

GUARDING THE THOUGHTS, GUARDING THE HEART

by
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One of the major themes in the *Philokalia* and the writings of the Holy Fathers in general is that of the “guarding of thoughts.” A thought is a seed which, when planted in the heart, can affect the totality of not only how we act, but of our entire attitude towards life, towards a particular situation, towards others and even towards ourselves. Thoughts are *powerful*, and can either motivate us or totally discourage us.

For this reason, the Orthodox Fathers placed great emphasis on the guarding of the thoughts and the guarding of the heart. They recommend a constant vigilance over oneself effected by perpetually standing before God in the depth of one’s heart. Here, each thought is brought before Christ to be judged. Unworthy thoughts are expelled from the mind. More simply, we need to pay attention to our inner monologue. If we give place to negative or defeatist thoughts, they will become a prophecy that we ourselves will fulfill.

Prayer is the greatest aid to maintaining positive thoughts. When we invite God into any situation, He will come – and His presence is always one of power, energy and light. He may not reveal Himself immediately, but He is not absent from that moment forward. An old saying goes, “the Lord may not come when you want Him to, but He’s always right on time.” But it is up to us to invite him. A simple “Lord have mercy,” or “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” is powerful enough to do this.

Prayer cracks the stronghold of negative or defeatist thinking. God is all-powerful. He created the world out of nothing. There is no situation in our lives too difficult, nor too trivial, for God’s help and action. But again, it’s up to us to make the first move, and to persist in our supplications.

Discouraging thoughts are not necessarily irrational. Often, they are mixed with truths, or half-truths. Sometimes thoughts come to us from others, sometimes from ourselves. But what others think is ultimately meaningless. Only God’s “opinion” matters. Take, for example, both Joseph and David. Both were called by God to be kings, yet both came from large families in which their own brothers and parents did not believe in their calling or abilities. Both were unjustly accused; one imprisoned, the other persecuted. Yet by keeping their eyes focused on God, they did what no one thought they could do. They over-

came the negativity and discouragement of others.

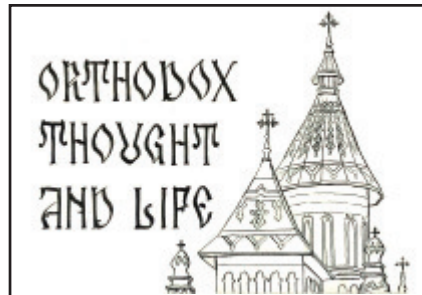
Often, however, our own thoughts are more difficult to conquer than those coming from others. Here we only wrestle with ourselves. This is why prayer is so important – prayer is the bringing in of another, independent perspective: that of God.

How do we know if thoughts come to us from God, or from the devil? What should we do if thoughts of our failings and sins are presented to us? The Fathers give a simple rule: if the thought of a past failing discourages us to the point of depression, draining all our energy and zeal, tempting us to quit every struggle for virtue, or to remain complacent, it is from the devil. If, however, the sorrow such a thought brings gives us a desire to change, energy to repent, fast, pray, forgive, etc., it is from God. St Paul himself talks about these two sorrows: one which is worldly, and brings death; one which is godly, and brings zeal and energy to change (2 Cor 7:10).

If we turn our thoughts over to God for His judgment, they become pure, and catalysts to a correctly ordered life. More than this, healthy

thoughts lead to a healthy, joyful soul, one steadfast even in the midst of great trials. Only a soul filled with God’s love is such, and the first step is in our thinking. Love for God leads to pure thinking, and vice versa. “Love is essentially the banishment of every kind of contrary thought, for love thinks no evil (I Cor 13:5),” wrote St John of the Ladder.

Our thoughts must be turned over to God, such that their effects will be positive. Yes, we need to encourage ourselves in our inner monologue, but most importantly, we need to bring God into our thinking and hearts by prayer. Then our thoughts will become seeds of transformation and victory in our lives, aiding and abetting us to fulfill God’s purposes.



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