can meticulously study and review every detail of a past unclean act, along with the individuals involved. Similarly, a vainglorious scholar replays in their thoughts an outstanding performance, focusing on the most elegant aspects. Individuals also ruminate on any speech of commendation uttered by others, savoring it. All of this mirrors how a good-hearted person repeats and remembers the good things they have heard or read, recalling the quickness and warm emotions they experienced. Similarly, a godly individual finds comfort in recalling the actions of a well-lived life, just as Hezekiah said, "Lord, I have walked before thee with a perfect heart." This stirs and motivates their hearts towards a similar disposition. However, wicked individuals tend to recall and relive the most pleasurable sinful moments in their lives, extracting a new sweetness from them. Nothing demonstrates more hardness or wickedness of heart, or provokes God more than this.

1. It reveals a significant wickedness of heart, which, when it becomes a regular practice, is incompatible with grace. As the Apostle shows in Romans 6:21, a good heart does not reap such fruits from past sinful actions: "But what fruit had ye then in

those things whereof ye are now ashamed?" Saints gather nothing but shame, sorrow, and regret from those experiences. When Ephraim remembered his sin, he felt ashamed and repented. Can you, in your thoughts, repeatedly harvest and enjoy pleasure from them again and again?

2. It indicates a great hardness of heart, as nothing goes more against the truth and practice of repentance. Repentance is founded upon recalling sin with shame and sorrow, feeling more grief than pleasure in the act of committing it. It involves hating the very appearance of sin and igniting the heart with zeal and a desire for revenge against it. By remembering sinful actions with pleasure, we greatly provoke God. Our hearts become stained with new guilt, reaffirming and affirming our previous sinful acts. When we remember our sins with delight, we provoke God to remember them with a renewed abhorrence, leading Him to send down new afflictions. If we were to recall our sins with grief, He would choose to "remember them no more." By finding pleasure in revisiting these wounds, we display a delight in reopening the wounds inflicted upon Christ. Finding pleasure in viewing the sins of others, as mentioned in Romans 1:32, is considered worse than committing them. However, finding delight in revisiting and reliving our own sins is even more grievous. Hence, be aware that while you may currently take pleasure in repeating your past sins to yourselves, in hell, nothing will torment you more than the remembrance of them. Every circumstance of each sin will then become a dagger piercing your heart. This was the rich man's torment and preoccupation in hell – to remember the good things he had received and the sins he committed in their abuse. If godly individuals here on earth are horrified by the sins of their youth, as exemplified by Job, and constantly keep them before them, like David, imagine the perpetual terror that wicked individuals will experience in hell. Their punishment is partially depicted in Psalm 50:21: "I will set them in order before you."

Fourthly, The fourth aspect in which speculative vanity is evident is in acting out sins based on mere imaginary suppositions. People create and devise scenarios in their own thoughts, imagining what they would be and what they would do. They construct their own fantasy worlds and wander about in them. For example, if they had enough money, they envision the pleasures they would indulge in. If they were in positions of power, they imagine how they would conduct themselves. This can be likened to what Absalom said in 2 Samuel 15:4, "Oh, if I were a judge in the land, I would do this or that," etc. They take great pleasure in these imaginings, almost as much as those who actually experience them. This may well be the meaning of Psalm 50:18, where it is said of the hypocrite, who outwardly refrains from gross sins, that "he consents with the thief and shares with the adulterer," namely, in his heart and imagination, envisioning himself participating in their actions and desiring to do what they do.

Consider someone who is naturally ambitious, but circumstances have confined them to a lower sphere, incapable of rising higher or achieving greatness. Yet, in their own heart, they take on the role of a great person, erecting a throne and sitting upon it, contemplating what they would do if they were a king or a person of importance. Similarly, take an elderly person who was once lustful but is now weak and lacking the ability to act upon their desires. Yet, their thoughts compensate for what is lacking in strength or opportunity. They turn their own heart into a brothel, fulfilling all their desires within it. Likewise, a naturally pleasure-loving individual who lacks the means to indulge themselves will still find satisfaction in thoughts of the various delights they would enjoy. They create a menu for themselves, imagining the perfect concoction of pleasures and the ingredients they would include. Similarly, a vengeful person who lacks the means to exact revenge will still find pleasure in vengeful thoughts and wishes, engaging in invectives and verbal attacks against the one they despise when they are not present. A person in love will court their beloved in their imagination, even

when they are absent, crafting elaborate speeches to express their feelings.

