

Meditation

Preventing Spiritual Identity Theft

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Some of the topics we will be looking at in this sermon are: attention span, concentration, distractions, focus, mental laziness, spiritual rumination, bogus meditation, and saving our data. I would like you to turn over to a very familiar scripture.

Proverbs 4:23 Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.

If we pause to think about the profound implication of this initially simple-looking verse, we realize that all we are, or what we may become, derives from what we think about all day long. We are what we assimilate. We become what we assimilate. Our very core identities derive from what we assimilate. The scriptures tell us to jealously and protectively guard whatever goes into our minds because we will ultimately turn into what we assimilate. As Brian Wulf suggested in his August 21st sermonette, we automatically turn into what we fear.

The only part of us that will survive through the grave—that is, our character, our thoughts, the contents of our hearts—constitutes what we think about all day long. There is a principle that we have all gleaned from the first part of Proverbs 23:7, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he."

Our Elder Brother also underscored this principle in:

Matthew 12:35 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

And again in Matthew 15,

Matthew 15:18-20 "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

The contents of our hearts (the thoughts and ruminations we recycle through our nervous systems on a continual basis) constitute our character. These constitute our identity. If we should ever lose the ability to control what goes into our hearts and minds, we run the very real risk of losing our spiritual identity, of allowing someone else to take our precious crown. Is it possible that our spiritual identity can be stolen or hijacked?

Consider the implications of the simile in:

Proverbs 25:28 Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.

In the ancient fortified cities, if the walls were broken down and penetrated, foreign powers could occupy the territory. Likewise, if our thoughts are not under control but under the influence of something else, we run the risk of having someone other than ourselves control our thought processes and claim our identity.

How many of you have felt over the past several years, with increased traffic on the Internet, cellular phones, email, voice-mail, pagers, etc, that demands upon your limited time have increased exponentially or drastically?

How many of you feel on a daily basis that your attention has been torn in multiple directions—giving you little or no time to sort out your thoughts?

How many of you have experienced the sinking feeling that your own attention span, along with the rest of our future-shocked society, has become dangerously attenuated, that is, being able to stay focused for shorter and shorter and shorter periods of time?

Karl Beyersdorfer used to repeatedly admonish the Duluth, Minnesota congregation that their time was their life. Our time literally is our life.

On July 3rd of this year, Richard Ritenbaugh gave a sermon on listening in which he pointed to media over-stimulation as a major contributory cause of our society's shortened ability to stay focused. Last April, David Grabbe posted on the *World Watch* an alarming *Associated Press* article based upon a Chicago media study. The summary reads as follows:

Chicago April 5 Very young children who watch television face an increased risk of attention deficit problems by school age, a study has found,

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suggesting that TV might over stimulate and permanently "rewire" the developing brain. For every hour of television watched daily, two groups of children aged 1 and 3 faced a 10 percent increased risk of having attention problems at age 7. The findings bolster previous research showing that television can shorten attention spans and support American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations that youngsters under age 2 not watch television.

I have been teaching English Composition and Literature for over 37 years and have experienced ever increasing difficulty getting my students, who have been reared in a milieu of computerized video games and fast-paced MTV, hip hop and rap, to stay on task or remain focused for any more than a few minutes at a time.

New maladies such as Attention Deficit Disorder (virtually unheard of when I was in grade school or high school) have mushroomed out of control, along with the dubiously popularly prescribed societal antidotes: Ritalin, Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, and other serotonin reuptake inhibitors. .

We all, society at large as well as members of the greater church of God, have experienced an alarming fragmentation of attention and an increasing difficulty of staying focused. This is part of the unraveling of our culture that John Ritenbaugh talked about Thursday morning. If our minds are torn in many directions, controlled by distractions rather than things of our own choice, we run the real risk of incrementally losing our spiritual identity and allowing someone else to take our crown.

Whether we like it or not, our time—what we think about all day long—constitutes our lives, constitutes our identity. I am going to repeat for emphasis: if something other than our own choice determines what we think about and what we spend our time on, we are no longer in control of our own mind and have, for all practical purposes, surrendered our identity to alien thought patterns.

My specific purpose in this split sermon is to provide an antidote to the dangerous erosion and insidious fragmentation of our thought patterns. The antidote consists of the successful application of a badly neglected or abused spiritual tool, namely meditation.

The thesis for this message is if we do not cultivate the ability to meditate or seriously practice meditating, we run the very real risk of losing our spiritual identity.

