

LOVE THE LORD



Lesson Thirty-eight - How can I stay alert and stop my thoughts from destroying me?

August 2023

Summary of key points

- It is crucial that we are aware of our thought patterns because our lives are shaped by our thoughts.
- Jesus has said that out of our hearts can come evil thoughts and these are what defile us.
- As believers, we are to exercise self-control over our thoughts.
- Jesus will bring our darkest secret thoughts to light and reveal our private motives when He returns to judge the earth.
- Thankfully, God has given us the Bible and His Spirit to teach us what is true, right, or wrong to think about.
- In this world, however, we will have many other teachers (with 5 examples).
- We need to set up and strengthen the security systems around our hearts and minds (with 4 examples).

Watch the lesson online

<https://youtu.be/kEqPnFORXOU>

Transcript

Welcome to lesson 38 of Love the Lord where we discuss the ways this world teaches us how to think and why we need to filter our thoughts, because our lives are shaped by our thoughts.

We will begin by inviting God to speak to us personally through this study. Please follow along as we pray together.

First, let's thank God for our lives and His perfect will for us.

Next, please tell Him about the things that have been stressful and ask for His help and guidance.

Let us confess the ways we have sinned against God and against others, and ask for His forgiveness.

Please confess the ways others have sinned against us, and forgive them in Jesus' name.

Next, let us ask God to purify and open our hearts to receive His teaching.

Finally, please repeat these words, “In Jesus’ name, I silence all distractions and voices that are not from God. Amen.”

Let’s begin the lesson for today. How can I stay alert and stop my thoughts from destroying me?

We don’t often examine the direction of our thoughts or what has been driving us to think the way we do. Yet it is crucial that we do because our lives are shaped by our thoughts.

Proverbs 4:23 Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts. (GNT)

Interestingly, the Bible often links our thoughts to our hearts. For instance, Jesus is described as “a sign from God” through whom “the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.” Just how are our thoughts led by our hearts? Let us use an example to illustrate this. Let’s say we believe that it is important to do our best at work, so we spend a lot of our time thinking about work and our jobs.

Luke 2:34-35 ... He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed... (NLT)

But if we stop to examine why we think so much about our work, we may find that we have fallen into the trap of fearing people. We could fear letting our family down, being rejected by our supervisors, or falling behind our peers. Fear is not from God. It may show us that we don’t trust that God is with us and will help us.

Proverbs 29:25 Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the LORD means safety. (NLT)

Or we may realise that we are trying to prove to ourselves that we can outperform a sibling because of all the bitter and unfair comparisons we endured growing up. The Bible shows that such jealousy and selfish ambition are earthly, unspiritual, and even demonic.

James 3:14-15 But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don’t cover up the truth with boasting and lying. For jealousy and selfishness are not God’s kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. (NLT)

Jesus has said that out of our hearts can come evil thoughts and these are what defile us. We may not consider the desire to perform well at work to be “evil” but if our real desires are to serve our fears or to glorify ourselves, then we do grieve God and insult Him. That is evil.

Matthew 15:19-20 For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you... (NLT)

As believers, we are to exercise self-control over our thoughts.

Let's read 1 Peter chapter 1 verses 13 to 14 together, *"So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control... live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then."* (1 Peter 1:13-14 NLT)

We often associate self-control with what we do, but God is showing us that we need to exercise self-control over our thoughts first and foremost.

It also means we need to make a conscious effort to fix our thoughts on what is true, honourable, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. In other words, we are to focus only on thoughts that God will praise us for.

Philippians 4:8 ... Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. (NLT)

Consider this for a moment. Imagine all of your private thoughts and hidden motives will be broadcast online to the whole world tomorrow morning at 9am. Will you be motivated to become more conscious about your thoughts?

1 Corinthians 4:5 So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due. (NLT)

This example is not an unrealistic one. Let us remember that all our personal secrets will be exposed one day. God will bring our darkest secret thoughts to light and reveal our private motives when He returns to judge the earth.

Jeremiah 11:20 O Lord of Heaven's Armies, you make righteous judgments, and you examine the deepest thoughts and secrets. (NLT)

How will we feel about our thoughts on that day? God will not only judge us for our actions, but also our deepest thoughts and secrets.

