

Good Thinking



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Mark 7:21–23, Luke 6:45, Acts 14:2, 15:24, Gal. 3:1, Ps. 19:14, Col. 3:1–17.*

Memory Text: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (*Philippians 4:8, NIV*).

As one of the most utilized forms of mental health intervention today, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is based on the assumption that most psychological problems are improved by identifying and changing inaccurate and dysfunctional perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors. People with depression tend to interpret facts negatively; people with anxiety tend to look at the future with apprehension; and those with low self-esteem maximize others' success and minimize their own. CBT, therefore, trains people to identify and change their unhealthy thinking habits into better alternatives that promote desirable behavior and eliminate unwanted ones.

The Bible teaches us about the connection between thoughts and actions (*Luke 6:45*). Good thought patterns not only are healthy but also provide a way toward integrity: “Do not those who plot evil go astray? But those who plan what is good find love and faithfulness” (*Prov. 14:22, NIV*).

This week we'll look at some biblical truths that can help us gain control over our mental activity by allowing Christ to take charge of our mind.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 5.*

Thoughts: The Root of Behavior

Read Mark 7:21–23 and Luke 6:45. What do these texts tell us about the importance of controlling not just our actions, not just our deeds, not just our words but our thoughts, as well?

People who suffer from impulse-control disorders fail to resist the impulse to steal, to gamble, or to attack someone. Mental health clinicians know that these impulses often are preceded by a certain thought (or chain of thoughts), which leads to the undesirable behavior. Consequently, patients are trained to identify those thought triggers, dispel them immediately, and occupy their minds with something else. In this way, they gain control of their thoughts and avoid the actions to which these wrong thoughts so often lead.

Indeed, sinful acts often are preceded by definite thoughts. (Isn't this what temptation is all about?) It is the duty of every Christian to learn to identify, with God's help, the first steps in this process, because dwelling on wrong thoughts leads almost inevitably to sin.

What alternative is proposed by Paul to deal with immoral behavior? *Rom. 8:5–8.*

Mind and behavior are shown by Paul to be intimately linked. The Spirit-filled mind will seek good deeds, and the sin-dominated mind will bring about sinful deeds. It is not enough to change the behavior for the sake of convenience or to present a righteous face to the world. The heart (mind) needs to be transformed or else the eventual fruits will show the true nature of that heart.

“We need a constant sense of the ennobling power of pure thoughts and the damaging influence of evil thoughts. Let us place our thoughts upon holy things. Let them be pure and true; for the only security for any soul is right-thinking.”—Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times*[®], August 23, 1905.

Suppose you had to express, verbally, to others the thoughts you have had during the past 24 hours. What would you say? How embarrassed would you be? What does your answer say to you about the changes you need to make?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Philippians 4:8*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine the impact of our thoughts on our words and behavior and the effect of God's words on redirecting our thinking.

Feel: Sense the power available through the Holy Spirit as we dwell on God's Word.

Do: Choose to allow the Spirit to shape our thinking as we ponder God's creative power, His faithful love, and His law.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Wellspring of Action

A What relationship do our thoughts have to what we say and do?

B What difference does it make in our thoughts and feelings when we dwell on God's words in the Scriptures? How does prayer work to change the directions of our thoughts?

II. Feel: The Power of God's Words

A Our feelings are closely related to what we tell ourselves. Why is it important to make conscious choices about the words upon which we dwell?

B How can the Spirit, by changing our thoughts, change our feelings?

III. Do: Choose the Spirit

A By purposefully placing ourselves where the Spirit can fill our minds with His way of thinking, we allow Him to control our minds and hearts.

B What can we do to allow the Spirit full access to our thoughts?

C What changes need to take place in our choices of associations and entertainment?

► **Summary:** Our thoughts are the wellspring of our words and actions, and, as such, they need to be surrendered to the control of the Holy Spirit, moment by moment.

Thoughts as a Source of Distress

What are the things that really frighten you? What are ways that you can learn to trust the Lord, despite that fear? After all, isn't the Lord's power greater than whatever threats you face?

Much suffering can occur through thinking. Psychologist Philip Zimbardo, in his book *Psychology and Life*, reports the case of a young woman taken to a hospital because she was terrified of dying. Apparently there was nothing wrong with her, but she was admitted overnight for observation. Hours later she died. Further investigation showed that years before, a psychic had predicted her death on her twenty-third birthday. This woman died, a victim of her own panic, the day before she would have become 23. No question, people can suffer seriously from their negative thoughts; hence the need of wholesome thinking (tomorrow's lesson).

Also, just as important to remember: we also adversely can affect others' thinking by expressing our negativity to others. Words are very powerful tools, either for good or for evil. Our words either build up or tear down. There is life and death in the words we speak. How careful we need to be with the thoughts and sentiments that come out of our mouths.

