

Those who are 'spiritually-minded' are born of God,
. . . and shall come to the enjoyment of him.

John Owen¹

CHAPTER 6

A SPIRITUAL MIND-SET

"There it goes! Way back! It might be, it could be, it /S! A HOME RUN! A GRAND SLAM! I can't believe it! This is the *greatest*, most *exciting* finish in World Series *history!*"

I had already thrown my helmet into air, rounded first base, and was leaping like an impala toward second by the time the announcer said, "The Cardinals are World Champions!"

It was the zenith of baseball drama. Three balls. Two strikes. Two out. Bases loaded. Bottom of the ninth. Last game of the World Series. We're three runs down. I stepped out of the box and did all the things nervous batters do even when it isn't necessary—knocked the dirt out of my spikes, held the bat behind my head with both hands and quickly twisted my torso twice each way, took a practice swing, adjusted my helmet, breathed deeply, made sure the "Louisville Slugger" label faced me, dug back in with my right foot, and tapped the outside corner.

Never had I concentrated so hard, never had I found it so hard to concentrate. "Don't swing at a bad pitch," I said to myself as I riveted my eyes on the horsehide in the pitcher's hand. "But you've got to swing at anything that's close. Whatever you do, *don't strike out!*" Every one of the fifty thousand people in the stadium was on his feet, screaming. A hundred million people were watching by television. For the rest of their lives, people would remember where they were when they saw the next five seconds. For generations to come, men would tell their children and grandchildren about what I did with this pitch.

In it came. A heater right in my wheel-house. The swing was pure instinct. A sharp, wooden crack and my name became a household word.

If you've ever hit a fastball with the sweet spot of a bat you know how magical the world seems for a moment. And the world never felt more wondrous than at that moment. Before I got to third, fans were spilling over the walls, past the hopelessly outnumbered policemen, and converging on me as if I were giving a million dollars to the first one who reached me. Pushing past them, I finally reached home, leaped on it with both feet and bounced into the waiting mob of teammates. Like a human *tsunami*, they rushed me with a force that flattened me. After the initial crush, we were up hugging and bouncing like ecstatic three-year-olds. Then I felt something under my legs and before I knew it I was aloft on the shoulders of two fellow-players. The crowd roared even louder.

It seems as though you'd get used to something like this after you'd been through it a few times, but I never have. I first hit this home run when I was about six-years-old, yet it has never lost its thrill for me even though I've won at least a thousand World Series' championships with a thousand other grand slams.

Of course, I've known similar moments just as exciting. The long, incredible touchdowns I scored to win several Super Bowls were exhilarating. The last-second, 75-foot shots to win NCAA and NBA championships were electrifying also.

What? You've never seen them? Well, I have. Many times.

Each of us daydreams on occasion, as we have since early childhood, about fantasies. Most of us have fantasized about what we'd do if we inherited millions of dollars from some long-lost relative—where we'd live, what kind of mansion we'd build, what kind of car we'd drive, where we'd travel, etc.

Perhaps you've daydreamed about being a courageous battlefield hero, or a lovely ballerina, or a graceful Olympic figure skater. Some fantasize about life as an accomplished singer or musician, or a master craftsman, or as someone living "happily ever after." Maybe you sometimes imagine how it would be as a spellbinding speaker, a top-gun jet-fighter pilot, or retired to a quiet life in a mountain or lakeside cabin, far from crowds and hurry.

Doubtless you've had fantasies of Heaven and what life is like there. And you've probably tried to imagine the horrors of Hell.

Continuing to think about the darker side, it's not uncommon to fantasize occasionally about different physical pleasures and having them without limitation or accountability.

But of all your fantasies, which is strongest? Which daydream, when you imagine it, thrills you more than any other? If you had the power to make any one of them come true, which would it be?

In his best moments, the Christian would choose to be in Heaven with His God and to be made perfect and without sin. That's because the Lord has planted within every believer an unquenchable desire to be like Christ, to be with Christ, and to be free from sin. And though the Christian daydreams about earthly things, too—and yes, even sinful things—his most consistently absorbing imagination is with spiritual things and the things of God.

But that's not true with others. The non-Christian can identify himself as one who, if he could indulge any fantasy, would choose to indulge some sin. His most compelling wish is to gratify a sinful craving without restraint, without law, without limit, and ultimately, without God.

This illustrates the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian described in Romans 8:5: "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires."

This verse recognizes only two kinds of people. "Those who live according to the sinful nature" aren't some kind of "less spiritual" Christian than "those who live in accordance with the Spirit." Throughout verses 4-8, there are only two types—those who live by the sinful nature and those who live by God's Spirit, the non-Christian and the Christian.

