Keeping a Pure Mind
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: 80-129

As I mentioned earlier, next Sunday morning I'll be doing a special message on this matter of church membership and sharing my heart with you. The Sunday after that, we'll get back into the first chapter of 2 Corinthians and the text there that follows, starting in chapter 1 verse 15. But this morning, I want to linger a little longer on this matter of the subject of the conscience. Turn, if you will, to 2 Corinthians chapter 1, and you will remember that we looked at verses 12 through 14 a number of weeks ago, even before the Christmas holidays, and we went through those verses rather carefully and discussed them.

But for several messages beyond that, I've sort of camped on the word "conscience." Let me just read verse 12 to you to set the context for a further discussion of this matter of conscience. Paul writes, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom, but in the grace of God we have conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you." Now you'll remember that the apostle Paul was being assaulted as to his integrity, as to his righteousness, as to his authority, as to his credibility, as to his effectiveness. He was being attacked on every front. And in defense of himself, he appeals to the highest court, the highest court that is on earth apart from God Himself is conscience. He doesn't ask for the testimony of some other men to come to his aid. He doesn't ask for some group to write a letter of commendation. He simply says this, "Whatever you may be saying, our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience." And his conscience was affirming that he was holy and he was godly, he was sincere, he had conducted himself properly in the grace of God, in the world and toward the Corinthians.

Conscience, then, is the highest court on earth. Conscience is the soul's warning system, as we noted in our last message about this. It is conscience, according to Romans 2:15, which either accuses us or excuses us. That is, it either affirms us as being good and righteous and holy, or it indicts us as being evil and sinful and wicked. And frankly, conscience is the best critic because it knows the innermost secrets of our heart, and nobody else does except for God. If we are going to have a peaceful life, if we are going to have a tranquil life, as Paul called it a quiet and peaceable life, if we're going to enjoy happiness and fulfillment, we're going to have the kind of joy that causes our heart to rejoice and gives us the freedom to serve God gladly and happily and without constraint, then we have to have a clear conscience. That should be really the desire and the goal of every believer, to be able to say what Paul said: you can bring all the accusation against me you want, but the proud testimony of my conscience is that I am living in holiness and godly sincerity.

We want to experience that kind of affirmation from our conscience, and that's challenging because sin pervades us, all of our inmost being. Sinfulness is at the very core of the human soul. Jesus said, for example in Matthew 15:19 and 20, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man." And then he said, "The evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth what is evil, for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart," Luke 6:45. In other words, down deep in the human heart is pervasive sinfulness, and it rises to create the kind of words and the kind of actions that we label as sinful. Frankly, it is human nature to love sin and hate God. The carnal mind, Romans 8:7 says, is enmity against God. We are born loving sin, loving ourselves, hating righteousness, and hating God. Yet, though we are born that way, mark this, sin is not a weakness or a flaw for which we cannot be held responsible. It is an energetic, purposeful antagonism toward God that rises out of our will. Sinners freely, willfully and gladly choose sin. In other words, the sin that is in us manifests itself in a deliberate, willful rebellion against God.

The Bible says that sinners will reason in their hearts like this. Psalm 12:4 says, "With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are our own, who is Lord over us?" As if to say God's not making any claim on my life, I'll say what I want and I will do what I want. Isaiah 57:4 characterizes sinners as rebellious children who open wide their mouths and stick out their tongues at God. Sin would dethrone God, depose Him, usurp His authority and set self in His place. All sin is therefore, at its heart, an act of pride. Pride says, "Move over, God. I'm in charge; I'll do what I want." Therefore, all sin at its core is blasphemy. All sin at its core is blasphemy because it attacks God.

And when we come into this world we love sin, and so we love our rebellion, and we love our pride, and we love our blasphemy. We delight in it and we seek every opportunity we can to manifest it. But, we have a problem. We have a conscience, and conscience tells us we are guilty. It hammers us. It is like a relentless ringing in our spiritual ears. And so, what do we do? We try to silence conscience by camouflaging our sin, or redefining our sin, or disavowing our responsibility. And you could summarize how we do this maybe in three ways. First of all, in order to quiet our conscience typically, we try to cover up sin, mask it. This isn't new, Adam and Eve did this in the garden. It says in Genesis that when they sinned, the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings. And then they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord. They tried to hide. They tried to cover up.

