

Think about it

When we ask someone “How are you?”. We often get the response, “I am good”. We never truly know what they are thinking on the inside. They may have anxious thoughts having heard some bad news from the doctor; or angry thoughts because the kids spilled hot chocolate on the new carpet; or if like me what’s for dinner tonight.

According to a study by the University of Southern California, our brain generates about 70,000 thoughts per day. 70,000! That is a lot of thoughts.

Think about it. What have you been thinking about today? Or yesterday? Or last week? Chances are, not all our thoughts are filled with raindrops on roses, whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, or brown paper packages tied up with strings. In fact, many of our thoughts may be stinky, full of doubts, untruths and discouragements as we battle anxieties, pains, demands and hardships.

Let me tell you about a chicken. Chicken Little is a silly little chicken. One day, “whack”! A pine cone fell on her head. “Good gracious me”, she said to herself, “the sky is falling!”

Some days I feel like Chicken Little. Not only is the sky falling. It is failing on me!

My mum died of lung cancer. I am paranoid whenever I get a cough. Unfounded and anxious thoughts will fill my head. I am coughing. I must have lung cancer too! How many months do I have to live? Why do I even bother turning up for work today?

You see how our thoughts can easily spiral downwards; and most importantly affect our actions.

But I have good news today. We don’t have to entertain every thought that comes to our mind. Just because you have a thought, you don’t have to think it.

I like what one of my favourite authors wrote. Our mind is like an airport. Thoughts circle above, coming and going. A good air traffic controller follows rules and protocols to decide if a plane is allowed to land or not. In our mental airport, we are the air traffic controller. Our rules and protocols are scriptures from the Bible.

Paul instructs us in 2 Corinthians 10:5 to “take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ”. Every thought? Yes, every thought. All 70,000 of them? Yes, all 70,000 of them.

We can give each thought permission to land or tell it to go away.

Stopping unwanted thoughts is not enough. We need to fill our mind with righteous thoughts else garbage will end up piling up again. In this morning’s reading, Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8.

“whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Paul isn't just giving a random list of nice virtues. He is giving a strict checklist to run our thoughts through before we allow them to take root.

Whatever is true

Whatever is genuine and real. God is the only one who is perfectly true. "Let God be true, and every human being a liar." (Romans 3:4). Paul commands us to anchor our mind in the unshakeable reality of God's Word and character, rather than our shaky feelings, anxieties; or lies from the enemy.

Stinky thought: I have made so many mistakes in my past. I am not worthy to do anything for God.

True thought: I am a new creation in Christ. I am God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. (2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:10)

Whatever is honourable

Whatever is honest and is worthy of respect. An honorable thought reflects the holiness and worthiness of God. Paul urges us to fill our minds with thoughts that show respect, dignity, integrity, and seriousness about what is good.

Stinky thought: As long as I get what I want, it doesn't matter how I get it.

Honourable thought: I will not take the easy way out. I choose honesty and integrity even when it costs me something. For when I walk in integrity, I walk securely. (Proverbs 10:9)

Whatever is right

Whatever is just, morally right and upright – according to God's standards. Right in this context is about relationships – concerning how we relate to others as God would have us do. It is unselfish thinking, it challenges us to put on a cloak of humility and look to the needs of others, instead of our selfish desires.

Stinky thought: They hurt me, so I'll hurt them back.

Right thought: They hurt me. But I choose forgiveness instead. I will not repay evil for evil and I will do what is right in God's eyes. (Romans 12:17)

Whatever is pure

Whatever is chaste, innocent and free from sin. God desires that our thoughts are clean, honest, and free from harmful or selfish intentions. Thinking what is pure requires mental discipline to constantly meditate on uncontaminated thoughts that will eventually shape our behaviours.

Stinky thought: I am not going to declare this income in my tax. They are not going to miss a few hundred dollars.

Pure thought: Even though this seems like an insignificant amount, I choose to be honest because God hates lips that lie but He delights in people who are trustworthy. (Proverbs 12:22)

Whatever is lovely

Whatever is pleasing or acceptable. The Greek word for “lovely” is made up of two Greek words. One is for “toward” the other is “love”. A good translation would be “that which pushes you towards love”. A lovely thought encourages us to focus on love, kindness, gratitude, and the good relationships God has placed in our lives.

Stinky thought: Their problems aren't my business. They can deal with it themselves.

Lovely thought: My friend is struggling. I will encourage them and remind them that they are not alone. In this way, we build each other up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Whatever is admirable

Whatever is praiseworthy and commendable. Paul warns us that we need to guard our minds to focus on things that are of good reputation, worthy of respect, and positive to speak about. Thoughts that are kind; and are pleasing and acceptable to God.

Stinky thought: Why should I respect people when they are being difficult? They don't deserve it

Admirable thought: Even when people are being difficult, I will remain humble and gentle, I will be patient and learn to bear with one another in love. (Ephesians 4:2)

If anything is excellent

If anything has virtue, excellence, and moral goodness. Not the virtues of the world, but the moral and spiritual qualities that belong to God. This command goes beyond secular self-improvement; it is a fruit of deep faith that submissively honors God with our absolute best, even when nobody else is watching.

Stinky thought: I'm not good at anything, so there's no point in trying.

Excellent thought: I am going to persevere. I will not become weary in doing good, for at the right time, I will reap a harvest if I do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)

If anything is praiseworthy

If anything is commendable. This command is beyond basic gratitude. It is praise directed towards God, to turn our mind to worship and offer thanksgiving to God. Instead of dwelling on our problems or anxieties, we choose to praise Him for who He is, for God is good.

Stinky thought: Why did God heal them and not me? Why did God answer their prayers and ignore mine? This is totally unfair.

Praiseworthy thought: God is so good, and it is wonderful to see Him moving powerfully. I will give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for me in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Think about such things

This phrase demands us to take action – to deliberately reckon, consider, and meditate.

By directing us to think about whatever is true, honourable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, God is telling us that a peaceful mind is not an accident—it is a calculated, daily choice. We need to stop being passive victims of our anxious, bitter, or cynical thoughts and instead become active caretakers of our hearts (Proverbs 4:23).

In Romans 12:2, Paul urges “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

The goal of filling our mind with right thinking is to be like Jesus. As we renew our mind, “we put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of Christ Jesus.” (Colossians 3:10)