Both the old and New King James versions of the Bible use a term in verse six that is helpful. Instead of referring to "minds set on what the Spirit desires," it speaks of being "spiritually minded." This doesn't mean that non-Christians who think about the invisible, spiritual realm are spiritually minded. The term still means to have a mind oriented specifically toward the things of God. But I want to use the term in this chapter, and let me first use it to ask you, "Are you 'spiritually minded'?" It's a critical question, because .

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ONLY THOSE WHO ARE SPIRITUALLY MINDED ARE CHRISTIANS

These verses teach us that what you set your mind on indicates your spiritual condition. In other words, the thoughts of your mind reveal the state of your soul. If your mind is set on the sinful nature and earthly things instead of Heavenly things, then you are in spiritual death; you are not a Christian.

The Bible says the same thing in Philippians 3:18-19 where it speaks of ". . . enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. *Their mind is on earthly things*" [emphasis added].

So each of us belongs to one of two groups of people: non-Christians who set their minds on the sinful nature and things of the world, or Christians who set their minds on the things of the Spirit of God.

Obviously, there are different levels within each group. There are non-Christians who live according to the gross and flagrant sins of the sinful nature. But there are also moral, well-respected people who, despite their morality, do not live according to the Spirit of God. All, however, have their minds set on the "sinful nature."

On the other side, there are Christians who demonstrate in every area of life the priority of following Christ, and there are those usually known as "backslidden." But the backslidden also have their minds set on the things of the Spirit of God because He is in their minds. In the midst of their backslidden condition, they are constantly hounded about their sin by the Spirit of God. Even when choosing to do wrong, they have to do so over the voice of the Spirit who keeps reminding them about obedience to God, confronting them about the will of God, and urging them back to the ways of God. Though the backslider is long negligent or resistant to the things of the Spirit, his mind is

never void of the voice of the Spirit. To some degree then, even those who are backslidden are "spiritually minded" because they "have their minds set on what the Spirit desires." That's why, unlike the apostates, backsliders eventually return to faithfulness.

My wife, Caffy, and I have a close friend who was backslidden for two years. She moved, changed jobs, and was so secretive that we couldn't find her. Reverting to her pre-conversion days, she twice lived with men for months at a time and frequented bars. Mercifully, God granted her repentance and drew her back to Himself and faithful Christian living. After hearing me express the things in the previous paragraph she told me, "That's absolutely true. The whole time I was away God was convicting me that I was sinning. I couldn't get Him out of my thoughts. He was always bringing Bible verses to my mind. I kept trying to do what I thought would make me happy, but I was miserable. I was even more miserable than when I did these things before I became a Christian because now the voice of God was in my mind."

How your mind is set refers to what you think about. What your mind is set on is especially revealed in the things you think about when your mind is in neutral, i.e., when you daydream, when you aren't forced to think about something else. For example, the kinds of things you most often think about when you are driving, when you're about to fall asleep, when you awaken in the night and lie sleepless, when you are gazing out the window of the car, train, or plane, or when you are waiting, say, in line at a store, reflects your mind set.

What you have your mind set on also refers to the kinds of things you are most interested in, the things that excite you most, the things you feel most deeply about, and the things you enjoy discussing and pursuing more than anything else.

The minds of non-Christians, according to verse five, are "set on what that [sinful] nature desires." We tend to think only of bodily or sexual sins when we hear about "the sinful nature," but it's much broader than that. In general it means to be consumed with earthly things rather than, by contrast, the things of the Spirit of God.

But even more broadly, to think of *anything* without ever thinking of its relationship to God is to think "according to the sinful nature." That's why people can commonly consider some of the noblest things on earth and still not be "spiritually minded." Thus they can be involved in the most beneficial things to humanity and yet be setting their minds totally on the sinful nature.

To summarize, setting your mind on the things of the sinful nature means that in *whatever* you think about or do, God is not in the center of it. Those who characteristically think like that have not been born into the family of God.

Christians, on the other hand, simply think differently. They are spiritually minded. Spiritual mindedness is usually one of the easiest and most reliable evidences of salvation to see within yourself. Many non-Christians appear to have some of the

outward marks of a Christian. They may be honest with money, love their families, work faithfully, treat people kindly, help others, etc. Despite all these things, they may be Muslims, atheists, Mormons, or simply uninterested in actively pursuing the things of God through the Bible and church. How can you tell if there really is a difference between your soul and theirs, between your relationship with God and theirs, and between your eternal destiny and theirs? How do you know whether the Holy Spirit lives within you or you've deceived yourself? *The distinguishing mark between true believers who have the Spirit of God and all unregenerate people, according to Romans 8:5, is the set of the mind-what you think about.*

Do your thoughts steadily reflect the constant presence of God's Spirit? Are you spiritually minded? My understanding of what this means has been deepened by what an Englishman named John Owen wrote on Romans 8:5 over 300 years ago.¹ He points out that . . .

