

*All Roads Lead Here: Penny For Your Thoughts?*

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*Psalm 26:2-3; Luke 24:44-48; Romans 8:1-9*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 8:1-9. This is the word of the Lord. “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”

A penny for your thoughts is a bad deal, isn't it? I think my thoughts are worth at least a dollar or two. What about you? We understand that “a penny for your thoughts” is really an expression to encourage someone to talk about their feelings. But how do our thoughts reflect who we are? The philosopher Rene Descartes was the first person to say, “I think, therefore I am.” We alone of all creatures have enough rational thought to know of our existence. But what does our mind have to do with who we are? When Jesus said that we were to love God with all of our mind – as well as our heart, soul, and strength – what was that about?

Today we'll explore a couple of those concepts as we move into Romans chapter 8, a chapter that includes some of the most comforting and encouraging passages in all of the Bible. Today, we'll hear how we are set free by Jesus. We'll learn a little about what the Holy Spirit does. And just as important, we'll see how the mind is central to our faith and living it out. We'll be cheered by what God is doing in us and challenged to grow in our faith as we dedicate our minds to knowing and following Jesus.

Last week, we saw how we are at war with sin, how it's a long-term fight that can't be rushed. We ended with that great affirmation – therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you are a genuine believer who has put your faith and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord, you will be redeemed at the end of time. Paul then goes on to explain how we can be redeemed simply by trusting in Jesus.

Because it's a strange deal. We get to enter God's Kingdom on the basis of trust? On the basis of believing in something deeply and living our lives according to that belief? For all the things we've done against God, it seems like we're getting the better end of the deal, and we are. It seems too good to be true, but it's not.

But how does it work? Now I don't have to know how an engine works to drive my car. Most people think about faith the same way – “I don't need to know why God does what He does to save me; I believe in Him, and that's enough.” But you do need to know some things in order to keep your car running. You don't have to know how to pump gas – by law stations still have to provide someone who can do that for you – but you better make sure you know when the tank is running low. You don't have to know how to change the oil, but you better know how often your car needs it changed or refilled. We want to understand as much as our minds can comprehend about what God did because we are to love Him with our whole mind.

So here's how it works. The law that God gave us actually condemns us. We've broken it; we've failed; there's no hope found in the law. Only the person who keeps it completely in spirit and letter can achieve salvation through it. That good law of God condemns me to hell if there isn't a way around it.

And there is. Paul makes a play on words when he says the law – the principle – of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. There's a new game in town. The law that condemned us has no power over believers anymore. Why not? Because of what Jesus did. Now here's what the next verse says. “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did.”

The law had no power to save us because our sin nature overrode it; the sin nature used the law as a catapult to drive us to disobedience. The law can't save. But there are two beautiful words – “God did.” What the law did not do, God did. God provided a way out.

Here's how: “God did it [gave us salvation] by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.” Now be careful here – the word “likeness” can trip us up. Jesus did not just appear to be a man; He was a man; He was fully human, just as He was fully God. The only place that he has a likeness but not actual similarity to us is in sin. He had none. He was fully obedient to His Father.

Paul goes on: “He sent His son to be a sin offering.” This is language directly out of the Old Testament. Sin offerings were made so people could be set right with God – the life of the sacrifice took the place of their life which was forfeit because of disobedience. Hebrews 9:22 described the sacrificial system this way: “The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” The only way the Law could be fulfilled was with a permanent sin offering that would cover all offenses – past, present, and future. And that's what Jesus' death accomplished.

Think about just how incredible this was. God did it by sending his own Son. He didn't use a proxy. He didn't put the responsibility on anyone else. God didn't send another Abraham or Moses or Elijah or David. What God did to save us was deeply personal. Jesus is not a created being. Jesus says in John 10:30, “I and my Father are one.” Jesus is close to God the Father in a way we can't possibly imagine. When the Father sends the Son, it is at great personal cost. The Son, who had always been by Father's side, who was the One through whom the Father made the universe, gave up everything to come to us.

Would I do that? Would I send Jackson or Cameron on a mission where they would be ridiculed, scorned, mocked, and killed in a most horrific fashion, even if I knew it would save the world from hell? I doubt it. I doubt you would that to your children. That's not the way we think. In the film *Patton*, General Patton says, "No one ever won a war by dying for his country. He won by making the other poor, dumb guy die for his country." (And Patton didn't put it so nicely!) But that's exactly what God did – He sent His Son to die in order to win the war.

As Paul put it, "And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit." What does this mean? Through Jesus, God is both just and merciful. He is just because the penalty for all our sins falls on Jesus.

For all of us who say, "I want to be counted under Jesus' righteousness rather than my own," the requirements of the law are met. Every sin is paid for and we are counted righteous because we're on Jesus' tab, not our own. God is merciful because while He didn't have to do this, He wanted to. Sin is fully condemned through Jesus – every disobedient act is paid for – and so the Law is fulfilled. For all who live according to the Spirit, we are seen as blameless.

Jesus is our substitute; He took our disobedience on Himself at the cross. The bill due for our sin has been paid, just not by us. If you're at Coney Island and you're short, and someone else pays for you, you're grateful, but you can pay them back. We can't pay God back what is due for our sins, but God pays the debt anyway. That's how gracious He is. That's why we love Him. And that's why we want to have our minds set on Him.