Thankfully, God has given us His inspired Word, the Bible, to teach us what is true, right, or wrong to think about. In this world, however, we will have many other teachers. We may not call them our "teachers" but they do teach us how to think nonetheless. And what they teach us will certainly impact the way we think about God.

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. (NLT)

We will now go through a few examples so that we can see how they inadvertently lead us to fear, sin, and unbelief.

We will start with our experiences from our family and culture. A vast amount of our views on life and on ourselves are formed here.

1. Family & culture

1. "I must always please my family...therefore, I must not betray them by choosing God first."
2. "My family doesn't think I am good enough... therefore, I can't be worthy of God's love either."
3. "Our culture honours our ancestors...therefore, I have to take part in pagan rituals to venerate the dead."

One common belief is that we must always please our families first and remain loyal to them at all costs, even at the cost of our own independence as individual adults. Therefore, we think that we must not betray them by choosing God first. We feel conflicted when God asks us to love Him with all our hearts, all our souls, all our strength, and all our minds, so we may make up excuses for ourselves not to obey God's Word.

If we feel that our family doesn't think too highly of us, we may struggle to see our self-worth and value. Therefore, we think we can't be worthy of God's love either. We find it hard to believe that God loves us unconditionally. We may feel defective even though that is not how God sees us.

Some of us have been born into cultures that make it a point to honour their ancestors with rituals conducted at memorials and shrines. This is a form of worship, except that we don't call it that because people don't see it as worship. Therefore, we may feel obliged to take part in pagan rituals to venerate the dead, even though God finds such pagan rituals highly offensive. It is God who gives us life, not our ancestors.

Another way we learn to think is based on how our fleshly nature reacts to fear, pain, and suffering.

2. Fear, pain, suffering

1. "I'm terrified of not having enough...therefore, I don't think I can trust God to provide for all my needs."
2. "I will do anything I can to avoid pain...therefore, I will even tell lies in order to get out of trouble."
3. "We should all avoid loss and suffering...therefore, I won't help others unless it costs me nothing."

For instance, if we have experienced bankruptcy, where our lives suddenly changed overnight, we may form a fear of not having enough in the future because we want to avoid going through the same trauma again. Therefore, we don't think that we can trust God to provide all our needs because of our deep anxiety. We think we need to hold on to some sort of control in order to feel secure.

Or we may want to avoid any type of pain at all costs. Therefore, we think that even lying to get out of any trouble is justified.

Or we may have a belief that we should all avoid loss and suffering. Therefore we won't help others when it costs us something, we will only help if it suits our personal agenda.

Another thought "teacher" are the ideals that this world tells us that we should strive towards.

3. Worldly ideals

1. "You can achieve anything by hard work...therefore, I can achieve whatever I want, I don't need to wait on God."
2. "Having more is the key to happiness...therefore, I will have to keep striving more to gain more."
3. "Don't let anyone look down on you...therefore, I must protect my self-image and prove how important I am."

Most of us have been taught that we can achieve anything as long as we work hard for it. This gives us a false sense of self-empowerment. Therefore, we subconsciously think that we can achieve whatever we want, and don't need to wait on God. If we do turn to God for any help, it is only to ask Him to help us achieve what we want faster.

Another widely-held idea is that having more possessions is the key to happiness. Therefore, we think that we will have to keep striving more to gain more, when this doesn't lead us to peace and deep contentment at all.

We may have heard the phrases, "don't let anyone look down on you" or "don't lose face." Therefore, we think that we must protect our self-image and prove how important we are. Our reputation and self image become our idols because we end up working to honour and uphold them.

The fourth example of how this world teaches us how to think are the shows, songs, games, and stories we are exposed to. Our brains are constantly absorbing subliminal messages from what we see and listen to, especially if they move our emotions — which is what media and entertainment try to do.

4. Shows, songs, games, stories

1. "It's entertaining to poke fun at people..therefore, it is perfectly normal to mock and dishonour people."
2. "I can't live without your love...therefore, death is better than life without you."
3. "The hero brings justice by taking revenge...therefore, why isn't God taking revenge yet? Is He really just?"

