

Session 7: God will offer us guidance in our thoughts. (Part 1)

I. Opening Prayer

The passages that will be prayerfully read as part of the opening prayer are the Scriptural foundation for this teaching.

- “I will bless the LORD who counsels me; Indeed He instructs me in the night [in my thoughts]. I have set the LORD continually before me; Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.” Psalm 16: 7-8
- “Your ways O Lord make known to me, teach me Your paths [in my thoughts]. Set me in the way of Your truth, and teach me, for You are the God who saves me and my hope is in You all day long.” Psalm 25: 4-5
- “Happy the man who listens to me, watching daily at My gates.” Proverbs 8: 34
- “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and **minds** through Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 4:6-7

II. The TEACHING for Session 6: God will offer us guidance in our thoughts (Part 1).

Thinking is essential, but we want to be careful that we don't overdo it. We need a proper balance because God communicates with us through our thoughts; He helps us understand His truth, and our thoughts are a means of conversation and communion with Him. Further, God uses this gift of “thinking” that He has given us to provide direction for every aspect of our lives. He places helpful ideas in our heads.

Therefore, it is essential to examine the sources of our thoughts. There are good sources and there are bad sources for our thoughts. We need to realize that good and godly thoughts come from God and anything that is uncharitable toward ourselves or others is from the “enemy.” The enemy here refers to the devil, “the father of lies,” or any influence he has upon the world and the people in it. (See John 8:44) We do not have to accept these thoughts as our own. In other words, we don't have to take ownership of an ungodly thought. The important thing is to recognize when a thought is ungodly, and then we have a choice to reject it; in other words, turn away from it and not accept it as our own. Note: An ungodly thought is not a sin if we reject it immediately. Once we become aware of an ungodly thought in our mind, we will want to make a decision to turn from it by rejecting it with the help of God's grace – the help of the Holy Spirit.

To help us understand, there is a saying that “...you can't stop birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them from building a nest in your hair.” That is to say, we can't

stop thoughts from flowing through our mind but we can make a choice as to whether or not we welcome them and continue to ponder them and then possibly act upon them. We do need to plan how we will deal with ungodly thoughts; otherwise we tend to fall into a continual playback of them in our mind. Praying a prayer will help to dispel the ungodly thought. It is important to choose ahead of time which prayer that you will want to pray to dispel ungodly thoughts so that you can turn to the prayer immediately and not get caught up in continually repeating the bad thought in your mind.

Scripture says to, “on purpose” think about good things to counter the ungodly thought:

“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 these things.” (Philippians 4:8)

In these words, St. Paul is encouraging us to notice what we think about, and to focus on things that are true, noble, and pure rather than the opposite. This is not about ignoring difficulties. St. Paul is guiding us to be aware that we will want to “crowd out” ungodly thoughts that we recognize are destructive, i.e. unkind, resentful, jealous etc. and replace them with prayer, godly thoughts, goodness, truth and beauty.

Take a bit of time to think about what you are feeding your mind. You are what you think about all day long. We want to be intentional about choosing what comes into our thoughts. We do not have to expose ourselves to thoughts and ideas that are not of God. Further, we need a standard of truth to judge every thought and to be able to determine its source. That is why it is so important to be reading and praying with God’s Word in the Bible. If we have the standard of truth – God’s Word – and if we are becoming more aware of the truth of God, then we have a means to determine if we should accept or reject any particular thought.

One example of a bad thought is “I am jealous of this person. I want, in a disordered way, what they have in regard to their academic or athletic or musical ability.” Holding this thought up to the Word of God will show that this is a thought we need to reject. So what do we do? In situations like this, when we become aware and understand that this is a thought we want to reject,

- ask the Holy Spirit for His help in this matter, and
- possibly discuss it with a wise, trusted, spiritually-competent person, such as a priest or deacon, a teacher or parent, or someone you know who has a relationship with Jesus through committed daily prayer and regularly receives the Sacraments.
- turn this jealous thought to a positive thought that will lead to rejoicing in this person’s abilities, as well as recognizing and rejoicing in the personal and specific abilities that God has given you. You could ask God to help you be the best steward of **your** God-given gifts, such as being good at a sport, working with small children or the elderly, being a good leader or being a person who is good at helping another person be a leader, making very good grades in a particular subject, being a good writer etc.

- make a decision to be more intentional about noticing thoughts and identifying their source.
- seek to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind [*your thoughts*]” Romans 12:2. We renew our minds by prayerfully reading and studying the Bible, filling our thoughts with the truth of God’s Word.