King David tried in futility to cover his guilt when he sinned against Uriah. He committed adultery with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. When she became pregnant, David first plotted to try to make it seem as if Uriah was the father of the baby, according to 2 Samuel 11:5 to 13. That didn't work. So then, he had to scheme to have Uriah killed. That only compounded his sin, and for all the months of David's having to deal with Bathsheba's pregnancy, he continued to try to cover his sin. Later, when David was confronted with his sin and repented, he said, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted

away through my groaning all day long, for night and day Thy hand was heavy upon me, my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer," Psalm 32:3 and 4. David tried to cover it up, and his conscience just plagued him so that his life juices dried up. What's that? Saliva, blood flow, the fluid that conducts the nervous system. He literally became a sick, sick man.

A second way we try to deal with our sin in order to salve or camouflage and help our conscience survive is to attempt to justify ourselves. Sin is always somebody else's fault. Again you go back to Adam and Adam blamed not Eve, but actually God. And he described Eve as the woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, and therefore was blaming not just his wife but his God as well. Typically, people try to excuse their wrong doing because they think they have some valid compelling reason. They convince themselves that it's okay because they really are victims of some outside power, some other source. In our day, we even label sin as sickness, label ourselves as victims, deny that we have ever done anything really wrong. The human mind is endlessly creative in trying to justify itself. Perverted thinking causes us to do that.

Thirdly, and just briefly, we are oblivious to our sin. We try to camouflage our sin by covering it up, attempting to justify ourselves as victims, or we are oblivious to our sin. In other words, we may sin in absolute ignorance. We're so ignorant, we're so unknowing in terms of God's law, that we just sin inadvertently. And that's characteristic of us as sinners. We, like the psalmist, have to pray, "Who can discern his errors, acquit me of hidden faults." And that's what David said in Psalm 19. There are things going on in my life I don't even know about, as well as keeping me back from presumptuous sin. There are the things we know about and plan and premeditate; there are the things that just are the inadvertent activities of our fallenness. We naturally tend to be insensitive to our own sin. That's why Jesus said before you go poking around in somebody else's eye in Matthew 7, to take out a toothpick. Why don't you take the two-by-four out of your own eye?

And we can see sin very often better in others than in ourselves. And sin is very deceitful. Sometimes we think because we don't see the act of sin that we don't have to deal with the attitudes of sin that are in our hearts. So we, as human beings, we're just talking categorically in general now. We as human beings have a conscience. Conscience is triggered when we sin. It is triggered by the highest law known in our hearts. And since even pagan people have the law of God written within them so they know what is right and wrong, their conscience afflicts them with guilt. They have to deal with that. How do they do it? Usually they cover it up, justify it in some way, or just flatly ignore it because they're so busy in their life, they're so uninformed about the things that God says about their sin. And even if they sometime in the past knew about it, they've long forgotten what they once knew, and so sin can go on in the lives of people and they aren't even sensitive to it. It's becoming such a pattern in their life that they don't even label it as sin. Now, that's a dangerous way to live because ultimately it's going to damn you. Ultimately it's going to send you to hell because you're camouflaging the very thing that you have to recognize in order to come to a Savior. Right? And we've talked about that.

Now, I want to go a little bit deeper into this because I'm very concerned about it for all of our lives, and I want to just ask a few questions this morning and try to answer them so we can dig a little deeper into this. The first question is: what is sin? Let's get some kind of a clear idea of what sin is. Sin, according to Scripture, is, 1 John 3:4, the transgression of the law. That is to say, sin is any violation of God's law. Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness, as the New American Standard in that same verse, and sin is lawlessness. It is a violation of God's law. Any lack of conformity to the perfect moral standard of God is sin. Now, the central demand of God's law is this: what is the first commandment? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." Right? And the second is, "Like unto it love your neighbor as yourself." So, the epitome of all sin is to violate those two; the epitome of all sin then is to fail to love God. That is the primary violation. And it shows up when John 16 says that the Lord is going to send the Holy Spirit and He will convict the world of sin. What is the sin of sin? Because they believe not on Me. In other words, that's the partner to loving not the Lord, is loving not the Lord Jesus Christ. That's why 1 Corinthians 16:22 says, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be damned."

