

SPIRITUAL WARFARE

PART THREE

Ruling our thoughts

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This is part three of the series. Part one was ruling our emotions. Part two was ruling our words. His Word in our mouths is our primary weapon. If you missed that, go back. Without that tool you will not know how to be victorious. Today is another application of the same war: ruling our thoughts. Our words and emotions come from our thoughts. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. If the mind is wonky, the mouth and the emotions will be wonky. This is the place to start, and it is the hardest of the three.

Ruling Our Thoughts

Spiritual warfare is learning to rule ourselves. We rule emotions. We rule words. Now we rule thoughts. The most-used warfare verse is 2 Corinthians 10:4–5, and in context it is about thoughts. The primary weapon is still His Word in our mouths. That is how we rule thoughts. Speak it out loud.

2 Corinthians 10:4–5

> *"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."*
>
> **— 2 Corinthians 10:4–5**

Four things: pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments, every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. The weapons are mighty in God. The "in God" part is not optional. There were men who were not in Him and tried to cast out devils. The devil said, "Jesus we know, and Paul we know of, but who are you?" It did not go well for them.

The Goal Is His Thoughts

The goal is not just controlling our thoughts — not merely "don't think bad thoughts." The goal is conforming our thoughts to His thoughts. Take your thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ, not to yourself. Not-thinking-bad is only the negative application. The positive application is: think the thoughts Jesus is thinking. That is harder. That is the war.

We Can Know His Thoughts

> *"For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ."*

— 1 Corinthians 2:16

In the Old Testament no one fully knew what God was thinking. Under the new covenant the Spirit of God dwells in us. We have access to the thoughts of Jesus. First we have to believe that. This is how we are transformed.

> *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*
>
> **— Romans 12:2**

Not merely changing your mind. Not merely controlling it. Renewing it — getting a new mind. That new mind comes from Him, through the Word.

His Thoughts Are Different

> *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."*
>
> **— Isaiah 55:8–9**

His thoughts are counterintuitive to human nature. They are higher. You will not get them by reading one verse and assuming you already think that way. Your mind will have to be renewed.

Mercy as the Example

> *"Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy."*
>
> **— Micah 7:18**

He delights in showing mercy. Someone has been really mean to you, unrepentant, and will be mean again. Are you excited about the opportunity to show them mercy? Most of us are not. He is. That is not hyperbole. Jeremiah 29:11 — thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope — was spoken while Israel was being carried into a seventy-year captivity. If you put a child in a long timeout you do not say, "I'm already thinking about the ice cream when this is over." He was already thinking about bringing them back. His thoughts are that different. Love, patience, mercy — the whole character of God — sits higher than we are used to thinking.

Mental Strongholds

The strongholds in this passage are mental strongholds — belief systems. Fortresses inside our brains that need to be torn down. Principalities and powers are in heavenly places, but the battle is not in the heavens. They are there trying to influence our thoughts. The battlefield is our heads. It is over the belief systems we hold. Even students of the Bible hold belief systems that do not match how God thinks. It is easy. It is scary easy.

These strongholds are built from two things that compete against the knowledge of Him for our thoughts: human reasoning and demonic wisdom. The knowledge of God is trying to build the mind of Christ in us. Those two things are trying to take over the head and build a fortress. Every day. All the time.

The Greek for "exalts itself" carries the sense of gluttonously exalting. Principalities flood our thoughts looking for agreement, so that when we speak it they can feed on words against the knowledge of Christ. Feed raccoons and they never leave. Devils are worse. Agreement is access. Amos 3:3: can two walk together unless they are agreed? Agree with demonic wisdom and you enable a stronghold. The good news is the last verse: bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Conform your thoughts to Christ's thoughts through the knowledge of Him, and you pull down arguments, high things, and strongholds. Devils and world systems try to build them. We pull them down by learning to think like Jesus.

Human Reasoning

Human reasoning is reasoning independent of God. Reasoning itself is good. A linear argument can be useful. Human reasoning — leaving God out — is poor reasoning. If we reason independent of God we miss all the wisdom and knowledge hidden in Him.