Read Acts 14:2, 15:24, and Galatians 3:1. What do they tell us about the power to impact people negatively?

“If you do not feel lighthearted and joyous, do not talk of your feelings. Cast no shadow upon the lives of others. A cold, sunless religion never draws souls to Christ. It drives them away from Him into the nets that Satan has spread for the feet of the straying.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 488.

Think about times someone's “mere” words tore you down in a big way. How can you be sure you never do that to anyone else?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Moment by moment, day by day, our thoughts are a potent force that either draw us closer to Christ or take us farther away from His will for our lives.

Just for Teachers: Trying to control our thoughts can be like trying to herd fish—you corner one, while five more slip out of your reach. Help your class to understand the powerful role our habitual thought processes—conscious and unconscious—play in shaping our daily Christian walk and explore spiritual tools to help safeguard our minds.

Opening Activity: On November 18, 1978, 909 men, women, and children died in a mass suicide-murder pact in a remote Guyanan settlement. The few survivors of the “Jonestown massacre” gave an account of a tumultuous scene, where many parents willingly injected their children with a cyanide solution before drinking the same poison themselves. But an audiotape recording, recovered later, showed that not everyone participated willingly. One woman, Christine Miller, loudly challenged Jim Jones, the charismatic religious leader of the group who presided over the death of his followers. Jones responded as he had countless times through the years to damp down dissent. He urged others in the crowd to “shout down” Christine, and her lone voice of protest was drowned out in an avalanche of mob disapproval.

Jones’s methods of crowd control were not new. Gustav LeBon in his 1895 book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, explored how an individual’s thoughts may be perverted, controlled, and channeled into action by the power of “mob mentality.” Decades later, Adolf Hitler notoriously employed similar techniques in his use of the mass media.

Consider This: We easily forget the sheer power of what happens inside our minds, the incredible ability of thought patterns to impact not only our own lives but the lives of those around us—for good or ill. Do we seriously consider the frightening vulnerability of our thoughts to outside influences—to what we watch, read, or allow ourselves to dwell on?

Explore the simple power of suggestion. Ask your class NOT to think about a pink elephant balancing on a tightrope. How many were able to keep this image from their minds? Ask them to list daily influences that can unconsciously shape their thinking.

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Wholesome Thinking

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (*Phil. 4:8, NIV*).

What is the essence of Paul’s words to us here? What is the key to doing what he says? See also *2 Pet. 3:1, 2*.

Remembering, repeating, thinking about, and meditating on the words in the Bible is one of the greatest spiritual blessings available to us, and it is a sure way to cultivate what Peter called “wholesome thinking” (*2 Pet. 3:1, NIV*). Many people have obtained invaluable blessings by committing to memory treasured Bible texts. When confronted with moments of worry, doubt, fear, frustration, or temptation, they have repeated such thoughts in their minds and have obtained relief and peace through the power of the Holy Spirit.

With so many alluring competitors (TV, computer, etc.), this generation of believers is being tempted to put the Bible aside. It is necessary therefore to make a committed decision to read and reflect upon the Word every day. The Word of God is the only true fortification we have against the mental onslaught of unspiritual distractions that come from the world.

Look again at the text above. Make a list of what things you encounter that are true, pure, lovely, and so forth. What does that list consist of? What do these things have in common? Bring your list to class and share it with others on Sabbath.

Prayer is another way to keep the mind out of trouble. While we talk to God, there is little chance for lustful or other forms of selfish thoughts. Acquiring prayerful habits is a sure protection from sinful thoughts and, consequently, from sinful actions. The Bible is clear: God cares about our thoughts, because our thoughts impact our words, our actions, and our overall well-being. God wants us to have good thoughts because good thoughts (wholesome thinking) are good for us, both physically and mentally. The good news is that through meditating on the Bible, through prayer, and through Spirit-inspired choices on our part, we can keep our minds and hearts on things that will uplift ourselves and others, as well.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED▶ **STEP 2—Explore****Bible Commentary****I. Making the Connection** (*Review Luke 6:43–45 and Mark 7:21–23 with your class.*)

Thoughts may seem ephemeral. Physiologically, they're merely the sparking of synapses in our brain. Yet, the message of Jesus' words is unmistakable: thoughts matter. Eventually we express our innermost convictions and emotions in our choices, speech, and actions. If love is the controlling force of our mind, then, as Ellen G. White points out, "Love can no more exist without revealing itself in outward acts than fire can be kept alive without fuel."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 695.

Consider This: Scripture often refers to our actions as "fruit" (*karpōs*). Contrast the "fruit" of those who fail to control their thoughts with the "fruit" of those who surrender their thinking to God (*Gal. 5:19–23*). Dig deeper into this metaphor. What practical lessons about Christian living can we draw from the natural growth phases of a living plant? Just as the production of fruit first requires a healthy seed, planted well and tended regularly, what must come before this harvest of spiritual "fruit"?