So, the ultimate sin, the epitome of sin, the summation of sin is lack of love for God, lack of love for Christ. That is the epitome of all sin; that is the summation of all sinfulness. The carnal mind, Romans 8:7 again, is not subject to the law of God and it can't be. So, an unregenerate person cannot keep the law of God and therefore he sins, and sins, and sins, and sins, and the compelling sin that leads the parade is lack of love for God, lack of love for Christ, and along with it the attendant love for self which manifests pride. Our natural hatred of the law is such that even knowing what the law demands does nothing but stir up more disobedience. Listen to what Paul wrote, "The sinful passions are aroused by the law. I would not have come to know sin except through the law. I would not have known about coveting if the law had not said you shall not covet, but sin taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind." Romans 7:5 to 7. Paul says, I read about a sin, and then I knew what it was, and then I saw myself doing it. Rather than the law of God helping me to defeat sin, the law of God just aroused sin. The more sins I learned about, the more things my heart desired to commit.

Such is the sinner's penchant for sin, that the more he learns about God's law the more he sins. The law is not going to help him. The law is just going to excite sin. In fact, Romans 1 verse 32 says, I suppose the sum of it all, even though they know the law of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but they give hearty approval to those who practice them. They know the law of God, and they know it leads to death, but they do it anyway. And they applaud the others who do it. Amazing.

Now, our entire culture today reflects this passion for sin. We live in a culture where the passion is now legitimate. In some cultures it isn't, and so there are social restraints on it. But not in ours. Our entire culture reflects this passionate love for sin and nobody wants to seem to hinder it. Nowhere is

this more visible than in the media world. The media have become the spokespeople for the base sins of man. And, nowhere is it more vile than on MTV. MTV, called Music TV, broadcasts nonstop images of sex, drugs and violence. Nonstop. Its programming is purposely designed to appeal to the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life. It has no other purpose. It has no redeeming virtue. It is not intended to make people moral, to make them good, to make them think deeply. It is not intended to educate them. It is not intended to inform them. It is intended to release their passion. That is all it is intended to do. That is its entire purpose.

MTV's highest rated program is an animated series featuring two characters whose entire lives are spent watching music videos, and challenging every standard of goodness and morality. Beavis and his friend, whose name shouldn't be mentioned in public, but is known to you, have literally plumbed the depths of moral nihilism on television. The language, the images featured on these programs are purposely offensive. They are purposely vile. They are anti-morality, anti-Christian and wouldn't even be appropriate for me to discuss in a worship service.

In spite of this amazing reality of MTV, which is the dregs, the sewer of the media industry, MTV recently did a special on the theology of sin. I didn't see it on MTV, I want to make that clear, 'cause I don't have that on my television. I saw it on PBS where they repeated it on the Public Broadcast System. I was frankly surprised to see that MTV would even acknowledge the concept of sin, let alone do a special series on it. So I was curious to see what it was about.

I watched a video tape of the program. It was pretty much what I expected, an entirely humanistic rationalization that portrayed sin as something that wasn't evil, just redefined it. There were certain kinds of behavior they said that were inadvisable. I mean, some things were imprudent, and sometimes it's unkind to do certain things, but there was nothing inherently wicked in anything, and there was nothing that offended a God because there was really no God.