In short, regardless of a person's inclinations or the unlikelihood of their desires coming to fruition, they reveal their true selves through their fantasies and thoughts. They depict in their own minds everything they long to be. They draw maps of their desires, calculating their own aspirations, carving out an ideal life that fills their hearts and brings them pleasure. There is no surer way to discern a person's natural inclination than through these thoughts and imaginings.

1. However, firstly, this is as foolish as any other folly, resembling the behavior of children. Isn't it childish to make clay pies and puppets (what else are such fantasies?) and to play the roles of ladies and mistresses like children do? Yet, such childishness exists in the hearts of adults.
2. Secondly, it is also a vanity because a person sets their heart on what does not exist. The things themselves do not exist, even if a person were to possess them (Proverbs 23:5). But to derive pleasure from mere suppositions is even worse.
3. Thirdly, this indicates a profound discontentment of the mind when individuals, in their own thoughts, place themselves in a different condition than what God has ordained for them.

Uses: The Good of Knowing the Vanity of Thoughts

Use 1.—After recognizing the vanity of your thoughts and how they affect your condition, humble yourself because of them. I base this on Proverbs 30:32, where Agur instructs us to humble ourselves not only for our actions but also for our thoughts: 'If thou hast done foolishly in lifting up thyself, or if thou hast thought evil, lay thy hand upon thy mouth.' Just as 'smiting upon the thigh' represents repentance, shame, and sorrow in Ephraim (Jeremiah 31:19), so laying the hand upon the mouth signifies deeper and more profound humility, indicating full recognition of one's guilt. In Romans 3:19, it is stated, 'Every mouth must be stopped.' Having nothing to say, not offering excuses that thoughts are uncontrollable and impossible to be rid of, etc., but instead, as Ezekiel 16:63 states, 'to remember, and to be confounded, and never to open thy mouth more'—to be humble and not answer back, as in Job 40:4—this is to lay your hand on your mouth, meaning to humble yourself.

And indeed, there is much reason for it. Your thoughts are the firstborn and eldest sons of original sin, and thus they embody its strength, just as Jacob referred to Reuben as the firstborn. Moreover, they are the parents and progenitors of all other sins, their siblings. They are the initial plotters and schemers, acting as Ahithophels in all the treasons and rebellions of our hearts and lives. They are the instigators and enablers of all excessive desires, and they facilitate the gratification of our lusts. They disrupt and undermine all our righteous duties, interrupting and corrupting our prayers to the point where they become repugnant to God.

And if their heinousness does not move you, consider their number, for they are constantly present. This makes our sins more numerous than the sands; the thoughts of Solomon's heart were as plentiful as sand, and so are ours. Not a minute passes without countless thoughts flowing from us, just as sands flow in an hourglass. So even if, individually, these thoughts may seem small and insignificant compared to gross defilements, their multitude makes them greater and heavier than all your other sins combined. Nothing is smaller than a grain of sand, yet when they accumulate, they become