YOU ARE SPIRITUALLY MINDED WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE THINGS OF GOD SPONTANEOUSLY AND WITHOUT EXTERNAL CAUSES

Everyone thinks about God and the things of God sometime, but it is vital to discover the source of those thoughts. Unlike the unconverted, the spiritually minded think about the Lord and spiritual things *spontaneously*.

Jesus said in John 4:14, "whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." When the Holy Spirit is within you, He causes thoughts of God and spiritual things to spring up within you as spontaneously as an artesian well.

Not long ago I saw a TV version of a mystery about the famous fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes. In this adventure, a woman had disappeared and a Mr. Green who loved her was deeply upset. Holmes believed she had been kidnapped by a known murderer, but didn't know where to find her. As the sleuth contemplates his next move, Green's fears get the best of him.

Holmes says to him, "Calm yourself! Stop thinking of her possible condition."

Green snaps back, "Do you think I *want* to think about it, Mr. Holmes? Such thoughts come *unbidden*!"

His response illustrates what spiritual mindedness means in Romans 8:5. Green thought about her spontaneously and did so because he loved her. His mind was set on her. And we all understand that. We think about what our minds are set on. If your mind is set on your work, you often think about it. If your mind is set on your children, you frequently think about them. And when your mind is "set on what the Spirit desires," you often *spontaneously* think about spiritual things. Even when you aren't trying to meditate on God or the Bible, thoughts related to Him spontaneously come into your mind.

Everyone thinks about God or the things of God sometimes. An unspiritually minded person hearing the preaching of the Word of God may have thoughts of God, but the source is external. Such thoughts come down like rain upon them, not up like a spring from within them.

Perhaps something on the radio or TV puts a thought of God into their head. Or they may have brief Godward thoughts when a child or friend surfaces a question about God or the Bible, or when they see a Christian acting on his faith. Such thoughts may be commonplace, but are not spontaneous.

Maybe some calamity or injury or illness or family situation makes them think about God or Judgment or eternity. Some need may arise which prompts them turn to God and pray. But all their thoughts of God are from *external* causes. With a Christian such thoughts come *unbidden*.

Someone may be thinking, "You just don't understand my situation. I'm so busy all day long that I rarely have time to think about God or spiritual things."

That's the point. It doesn't matter how busy you are, a Christian can't help but think of God spontaneously throughout the day. It's not you who consciously decides to take your mind off the work before you and focuses it on spiritual things (although sometimes that happens). Just as you don't have to consciously think to breathe, so you don't have to consciously bring up thoughts of God. Regardless of what your day is like, thoughts of God and the things of God will come because the Holy Spirit who lives deep within in every Christian effervesces them into your mind.

YOU ARE SPIRITUALLY MINDED WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE THINGS OF GOD MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE

There is no greater evidence of conversion than a change in the whole direction of your thinking. To think wrongly and very little about God and the things of God all your life, and then to begin thinking about spiritual things more than anything else is solid proof of the work of God's grace.

When you are spiritually minded, your mind not only thinks of spiritual things spontaneously, but also *abundantly*. Spiritual thoughts are produced in the mind of a Christian like leaves on a tree. Compare a tree's leaves to a believer's spiritual thoughts, and its fruit to his spiritual deeds. There are always more leaves than fruit. That is not to minimize the importance of spiritual fruit, because fruit is also an indispensable evidence of salvation (see chapter five). And even though the deeds of spiritual fruit may be more lasting, the leaves of spiritual thoughts are more numerous.

The writer of Psalm 119 testified to his daily abundance of spontaneous spiritual thoughts. In verse 97 he exclaimed, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." That doesn't mean he always had a scroll in his hand. It means he always had the Word of God bubbling up in his mind.

In verse 164 he declared, "Seven times a day I praise you." The Psalmist was not called to prayer at stated times like a Muslim. He is telling us that throughout his day, the desire to praise God burst into his thinking.

Before coming to Christ, you may have thought of school, work, sex, your children, getting things, your hobby, TV, sports, finances, or any number of things more than you thought of God and spiritual things. But now Christ is no longer just a part of your life, He is your life (Colossians 3:4). And even though you may still think of all these things often, you don't think of any of them more than you do spiritual things. And when you do think about them, frequently you think about how God relates to them.

