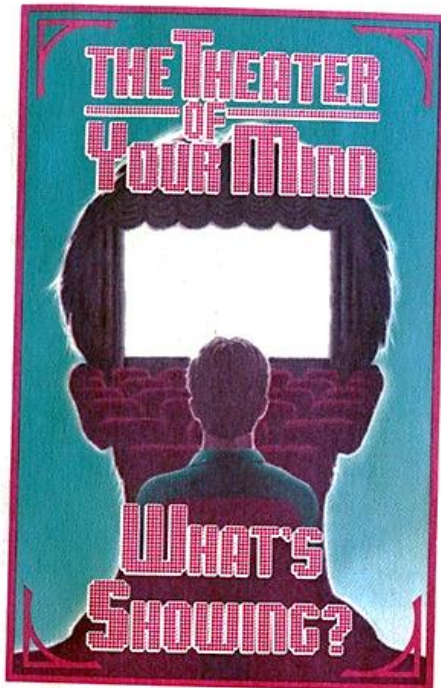


# The Theatre of Your Mind—What's Showing?

By Gunderson, Denny

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The tension produced by what we *know* compared to what we *are* leads some Christians to believe that the practice of sin in their life is inevitable and that victory is a wonderful idea but only possible in heaven or at some future date.

I want you to know, however, that there can and *should* be increasing victory in our overcoming sin, whether in "thought, word, or deed." Jesus came, died, and rose again to break the power of sin once and for all. But the grace to overcome must first be applied to our mind if the victory is to spread naturally to our actions.

## A Renewing Process

In Romans 12:2, Paul tells us not to be "*conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...*" The word "renewing" suggests a process. At conversion God gives us a new spirit, but that doesn't mean when we're saved we become instantly mature in the Lord. Rather, the Spirit of God, interacting with the new spirit in us, goes to work developing the character of Christ within us. This development of godly character begins a process which will continue for the rest of our lives.

During a typical day we constantly use our will and mind making decisions and responding to the circumstances of life. The general sequence of events looks like this: We *think* about something - our thoughts produce an *attitude* toward the focus of our thinking - our thoughts plus our attitude produce an *emotional* response - then we act *out* what we have thought about.

God has created us in such a way that our actions follow our thoughts. Many Scripture verses display this. For example Jeremiah 11:8 says, "*They obeyed not, nor inclined their ear, but walked every one in the imagination of their evil heart.*" God, speaking here of a rebellious nation, states that the people acted out what they imagined in their minds. (In both Hebrew and Greek the words used for "heart" are connected with the function of the mind.)

## It's What's Inside That Counts

An even clearer statement is found in Proverbs 23:6-7, "*Do not eat the bread of a selfish man, or desire his delicacies; for as he thinks within himself, so he is.*" This proverb is sobering because it cuts through the icing of outward actions by implying that the way we think is the way we are.

Too often we assess a person's spirituality by how they act in church. But anyone can *look* saintly at a worship service! A more accurate gauge of our "saintliness" takes place when we are laying in bed late at night with the lights out, alone with our thoughts. What do we think about when there's nobody around to impress? Where do our fantasies take us? Do we engage in sensual or self-gratifying daydreams? Are we criticizing our neighbor or plotting revenge? Do we desire positions or possessions that God has not released to us? If so, we are programming ourselves for defeat.

## Getting In the Groove

The failure to discipline the mind will ultimately produce bondage to bad habits both in thought and action. The wrong thoughts we entertain over a period of time become easier to dwell on.

Picture a farmer driving his tractor down a dirt road. When the road is new, the smooth grade allows the farmer to easily drive from side to side. But if the farmer constantly drives in the same place, ruts or grooves begin to form in the road and it becomes increasingly difficult to steer his tractor. Eventually, if the road isn't smoothed over, the ruts become so deep that the tractor tires just naturally follow them.

In the same way, someone who continues to have sinful thought patterns soon finds it easier to let his mind "fall into a rut" than to steer down the right path. If a person doesn't heed the conviction of the Holy Spirit and continues to let his mind go, he will reap the consequences of his fleshly habit.

## The Great Escape

A number of years ago I dealt with a young man who had been rejected by his parents because his birth was "an accident." From birth the message he received was, "We don't want you." Life was such an unpleasant experience for him that he decided to escape the reality by living in a fantasy world created by his own imagination.

