

AS A MAN THINKETH IN HIS HEART

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 9, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Will you listen thoughtfully as I read with you four very thoughtful passages of scripture? The first is found in Proverbs 23:7. Solomon wrote, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." The second is found in Matt. 15:10-11, 15-20. Our Lord said, "Hear, and understand: Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man; but that which proceedeth out of the mouth, this defileth the man ... And Peter answered and said unto him, Declare unto us the parable. And he said, Are ye also even yet without understanding? Perceive ye not, that whatsoever goeth into the mouth passeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But the things which proceed out of the mouth come forth out of the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, railings: these are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not the man."

The third passage is found in Matt. 23:25-38. Here Christ scathingly rebukes the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye cleanse the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full from extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee cleanse first the inside of the cup and of the platter, that the outside thereof may become clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but inwardly are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." The final passage is found in I Sam. 16:7 and reads, "For Jehovah seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but Jehovah looketh on the heart."

God has always been especially concerned about man's heart or mind. These four passages that we have just read together indicate clearly the importance of what goes on inside of man. One might ask why God is so concerned about the things which man thinks. The answer would be very simple. What man holds in his heart, or thinks, has a great effect upon him spiritually, mentally, and physically. Because the heart or mind largely determines what man will be, there is special emphasis throughout the Bible upon the importance of what man believes, thinks and feels. As we read the New Testament we find a special inwardness in Christianity. It is our purpose in this study to indicate some of the effects which man's mind has upon his body.

Effect Upon The Body

What man holds in his mind has a tremendous effect upon his physical body. This is true because God's laws of cause and effect work in all realms--the spiritual, the mental, and the physical. No effect is without its cause; no cause is without its effect. This being true it follows that when man allows his heart or mind to be dominated by the great negative destructive emotions of HATRED, which includes anger, jealousy, envy, resentment and the like, or FEAR, which includes many different types of anxiety, or GUILT, which also is of many kinds and many degrees, and FAILURE or FRUSTRATION, which means man is inadequate to face his situation successfully, it is inevitable that his whole life shall show the effect. These four areas contain the great negative, destructive emotions which have plagued mankind through the centuries, and are doing so today with even increased force. Competent modern physicians tell us that these powerful emotions literally cause certain types of asthma, duodenal or stomach ulcers, high blood pressure, chronic ulcerative colitis, rheumatoid arthritis, and other diseases.

One immediately asks, "Is there real evidence to support the idea that many of our diseases and physical breakdowns are a result of our thinking?" The answer is a definite yes. For example, Dr. Hans Selye of Montreal, Canada, has produced some definite experimental data in this direction. Dr. Selye holds "a stress concept of disease." By this he means simply that the body becomes ill or breaks down as it reacts to excessive stresses. In his experiment he inoculated a group of rats with disease producing germs such as staphylococcus, and streptococcus. Poison was injected into a second control group of rats. A third similar group of rats was subjected to stresses that produced great anxiety, and mental and emotional confusion. The amazing result was that the stresses of hate, envy, jealousy, fear and anxiety produced bodily disintegration and brought on death just as certainly as did the disease germs and the poison.

Russian scientists have repeatedly reproduced symptoms of hardening of the arteries and high blood pressure in chimpanzees by subjecting them to experiences that made them violently and helplessly jealous. Several times they have conducted experiments in which a chimpanzee who had been living happily with his family was suddenly taken away and placed in an adjoining cage from which he could see and hear his family but could not reach them. In full view another chimpanzee was given his place. Screaming with rage, he could only watch as his fury mounted. Within three months he was dead of severe hardening of the arteries and of high blood pressure. He was killed by the strong negative emotions which resulted from his situation. Even though the chimpanzee was thoroughly justified in his feelings of jealousy and rage, he died of hardening of the arteries and high blood pressure just the same! Identical traumatic experiences have been produced in human beings in far less harrowing ordeals.

Diseases that are brought on by mental attitudes are known as psychosomatic diseases. The name comes from combining the word "psycho" which means mind and the word "soma" which means body. Although the mind has had its influence upon man's body through the centuries it is only during the past thirty years or so that psychosomatic medicine has come into real prominence. The American Medical Association has long suggested that possibly fifty per cent of man's illnesses are of this type. Many who come to see a physician are not organically ill, but are rather suffering from their own mental attitudes. Incidentally, this is the large area in which modern faith healers can easily create their illusion of having performed wondrous cures. Some respected doctors of today estimate that as high as eighty per cent of the people who come to them are suffering from physical ailments brought on by man's thinking.

It is there that Christianity comes in. The attitudes which Christ and the apostles taught are not the negative and destructive ones, but rather they are the attitudes which foster health and happiness. Review in your own mind for a moment the teachings of Christ, and I believe you will see how they are set in opposition to the destructive emotions of hatred, fear, guilt, and failure. Christ's teachings are of the positive, constructive type, and these foster not only good spiritual health, but good mental health, and good physical health as well. It is rather thrilling to realize that modern men of medicine are saying in effect, "If you would be healthy in mind and in body, be a Christian." The Christian way of life, as it directs the mind, as it controls man's behavior as it guides man morally and ethically, constitutes the finest plan of living so far as spiritual, mental, and physical health are concerned.