When you are spiritually minded, you think about the things of God more than anything else because you think about almost everything from a spiritual perspective. When you think about your job, you wonder, "If I did things this way, would it be a good witness? . . . Lord, please help me make the right decision. . . . How does the Bible speak to this situation?"

Your parental thoughts become Godward thoughts when you're spiritually minded. You're always thinking of how to raise your children Christianly. While disciplining your child you think, "Lord, forgive me if I am doing this in anger. . . . Please help me discipline my child always in a biblical way. . . . Father, I don't want to exasperate my child; I really want to show Your love."

When you think of money, sports, or even sex, you soon wonder what God's perspective is on the matter, or even what He is thinking about your thoughts.

Natural disasters prompt you to think the Judgment. Tramping through the leaves on a glorious fall day causes you to think of the creativity and glory of God. When your breath is taken by a beautiful sunset you try to imagine Heaven. You can hardly look at billowing clouds in a blue sky without thinking of Christ's return. When you are spiritually minded, everything reminds you of something related to God.

Most conclusive of all, if you are spiritually minded, even when you sin you think of God! Sometimes the Christian will immerse himself in thought about sinful things for long periods. The Bible says that while we are in this world, even the best Christians will still think about sinful matters and do sinful deeds. But the Spirit often warns you that what you are thinking or tempted to do is against God and His Word. Frequently your conscience burns *even in the midst of the sinful act* with the awareness that you are breaking the Law of God and displeasing Him. Immediately afterward you know you have grieved the Holy Spirit and you regret what you've done. Despite your shame, you come to a God whom you know to be holy, confess your sin and ask His forgiveness.

Why would anyone think of God at the moment they are sinning against Him? Why would anyone, with the shame of sin freshly smeared over his face, want to turn at once to a holy God? It's unnatural! Ah, there's the explanation. Christians do not think "naturally." They think spiritually, they are spiritually minded. And they do so only

because the Holy Spirit within them is always pushing thoughts of God to the forefront of their thinking.

No matter which way you turn a compass, its needle will soon point northward. Similarly, no matter what a Christian thinks about, his mind soon looks Godward. That's spiritual mindedness.

YOU ARE SPIRITUALLY MINDED WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE THINGS OF GOD WITH MORE DELIGHT AND ENJOYMENT THAN ANYTHING ELSE

Scientists say that thousands of thoughts flash into our minds daily. Which types do you most love to linger upon? Those who are spiritually minded typically find more joy in thoughts of God and the things of God than anything else.

This doesn't mean that Christians shouldn't overflow with love for their children, or feel deeply stirred by a stunning spectacle in nature, or be so excited over a ballgame that they yell and jump around. But it does mean that there is a quality of joy and delight in God and the things of God which transcends all other things.

With the spiritually minded, there are times of public and private enjoyment of God that overwhelm them with a sense that this was what they were made for. The great Westminster Catechism opens with this question: "What is the chief end of man?" In other words, "What were we made for?" And the unforgettable answer is, "To love God and to enjoy Him forever." The spiritually minded understand that, for they both love and enjoy God more than anyone or anything else. They know that God is not Someone merely to be obeyed, but to be loved and enjoyed.

Do you *enjoy* thinking about God? Those who are not spiritually minded don't delight in thoughts of God. They can't. Verse six says their "sinful mind is hostile to God." They always have one of three options. Either they are so terrified of Him that they can't think of Him, or they feel so guilty because of their sin that they can't long think of Him, or they choose the more common response, which is to construct wrong views of Him and believe in a God who conforms to their own desires.

So they invent for themselves a God who is *only* a God of love, winks at sin, and will make exceptions in their case at the Judgment. They never imagine a God who is perfectly Holy and just. They can't conceive of a God who created Hell. They never think of a God who expects absolute obedience and sacrifice. They never envision God requiring anything of them they don't want to do. They never consider a God who is anything unpleasant to their way of thinking or living. They would have God be anything but what He really is and reveals Himself fully to be in the Bible.

Not so with the spiritually minded. They love God as He really is. Even things about God which are often repulsive to the natural human mind become delightful to the mind set on the things of the Spirit.

A famous passage from the pen of Jonathan Edwards in the 1700's shows how one's view of God changes after conversion. Specifically he reveals how an old hatred for a difficult attribute of God melted into a delight in Him. America's greatest native theologian wrote,

From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty in choosing whom He would to eternal life, and rejecting Him whom He pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastinglly tormented in Hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. But I have often, since that first conviction, had quite another kind of sense of God's sovereignty than I had then. I have often since had not only a conviction, but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so.²

Do you love God for who He is? Do you delight in all He has revealed about Himself? Do you enjoy even the mysterious parts of God's character so much that you can never get enough of knowing Him? Do thoughts of Heaven, and of seeing God there in His holiness and glory sometimes ravish your heart, mind and soul? Then your mind is "set on what the Spirit desires."