In this new world he was the hero, the knight in shining armor. Once he reached adolescence, sexual desires entered his fantasy world. At that point, his thought-life moved into the seductive world of sexual pleasure. This young man would spend the majority of his time feeding his mind with graphic, sexual thoughts. Eventually he tried to satisfy his lust through pornography. Like the farmer driving his tractor, it became easier for him to let his thoughts follow the ruts rather than steer away from them. Habit produced bondage.

I talk to Christians every week who, like this young man, have great difficulty "bringing their thoughts into captivity." Some are driven by fear, constantly entertaining anxious thoughts. They worry about crime, lack of approval, the possibility of failure, or the nuclear threat.

Others are obsessed with bitterness, focusing their thoughts on someone who betrayed them or maybe someone who dared to cross their will. Their thoughts of retaliation produce the bitter feeling of resentment. This person may even become more susceptible to disease as a result of his bitterness, which some doctors say produces stress hormones in the body. Still others find themselves prisoners of distrust and jealousy - their emotional antennas constantly scan the air, looking for evidence to confirm their suspicions.

## Think Before You Act

The point is this: Our thought life is the foundation on which Our actions are built. This is the principle behind Jesus' words in Matthew 5:27-28, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery, but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.'*" In the eyes of the Lord, entertaining just the thought of adultery is in itself a form of adultery. Letting your mind go the wrong way will lead your *life* the wrong way.

There seems to be an apathetic attitude among Christians when it comes to disciplining the mind. Some would rather get into the more "spiritual things" of the Christian life and dismiss talk of controlling our thoughts as some gimmicky type of positive thinking. Others assume that thoughts are not all that important as long as you're able to follow a prescribed set of "dos and don'ts" in outward conduct. The person who holds either of these assumptions is only fooling himself. Failing to come to grips with this issue leads to an empty, unstable life, and victorious, joyous living will never be real.

## No Place to Hide

So, what do we do in order to gain victory in the battle for the mind? First, let me state one obvious fact: God *can* read our minds. *"...for the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts."* (1 Chron. 28:9) *"The Lord knows the thoughts of man."* (Psalm 94:11) Nothing is done in secret. There is Someone who *always* sees. That's a sobering thought and should convince us that what we think about can be either a source of joy to God, or a source of grief. What kind of response do your thoughts produce in God's great Father heart?

## Are Bygones Gone?

Another key concept is found in Matthew 6:34. Jesus said, *"Do not be anxious for tomorrow."* We focus most of our

thoughts toward either the past or the future. A worrying person constantly thinks about the possibility of future harm or failure. His thought-life centers on a lot of "what ifs." Those who dwell on the past usually fill their mind with "the good old days" or painful experiences. If we entertain pictures in our mind of past hurts, our emotions begin to relive those experiences. We find that the past has a hold on us - influencing and tainting our present relationships even though the incident may have taken place forty years ago.

These fears of worry and doubt are the enemies of faith and will hinder spiritual growth. Jesus knew the kind of damage they bring to a person's life. Right before He warned about worrying, He said, "*seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness.*" (Matt. 6:33) The Kingdom of God is a worthy subject for your thoughts - worry is not.

## Garbage In - Garbage Out

The young person who plugs into his stereo for hours at a time, filling his mind with music that doesn't edify his spirit, is only fooling himself when he says he's not listening to the lyrics, only the beat. That's not possible! Once you hear the message it's sent to your brain and recorded in your memory. How many times have you heard a musical commercial somewhere? You might have consciously "tuned out" at that point, but four hours later you find yourself mowing the lawn and humming, "...you deserve a break today... at MacDonald's."

The input our mind receives *does* affect us, even though we might not realize it at the time.. The mind is like a sponge. Whatever the sponge absorbs will come out when it's squeezed. Garbage in, garbage out! Truth in, truth out!

We've all known marriages where this was the tragic case. A husband may tell his wife he loves her, yet entertain thoughts of unfaithfulness. If those thoughts are allowed into the mind, this husband feels an increasingly strong drive to act them out. It may take years, but if he's in a time of stress or temptation, his actions may fall right in line with his thoughts. Pressure, crisis, or temptation are ways we're squeezed. At that point, the things held inside come pouring out

## The Inner Fight

Speaking of temptation, let's look for a moment at James 1:14-15. "*But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.*"

During temptation, there's always time to stop and think about the consequences of giving in to either God or self. Often temptation crosses our path when we're merely going our merry way with no desire to sin. The temptation itself isn't sin, but if we stop and contemplate the temptation, we usually wind up rationalizing the sin. We become "enticed" (the Greek word used means "beguiled"). But notice we are enticed by *our own lust*. The word "lust" simply means "strong desire." The platform for temptation is already within us if we have any strong desires that are ungodly.