The Deadly Emotion of Resentment or Hatred

Let us turn our attention in a special way to one of the deadly emotions--that of resentment or hatred. One doctor puts the matter this way: "Chronic resentments, grudges that we carry around with us, become deep-seated abscesses. They ruin our personalities. They poison our minds, and they produce diseases in our bodies. When we continue to carry them, we are slowly but surely committing suicide! The cure for a surgical abscess is incision and drainage. This makes healing possible from the inside out so that the patient is rid of the abscess once and for all. The cure of a spiritual abscess is forgiveness--real forgiveness. This heals our minds, our bodies, and our souls."

Jesus did not use the terminology of modern medical men, but he knew the destructive power of these negative emotions. Notice his instructions as we find them in Matthew 5:23-24, 43-45, "If therefore thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift ... Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and, pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." Throughout his life Jesus taught love and forgiveness instead of hate and resentment toward one's fellowman. Not only did he teach it; he practiced it. Even while dying on the cross, when it would have certainly been justified for him to hate and resent the people who were unjustly murdering him, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34).

Here is a case history: "I think I must have been about forty years old before it finally began to dawn on me that the reason for forgiving someone was not primarily as a favor to the person that I was forgiving, but as a favor to myself. Forgiveness is the greatest act of self-interest in which you can possibly engage. When you forgive you quit committing suicide. A burden is lifted from your life. Happiness, together with a sense of release, comes with a measure that few have ever known." He went on to say, "Some of us have had to learn this the hard way. I developed a duodenal ulcer with a very severe hemorrhage before it really began to dawn on me that the person that I was damaging most by my hatred and resentment was myself. This realization made it much easier to forgive. As I looked back into my own life and began to see how cause and effect had operated I was able to see how cause and effect had operated in another person's life. When I realized this, I was able to see why people had done evil things against me. After a while I was able to feel sorry for them--and able to forgive them. Forgiving means all emotional impact has been removed from the things which have happened. And once you have completely forgiven a person, you can think or talk about the things they did to you with no more emotional impact than you would have in discussing the price of a sack of potatoes at the market."

Even When Warranted

Something else that people often fail to realize is that even when conditions warrant feelings of resentment and hate these feelings must be eliminated because the law of cause and effect works just the same. In many instances a person has been treated so badly by others that in a certain sense he had a right to feel resentment and hatred. Yet, for his own sake, as well as for the sake of others, he must not allow himself to harbor these feelings. Even though he is right, in a certain sense, in feeling resentment it will destroy him.

Imagine for a moment a man atop some high building. One might conceive of him jumping from the top of this building as a suicide. One might also imagine him being accidentally pushed over the edge of the building. One might also imagine him under other circumstances being forced by some angry enemy over the edge of the building. No matter what the circumstances the results on the pavement in the street below will be the same. Whether it be suicide, accident, or murder, the man will be dead in the street. Similarly, when we hold these negative feelings of hatred and resentment, the ultimate destructive effect upon ourselves is the same whether the feelings be the result of purely imagined grievances or whether the grievances be very real. We might also remember that the

chimpanzee who died in the Russian experiment was right in feeling his rage and resentment, because he had been treated badly, yet we must also remember that he died just the same of high blood pressure and hardening of the arteries.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* recently reported a symposium. in which a number of doctors participated in discussing the treatment of chronic ulcerative colitis. The final recommendations for prevention and treatment placed strong emphasis upon faith, hope, love, and forgiveness. It is rather heartening to the Christian to find the highest medical authorities in our land today proposing for the cure of certain physical illnesses the same things that the apostle Paul advocated in the long ago.

Just here let us glance back at the writings of the apostle Paul, as we find them in Romans 12:14, 17, 19-21, "Bless them that persecute you; bless, and curse not ... Render to no man evil for evil ... Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto the wrath of God: for it is written, Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense, saith the Lord. But if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

We are also reminded of the words of the Lord, as he was instructing the disciples to pray in the giving of the model prayer, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors ... For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matt. 6:12, 14-15). The same emphasis upon forgiveness is found in the conversion between Christ and Peter in these words, "Then came Peter and said unto him, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Unto seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but until seventy times seven." (Matt. 18:21-22).

It is said that John Wesley spoke to General Oglethorpe in behalf of a man who was guilty of an infraction of rules in the new colony of Georgia. The obdurate Oglethorpe replied, "I never forgive." After a moment's hesitation, Wesley responded, "Then, sir, I pray you may never offend." Clarence Macartney used to tell of a lonely cemetery where there is a grave which had inscribed upon its headstone just one word--"Forgiven." There is no name, no date of birth or death. The stone is unembellished by the sculptor's art. There is no epitaph, no full course eulogy--just that one word, "Forgiven." But that is the greatest thing that can be said of any man, or written upon his grave, "Forgiven." It is also the finest thing that man can do for his fellowman. To be forgiven by God and to forgive our fellowmen constitute the highest privilege and the greatest responsibility that man has.

What we have been endeavoring to say is summed up in a quotation from James Allen in his fine book *As A Man Thinketh*, "A noble and God-like character is not a thing of favor or chance-, but is the natural result of continued effort in right thinking, the effect of long-cherished association with God-like thoughts. An ignoble and festival character, by the same process, is a result of the continued harboring of groveling thoughts." To this we would add finally the words of the apostle Paul, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and of there be any praise, think on these things. The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do: and the God of peace shall be with you." (Phil. 4:8-9). As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he, spiritually, mentally, and physically.