II. Setting Our Perspective (*Review Colossians 3:1–17 with your class.*)

What is the most crucial step in building a healthy thought life? Read again Colossians 3:1–4. Note the phrases "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ"; "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God"; and "you also will appear with him in glory" (*NIV*). Now compare this with the similar language of Hebrews 3:1: "who share in the heavenly calling" (*NIV*).

Paul is reminding his readers that they have had a *life-transforming, perspective-altering encounter with their Lord*. We see things differently. We are invited to share in Christ's triumph over death. Our perspective now transcends the finite world. We see, instead, through the lens of eternity.

Thought Question:

What practical changes can this "eternal perspective" bring to the way we think about our career, our family, our finances?

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The Thoughts of Our Hearts

Read 1 Kings 8:39, Psalm 19:14, 1 Chronicles 28:9, and 1 Samuel 16:7. What crucial point are these texts making? More important, how should this truth impact us and how we think? Does this truth make you nervous and fearful, or does it give you hope? Or both? Analyze the reason for your answer.

“For you alone know the hearts of all men” (*1 Kings 8:39, NIV*). The word *heart* often is used in the Bible as the seat of thoughts and emotions (*see Matt. 9:4*). Only God has access to the intimacy of our mental activity, to our true intentions, and to our secret yearnings. Nothing, even in the form of a fleeting thought, can be hidden from the Creator.

God’s knowledge of our soul is to our advantage. When people are too discouraged to utter a sensible word of prayer, God knows their need. Humans only can look at the outer appearance and behaviors, and then try to imagine what someone else is thinking; God knows the thoughts in ways others never can.

Likewise, Satan and his angels only can observe, listen, and estimate what goes on inside. “Satan cannot read our thoughts, but he can see our actions, hear our words; and from his long knowledge of the human family, he can shape his temptations to take advantage of our weak points of character.”—Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald*, May 19, 1891.

As you make everyday decisions (personal or work-related) or think of other people, pause for a moment and send a quiet prayer to God. Enjoy the understanding of an intimate dialogue that is between you and God alone. Nobody else in the universe is privy to this communication. Allowing Christ into your thinking process will safeguard you from temptation and bring spiritual blessings. This process will, beyond doubt, help you build a closer walk with the Lord.

How does the day’s lesson help you better understand the biblical admonition not to judge others? How many times have your motives been misjudged by those who don’t know your heart? Why, then, is it important not to judge others in return?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**III. Input/Output** (Review with your class *Philippians 4:8*.)

If a perspective-altering encounter with God provides the foundation for a healthy thought life, how do we then build on this foundation? How important in this process is the simple equation, “garbage in = garbage out”?

Thought Questions:

- ❶ Read again Colossians 3:16. What role does the community of believers play in helping us to develop healthy thinking? How important is it to have a safe place to express our fears, our failings, our hopes, and our struggles? What happens when we attempt to be “poker-faced Christians”—keeping everything inside?
- ❷ How far is the spiritual battle to “guard the avenues of our minds” influenced by seemingly mundane considerations, such as getting adequate rest, eating well, maintaining a balanced lifestyle, and rejecting substances that could impair our ability to think clearly?

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The biblical principles we have studied are critically important in today’s world of pervasive mass media. Help your class to take these age-old teachings about guarding the mind and apply them within a modern context.

Consider This: How conscious are you of the messages that shape your thoughts each time you turn on the television, log on to the Internet, or open a magazine? What does it mean to cultivate a mindset of “critical evaluation”?

Learn to *talk back* to the media you engage with. If you’re watching a program or reading an article, ask it these questions: “What are you trying to get me to believe? What assumptions, values, and worldview underlie the messages you’re giving me? Are these acceptable to my worldview? Do they line up with my values and the “eternal perspective” given to me by Christ?”

Activities:

- ❶ Give each person in the class a page from a magazine or newspaper. Ask him or her to spend a few minutes looking at the articles and advertisements; then ask each person to share with the class two or three values or assumptions that, although unstated, are still being communicated. Ask

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The Peace of Christ in Our Hearts

Read Colossians 3:1–17. What are the specific actions that we are called upon to do in order to live the kind of life in Christ we are promised?

This passage takes us to the root of moral and immoral behaviors, the heart and mind. It also points at the only One who can work goodness in us by governing our thoughts, Jesus Christ: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (*Col. 3:15, NIV*). Note expressions such as “set your hearts,” “set your minds,” “put on love,” “let the peace of Christ,” “let the word of Christ.” They indicate that avoiding sin and acquiring virtue are matters of choice and preparation, not improvisation. Sin can be overcome only by setting hearts and minds on things from above. Christ is the source of virtue and goodness. Christ, when allowed by us, is the only One capable of bringing true peace to our minds.