Conversely, . . .

YOU ARE NOT SPIRITUALLY MINDED IF "GOD IS NOT IN ALL YOUR THOUGHTS"

Psalm 10 was written by David and often subtitled, "A Prayer for the Overthrow of the Wicked." Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David describes a wicked person this way in verse four, "God is not in all his thoughts" (KJV).

We don't use the word "wicked" very much anymore. To the ears of our culture, describing someone as wicked sounds outdated at best, arrogant at worst. But the Bible uses it to describe all those who have not come in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ. And it says that the distinctive characteristic of the wicked is that he is not spiritually minded. "God is not in all his thoughts."

Those who aren't spiritually minded think of many things, but they rarely think of God, particularly as He's revealed Himself in Scripture. They never consider God in their plans. They don't consult God for His will. They never wonder if their lives please and honor Him. If somehow their thoughts were projected onto a tiny TV screen in their forehead, you would *rarely* see an earnest thought about God, and those you would see generally would come from external sources. He may be in their minds occasionally, but God is not in *all* their thoughts.

The Godly Puritan thinker, John Owen, observed in "The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded," that there are degrees of not having God in all one's thoughts.

Some, he says, do not because they do not believe God exists. They are the most extreme form of those who do not have God in all their thoughts—atheists. They have their eyes tightly shut to God and the things of God.

However, almost everyone does believe God exists. But of this overwhelming majority, there are many who "claim to know God," but as Titus 1:16 puts it, "by their actions they deny him." Most of them would vehemently affirm that they believe in God, yet they think and live as though God doesn't exist. But they could not have God in all their thoughts and persist lifelong in acting as they do. So despite their words, those in this second group prove by their deeds that "God is not in all *their* thoughts."

Still others *think* they are spiritually minded, but God is in relatively few of their thoughts because "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in" (Mark 4:19). These folks may know much about the Bible and do many good works both inside and outside the church. They may enjoy the forms of worship because their conscience eases and coming to church just makes them "feel better." Because in these ways they have responded to the Word of God and are more familiar with spiritual matters than most people, when they hear about being spiritually minded they assume that they are. But in reality they think more spontaneously, predominantly, and joyfully about "worries, . . . and wealth, and . . . desires for other things" than the things of God. In truth, God is not in all *their* thoughts.

The thoughts of non-Christians and Christians are fundamentally different. "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that desires," and so "God is not in all [their] thoughts." The spiritually minded "have their minds set on what the Spirit desires," and as a result they think of God spontaneously, abundantly, and with more delight than anything else.

MORE APPLICATION

Are you spiritually minded? Is God a magnet for your mind? Are you finding thoughts about spiritual things simply irrepressible? Do you often become delightfully absorbed in thinking about Jesus Christ, Heaven, the Bible, or other things of God? Take heart! That's the way a Christian thinks.

God will change the thinking of all who come to Jesus Christ. If God is not in all your thoughts, He can be. But the Holy Spirit alone can put Him there. Will you submit your mind to Him? Will you repent of "living according to the sinful nature" and of having your mind "set on what that nature desires"? Will you trust Christ to bring you to God and His transforming power? If so, you will experience the promise God made to all who come to Him through Christ: "I will put my laws in their minds" (Hebrews 8:10).

In 1987, Minnesota Twins' superstar centerfielder, Kirby Puckett, lived my childhood fantasy of baseball glory. He was a hero who led his team to the championship in the last game of the World Series. A few weeks later, I heard a radio interview with Greg Gagne, the Twins' shortstop. Gagne was asked to describe the scene in the victorious

clubhouse after the dramatic victory. He recounted the shouting, the jubilant hugging and dancing, the pouring of champagne over each other's heads, etc. But what he remembered most was an eye-snagging glance at a surprisingly silent Puckett only about ten minutes into the celebration. Gagne picked his way through the players and media to the Series star, sitting conspicuously quiet at his locker, and explored. "If this is all there is to it," Puckett lamented, "life is pretty empty."

Ultimately every fantasy is empty except great thoughts of God and the things which are eternal. Fantasy is defined first as "imagination, especially when extravagant and unrestrained." God is so great and glorious that no one can imagine, even in their most extravagant and unrestrained thinking, how fantastic the *reality* will be to see Him and live with Him forever in Heaven. But how the spiritually minded delight in trying!

1 John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 7, (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850-53; reprint ed., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), pages 262-497.

2 Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), page 103.

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