weighty. Job 6:3 says, 'My grief is heavier than the sand.' Suppose these thoughts are like farthing tokens in comparison to major transgressions, but because the mint never rests, whether we are sleeping or awake, they constitute the majority of the treasure of wrath we are amassing. And know that God will account for every farthing, not discounting a single vain thought from your punishment. God considers our thoughts in this manner; just look at the indictment He brings against the old world, which is still on record in Genesis 6. When He pronounced the severe judgment of destroying the old world, did He primarily cite their murders, adulteries, and gross defilements as the cause? No, it was their thoughts—because they were so numerous and consistently evil—that provoked Him more than all their other sins. Therefore, examine your heart closely to humble yourself and to acknowledge your vileness. If such a treasure of wickedness is found in one chamber of your heart, what could be in all those other "chambers of the belly," as Solomon calls them? Consider them to humble yourself, but do not let the multitude discourage you. For God has more thoughts of mercy than you have had thoughts of rebellion. Psalm 40:5 says, 'Thy thoughts to us-ward' (referring to thoughts of mercy) 'are more than can be numbered.' You only began to entertain thoughts of rebellion against Him recently, but His thoughts of mercy have been from eternity to eternity. In Isaiah 55:7, after mentioning our thoughts, it says, 'Let the unrighteous man forsake his thoughts, and he will have mercy on him.' This is stated because the objection of the multitude of thoughts might discourage people from hoping for mercy. Therefore, it is purposely added, 'He will multiply to pardon,' to assure us that His thoughts of mercy surpass our thoughts of sin, as heaven exceeds the earth.

Use 2: We should conscientiously guard our thoughts. Just as Job did, in Job 31:1, when he said, 'I made a covenant with mine eyes; why should I think upon a maid?' Solomon specifically charges us to 'Above all keeping, keep thy heart' in Proverbs 4:23.

First, you are to keep the Lord's day holy, keep yourself unspotted from the world, keep your brother, keep all the commandments; but above all, keep your heart and your thoughts within it. This is the greatest commandment because it encompasses them all. Just as in the commandment where murder is forbidden, a malicious thought is also prohibited, and the same applies to the rest of the commandments. By keeping your thoughts in check, you are essentially keeping all the commandments. Just as original sin is prohibited in all the commandments, thoughts are addressed in each of them.

Secondly, 'Out of it are issues of life.' Thoughts and affections are the source, while speeches and actions are the result. Our thoughts determine our affections, as they serve as the bellows. The same applies to our prayers and all aspects of our lives, for they are like the spirits in the body, running through all and influencing all.

Thirdly, if you consider God, our thoughts are the territory He proclaims Himself the sole Lord of, and it is one of His greatest attributes that He 'knows them and judges them.' Earthly kings may attempt to govern your speech, bind your hands, and control your actions, but God governs only your thoughts. Through our thoughts, we primarily sanctify Him in our hearts and walk with God. Should we not, then, be conscientious about them?

Fourthly, if you look at the work and power of grace, where does it lie if not in 'bringing every thought into obedience?' (2 Corinthians 10:5) This is the glory of our religion, surpassing all others in the world. What makes it difficult and demanding? It is the task of observing and restraining our thoughts. The difference between sincere-hearted Christians and others lies in the control of our thoughts. Without this, all religious practice is merely 'bodily exercise.' Papists may mumble their prayers, hypocrites may speak, but true godliness lies in the governance of our thoughts.

Fifthly, if we consider the things we care about, if we care about our words because Christ said we will 'answer for every idle word,' then for the same reason, we should also care about our thoughts. Thoughts are the words of the mind, they just lack a form to be audible to others, which the tongue provides. Yet, you will be held accountable for them just like for your spoken words (Hebrews 4:12; 1 Corinthians 4:5). If you are careful about the companions you keep, the people you allow into your homes, and those who share your innermost secrets, then you should be even more careful about your thoughts. Thoughts reside in your hearts, which are not truly yours but God's dwelling place, built for Himself and for Christ and His word to abide in. Moreover, the things you think about have the closest and most intimate fellowship and interaction with you. Therefore, when you meditate on the word, it is said to 'talk with you' (Proverbs 6:22). If you are mindful of what you eat because it affects your physical health, then be mindful of what you think, for thoughts are the nourishment of the soul, as Cicero called them. Jeremiah expressed it when he said, "'Your words were found, and I ate them,' and your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Jeremiah 15:16).

Sixthly, if we consider the outcome of things, what will be the subject of the great inquiry on the day of judgment? It will be our thoughts and counsels (1 Corinthians 4:5). And even after the day of judgment, people's own thoughts will become their greatest tormentors. What are the lashes that God will inflict upon you for all eternity? They are your own thoughts—accusing thoughts that make you ponder over every sin, and each one will feel like a dagger piercing your soul (Isaiah 33:18). The hypocrite's torment is to dwell on terrifying thoughts, to study God's wrath, the blessedness of the saints, and their own sins and misery.