Now, the series was built around the seven deadly sins. And if any of you have a background in Catholicism you've probably heard some people talk about the Seven Deadly Sins. They're not listed as such in the Bible, but in medieval times, some medieval theologians put together a list of what they thought were the seven deadly sins. It's a somewhat familiar list, here they are: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, envy, gluttony and sloth, or laziness. Not a biblical list, but a classical grouping, probably assembled by some medieval theologians. The purpose was not to identify all sin but to identify the root attitudes of all sin. You will notice that those seven sins, called the Seven Deadly Sins, are not actions, they are attitudes. Pride, covetousness, lust, anger, envy, gluttony and laziness. Those will issue in certain words and certain actions, but those, theologians thought were sort of the things that were underlying human sinful behavior.

Now, on MTV the Seven Deadly Sins were portrayed as anything but deadly. In fact, what they did was they got sound bites from cartoon characters, and excerpts from well-known movies, and

interviews with celebrities, and punk rockers, and rappers, and interviews with people in the mall, and it was all edited to provide a running commentary on these sins. And here are the typical responses. Queen Latifah, a rap singer, said, “Pride is a sin? I wasn’t aware of that.” Actress Kirstie Alley agreed, quote, “I don’t think pride is a sin and I think some idiot made that up.” A rocker from the group Aerosmith said, quote, “Lust is what I live for. It’s what I got into the band for. Little girls in the front row.” Rapper Ice-T said of anger, quote, “It’s necessary. You have to release this tension because life brings tension. We release our anger when we do records. When we did ‘Cop Killer,’ we were angry and the cops got angry back.” Some Michael Douglas character in a movie called “Wall Street” said, “Greed is good.”

And, of course, there was along with all of this, total reversal of definition of sin, the inevitable appeal to pop psychology to defend these viewpoints, and the defense was always along the line of preserving self-esteem. Psychology says we can’t be labeling people as sinners; it will mess their self- esteem up. Ice-T said, quote: “Pride is mandatory. That’s one of the problems of the inner city; kids don’t have enough pride. I got into a gang because of pride.” Now how warped is that?

John Leo wrote a perspective on this in the U.S. News and World Report, summed up the program’s flavor which I read and thought it was very interesting. Listen to what he said. “Instead of the language of moderation and self-control, everybody seems to speak the therapized language of feelings and self-esteem.” Pride isn’t a sin; you’re supposed to feel good about yourself. Envy makes you feel bad about yourself. “When you have sex with a woman,” one rocker says, “she makes you feel good about yourself.” But I don’t know if it saves you in the end. Even the repentant gay basher is totally committed to self-talk, quote, “Forgiving myself has been the challenge of my life.” He writes, “There’s a vague sense that sin, if it exists, is surely a problem of psychology.” Kurt Loder, the narrator, tells us at the start of the program that we are dealing with compulsions. He says, “The Seven Deadly Sins are not evil acts, but rather universal human compulsions that can be troubling and highly enjoyable.”

Discussion of gluttony quickly deteriorates into chatter about addictions. That’s the way all habits and attachments are discussed and the pop therapies the MTV generation grew up on. “I’m addicted to my girlfriend,” one male says about gluttony. Someone else says that the 12-step self-help program is God’s gift to the 21st century. He’s just chronicling the chaos and the confusion.

By the way, the repentant gay basher referred to in that article was a young man who had actually killed a homosexual, and then described his feelings of remorse. He wondered if he could ever be forgiven, so he went to a chaplain, I suppose in his prison, and the chaplain told him forgiveness is possible, but the only way he’ll ever know he has forgiveness is if some day he feels it. And so he lives each day to feel forgiven. Sad.

Sin, according to MTV, is not based on absolute moral standards. Instead, it is a question of each person's own preference. In other words, what is sin to me may not be sin to you. And the MTV program ends with an appeal to universal tolerance. Listen to this. The real danger of sin, according to MTV is anything that does damage to your ego. That's sin. And no sin, listen to this one, is as evil as the killjoy attitude of those who think sin is an absolute standard that offends a holy God. Thinking that is the worst sin.