> *"Attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ."*
>
> **— Colossians 2:2–4, 8**

Understanding is correct knowledge (truth) plus wise actions (application). You can be intelligent and not wise. You can be wise without much knowledge. A rocket scientist can get a vehicle to the moon and not know how to raise children or build a marriage. Both wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him. Reason only works if the foundational premise is truth and wisdom is applied.

All of that is in Him. Biblical principles are always a wise foundation. Examine the premise before you admire the argument. Lawyers know this. A beautiful house on sand still falls. One of the most common false premises is that man is basically good. Scripture says no one is good, no not one. Governments that last are rare. Ours has lasted because the founders started with the premise that men are evil and will take advantage of power, and they limited that power. Start with the wrong premise and the rest of the reasoning, however tidy, will not stand.

How Human Reasoning Cheats Us

Human reasoning will cheat you. One current example is victimhood. If you are a victim you get a pass, special treatment, things other people cannot say. Someone did something bad to you, meant it, unrepentant, would do it again. A counselor may reinforce the victim identity, talk boundaries, even help you start a ministry where other victims gather and you remain a victim for twenty years while you learn to function. Counseling and support are not the problem. Staying a victim is. The Bible says because Jesus died for your sins and forgave you, you can forgive others. You can be more than a conqueror. You cannot be more than a conqueror and a victim. You have to pick one. Choose forgiveness — hard as it is — and you gain freedom and peace, even if the person never repents. Stay a victim and you are cheated out of both. Trauma is real. In the middle of it we do not first think, "I can be free if I forgive this person I want to punch." We have to learn to think like Him. There are many other ways human reasoning cheats us out of the grace and freedom that are in Christ. Examine the foundational premise against His word.

Demonic Wisdom

Demonic wisdom does not always look evil. It is revealed by its fruit. James makes the test clear.

> *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."*
>
> **— James 3:13–18**

Wisdom is meek. Conduct is fruit. We can tell by the fruit. Two summaries: demonic wisdom is self-focused; wisdom from above is deferential — it looks at the other person. Demonic wisdom produces conflict; wisdom from above makes peace. If you are continually in conflict, check which wisdom you are using. You may have to become deferential, meek, and willing to yield.

Self-Focused or Deferential

> *"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."*
>
> **— Philippians 2:3–5**

Let this mind be in you. Jesus is like this. Think like this too. Most of us do not have Philippians 2 nailed. There is work to do.

Knowledge of God

We pull strongholds down by taking thoughts captive through the knowledge of God. That is how we get the understanding we wanted at the start. That is how we learn to think His thoughts. Three verses:

Romans 8:29 — we were predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. If you wonder what your calling is, there it is: become like Jesus. We have all been predestined to that. 2 Corinthians 3:18 — as we behold Him we are changed from glory to glory into the same image. Worship, prayer, talking to Him, reading Scripture about Him — as we look at Him and learn to think like Him, we are changed. Romans 12:2 — transformed by the renewing of the mind. Insert into that: learning to think like Christ.

> *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."*
>
> **— Proverbs 9:10**

They are equivalent. Learn about Him and you will understand. You cannot understand your life without Him. Without Him people do not know why they are here.

> *"Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into*

Him who is the head — Christ."

— Ephesians 4:13–15

The goal of the church is unity in the knowledge of the Son of God, growing up into Him. Human reasoning is one of the winds that tosses children. Truth spoken in love grows us up.

"That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know…"

— Ephesians 1:17–18

Pursue the knowledge of Him and you get a spirit of wisdom and revelation. You will know things the world does not know. When the world is freaking out you can say, "It's Bible. It's right there. It will work out."

"As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue."

— 2 Peter 1:3

All things that pertain to life and godliness are not automatic. We receive them as we assimilate the knowledge of Him. Pursue the knowledge of God not only so you can answer questions or be theologically correct, but so you can learn to think His thoughts.

Think Like Him Before You Act Like Him

"What would Jesus do?" is step two. Step one is "What would Jesus think?" We cannot act like Him if we have not learned to think like Him. Jesus would show mercy. I do not delight in mercy. I want to punch the person and then say I'm sorry. That is not what He thinks. The bar is not merely "don't be bad" and "believe right doctrine." The bar is think like Him. Make a habit of asking Him His thoughts, especially in conflict. "Jesus, what are you thinking about this?"