Remedies Against Vain Thoughts.

The first step is to ensure that the heart is filled and enriched with a good supply of sanctified and heavenly knowledge in spiritual truths. As Christ said, "A good man brings forth good things out of the good treasure of his heart" (Matthew 12:35). This means that a person who possesses various graces and precious truths, like gold in its raw form, can use their thoughts as a mint to coin and shape those truths into words. Therefore, if there are no mines of precious truths hidden within the heart, it is no wonder that our thoughts produce nothing but worthless, empty, and vain musings. This is because the mind lacks the proper material to feed upon. Solomon also says, "Wicked men forge wickedness" (Proverbs 6:14), as Junius translates it. If people have an abundance of worldly knowledge but lack spiritual knowledge that is beneficial to themselves, then even though they may express good things in their conversations with others, their thoughts do not dwell upon them when they are alone. A passage from Deuteronomy 6:6-7 reveals that storing up God's word in the heart and being deeply acquainted with it, gaining knowledge from it, is an effective means of engaging our thoughts when we are alone. The purpose of storing up the words of the law in our hearts (verse 5-6) is not only to teach others but also to occupy our thoughts during times of solitude, when a person can do nothing but engage their mind in thinking. When riding, walking, lying down, and rising up (which are often our most private moments for contemplation, and many people ride or lie alone, etc.), we are instructed to talk about the word. This command, however, cannot be fulfilled through verbal conversation alone, although it includes conversing with others when the opportunity arises, such as discussing it with one's bedfellow or companion. But even if there is no one else present, one can still talk about it to oneself, for thoughts are the internal dialogue of the mind. This is further supported by comparing Proverbs 6:22 with the aforementioned passage, which provides a fitting interpretation. Solomon, while exhorting the duty of binding the word to the heart, presents the resulting benefit that "when you awake, it will talk with

you." This means that through contemplation, the word will engage in conversation with you when you are alone, serving as a companion and offering insights and suggestions.

Secondly, make an effort to maintain and cultivate lively, holy, and spiritual affections in your heart, and do not let them grow cold. Do not fall away from your initial love, fear, or joy in God. If you have become negligent, strive to revive those affections once again. Your thoughts will naturally align with the nature of your affections. They incline the mind to dwell on objects that please them rather than others. That is why David declares, "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97). It was his love for the law that made him think of it so frequently. Similarly, in Malachi 3:16, those who feared the Lord and thought about His name are mentioned together. What we fear, we often think about and speak of. Therefore, it is added, "They spoke with one another." Fear caused them to think deeply about God's name, and thinking about it led them to speak about it. Thoughts and affections are mutually influential. As David wrote, "While I was musing, the fire burned" (Psalm 39). Thoughts are like bellows that ignite and intensify affections, and when affections are inflamed, they cause thoughts to bubble up. Therefore, those who have newly turned to God, with their fresh and fervent affections, can think of God with greater delight than anyone else.

Thirdly, above all other considerations, fill your heart with deep, strong, and profound apprehensions and impressions of God's holiness, majesty, omnipresence, and omniscience. If any thoughts have the power to settle, anchor, and captivate the human mind, it is thoughts of Him. Why is it that the saints and angels in heaven never have a vain or errant thought for eternity? It is because God's presence fixes them, and their eyes are always upon Him. Take a frivolous and careless spirit, and place them in the presence of a superior whom they fear and respect, and it will steady them. Job, therefore, was conscientious about his thoughts, refusing to look in a crooked way, because, as he said, God sees it (Job 31:1-2). This also

drew and anchored David's thoughts. In Psalm 139:1-12, he vividly expresses his continual awareness of God's greatness, majesty, and omnipresence. And what was the effect? "When I awake, I am still with you" (verse 17). The objects that make the strongest and deepest impressions on the mind are the ones a person thinks of first upon awakening. David's thoughts of God were so deeply ingrained that whenever he woke up, he was already with Him. Therefore, through our experience, we find that expanding our thoughts during prayer preparations, particularly at the beginning, with contemplation of God's attributes and His relationship to us, serves as a means to avoid distractions and brings about a serious attitude.