Back in April 1985, I gave a sermonette in North Hollywood in which I referred to

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meditation as the rusty (or neglected) spiritual tool. Since that time, I have somewhat changed my mind about that description and have embraced Al Portune's description of meditation as an abused or a hijacked spiritual tool. At the 1969 Feast of Tabernacles at Lake of the Ozarks, Al Portune, giving a sermon on the devastating effects of fear and worry, which he described as a perverted form of meditation, exclaimed, "Many of you are past masters of meditating—just not on the right things. Fearing," he concluded, "is a form of meditation intently focusing and concentrating upon failing."

Many of us have learned to mull over in our minds on a continuous basis vivid digital high definition Technicolor pictures of horrible things that can go wrong. Often the constant rehearsal of these foreboding pictures of what could go wrong becomes a major contributory factor in bringing these events to pass. Those of us who have experienced the embarrassment of stage fright or performance anxiety know exactly what I am talking about.

Let us turn to Job 3:25. Job had evidently become a victim of a perverted form of meditation when he concluded:

Job 3:25 For the thing I greatly feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me.

I do not know if some of you have watched the British comedy, *Keeping Up Appearances*, but Mrs. Bucket has a rather high-strung neighbor and she is always worried about breaking Mrs. Bucket's china. She develops a purpose tremor and actually drops the china at that time.

We are all familiar with the proverb that corroborates this principle.

Proverbs 10:24 The fear of the wicked will come upon him, and the desire of the righteous will be granted.

It would appear that both fear and faith are reinforced or perfected through meditation. Ironically, people have used their minds in ways that partially resemble meditation, but which over a period of time destroy the mind's ability to concentrate. Daydreaming—or mind wandering—is one such activity. Daydreaming masquerades as meditation because, like meditation, it floods the mind with vivid pictures or images.

God expects us to use this marvelous picture-making apparatus of our mind (our

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imagination) to envision the reality of God's kingdom, to envision ourselves overcoming some problem, or to reflect upon concretely applying some aspect of God's law, but not to randomly or chaotically flit from one subject to another.

Meditation, because of its association with New Age and Eastern religions, has taken on some rather negative connotations. J Hampton Keathley in his article "Biblical Meditation" suggests that all Eastern forms of meditation stress the need to become detached from the world. There is an emphasis upon losing personhood and individuality and merging with the cosmic mind. Detachment is the final goal of Eastern religion. It is an escaping from the miserable wheel of existence.

Transcendental Meditation, abusing the purpose God has intended for this spiritual tool, encourages emptying the mind and blanking everything out. Ironically it makes us more vulnerable to Satanic or demonic attacks.

Godly meditation demands a fully attached, active, engaged, disciplined mind, while counterfeit meditation encourages detachment, escape, and surrender of the mind to mysterious cosmic forces. Daydreaming, mind wandering, and fear (all bogus forms of meditation) are all passive, diffuse, non-focused, and non-directed. The common denominator in these bogus forms of meditation is letting go of the required mental discipline needed in legitimate, Godly meditation.

Keith Thomas, in a sermon he gave in Minneapolis back in the fall of 1971, said that one of the biggest curses on our society, in and out of the church, is mental laziness. He went on to say, "For every physically lazy man, there are a hundred mentally lazy people."

Turn to Hebrews 5:12. Legitimate meditation is one of those activities that mentally lazy people avoid because it requires focused concentration. Sadly, people feel they are being coerced, giving up a part of their freedom, or doing something against their will. Ultimately, lack of meditation makes us spiritually flabby, just like the scattered Hebrews Paul admonished.

Hebrews 5:12-14 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Having their senses exercised by reason of use refers to the continual mental exercise of meditating, reflecting, pondering, continually going over or mulling over a matter in one's mind.

II 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.

Meditation is that vital tool, that systematic process of bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

Many of us have experienced increasingly truncated attention spans. In preparation for this message, I came across a valuable set of exercises on the Internet to kick-start our concentration so we can start taking back control of our attenuated attention spans. Remez Sasson in his article "The Power of Concentration" provides some mental stretching exercises to get the concentration back. We can use this as a prelude to our sustained meditation of biblical passages, prayer, and Bible study. In the printed transcript of this sermon, I will provide a hyperlink to the source itself. http://www.successconsciousness.com/index_000005.htm

But to give you a few of the techniques he uses, I will mention that these are old, reliable chestnuts that both my grandfather and dad had used successfully. Sasson recommends exercises such as:

Taking a book and counting the words in one paragraph.

Counting backwards from 100 to one.

Counting backwards from 100 to one, skipping every third number; that is 100, 97, 94, 91, and so on.

Mentally going through the multiplication tables from 0 x 0 to 12 x 12.