Now we move on to a picture of what life without the Spirit is like, and what life with the Spirit is like. So let's first hear about life without the Spirit. "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires... the mind of sinful man is death...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." Pretty depressing.

But here's life with the Spirit. "Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. You are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit if the Spirit of God lives in you." Much better.

Our friend Jim talked about the Holy Spirit a few weeks ago, so I'm not going to go over all that again. But we need to understand who the Spirit is and what He does. The Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. Because Jesus is at the right hand of the Father now, in heaven, the Spirit is how Jesus does that. When Jesus comes to live with us, it happens through the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is so tied to the Father and the Son that the three of them are one – and when you read about the Spirit of Christ, that's interchangeable with the name "Holy Spirit."

So how can we have the life and peace of the mind controlled by the Spirit? How can we have our mind set on what the Spirit desires? The Holy Spirit is active and plays a role; He guides and directs our conscience; He turns us away from bad choices; He convicts us when we sin so that we confess it and repent. But when it comes to fighting sin and becoming more like Jesus, we have entered the realm where we actively participate with the Spirit to become more like our savior Jesus.

To be honest, entering the realm of the mind is hard things for American Christians. We Americans don't pride ourselves on being intellectual. We have a strong intellectual heritage as a country, but we don't like it when people act smart. We want practicality. We aren't interested in the why or how; we just want things to work as simply as possible.

And churches have fallen in line. We have dumbed down the gospel. We went to a youth event on Wednesday, and we all had a good time. But they gave an evangelist twenty minutes to speak about heaven and hell and sin and he tried to convince these youth they needed to give their lives to Jesus in twenty minutes. You can't watch a sitcom in twenty minutes!

There was no time for a discussion how becoming a Christian is a journey, that you're committing yourself to follow Jesus the rest of your days, that being a Christian in today's culture is becoming harder, not easier. And it left me cold. And that's not the event's fault; it's our expectation that the gospel is easy to understand and easy to follow.

But we are not in the Billy Graham days when people had heard about Jesus even if they'd not stepped foot into a church. 25% of Americans have no religious affiliation; 40% of those 18-29 have none. They don't know the story of the Bible or of Jesus. We need to be educated in God's Word so that when we say we are Christians, we are sold out to Jesus; we are on fire for Him.

The average book released on the Christian market sells 800 copies across the country, total. 800 copies may get you a second book. If you sell over 10,000 books, your book pays for other books to be on the market. One reason we have bad books in Christian bookstores is because they sell enough copies to keep the good books on the shelves.

I say all of this because the life of the mind is incredibly important for the Christian. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul writes, "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Proverbs 23:7 states, "For as a man thinks within himself, so he is." In Philipians 4:8, Paul comments, "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."

Writing to his dear friend Timothy, Paul encourages him, "But as for you, continue in what you have *learned* and have become convinced of." And finally, from a passage coming up in Romans 12, Paul charges us, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Learning, thinking, growing in the ways of God requires us to be mindful of Him. It doesn't require being a book learner, but it does require being teachable, willing to have your mind molded by God.

So if our first point today was to be encouraged by the sacrifice of Christ who saves us, the second point is to be challenged to renew your mind in the ways of Christ who leads us. Let me make a few suggestions how we might go about doing this and helping one another in this task of setting our mind on the Spirit of Christ.

First, *think on excellent and praiseworthy things*. Most of what comes across our screens is not excellent or praiseworthy. Scandal sells; gossip gets clicks. Degrading entertainment is the norm. That doesn't mean you have to throw away your TV or your Kindle, but are you looking for the excellent and praiseworthy? Do the stories you choose show the ultimate effects of sin? If there is seediness, is there also redemption? Does it help you grow closer to God? Are we reading things that help us grow in grace, love, and kindness?

To be fair, not every story that contains offensive elements is bad; they reflect the world as it is. Not every story that is inoffensive is worth your time. But it greatly helps us to be looking for the good to praise and the wrong to correct so that our own thinking doesn't get poisoned by the world. Even when something we see or watch isn't great, we can lift it up to God and ask for Him to redeem our thoughts about it.

That leads to another idea: *take every thought captive*. I don't know about you, but my thoughts wander a lot. Sometimes I imagine what God could be calling me to do or how to act. But sometimes my mind wanders to the bad – ways I've been wronged or cheated, desires that don't belong there, that kind of thing. Letting those thoughts drift through my mind isn't good. That's why we're called to take every thought captive. That means we put some of those thoughts in thought jail. We say, "I'm not going to think that way. I'm not going to speak ill of that person. I'm not going to get involved with that idea." Think about what you're thinking.

Finally, *renew your mind*. Make plans now to participate in Bible study in the fall. I would like to see us have a regular time of prayer once a month – when we take enough time to pray not only for our immediate needs but for our community and our church and our world, our minds are renewed in the things of God. Find a Bible app that gives you a few verses daily to ponder. Become a friend of CrossWay on Facebook and every day you'll have an illustrated Bible verse to think about. We spend hours and hours in front of screens every day. Let's make some of that time about God. If you need suggestions about resources, let me know. I use several free on YouTube – they give me new music to listen to, short videos about biblical topics, things to get my mind on God every day.

Our thoughts are worth so much more than a penny, and so are our souls. God sent His own Son so that we could live with Him forever, and He has sent us the Spirit so that we have direction in this crazy world. How can we show our appreciation? Make a commitment to love God with all your mind. We can do it together as we live lives that show our great Savior's love.