

S E R M O N S

NEW AND OLD

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LONDON

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, & CO., 1 PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1886

SERMON XI.

ON THE DUTY OF HATING VAIN THOUGHTS.

PSALM cxix. 113.

I hate vain thoughts.

How many are there among us who could confidently take up the Psalmist's words, and make them our own ; and in his sight, and speaking as in the immediate presence of Him to whom all hearts, and all the imaginations of all hearts, are open and manifest, could say, 'I hate vain thoughts' ? I fear not all ; perhaps very few indeed. For indeed how many, while they acknowledge a certain rule on their outward conduct, and that their actions must be conformed to a law imposed on them from above, seem to take for granted that thoughts are free, that these may move in that inner region and province which is peculiarly their own, unquestioned and unchallenged ; that they will have to give little or no account of these.

And yet Scripture does not encourage us in any such notion as this. The wickedness of the old world, that wickedness which only a Flood could wash away, how

is that set forth to us there? Not so much by the evil which was done, as by the evil which was thought. 'God saw,' we are told, 'that every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually.'¹ What does St. Peter say to Simon Magus? 'Pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.'² And does not another Apostle remind us that the Word of God is 'a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart';³ that the Lord at his coming 'both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God'?⁴

But what need I to accumulate proofs that, as God is a knower of the thoughts of men's hearts, so also is He a punisher of those which are evil? Often, it is true, thoughts present themselves to us as such slight, shadowy, evanescent things, coming and going, and, as we fancy, leaving no trace behind them, that we fail altogether to attach to them the importance which they deserve. And yet, dear brethren, what is a word or deed but an embodied thought? the incarnation, if I may so speak, of a thought? And must not the thought of a man, as the primary and immediate birth of his heart, be more truly indicative, tell more clearly what is in him, than his words or works, which are only

¹ Gen. vi. 5.² Acts viii. 22.³ Heb. iv. 12.⁴ 1 Cor. iv. 5.

secondary outcomings of the man, can ever do? Reason, then, there is enough that we should set a watch not merely at the door of our lips, and over the works of our hands, but that we keep a watch closer still, one which will demand a yet stricter vigilance; ever striving and ever praying that the meditation of our hearts may be acceptable in God's sight; and, as a needful condition of this, hating 'vain thoughts,' which cannot be acceptable to Him.

But what, it may be asked, is included in this phrase, 'vain thoughts'? This question, I propose to answer first; and then, this answered, to consider, very briefly, what are some of the helps which we may use, and where we may find such helps, for the fighting against, overcoming, and in the end getting rid of these.

And first, what are 'vain thoughts'? To this it may be answered in the general, that as there are three forms of temptation by which we are assailed in other regions of our spiritual life, as there is no sin which does not range itself under one or other of these three heads, which is not **a yielding to the world, or to the flesh, or to the devil**, so fares it also in that region with which we have now particularly to do, the region of the thoughts.

And, first, there are the vain *worldly* thoughts,

which we must hate. And here, let me observe by the way, that thoughts, which in themselves are perfectly harmless and innocent, may become vain through being welcomed and entertained at the wrong season. Thoughts, for example, of the shop, of the market, of the exchange—no one would affirm that these in themselves are vain; they belong to the necessary business of many men; allowable, and more than allowable, in their place and in their time; but yet they may become 'vain,' if suffered to intrude, without rebuke, 'on our prayers, to follow us to the house of God, it may be to the very table of the Lord, and in other ways to disturb the holy seventh-day rest of our spirits; if we do not resolutely shut the door of the inner chamber of our hearts against them when we would pray to our Father in heaven.