I remember having the skill to do this back in the fourth grade. I had a little red and yellow plastic pencil box with a slide ruler on it. I remember on one side it had a pencil sharpener, which I pretended was a jet powered speedboat. Despite the daydreaming, I did learn the multiplication tables from 0 x 0 to 12 x 12, but found the skill rapidly deteriorating during middle age with the advent of the now ubiquitous hand held

calculator, which is sapping our concentration power.

Ironically, it is possible for our undisciplined thought eruptions, if we do not carefully regulate them, to bring us into captivity to them.

Victorian writer John Henry Newman described such mental tyranny in his essay "The Idea of a University" in which he differentiates what he calls possessing our knowledge and being possessed by it. Newman warns, "The memory can tyrannize, as well as the imagination. Derangement, I believe, has been considered as a loss of control over the sequence of ideas. The mind, once set in motion, is henceforth deprived of the power of initiation, and becomes the victim of a train of associations, one thought suggesting another, in the way of cause and effect, as if by a mechanical process, or some physical necessity."

In other words, if we do not exercise control over what we allow ourselves to ruminate about, we will be tyrannized by ideas not of our own choosing. God has designed the mind as a sorting tool—connecting like ideas with like ideas. Newman, in the same essay, suggests that converting raw experience into truth involves a slow process of digesting and assimilating, mulling over raw unprocessed experience.

Newman said:

We do not discern truth intuitively, or as a whole. We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round [and round] an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the concentration, and exercises of mind.

This reminds me of Isaiah 28:10, "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." Semanticist I. A. Richards has made the observation that "All thinking is sorting." When we meditate, we exercise control. We actively choose what we want our minds to think about, what we want to become. We systematically mull over, turn over, chew, and ruminate, converting our raw experience into meaning.

The term ruminate is a figurative expression, derived from observing a cow chewing cud, a process of bringing back partially digested food (grass, corn stalks, or ground feed) in order to slowly chew on it again and again and again, preparing it for more

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thorough digestion and assimilation, actually for milk production.

In a similar vein President Bush, when he choked on a pretzel back in January 14, 2002, remembered some belated sage advice his mother had told him: "My mother always said when you're eating pretzels, chew before you swallow."

Pretzels are not the only foods we need to chew carefully before we swallow. A great portion of our previous fellowship destroyed their faith, choking on the putrid, poisonous antinomian doctrines dished out from Pasadena—swallowed whole without much reflection whatsoever.

Sir Francis Bacon has cautioned us in his essay of Studies:

Some *books* are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some *books* are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.

The Bereans, a group of people described in Acts 17:11 we could classify as true spiritual ruminants, realized that God's Holy Scriptures constituted one of the few works to be read wholly, with diligence and attention, chewed over or masticated thoroughly, serving as a secure standard upon which to measure or compare other works.

Acts 17:11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

One of the finest examples of a spiritual ruminant is the psalmist David, who devoted countless hours chewing upon, mulling over again and again and again, both the publicly observed testimony of the creation and God's revealed Word.

Psalms 119 itself is a product of spiritual rumination. The psalmist David no less than seven times identifies the object of his meditation—meditating upon God's Word, God's law, to the end that he might assimilate the scripture and apply it to his life, letting it become the core of his spiritual identity.

Psalms 119:15 I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways.

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Psalm 119:23 Princes also did sit and speak against me: but thy servant did meditate in thy statutes.

Psalm 119:48 My hands also will I lift up unto thy commandments, which I have loved; and I will meditate in thy statutes.

Psalm 119:78 Let the proud be ashamed; for they dealt perversely with me without a cause: but I will meditate in thy precepts.

Psalm 119:97 O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day.

Please turn to Hebrews 8:10. Of course the apostle Paul or whoever wrote the book of Hebrews has already linked to Jeremiah 31:31-34. This is the thing that we will actually personify and embody, God's living law.

Hebrews 8:10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their minds and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Now go back to Psalm 119 so we can finish the other objects of meditation.

Psalm 119:99 I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation.

Psalm 119:148 My eyes are awake through the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word.

Notice David's reference to the night watches. This was perhaps the best time to reflect. It was a time he could be alone with his thoughts—a restful, quiet, tranquil, and unhurried time, a time that he could reflect back upon the day's activities, thoughtfully matching up his accomplishments and failures against God's laws and statutes.

Time and time again David refers to the end of the day, the night watches, as the most appropriate time for this kind of spiritual rumination. Of course Psalm 1:2 has both day and night, but let us turn to Psalm 4:4.

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Psalm 4:4 Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still. Selah [That is, pause, calmly reflect.]

Psalm 63:6 [Another reference to the night watch] When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches.

Psalm 77:6 I call to remembrance my song in the night; I meditate within my heart, and my spirit makes diligent search.