Underlying thoughts of jealousy about other people’s gifts, as in the example stated above, show that we tend to think of some gifts as more important than others. God has bestowed different gifts on different people and all the gifts are needed. God loves each person unconditionally, regardless of his/her gifts. All gifts are necessary in building up the Kingdom of God. You are called to use the gifts God has given you, in order to become who you really are – who God created you to be. When we discover our gifts and use them in the service of others, we become truly happy.

As was mentioned in the opening paragraph, God uses this gift of “thinking” that He has given us to provide direction for every aspect of our lives. He places helpful ideas in our heads. God offers us His guidance in our thoughts in an assortment of ways. This can happen at school, at home, during prayer, watching a movie, playing a sport, practicing a musical instrument, going shopping, hunting, while we study, during Mass, in the midst of a struggle and even when we are with a group of friends. God is always with us, in every way possible, including our thoughts.

We tend to mull things over and even “argue” with God in our thoughts – and God is okay with this. But we find a different type of struggle or wrestling with God especially noticeable with those who are holding fast to unbelief and who have not truly entered into a relationship with God, even though they may not be aware of it. They much prefer to base everything on their own mental ability and thoughts, not really being open to God’s good help and the direction that He desires to make available to them through their thought processes.

Some people might have a personal example of how God offered His guidance through their thoughts that was quite unforgettable. Those are significant and will stand out in the person’s memory throughout life. However, powerful times like those, when God’s guidance “breaks through” to us in a big way, are less common. Far more often are the subtle signs that God puts in our thoughts; those that “quietly” lead us toward Him in peace, helping us to leave behind uncertainty, anxiety, resentment and frustration. It is important to remember that peace is the “hallmark” of God’s guidance. These God-given signals of gentle grace and peace can happen in any place and at any time.

One of the ways that God guides us is by providing us with grace-filled moments to see our lives from a more positive vantage point. We become more aware that God is with us. Further, we become attuned to the ways in which He sees us and showers His favor upon us, instead of seeing ourselves as insufficient and helpless.

As we cooperate with God's grace we are enabled to move forward based upon our trust in God's goodness, even when we face difficulties. This is one of the paradoxes that we find in God's Word: As we entrust ourselves to Him, we are not just resigning ourselves to doing nothing or "giving up." But indeed, we place ourselves completely in the hands of Our Lord Who possesses infinite power to accomplish all things and who loves us without reserve and wants the very best for us. Nothing is impossible with God! It is important to remember that what is best for us may involve some things that are very challenging.

We usually think that anything to do with God is serious and somber, and yes, we need to take our relationship with Him seriously. However, we need to be acutely aware that God is about joy! Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:5) and so interior **joy** is a clear sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in us. Joy is truly a gift from God and is different from happiness. Happiness is based upon circumstances, or events, or happenings and does not last.

Discussion questions for small groups

Question 1. What stood out for you? or What resonated most with your personal situation currently? Why? Summarize below.

Question 2. Why is it so important to be aware of the thoughts flowing through your mind?

Question 3. Why is it important to reject the negative thoughts that are coming from the enemy? And why is it important to accept and follow the thoughts that are coming from the Holy Spirit?

Question 4. Summarize in one or two sentences what your takeaway is from this section.

Question 5. If you were going to relate something from "God will offer us guidance through angels" to your family tonight at the dinner table, what would you tell them? Would you

- 1) share the story with them or
- 2) mention something that was helpful to you from the teaching or
- 3) bring up something that resonated with you in connection with your own life experience?

III. God guides us in Scripture through the counsel of St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians regarding our thoughts.

Look up Philippians 4: 1-9 in the Bible.

Introduction to the Scripture passage: God inspired St. Paul to write a letter to the Philippians and give them a very important piece of advice regarding their thoughts. St. Paul explains that we cannot simply leave a void when we dispel an ungodly thought. We must fill that void by thinking about things that are true, noble, just and pure.

Question 1. What do you think is the most important point of St. Paul's guidance in this Scripture passage?

Question 2. What stood out for you? Why?

Question 3. Does this remind you of something or someone in your life?

Question 4. What word or phrase had special meaning for you from this passage?

IV. True, modern-day stories illustrating how God provided guidance through people's thought processes. (35 min.)

Two modern-day stories have been provided. It is suggested that the participants read the first story by Bill Bair. These stories reveal how the Holy Spirit still gives guidance through people's thought processes. If time permits it would be beneficial if the participants could read the second story. Discussion questions follow the stories.