Fourthly, make a special effort to do this when you wake up, just as David did: "When I awake, I am still with you." To prevent the rise of empty and frivolous thoughts that naturally emerge, people often take a good morning draft that nourishes the stomach. Likewise, to prevent those vain and empty thoughts that arise from emptiness, fill your heart first with thoughts of God; delve into His wine-cellar. Whenever you open your eyes, you will notice many suitors waiting to engage with your thoughts, like clients at lawyers' doors, presenting various vanities and concerns. But speak with God first; He will say something to your heart that will settle it for the entire day. Do this before the crowd of worldly affairs overwhelms you. It is said of certain pagans that they worship the first thing they see in the morning as their god for the entire day. The same is true for the idols of people's hearts.

Fifthly, keep a vigilant eye on your heart and observe it throughout the day. Even though thoughts may crowd in, take notice of them and let them know they are not passing by unnoticed. If a person wants to pray rightly, they must also keep watch over who enters and exits. Where strict watch and vigilant magistrates are present, where the marshal and constable diligently examine wandering individuals, there will be few of them. The reason why swarms of wandering thoughts gather and pass by is due to a lack of strict watchfulness.

This is essentially all you can do, for thoughts will pass through regardless. However, still complain about them, whip them, and grant them their passage.

Sixthly, do not indulge your fancy too much with vanities and curious sights, as this generates idle thoughts. That is why Job said in Job 31:1 that he made a covenant with his eyes, so as not to think of a maiden. Proverbs 4:25 advises, "Let your eyes look directly forward."

Seventhly, be diligent in your work and "whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might," as stated in Ecclesiastes 9:10. This means giving it your full attention and putting all the strength of your mind into it. Let all the flow of thoughts be directed towards your task, preventing them from overflowing into vanity and foolishness. In 2 Thessalonians 3:11, those who do not work are referred to as busybodies, and in 1 Timothy 5:13, they are called idle and wandering (περιεργοί). They are not only idle (άρργοι) because they are not busy with what they should be, but also wandering, as they are preoccupied with things they shouldn't be concerned about, going from one place to another. Their bodies may be physically present, but their minds wander, lacking focus. When David walked alone, his spirit ran into extravagance. If the ground lies fallow, weeds will soon grow in it. God has appointed our callings to engage our thoughts, to provide them with work, and to keep them occupied during the intervals between acts of worship, knowing that the spirit and thoughts of people are restless and will seek occupation. Just as kings keep those with active spirits constantly employed to prevent them from thinking and plotting amiss, God also assigned man an occupation even in paradise to keep his active spirit busy. God thereby sets boundaries for man's thoughts, directing them to travel in a narrow lane, knowing that if they were unrestricted and left at liberty, they would "snuff up the wind" like wild donkeys, as Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 2:24. However, be cautious not to burden your mind with excessive business beyond what you can handle. This caused Martha to forget the "one thing necessary" while being preoccupied with many things, as mentioned in Luke 10:40. It leads

to cares (μέριμναι) that distract the mind, dividing it, and consequently causing wandering thoughts. This weakens and enervates the mind, and since it is vanity, according to Exodus 18:18, as Jethro said to Moses when burdened with business, "You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you." Like a leaf whose moisture has dried up, the essence that should be left for good duties will be depleted. Just as dreams arise from the multitude of business, as mentioned in Ecclesiastes 5:3, a multitude of thoughts arise from an excess of business.

Eighthly, in your work and in all your ways, entrust them to God for success. Proverbs 16:3 says, "Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established." This means keeping away from confusion, disorder, and the swarm of worries that afflict others, allowing your aims to be accomplished effectively. A few thoughts of faith would save us from many thoughts of worries and fears in the tasks we undertake, which often prove to be in vain as they do not advance the intended purpose. When the waves of the heart toss and turmoil it, and the winds of passion are stirred, a few thoughts of faith can bring immediate calm.

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