That's how perverse the culture has become. The entire production, the entire defense of sin reminds me that we live in a culture given over by God to its own evil lusts. People love their sin, and they will go to extreme ends to justify it and rationalize it. And as long as they do that, they damn themselves, right? Because, if you don't define the disease properly, you're never going to come to the proper cure. You can't come to salvation unless you understand sin. Obviously then, this kind of thinking is deadly and damning to those who are deceived by it. But it is also true, and this is where I want to move at this moment, we don't have much time left.

This kind of thinking, and this is what concerns me, this kind of thinking has invaded the thinking of Christians. It has. Christians are casualties to the culture's redefinition of human behavior. Churches are. Churches which once would not tolerate adultery, and fornication, and homosexuality, and lying, and cheating and whatever other kinds of things, very tolerant of it now. Churches that once would want to confront sin don't confront it anymore. We've all fallen into the psychological game playing of self-esteem and ego-building. This is typical in all the movements of the Christian church. It isn't in every church, but it certainly is where the thrust is. And if you speak against it, you're really anathema. We have allowed the world to redefine God's moral law and even to redefine God's character and make Him more tolerant of sin than He is.

Constant exposure then to the Word of God is essential. I'll tell you, folks, in a time like this, what churches need more than they need anything else is the constant exposure to God's divine standard. Instead of that, they're getting churches that are acquiescing to the MTV mentality and giving them more of the same stuff, which is inconceivable to me. There ought to be such an irate ground swell of hostility against this that it literally would overthrow those kinds of churches that are watering down the truth. I mean, we ought to be so irate about this acquiescence that it starts a spiritual revolution. I mean, it's amazing to me that in a time when the culture is being defined by MTV, churches are trying to adapt to the culture. It's incredible.

On the other hand, what people desperately need, constant exposure to the Word of God which is the only thing, listen to this, that's going to keep you sensitive to the divine morality week after week after week as you are assaulted by the other stuff. When we need that so desperately to keep our sensitivity to God's standard and to true holiness and true purity, churches are jettisoning that in favor of entertaining their people. It's an amazing time in which we live.

Now, I want to ask a second question, we'll see how far we get. What sin is the most serious? We know what sin is. It is any violation of the law of God, and we're never going to be sensitive to sin unless we are constantly made sensitive to the law of God and you do that through the teaching of the Word. Because the culture is just drowning people, including Christian people, in this new morality, and this new psychological explanation for iniquity, and this new garbage about self-esteem and the need to build your ego. We know what sin is, only as we are exposed to the Word of God, and I think it has to happen all the time. This is not a time for short sermons that are interesting; this is a time for long sermons that are demanding. Keeping a pure life is very, very challenging in this time. And we need to hear the Word of God.

But, let's go a little deeper. What is the most serious sin? What sin is most serious? And I'll tell you what the answer is, the medieval theologians had it right: it's the sins of the mind. It's the sins of the mind. Jesus said it: it's out of the heart that the mouth speaks. It's what's in the man's heart that comes out that is so defiling. And the real challenge in our lives, beloved, is to keep a pure mind, and that is very challenging. And I believe the only way that's going to happen is to be continually brought, as it were, to the feet of the Word of God and to have it convincingly proclaimed. Actually, the Seven Deadly Sins of medieval theology were not behaviors at all; they were sins in the mind, all of them. And no sin is more destructive to the conscience than the sin that takes place in the arena of the mind. Sins in the mind assault the conscience like no other sins because, listen to me, the conscience is the only deterrent.

A Christian friend can be a deterrent to a sin of the tongue, can't he? You're going to watch you say if you're around another Christian, is that not true? A Christian friend, a husband, a wife, a child, is going to be a deterrent to sins of action. But the only deterrent that you have in your entire life to sins of the mind is your, what? Your conscience. And you need to feed the Word of God constantly into your mind so that your conscience really operates with full power. Your conscience needs to be able to be so sensitive to the sins of your mind, so that you can enjoy the kind of thing that Paul enjoyed when he said our proud confidence is this, the testimony of a good conscience. You've got to deal with the sins of the mind. Only you and only God know about them. First Corinthians 2:11 says, "Who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?" Who knows? Nobody knows, just you, in your own spirit.