Night time is not the only time we meditate, but it is perhaps the best, most appropriate time when we can unhurriedly and soberly reflect upon the consequences of our daily activities, a time we can measure our own accomplishments and failures against God's laws and precepts.

Jack Bulharowski, some years back in the North Hollywood Graduate Club (I believe it was in the spring of 1986), talked about a written aviation log he systematically put together after each airplane flight. He noted the things that went right and the things that went wrong in order to save his life in future flights. Actually I have been keeping a journal for 33 years. My friend Bill Stenger calls it Chairman Mao's Little Red Book. I reflect on the daily log, and then at the end of the day I write a reflection on what has happened. I find this an excellent meditating tool.

The time to reflect upon the significance of an experience is not as we are going through it because we are too discombobulated at that time, but after we have gone through it and experience the consequences, either good or bad. Then we can reflect upon it.

Society it seems has conspired against our God-designed need for tranquility, rest, and solitude, and particularly, our need to meditate. Poet Carl Sandburg, years before the cell phones, e-mail, freeways, or the Internet, had the following appraisal of the human condition:

The people so often sleepy, weary, enigmatic, is a vast huddle with so many units saying:

"I earn my living.
I make enough to get by and it takes all my time.
If I had more time I could do more for myself and maybe for others.
I could read and study and talk things over and find out about things.
It takes time.

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I wish I had the time."

Sociologists refer to the perceived faster pace of life we all experience as symptoms of hurry. J. Hampton Keathley has suggested that our adversary, Satan the Devil, seems to major in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. Living in rural east Texas, I can more readily find oases of sanity or tranquility. About three times a week I try to walk around the lake at Tyler State Park and clear the cobwebs out of my mind, but the grim fact is that nowhere in this electronically-wired-together global village are we immune to the maddening increased pace of living and the ceaseless bombardment of media.

That is why God Almighty demands that we take time out of every day and every week to slow down the pace, to stop, and reflect

- Where we have been.
- Where we are.
- Where we are going.
- On our awesome destiny revealed only as a jig saw puzzle in God's word.

The Sabbath, including the annual Holy Days as well as the Millennial Sabbath we are rehearsing right now, all provide, if rightly used, the needed time to reflect upon our destiny and our identity: past, present and future.

Our daily, weekly, monthly, and annual times of meditation and reflection we could consider those times in which we (in computer parlance) save our data to our hard drives, jump drives, DAT tapes, or burn them on to a CD for safe keeping. My son Eric and his business partner out in Calabasas, California on a daily basis save the hard drives on 4 DAT tapes. One he takes home, one his partner takes home, and two they put in a safe. I talked to him on the phone last night and two days ago some thieves stole the safe. Now, if you could imagine, if the safe was stolen and the hard drive were destroyed, the company identity would have been destroyed. But that did not happen.

Meditation not only saves our experience, but attaches significance to it. God knows we need lots of unhurried time to thoughtfully process the significance of our accumulated experience.

Perhaps the main reason why the book of Ecclesiastes is reserved for the Feast of Tabernacles is that it provides a meditative reflection of Solomon's—and, by extension, mankind's—experience. Like Solomon we need to incrementally learn that although God

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has placed eternity in every human being's heart, He has not yet placed within human reason the ability to comprehend God's purpose and the ability to live as God lives.

John Ritenbaugh has said repeatedly, "Eternal life is living life the way God lives it." We do not want to live for eternity in our mortal and decaying state, even at its best state. It is altogether temporary, purposeless, and meaningless. The Amplified Bible has given an insightful reflection of

Psalm 119:96 I have seen that everything [human] has its limits and end [no matter how extensive, noble, and excellent. These are words from the Lockman Foundation]; but Your commandment [what we want as the core of character] is exceedingly broad and extends without limits [into eternity].

Our natural carnal human nature cannot comprehend God's mind or purpose.

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares 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."

We have to, through meditative reflection and with the help of God's Holy Spirit, incrementally exchange our carnal nature with God's nature. In short, we need a spiritual heart transplant.

In order to acquire the nature of God and to habitually think like God, we need time to process the consequences and significance of our experiences as they measure up to God's holy and spiritual law.

As a Millennial Sabbath, it will take a thousand years to process the full significance of the consequences of man's rule apart from God. During this Millennial period of restoration, mankind will be given the time needed to affirm the need to take on the character of God. To affirm as Solomon said, "The conclusion of the matter is to fear God and keep His commandments."

Brethren, we are given a foretaste of that opportunity right now. It behooves us to use a portion of each day, each week, each year at God's annual Holy Days, to metaphorically save our data through meditation, that is our life's experiences, filtering them through the word of God, percolating them through the word of God, in order to establish and save our spiritual identity.