Story 1

Why I Quit the Gas Company By Bill Bair

I sat in a pew near the rear of the church on that October night, thinking back over my life and feeling – well, satisfied. I looked at my family sitting alongside me, my wife Marilyn and the five kids. The three oldest were foster children whom we'd had since they were tykes: Ted, Marlene, Judy, all teenagers now. I thought of our cottage at the seashore and the fun we had there every summer. Not bad for a guy who flunked two grades before he ever finished grammar school.

I was the kid everyone said would never make it. I never did get past the ninth grade at school and then bummed from job to job. At twenty-five I was digging ditches.

And now, at forty-two, I had a good job in sales at the People's Natural Gas Company, already thinking about the day when Marilyn and I would retire, buy a home in Florida, fish, travel

Bill, I want you to work for Me.

That thought cut across my self-congratulations as sharp as though a voice had spoken. I was so startled I actually glanced behind me. I'd heard of God "speaking" to people, but – to me?

"Gee, Lord," I stammered, "I – I do work for You, don't I? Look at the Bible class I teach Sundays. And the youth work so many night."

I want you full-time.

The preacher Leonard Evans, climbed into the pulpit and started speaking, but all I heard was the uproar in my own mind. "I've got a fulltime job, Lord – with the gas company! About as much job as a guy like me can handle."

Quit the gas company.

Quit the – with five kids to support! Now I knew I was hearing things. "Lord Jesus, this can't be You talking. Look at the kids!"

Look at the kids . . . Suddenly, without any conscious will in the matter, I was seeing them. Not only ours but faces of kids I'd never seen. Dozens of them – frightened or rebellious or withdrawn – kids who were never going to make it.

Look at them, Bill, My children have no homes.

Interesting idea. To offer a home to such kids – not just the appealing, moldable little fellows, but to the older ones – the ones who'd been in trouble. The ones nobody wanted. It would make a full-time job for someone. Maybe when I retired, Marilyn and I could –

Now.

"Lord, a man can't pick up and leave that way! Look, in two more years I'll be eligible for pension. With that money we could –"

Don't you think I can care for My workers as well as the gas company can? I want you to quit your job today and I want you to go up to the front of this church and tell this congregation what you've done.

I looked around desperately, wishing the door were a few feet closer. "Lord, if this is You talking, okay. But what if it's just some crazy idea of my own? You're going to have to give me a sign."

This was no way to talk to God Almighty, but I was too scared to care. "Lord, if this is you, have the preacher up there say my name right in the middle of the sermon."

I settled back in the pew, enormously relieved.

“Isn’t that right, Bill Bair?”

Far down in front, Mr. Evans was looking straight at me. The church was tomb quiet.

“Don’t you agree, Bill Bair?” he repeated.

This time as my name rang out from the pulpit I managed to reply, “Yes, Mr. Evans, that sure is right?” I had no idea what he’d been talking about. He went back to his sermon while I sat in the rear of the church knowing I was trapped.

The sermon ended with the most stirring alter call I’d ever felt. I stood and made that long walk.

At the front I turned around and, talking as rapidly as I could, said I was quitting my job and starting a home for delinquent kids and would they please pray. Then I turned back to the alter because I couldn’t look my family in the eye.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Bill.” It was Marilyn’s voice. “I don’t know what you’re doing, but I’m with you all the way.”

I turned cautiously around. Not only Marilyn but all five kids as well were standing there. And with them maybe forty other people, all of them reaching out to clap my shoulder or grip my hand.

Monday morning I told my boss I was quitting. Well he treated me real nice, the way you do when someone is sick. He talked about all the legal red tape involved in chartering a nonprofit organization. It would take eight months at least. By then, you could see, he thought I’d be recovered.

But I began to have some tooth trouble about then, and of course the dentist turned out to be a member of the Pennsylvania legislature, who saw the application through personally. We had our charter within six weeks.

A Home for Kids to me meant having a great big place, maybe an old school building; or a farm. But as it turned out, God didn’t have that in mind at all. We first began to realize this when the Lawrence County Child Welfare Department heard about our willingness to take troubled older children. Placement for this kind of child, they said, was almost impossible to find. Since Marilyn and I had already been approved as foster parents for our own three, they wondered if we . . .

Before we knew it, Kitrick was with us: two days later, Johnny.

In a matter of weeks, there were thirteen people in our family, and still the phone kept ringing. Our own five children were wonderful, sharing rooms, moving onto sofas and bedrolls while we borrowed cots and moved furniture around. Far from being mad at the new turn of events, our kids were the ones who could really get to these lonely, angry youngsters.

But all the love and furniture arranging in the world couldn't push out the walls of the house. I was still thinking of one big house, when one day a couple came to visit us.