So, too, these same thoughts may become sinful and vain through mere excess, through occupying our minds overmuch; as when we dwell on them exclusively; at our uprising and downsitting; when they are with us at all times of the day; when we do not care to dismiss them, and indeed could hardly now dismiss them if we tried. The world must be very near us, when the worldly thought is ever with us. Our treasure, our best treasure, must assuredly be there, else our heart and the thought of our heart would not be always there also. I suppose that every one who

wishes to deepen and strengthen his own spiritual life, proposes to himself some sort of meditation on things heavenly at some set time of every day; but what chance has this meditation of holding its place, what likelihood is there that it will not presently be wholly thrust out of the day, when worldly thoughts, grown strong by too much allowance, are ever ready to dispute with it even that brief interval which it would fain claim for itself? Or even if they should not wholly expel it, they will leave it a dead heartless thing, with all power, grace, and strength departed from it. See then, I would beseech you, that that which in itself may be perfectly right do not, through excess and overmuch allowance, become wrong to you. You are in the world, and have your work to do in the world; and that work should be done vigorously and well, and this it cannot be without **due thought bestowed upon it**; moreover, as interesting and concerning you nearly, it *must* often recur to your mind. **Yet for all this have a care that it do not swallow you up, that it do not take possession of you altogether.** Thoughts that are *always* running on this world, on its hopes and fears, its gains and losses, its victories and defeats, that can never get out of this track, are **vain thoughts**; and he that is wise will see betimes the peril and the danger with which they threaten the whole life of his soul, and will watch against them, as knowing that we may perish

through things lawful as surely as through things unlawful.

But if a wise man will watch against these thoughts about this world, which are only sinful when indulged and allowed at a wrong time or in excess, how much more will he hate those that in their nature and essence are sinful; as, for example, *impure thoughts*; being such as more than any other sully and defile the mirror of the soul, and render it incapable of giving back the pure image of God. What a call there is not to eschew only but to hate such on the part of those who profess to be followers of the immaculate Lamb, of the Prince of all purities, of Him who has said, 'Be ye holy, for I am holy;' and who, when He demands holiness on the part of his people, does not contemplate a mere blamelessness in outward conversation, so that men shall see nothing amiss in them, but that holiness of heart which shall endure his searching glance, before whom all things are naked and manifest. Hate, then, these 'vain thoughts'; hate them with a perfect hatred. They are in themselves a whole world of iniquity, and do more perhaps than evil thoughts of any other kind to taint, corrupt, and poison the whole inner life of the soul, until nothing there is pure, but everything defiled.

The transition to other thoughts, to such as we more immediately ascribe to the devil, is easy. The connexion

between those at which I have just been glancing and these is closer than we might at first imagine. Shakespeare knew this when he made Iago, being as he is the most devilish character which has issued from the wondrous workshop of his brain, also in imagination the uncleanest. Neither is it only in the land of the Gadarenes that devils and swine are found in closest relation with one another. But into this mysterious connexion I will not seek to enter further.¹ It will be enough to indicate *proud thoughts in general*, as the third division of those which I have undertaken to consider. It is only little which I can speak of these.

Few persons in this world obtain as much homage, respect, observance from others as they fain would obtain ; few occupy places in this world as high as it seems to themselves their merits and services might justly challenge and *deserve*. But of these, thus *disappointed* and defeated of their proper rights, how many make it up to themselves, or at least seek some compensation, in imagining to themselves the course of this world as they would like it to be, or as they hope it may yet one day prove ; and *the Tempter in fantastic vision is ever at hand to feed these high thoughts of ours*, to set us on the high mountain of our pride, to bring half the world to our feet, as ready to do homage to us ; for he well knows that *there is nothing which more unfits us for*

¹ Matt. viii. 30, 31.

humble every-day duties, for prayer, for communion with God, than the indulgence in these vain conceits, and walking in imagination on these high places of our pride. Young men, young women, beware of allowing yourselves in idle daydreams such as these. There may seem to you no harm in them ; but there is great and serious harm. Examine them a little closer. Are they not always for the exaltation of self? Is not self the centre of them in every case? It is *you*, not anybody else, but always *you*, who in that imaginary scene which you depict to yourself, are the central figure ; you, who do something clever, or grand, or heroic, or self-denying, and obtain the applause and admiration of the world. Can anything be worse, can anything be more injurious to the spiritual life of the soul, to its simplicity and purity, than these secret glorifyings of self? Can anything do greater wrong to the soul than this substitution of magnificent feats of imaginary heroism or self-denial for the commonplace, every-day tasks and humbler duties of the Christian life, which are really within our power, and which claim fulfilment at our hands? Hate, then, these vain thoughts. They will fill you with conceit of the worst kind, and leave you empty of every good thing.