You may notice many talk show hosts try to be as entertaining as possible by poking fun at people. We may laugh and be entertained without realising that we are demeaning human beings who have been made in God's image. Therefore, over time and with repeated exposure, we may start to think that it is perfectly normal to mock and dishonour people too.

Then there are love songs that sing about devoting our souls to other people, making them the reason why we feel alive. Therefore, such lyrics can drive people to think that dying is better than living if we don't get the love of our lives.

Many stories and movies equate justice with taking revenge, whether it is through physical violence or by getting back at someone by becoming the more popular, better looking, or richer person. When we learn to think about justice in this way, we become dissatisfied with how God brings about His form of justice. Therefore, we think thoughts such as, "Why isn't God taking revenge yet? Is He really just?" We grow impatient and may even bear a grudge against God for not acting on our behalf sooner, according to our preferences.

The final example of a thought teacher are different schools of thought. Every culture has its own myths and superstitions that can lead people to practise witchcraft in order to improve their fortunes.

5. Superstitions & philosophy

1. "My zodiac sign says I will have bad luck this year...therefore, I can't help but keep looking out for misfortune."
2. "Aristotle taught that happiness is the highest good...therefore, I won't do anything that doesn't make me feel happy."
3. "All faiths lead to the same God...therefore, Jesus can't be the only way, the truth and the life."

One example are zodiac signs. Rather than seek God, many people believe that their horoscopes can help them figure out their personality, health, love life, and future. If a zodiac sign says we will have bad luck that year, for instance, we will begin to live in fear. Therefore, we expect misfortune even when God is protecting us. The word from the horoscope has become a curse.

Then there are the philosophers and gurus whose teachings have become so prevalent that they sound like the truth of life now. One example is "happiness is the highest good" from the philosopher, Aristotle. Now, many of us have made happiness the goal of our lives. Therefore, we won't do anything that won't make us feel happy. So if the Holy Spirit leads us to do something that is beneficial for our souls, but that is not necessarily going to make our flesh feel happy, we resist and judge God for not being good to us.

Perhaps you have heard the idea that all faiths lead to God or to heaven. Therefore, when we allow our hearts to be swayed by such thoughts, we can begin to doubt that Jesus is really the only way, the truth and the life.

We hope that all these examples demonstrate that the way we think is very much influenced by many factors that oppose God's good and perfect will for our lives. The purpose of illustrating these examples is to liberate us from the patterns of this world so that we can love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds, with all our strength. That is where we will find true joy and peace.

This is why we need to let God transform us into new persons by changing the way we think. As followers of Jesus, we don't mimic the thought patterns from this world. Rather, we allow God to show us how to think because He is the One who created us.

Romans 12:2 Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. (NLT)

Many things can sound good and logical to us but will only drive us away from eternal truths. In order to be effective, some lies can even comprise 98% truth. It is the 2% that leads us to destruction. We all need to mature in our walk with God so that we will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever that they sound like the truth.

Ephesians 4:14 Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. (NLT)

All this can sound very daunting but the good news for believers is that we have God's Word as well as the Holy Spirit to guide us to the truth. Moreover, there are a few ways to recognise unwelcome intruders into our thoughts.

John 16:13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth... (NLT)

Every computer or device has some form of inbuilt security system to filter and reject the thousands, or even tens of thousands, of unwanted messages or data packages received each day.

First, there are the scam messages. These usually target our deepest and most vulnerable desires. Scammers will patiently build up our trust while promising to help us achieve quick returns or even love. But if we stay alert and track the source of these messages, we will find that these people are not who or what they claim to be at all. They only want to manipulate us into giving them what they want, even if it means we have to make great sacrifices for them. Such con-artists will have no conscience whatsoever.

Similarly, we need to practise self control and not allow ourselves to be enticed by ideas that appeal to our lust, our fears, our curiosity, and so on, because the source is likely to be from evil spirits in disguise.

Secondly, there are phishing messages that sound as if they are from legitimate sources, but their real goal is to deceive us into giving away details that scammers and hackers can later use to steal from us.