Many people who won't do evil deeds are nevertheless boldly evil in their thoughts. They won't act evil things because there is peer pressure, and there are compelling reasons not to, but they are very involved in evil in their minds. A man who, for example, abstains from fornication for fear of getting caught might convince himself that it's all right to indulge in his own mind in salacious fantasies because he thinks no one will ever discover such a private sin. The fact of the matter is: the sin he deliberately entertains in his mind may be a thousand times more evil than anything he would ever think of doing before others. And Scripture says his guilt is the same before God as if he acted it out.

That's why his conscience is so demanding, so relentless. You see, to indulge in sins of thought, to indulge in those kinds of things is to molest your conscience directly. And that's to just have unending guilt and the absence of joy. Those who thoughts are impure cannot have pure consciences. The guilt is inherent in the evil thought. When the thoughts are defiled, the conscience immediately is defiled, and the conscience screams. To the pure, said Paul to Titus in chapter 1 verse 15, "All things are pure but to those who are defiled, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled." When the mind is defiled, the conscience is defiled. Nothing damages the conscience more than the habit of indulging in evil thoughts. Unfortunately, once it's begun the practice becomes all too easy.

And by the way, this is sin that doesn't need any opportunity. Have you noticed that? It doesn't require anybody, or anything, or any particular place. Sins of the mind can happen anytime, anywhere, under any circumstance, and that is why when you begin to cultivate sins of the mind, you are putting yourself in an absolutely terrorizing situation because you can't escape it. There are some sins you can flee, not the sins of the mind.

So, it is destructive beyond anything else. You think that it's okay because it's not on the outside, and everybody thinks all is well. And the truth of the matter is it is worse on the inside, because it is undetected by others and therefore breeding habitual iniquity, by engaging the mind, and the emotions, and the desire, and the memory, and the imagination. Thought sins. You will turn your soul toward sinful habits that kind of follow a flow. Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.

It's a tragic thing. And that is why it is so important that you hear the Word of God constantly, and are sensitized to sin constantly. Again I go back to this issue because it so concerns me. People can go to many churches over and over and over and over and sin is never confronted. That may make them feel momentarily comfortable. It does nothing for their long-term conscience. It's not helping; it's hindering. And eventually, those things on the inside will show up on the outside. No one ever falls into adultery. We read about that with pastors and others. No one ever falls into adultery. The adulterer's heart has been shaped by a long process of sinful thoughts and lustful thoughts. It gets shaped that way. The heart of the thief, it is bent long before his act of thievery by covetousness. All sin is first incubated in the mind. And James says in James 1:13, "Let no one say when he is tempted. I'm being tempted by God for God cannot be tempted by evil and He doesn't tempt anyone, but each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. When lust is conceived it gives birth to sin, and when sin is accomplished it brings forth death." Don't be deceived, brethren, it all starts inside.

Again and again, you remember Christ rebuked the Pharisees because they observed the external ceremonial law and they neglected the moral part? They were utterly preoccupied with appearing to be righteous, and they were like a tomb: white on the outside, on the inside they stunk with dead

men's bones. He says, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish so the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness for even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." And did you know the Pharisees had gotten to the point where they actually believed that evil thoughts were not really sinful, just evil deeds? And that's why Jesus said to them, "You have heard that the ancients were told, You shall not commit murder and whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court. You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery. I say to you that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart." Not only is murder a sin, but so is anger; not only is adultery a sin, but so is lust. Try to tell that to our culture.

What should be going on in our minds? What should be going on in the deepest recesses of our minds and hearts? What should be happening there? I'll tell you what, worship and love to God. Worship and love to God. When we were saved we were saved to be true worshipers. The Lord saved us in order that we might be made true worshipers. Listen to this: to sin in the mind, then, is to desecrate the very sanctuary where our highest and best worship should be taking place. So, cultivating sins of the mind not only defiles the mind, but it displaces worship for which we were saved. And there again, it can be defined as a form of blasphemy.