But, still more evidently devilish, there are 'vain thoughts' of malice and evil-will ; these too growing out of a root of pride, as it would not be difficult to

show. It is strange that persons should ever wish ill to others gratuitously, and without having received any slight or wrong at their hands. Yet so it is, nothing perhaps revealing so strongly the depth of man's fall, and the way in which the poison of the Old Serpent has penetrated into the veins, as the fact that there is such a thing as 'being glad at calamities' (the Greek language has a word for this gladness), and this even though the calamity of others bring no profit to us, and though they whom the calamity has overtaken have never in anything harmed or wronged us in the least. There is such a thing as looking abroad on the world, and grudging to see others more prosperous, more esteemed, happier in their family circle, in higher estate, more at ease in their outward circumstances; and desiring that this prosperity should be less, and having pleasure in any event which should make it less, which should justify words like those of the Prophet, 'Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?'¹ Hate, I beseech you, these vain thoughts. Let none say in his heart, 'Oh, I could never be tempted to such gratuitous malignity as this.' What any other has ever been tempted to, be sure that you may be tempted to the same; and perhaps, if you had watched yourself a little closer, you would be ready to acknowledge that you had been tempted to it already; and not this only, but had yielded to the temptation.

¹ Isa. xiv. 10.

But a few words must still be spoken on the remedies for 'vain thoughts'; how to resist them, how so effectually to hate them that they shall find no room nor entertainment with us. It is plain that before we undertake this in earnest, we must be fully aware of their guilt. I have attempted to say something of this already, and cannot now say more. Let it be sufficient once again to remind you, that in that day which may be so near, which cannot be very remote, **God shall judge not the open things only of men's lives, but the secrets of men's hearts, by Jesus Christ.**

Then, too, let us fully realize to ourselves the ever-present danger which there is, that the evil thought will breed something even worse than itself. 'Lust, when it hath conceived, bringeth forth sin.' The evil thought is mother of the evil deed. It is the cockatrice's egg, from which the fiery flying serpent may at any moment be born. No man can say, with confidence, 'Thus far will I advance in sin, but no farther. I will taste, in imagination, the sweetness of the sin; but there I will stop.' God evermore defeats these wicked calculations of ours; and the sin which we have deliberately resolved to commit in part, He compels us (for I will not shrink from using the word) to commit in the whole.

But this the guilt and the danger of allowing such thoughts as these freely admitted, how shall we rid ourselves of them? how shall we chase them away? Chase

them *wholly* away, we never shall ; but, as an old divine said well, ‘I cannot hinder a bird from flying over my head, but I can hinder it from building its nest in my hair.’ Let them find no entertainment from us. As often as they visit us, let them drive us to Him, by whose holy inspiration alone we are able either to think those things which be good, or to refuse to think those things which be evil ; let them, I say, drive us to Him in a real, though it may be a voiceless prayer, in a brief meditation on the glories of heaven, or on the pains of hell, or on Christ hanging upon his cross and bearing there the penalty of our sins, or on Christ coming to judgment and bringing to light all hidden things of darkness and this wicked thought of ours among the rest. In devices such as these we must find our help. Nor may we doubt that the issue and reward of all manful resistance to him from whom all evil things do come, and these fiery flying darts among the rest, will be that he will flee from us ; and that to us too it will be granted to enter into and a little to understand the blessedness of those words which had their first and most glorious fulfilment in the wilderness and for the Lord, ‘Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.’¹

¹ Matt. iv. 11.