Similarly, we need to have some non-negotiables that we never give away, even if it sounds like it is urgent. Examples include our loyalty to God, our sexual purity, our readiness to forgive, our willingness to help the downtrodden, and so on. Once we make a list of the things that we will never compromise on giving away, we will be better equipped to filter out temptations that Satan tends to plant in our thoughts.

Thirdly, there are the viruses and malware which cripple our operating or security systems. This usually piggyback on harmless looking documents and hyperlinks that will launch an attack once we allow them past our security systems.

Similarly, Satan will present us with many ideas and thoughts that we should never entertain or allow ourselves to agree with. Otherwise, he will launch a series of more attacks until we are overwhelmed. Some examples include thoughts about dying, thoughts about taking revenge, thoughts about how worthless and useless we are, thoughts that we will never do anything worthwhile, thoughts about committing adultery, thoughts that ridicule and condemn other people, and so on. The greatest mistake we can make is to believe that these thoughts come from us, and not recognise Satan's attack on our minds. This is one way how many people are defeated and discouraged.

The fourth and final example is junk mail, where we are bombarded by unsolicited messages that try to sell us something.

Similarly, we need to be aware of what we expose our entire bodies to — our eyes, our ears, our hearts and our minds. This is because our subconscious mind does not analyse or judge what we are exposed to. The subconscious mind simply records and stores whatever it senses as data, without a conscious filter for truth or falsehood, good or bad. The more we are exposed to something, the higher in priority it becomes in our subconscious. The subconscious mind learns by repetition, not by logic. Over time, we will form many deeply imprinted subconscious impressions that form the foundations for our beliefs and values — whether we realise it or not.

The human brain is the most sophisticated computing system in this world. Therefore, we need to protect our operating systems against the schemes of the enemy. Just as our devices need security systems to keep them safe and optimal, we need to also filter the junk and viruses out of our thoughts.

Here is a recap of how we can do that.

First, we need to be aware of our deepest desires so that we recognise when Satan is tempting us to sin by offering false promises that sound good to us but which are only going to destroy us.

Secondly, we need to build an internal alert system on the areas that we will never compromise on, so that we will not even be tempted to betray our own values and principles. People can easily fall onto sinful thoughts and behaviours when they do not have an internal structure like this.

Thirdly, we need to recognise the type of thoughts that Satan will plant into our hearts and minds. If our enemy throws a grenade at us, we would not be so foolish to try to pick it up and play with it. We need the help of a higher power to remove it safely for us. So, this is why we pray in the authority of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and say, "in Jesus name, go away!"

Lastly, we need to protect our subconscious minds from external influences that are ungodly. Repeated exposure will only train the physical brain that these influences must be important to us, which is not true. By using these examples, we encourage you to strengthen your own security systems around your hearts and minds.

Jesus has left us a gift, which is peace of mind and heart. This is a gift that the world cannot give us. Let us learn how to protect our gift and arm ourselves with the truth.

John 14:27 "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. (NLT)

If we are ever unsure, we simply need to ask God for wisdom and let the Holy Spirit guide us in renewing our thoughts and attitudes. God will help us. Let us take this opportunity to pray and thank God for His faithfulness and goodness.

Ephesians 4:23 Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. (NLT)

Let's pray this prayer together.

"Father God, Thank you for the gift of peace of mind whenever I fix my thoughts on You and Your good and perfect will. Holy Spirit, please give me the wisdom to recognise when Satan and demonic spirits plant destructive thoughts in my mind. Please lead me to the truth. Help me as I learn how to actively test my thoughts and make sure that they obey Jesus Christ, my Lord and Saviour. In Jesus' name, amen."

We have now come to the end of today's lesson. Here are the reflection questions for you to prepare answers to before your small group meeting as well as a testimony to watch. We pray that you will be blessed. See you next time.

Time for reflection

1. Which of your desires can Satan use to scam you into sinning? These can even sound good and right.
2. Make lists of a) non-negotiable areas and b) ungodly influences you will avoid from now on.

Watch the testimony for this lesson

To be uploaded soon.

Personal notes