Our minds, then, being the core of our existence, need to be put under the care of Jesus. It is central to the development of character, and it cannot be left to the mercy of circumstances. Sinful tendencies and corrupt environments both work against purity in thought. Yet, the Lord does not leave us abandoned; He extends His help and protection to all who want it. “Our thoughts, if stayed upon God, will be guided by divine love and power.” Thus, we must “live on the words that proceed from the lips of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 2, p. 669.

In the middle of spiritual warfare, a person may be tempted and find it very difficult to dispel certain adverse thoughts. In those moments, it may be easier to distract oneself by changing place or activity or seeking good company. This may permit a change that facilitates prayer and assurance.

Thought is a very mysterious human process. We really don't know for sure even what it is or exactly how it works. In most cases, though, in the inner recesses of our consciousness, we alone make the choice regarding what we are going to think about. A thought can be changed in an instant. We simply have to make the choice to change it. (In some cases, though, mental illness can affect a person's ability to change their thoughts easily, and so professional treatment [if available] can be extremely beneficial.) What about your thoughts? Next time the wrong ones come, what are you going to do?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the class to discuss in what way, if any, these assumptions challenge our Christian values.

- 2 Violent video games are front and center in the ongoing debate about the link between violence in the media and increased aggression. In the game series Grand Theft Auto, players engage in simulated theft, violence, street-gang activity, sexual activity, and profanity. Ask your class to develop a list of simple principles that could help Christian parents guide their teenagers through the difficult world of gaming and media. Just as important, discuss how these principles could be communicated effectively and positively to teenagers.

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Blocking negative influences is only one side of the battle to guard our minds. Encourage members of your class to search for practical ways to cultivate “God’s peace” in their thought life.

Thought Questions:

Do you have peace of mind? We often focus solely on the admonition contained in Philippians 4:8, but what theme do you see repeated in the verses that “bookend” this text (*vss. 7 and 9*)? What does this emphasis on “God’s peace” say to you about an important end result of learning to guard our thoughts?

Activity: Create two lists on a chalkboard or large sheet of paper. Ask your class to list the most powerful “disturbers of the peace” when it comes to our thoughts (such as worries about work or finances, anger, temptations, and so on.).

Next to each item ask the class to list specific promises or passages from God’s Word that could help someone combat this specific negative thought pattern and find God’s peace. Challenge class members to continue this during the coming week: whenever assailed by negativity, deliberately seek out a suitable “antidote” in Scripture, a piece of music, a devotional book, or in nature.

Reflection: End the class with a period of silent reflection and prayer. Ask class members to consider the health of their own thoughts and to bring their struggles before God. Ask them to reflect on these questions: Do I have a strong foundation for a healthy thought life? Have I had a life-transforming, perspective-altering encounter with God? Am I trying to wage the battle in my own strength, or do I instead ask God daily to reign in my heart and mind? What specific changes could I make this week to help focus my thoughts on that which brings me closer to God?

Further Study: “More precious than the golden wedge of Ophir is the power of right thought. We need to place a high value upon the right control of our thoughts. . . . Every impure thought defiles the soul, impairs the moral sense, and tends to obliterate the impressions of the Holy Spirit. It dims the spiritual vision, so that men cannot behold God. The Lord may and does forgive the repenting sinner; but though forgiven, the soul is marred. All impurity of speech and thought must be shunned by him who would have clear discernment of spiritual truth. . . . We are to use every means that God has placed within our reach for the government and cultivation of our thoughts. We are to bring our minds into harmony with Christ’s mind. His truth will sanctify us, body, soul, and spirit, and we shall be enabled to rise above temptation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times*[®], August 23, 1905.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, go over the list you made on Tuesday and compare yours with those of others in your class. What can you learn from one another’s picks?
- ❷ What is the meaning of “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ”? *2 Cor. 10:5*. How can we learn to do that?
- ❸ How do the Internet, TV programs, recreational reading, advertisements, et cetera, work in your mind? How much of your thinking and doing may be affected by these sources? Why do we fool ourselves if we believe that what we read or watch doesn’t impact our thinking?
- ❹ What are ways in which our actions, even subconsciously, reveal the thoughts in our minds? How does body language show what’s going on inside?
- ❺ What advice would you give to someone who is struggling with impulsive behavior? What promises can you present to them from the Bible? Why is it also important to keep before them all the promises of forgiveness and acceptance through Jesus? How can you keep them from giving up in complete despair, believing that, because they have not achieved the victory that they want, their relationship with God is somehow deficient? How can you help them learn never to give up on the promises of forgiveness, no matter how unworthy they feel?
- ❻ How careful are you with your words, which simply reflect your thoughts? How can you be sure your words always are working for good and not for evil?