"Bill, we know this is a wild idea. But do you think we could get county approval to take in a boy like Kitrick?"

And suddenly I glimpsed His idea. God's plan, I believe, for kids in trouble all over this nation is not another institution, but individual Christian families opening their doors. I talked about the new dream with the board of our nonprofit organization, and they caught the excitement. What a troubled kid needed, we all agreed, was Jesus. He needs to be a part of a family who live their faith, who pray together when problems come up, who lean on the Holy Spirit's wisdom instead of their own.

And one by one, we found such homes. Here in New Wilmington we started with those forty folks who were standing behind me that October night when I turned around from the altar.

The kids come to our house first – usually straight from the court with a probation officer to see they make it through the door. They stay several days or several weeks while we get to know each one's strengths and needs. Then we begin to pray for wisdom in placing each child with the right family. One kid will need a bunch of brothers and sisters; another should be an only child for a while.

Then we place the youngster in what we call a "love home." But in doing so we also place the child in a Christian community. For beyond the smaller community of the family there are the Christians next door in the church and throughout the entire town. Each takes a part in the child's renewal.

And as we help and pray for one another, we find that we ourselves are being helped. Families are knit together, churches reinvigorated, streets become neighborhoods. Today, sixty-seven families in this area are open to these youngsters; more than one hundred fifty "unwanted" kids have found homes. And the idea is spreading. Already, similar community projects are starting in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Toronto, Canada, and in several Ohio cities.

Sometimes when I walk through our silent house late at night, checking a dozen sleeping kids, I'll remember how I kicked and struggled that night four years ago, I was like Johnny, the second little fellow who came to us. He gave us a terrible scowl as the social worker left.

"I'm only staying ten days."

“Well, that’s okay, Johnny,” I said. “We’ll have a real good time those ten days.”

Ten days later he sidled up to me at supper. “Papa Bair?” he said. (Wouldn’t you know it, Marilyn and I are Mama Bair and Papa Bair.) “Papa Bair, which comes next, fall or spring?”

“Spring,” I said.

“Well,” he announced, “I’m staying till fall.”

You and me both, Johnny. We don’t like to commit ourselves. We hang on; we make conditions. But, Johnny, once we let go, what a God He is!

From How to Listen to God by Doug Hill, pages 115-118. Used with permission

Story 2 **‘Our Own Parade’ by Gina Bridgeman**

We were visiting my husband Paul’s parents in Ohio, and Grandma thought we’d enjoy watching the Fourth of July parade in a neighboring town. But when we arrived, the main street was empty. She had misread the time of the parade in the newspaper, and we had missed it. All we could do was turn around and head home. My daughter Maria, who’d been jabbering to her brother like a typical six-year-old, didn’t realize what had happened until Grandpa turned the car onto their street.

“We’re going home?” Maria asked. “But what about the parade?”

“I goofed,” Grandma answered, sounding sad and little embarrassed. Nobody said anything. I knew that whatever happened next to fill the silence would set the mood for the entire day. *Help me say the right thing*, I prayed. Then an idea that didn’t even take the time to pop into my head first popped out of my mouth: “Let’s have our own parade.”

Everyone jumped on the idea. “I’ll drive the lawn mower, with Maria in the cart in back,” said my twelve-year-old son Ross, running off. “I’ll push Dan,” Paul said, helping his big brother out of the car and into his wheelchair. “We need music,” Paul’s brother Tom said, heading to the garage and returning with an old plastic horn, a metal bucket and some sticks. “I’ll get the camera,” Grandpa said, while Grandma ran into the house and returned with a toy piano and a huge smile. Tom’s wife Ann brought their dog Randy out on a leash, and I grabbed the big American flag from the front porch to carry myself. We marched our horn-blowing, bucket-banging parade around the neighborhood, laughing and waving, bringing neighbors out to cheer and laugh with us.

Later, I wondered how many of those decisive moments I have faced unawares, especially when someone’s feelings were involved. I can’t always control what happens, but I can control how I react when things don’t turn out right. By bringing love instead of scorn, and with the help of God’s joyful Spirit, I can do more than make the best of it – I can have a parade.

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Discussion questions

Question 1: Underline the place/places *where* the person received guidance. Briefly describe *how* the person received guidance from God in their thoughts?

Question 2: How did this story affect you?

Question 3: Does this story or anything contained in it remind you of something in your life? .

Question 4: Did you find this story consoling, challenging, comforting? Why?

Question 5: In reflecting on this true, modern-day story, what is the take-away for you?

V. Closing Prayer: The 12th Grade Prayer Card

Using the “Seeking God’s Guidance” Prayer Card, pray the front side.