Satan is smart enough to tempt us where we're susceptible. Because Satan isn't a creator but rather an exploiter, he can only use something which already exists and twist its proper use. Unresolved sin allows the enemy a foothold on which to focus his attacks. Our response to this temptation should be three-fold:

1. Submit to God (*James 4:7a*) by responding to His conviction of sin;
2. Resist the devil (*James 4:7b*) by taking authority over him; and
3. *Flee* temptation and pursue righteousness (*I Tim. 6:11, II Tim. 2:22*).

The point to remember is that you can't flee from what you still hold in your mind. You can't just make your mind go blank or just fight against the thought. Instead, you need to *replace* the thoughts or pictures with thoughts that will edify and lift your soul toward God - a favorite verse or song or a spontaneous prayer of thanks for every good thing you can think of.

## Food For Thought

There are a number of commands given in God's Word which spell out things we should do in order to discipline our mind. Philippians 4:8 says, "*Finally brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, **let your mind dwell on these things.***" You don't have to force your mind to dwell on these things, *let* your mind dwell on them. This verse sums up God's standard for our thought-life by giving an eight-fold "thought gauge" which we could diagram like this:

God designed the mind to grow and flourish as it's fed these right things. But if we saturate our thoughts with things that don't meet God's glorious standard, the mind begins to react in adverse ways. It was not designed to handle garbage.

## Taking Out The Trash

Every experience we've had is recorded in our memory. If the sum of our life experience is negative and self-gratifying, that backlog of memory can have a powerful influence over our present circumstances. It's important that we go to work eliminating the effects of those experiences.

One way to aid this process is what we could call the principle of diluting. If a truck carrying a toxic substance has a wreck on the freeway, a specialized crew is called to clear the toxins from the scene. To completely clear the contamination they'd have to get rid of the pavement, the dirt, and everything that's affected. Instead, they spray a liquid on the contaminated area which dilutes the toxin, rendering it harmless.

In a similar way, we can cancel the poisonous effects of the past by diluting them and covering them with God's Word. Ephesians 5:26 says Jesus sanctified the Church, *"having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word..."* As we meditate on the Word and act on what we learn, we receive cleansing and purifying benefits. The disciplines of Bible meditation and Scripture memorization are important tools which not only bring cleansing, but also help us remain wholehearted in Christian practice.

## Determine To Win

Another strong directive from Scripture is I Peter 1:13: *"Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* The word "gird" carries the idea of preparation. A person involved in warfare doesn't casually or passively wander into battle. He does whatever is necessary to prepare himself, insuring the best possible chances for victory. Girding our minds includes being *"sober in spirit."* It means being serious-minded in our determination to persevere. Don't settle for partial victory.

Peter also tells us, *"Fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* And Hebrews 12:2 says, *"...fixing your eyes on Jesus..."* To fix means to focus or concentrate. I believe that the primary way to discipline our mind is to learn to focus our thoughts on God, His ways, and His character. The more you gaze upon Him, the more you will be drawn to Him. As we find our hearts drawn away from ourselves and toward Christ, there is a growing dissatisfaction with anything that distracts us from seeing Him.

## Swing Your Sword!

The bottom line is this: There's a battle for our minds, and we cannot be passive spectators assuming that God will take care of it all - while we do nothing. God is already doing His part to convict, expose, and bring healing. He has committed Himself to bring us victory if we will follow His instructions. It is now time for us to wage aggressive action.

II Cor. 10:5 declares that we are to take *every* thought captive. God's Word gives us no excuse for not developing a renewed mind. Spiritual weapons have been made available to us for the battle, but those weapons are powerless unless they are used. Victory can be accomplished if we will simply give ourselves to God's Word and His Spirit. God is more than able to overcome the enemy's tactics against us.

Will you now respond to God's provision by picking up your weapons and resolving to do battle until the victory is won for Jesus' sake?

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