Relatively easy sometimes, to confess and forsake deeds of sin, words of sin, but the sins of our thought life go unconfessed more than any other kind. They are the soul- blackening sins. They are the character-damaging sins. They work directly against the conscience, and there is the conscience fighting with all its worth against this onslaught. That's why the Old Testament says in Proverbs 4:23, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." But, you know, beyond conscience, I have to say that God knows our hearts. Acts 15:8 says, "God knows our hearts." First John 3:20 says, "God is greater than our heart and knows all things." David wrote, "Thou dost understand my thought from afar and are intimately acquainted with all my ways." So God knows whether we have a lusting, coveting, angry, hostile, selfish, proud heart that is cultivating all of those sins of thought or whether or not our heart is given over to worship to Him. Psalm 44:21 says, "Would not God find this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart." Jesus told the Pharisees in Luke 16:15, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts. And that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God."

And you know something? What's going on in your heart is the litmus test of your character. Proverbs 23:7, "As he thinks within himself, so is he." Proverbs 6:12, "A worthless person, a wicked man is the one who with perversity in his heart devises evil continually." You want to know what you really are? Take a look at your heart. Take a look at the inside, for as in water, face reflects face; so the heart of

man reflects man, Proverbs 27:19.

External behavior is not an accurate gauge of your character; the thoughts of your heart reveal the truth. The thoughts of your heart are only known to God and your conscience. And, beloved, it is so crucial that we cultivate a pure life so that we can enjoy the testimony of a clear conscience. And you know, the longer you learn the Word, and the more you're exposed to the Word, and the more your heart is filled with its truth, the greater will be your love and your worship toward God. And the cleansing of that is going to affect clear conscience. I honestly don't know how men can possibly feed their thought life, filth, and foul things, and obscenities, and wicked things, and things which displease God and stand and minister without literally being assaulted by their conscience.

Job's comforters, you remember them? They came to him and they falsely accused him, and there wasn't anything in his life they could accuse him of, right? You remember Job. He was more righteous than any other man, so what are they going to accuse him of? I'll tell you what, they accused him of a dirty thought life. Zophar came and said to him, Job 20 verses 12 and 13, "Evil is sweet in his mouth and he hides it under his tongue. Though he desires it and will not let it go, he holds it in his mouth."

In other words, he's really wicked on the inside. You don't see it, and you don't hear it, but he's all foul on the inside. The picture he painted of the evil thinker is vividly true. Evil thoughts are like candy to them. To the evil thinker they derive great satisfaction from their imaginary iniquities. They savor their evil fantasies. They relish them like a choice morsel of sweetness under their tongue. They roll them around in their imagination. They return to the same wicked musings from which they can glean illicit pleasure over and over again. They mull them over like an animal chewing the cud, bringing up the favorite evil thoughts time and time again to react anew in the mind. This is what they accused Job of, but so far misjudged Job. Job had carefully guarded himself against that. This is what he said in Job 31:1, "I have made a covenant with my eyes, how then could I gaze at a virgin?" I don't do anything. I don't look in any direction that's going to cultivate an evil thought. He knew God was the audience to his thoughts. He says this, "Does He not see my ways and number all my steps? If I have walked with falsehood and my foot has hastened after deceit, let Him weigh me with accurate scales and let God know my integrity." And then Job denied that his heart had followed his eyes. He denied that his heart has been enticed by another woman. That would be a lustful crime, he says, and iniquity to be punished by judges. To hide iniquity in the bosom, he said, would be to cover one's transgression like Adam. The very thought appalled his righteous heart.

No, Job was very aware of the danger of sinful thoughts. He consciously, deliberately set a guard on his heart to avoid such things. And then you know what else he did? He even offers a sacrifice to God just in case his children sinned in their hearts. When the days of feasting had completed their cycle, that Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in

their hearts. This, Job did continually. Concerned not only about his own thought life, but the thought life of his own family. That's why the Lord said there's no one like him on the earth. He's a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil.

So, this whole matter of sins of thought has to be dealt with if we're going to deal with the conscience, if we're going to liberate our conscience and enjoy peace and joy and happiness and bliss in Christian experience. If you want to quiet your noisy conscience, you've got to deal with your thought life.

