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## **TAKING THOUGHTS CAPTIVE**

*by William P. Wilson, MD*

"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ "  
(2 Corinthians 10:5).

I was listening to a sermon by Charles Stanley on TV recently. I was not paying close attention to him, but somehow I was startled to hear his repetition of one part of the scripture cited above. It was, "We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." This scripture was dramatically illuminated in my mind. I had a *eureka* experience. I realized many of our sins begin with a thought. This thought can in time lead to more thoughts and then to an act that is contrary to the commandments of God.

James summarized the psychological mechanism when he commented on temptation. "When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each of you is tempted when you are dragged away by your own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:13-15). James makes it plain that evil desire is where it all starts.

Several years ago I recognized that thinking wrong thoughts was a problem in my own life and in the life of many of my patients, so I asked the Lord to tell me if there was anything I could do to deal with these aberrant thoughts. At that time I realized that singing hymns, Christian songs, quoting scripture, and praying could keep our mind stayed on Christ and block out wrong thoughts. Paul said, "Finally, brothers and sisters, 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).

My new revelation is an extension of that exhortation. However, I find taking thoughts captive

seems to be more effective than hymns or Christian songs for it not only excludes them from our mind, but it also in time binds them so they do not readily come back. Doing so, though, is not a one shot deal. We must be constantly vigilant; for we cannot get rid of them – we can only capture them so they cannot overcome us at the moment. We cannot abolish memories from our minds, so they will come back. It occurred to me that this is perhaps the continuing answer to the question I posed to God earlier.

Now, the opening statement says that we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. This has to be understood, so we ask how do we go about demolishing an argument and pretension?

First, when we look at the thought life of a person we find that there are thoughts that are contrary to God commandments. He has told us that our thought life should not contain thoughts that are lustful, greedy, covetous, hateful, envious, or idolatrous.

Let us first take lustful thoughts as an example since they are so common in males of our species. If we have many of them and act on them they will organize themselves as a stronghold. Since they have been acted upon they set up conditioned reflexes that will result in further similar acts that are sinful when the right stimulus comes along. The outcome is that they either result in seeking relief with a male or female sex partner or in masturbation. We must not forget, though, that Jesus said that lustful thoughts alone are sinful (Matthew 5:28).

How do these argue against God? Romans, chapter seven, helps to explain how they are arguments. It is clear that they deny the authority of God who told us not to covet our neighbor's wife or to commit adultery. When we think these thoughts we are saying in essence that God either does not care what we think, he won't know what we think or we don't care what he thinks. We decide to think these thoughts no matter what the consequences. Then we sin and as a result grieve the Holy Spirit and are separated from God (Ephesians 4:30).

Knowing what God has said in his commandments, we know we have transgressed his law so we feel ashamed and guilty. This triggers more acts, for we are morally paralyzed. We keep on sinning with an increasing burden of guilt.

Satan delights in our weakness for he can exploit our stronghold by putting temptation before us. He knows what triggers our conditioned reflexes so he puts the stimulus before us to cause us to fall. In the case of lust he will put TV programs with explicit sexual acts. He will have women with skimpy clothes or bathing suits parade across the screen or on the beach, or women and men “making out” in a lustful way. He also will have articles printed in books and magazines that describe in detail sex acts that trigger our lustful thoughts. He knows our weaknesses.

More importantly, we too are responsible for we allow ourselves in times of stress to seek pleasure in sexual release, so we return to our old outlets whether they are fantasy or pornography. The psalmist and Peter understood this when they said, “Of them the proverbs are true: As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly” (Proverbs. 26:11), and “A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud” (2 Peter 2:22). Here he was talking about people who follow the corrupt desires of their sinful nature and despise or reject authority. Lust arises out of our human nature where sexual desire is part of that nature.

Greed arises out of a desire for material things. Greed arises out of our need to supply ourselves with food housing and shelter. The way Satan uses this is by leading us into obsessional speculative stock and commodity market trading. We are trying to get something for nothing. We are not going to work for what we get. He especially uses gambling to lead us into sin. In all these we are worshiping money. Jesus said that one cannot worship God and money (Matthew 6:24)!

Idolatry arises out of our need to worship objects that we can see. This tendency to idolatry is illustrated in the Bible in the Golden Calf episode in Exodus, in the Asherah poles that were erected constantly in the history of Israel, and in the adoption of foreign Gods by the Hebrews often during their history. In our day our idols are money, sports, alcohol, and sex.

Today we have a TV program called American Idol. There is no question that the attention paid this program is what God warned us against. Idols are often infected by Satan, whether they are made of bronze or marble or other materials. Not only are we worshiping demons, but idols

distract us from worshiping the living God. The Old Testament prophets warned the Israelis against their infection. We can read of the consequences of Solomon's idol worship after his death. In the New Testament there were continuing warnings (cf. 1 John 5:21). Here John said, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."

Elvis Pressley became a human Idol. When he was alive people swooned when he sang; they shouted and cheered when he came on stage. His home, Graceland, became a shrine where many go to worship. And then there are sports stars. Whether they are entertainers, actors or actresses – all of them, like the ancient gods, are human and sinful. Some of them, like Elvis and Marilyn Monroe, died ignominious deaths. This happened also to some Roman Emperors who declared themselves gods.

Now we can come back to taking every thought captive. We can do it if we so desire. I have seen it work in the lives of my patients for whenever an aberrant thought comes to mind they can, by an act of their will say, "I take this thought captive for Christ!" The Holy Spirit helps them in their weakness and deletes it from consciousness. When it comes back they say it again and again and again until it is taken permanently captive.

None of us, whether pagan or Christian, want to suffer the consequences of sin. Sin may be fun and pleasurable, but its wages are still the same. They have not been inflated or deflated. They are still death.

Since for many of us our thought life is the area in which we sin most, we must have control of it. Our God has instructed us as to how we can control it. We have two methods. One is to occlude sinful thoughts and the other is to take them captive for Christ. Let's use both.