Larry the Jehovah's Witness knocked on the door. He was not expected. He was annoying. The first thoughts were not loving. After the conversation the correction was: God, I have to love Larry. What are You thinking about Larry? If he comes back Monday I want to do a better job. We forget to ask. Ask. Sometimes He shows you what He sees in the other person. Sometimes He says, "Try this." Sometimes He says, "This is your problem." That is the one we least want to hear, and sometimes it is true. This is a lifetime pursuit, and it does not stop after this life. We might as well start now. Learn to think like Him in the culture of heaven.

Practical Tips

Acceptance, Not Performance

Lean into your acceptance in Christ. The devil will try to get you into performance orientation — self-justification. In the court of heaven, if he gets you standing there justifying yourself, he wins. The two before the Judge are you and the devil, and he will whoop you. You want your Advocate there. Plead the blood of Jesus. That is all you have. We make mistakes and have to fix them. We still have to know we are accepted, not performing. Paul prays that we would be rooted and grounded in love. That keeps us.

> *"As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love."*
>
> **— John 15:9**

As much as the Father loves Jesus, that is how much Jesus loves you. No caveat. Obedience affects how we walk it out. His love does not change. Abide there. The devil will try to move you.

Conviction, Not Condemnation

Conviction is specific. That is what the Holy Spirit does: "That thing you said was wrong. Fix it." Condemnation is vague: "You suck. You're terrible at being a Christian." That is not God. That is the devil. With condemnation there is nothing specific to do, so you try to perform and be better. That is the trap. You do not have to answer the devil's questions. He loves questions: Did God really say? What if? Why that? What if you made a mistake? As soon as you identify that it is not from God, do not engage. He loves unanswerable loops: "I think I made the wrong decision. Did I make the wrong decision?" Unless God speaks, you cannot know. He just wants you in your head.

Handle it this way: have more confidence in God's ability to lead than in your ability to follow. It is not your job to decide where you are going. It is your job to do what He says. Prepare your heart. Do not decide selfishly. Do not follow a worldly principle. Follow biblical principles. Take wise counsel. Pray. Then if you are 90 percent sure it is God, go. If you are 51 percent sure, go the same way, trusting Him to lead. If you were wrong, no condemnation. You prepared your heart. You were trying to follow. Move on. Conviction is specific — of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. If it is not specific, it is probably not Him. Ask God if there is anything specific. Otherwise move on.

Community, Not Isolation

Do this in community — biblical community, not a hundred strangers online offering advice. People who are trying to follow Jesus. Wolves do not attack the

herd. They find the one lingering. The devil isolates, intimidates, and discourages. Alone he will wear you down. You need a community of believers pursuing the same God, helping one another think like Jesus.

A Word as You Close

The Word is challenging, and it is the thing that enables us to live like Jesus and think like Jesus. We are going to spend eternity with Him. We might as well start now. Apart from Him we can do nothing. Lean into the knowledge of the Lord. Use His words. Know you are accepted in the Beloved either way. He is patient and kind. His Spirit is the teacher. We are partners with a good Father who is helping His children grow up into Christ the Head.

Lord, thinking like You, ruling over our words, all of it is hard. It is intimidating, and it is one more opportunity to realize we cannot do this without You. Give us Grace to pursue the knowledge of the Lord, to think like You, to use Your words, knowing we are accepted either way, knowing You are patient, knowing Your Spirit teaches us and Your Word discerns our hearts. We want to grow up into Christ. We want to learn to think like You because You are awesome. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Where are you still aiming only at “don’t think bad thoughts” instead of conforming your thoughts to His?
2. Which of His thoughts feels most counterintuitive to you right now — mercy, patience, love, or something else?
3. What belief system in your head is competing with the knowledge of Him? Is it human reasoning or demonic wisdom?
4. Where has a flawed premise (victimhood, “people are basically good,” or another) been cheating you out of freedom?
5. In your last conflict, was the wisdom self-focused and producing more conflict, or deferential and making peace?
6. When did you last ask Him, “What are You thinking about this?” What did you do with the answer?
7. Where is the devil trying to move you from acceptance to performance, or from specific conviction to vague condemnation?
8. Who is the biblical community helping you think like Jesus, or where are you lingering alone?

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SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Part Three

Bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:5

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