Well, maybe I better just quickly finish in two minutes. There are three ways the mind engages in sin. I'll just mention them, and then I'll stop. Sins of remembering, first. To cherish the memory of sins past, to bring back a lurid memory of a bygone sin is to repeat the sin all over again. Not long ago I baptized a man who was a former homosexual, transformed by Christ. His life was changed. His circle of friends was changed. He removed himself as far as possible from anything that was at all reminiscent of the past life. He wasn't tempted by old lovers. He wasn't tempted by homosexuals around him, but you know what he had unceasing temptation from? Take a guess. His memory that cycled back through all the illicit relationships of his past. Memories so vivid, so embedded in his brain that he thought sometimes he would never be able to overcome them. All the vile relationships of the past were stored there. And if he wanted to, he could say no to those temptations. And if he wanted to, he could say yes and cycle back through the filth of the past. Sin has a way of impressing itself on our memories with vivid sensations we cannot shake off.

I'll tell you, I grieve when I know that young impressionable people in their teenage years are going to go sit in a movie theater and watch people who are 18 feet high, in vivid drama, carrying out sexual activities and assume that those images may remain in the minds of those young people forever, at least in this life. It can't get out of them. You can't dismiss them. And Satan can cycle you back through those, and your flesh as well can do that.

And this isn't unique to sexual sins. Some people love to rehearse the memories of the time they got angry and poured out vengeance on somebody they resented, or they time they lied and got away with it, or they relish the time they cheated on their income tax. All kinds of temptations come from memory. Satan will try to take you back through the garbage of your past, and once you implant a lurid image in your mind, you can't take it away, it's there. So, one way we sin in the mind is through remembering sin in the past.

Secondly, sins of scheming. The mind, like we saw in James, begins to lust, and it spins its desire into the imagination and develops the full fantasy. And it schemes, and plots, and plans, the presumptuous premeditative sin.

And then it becomes the third kind, imaginary sin. The scheming could actually end in a real action of sin, but there are sins of imagining, purely imaginary sin. Committing adultery in the heart, murdering

in the heart, coveting in the heart, being discontent with what you have with your place in life, day dreaming about being married to someone else, musing about a luxury that you want in your life, indulging gluttony in an imaginary binge. Literally millions of people live in this kind of fantasy of sin. And you know what I believe? You've heard of this theology of positive confession? I believe for the most part it's nothing but fantasy sinning. It is not godly, it is not virtuous, and it is not faith. To say, I want a new Rolls Royce, or a new Cadillac, or a new house, or a better job, or more money, and I'm going to believe God for that, is not a righteous act of faith. It is an iniquity. It is a fantasy sin. It is a lust. It is covetousness.

And so, the mind can sin by remembering, by scheming for sins in the future, and by developing imagination. The psalmist said, "Create in me a clean," what? "Heart, O God, so that he could have a clear conscience."

Let's bow in prayer. Now, while your heads are bowed in this closing moment, let me just have you listen to what I say, and then we'll close in prayer. How are you going to deal with the problem of sins of thought? First, confess it, identify it and forsake it. Whether it's immorality, or anger, or vengeance, or bitterness, or covetousness, discontent. Secondly, refuse to entertain that thought. Make a covenant with the Lord to think on things that are honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and good. Then, feed on the Word which, when hid in the heart, prevents sin. And then, avoid evil attractions. Don't expose yourself to things that provoke sins of thought. And then, cultivate the love of God. It is my prayer and my desire for you that you will glorify God, you will honor your Savior, you will enjoy the blessing, the triumphant bliss of a clear conscience and that you'll be able to say with Paul, "Our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity we've conducted ourselves in the world." What a testimony.

Father, work that in every heart. Cleanse every heart, and may we have an affirming conscience, the joy and the peace of an affirming conscience. Thank You that forgiveness is available, and it's not just a feeling, it's a fact given to one who asks, for if we confess, You forgive. Create in us a clean heart, O God, for Christ's sake. Amen.

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