

Evil Thinking

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of having a charitable state of mind, which thinks no evil, and provides evidences of both evil thinking and a charitable state of mind.

Scripture: Matthew 7:1, 1 Corinthians 13:5, Philippians 4:8

Topics: "Charity", "Mindset Transformation"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the concept of 'Evil Thinking' in his sermon, emphasizing that true charity, or love, does not harbor evil thoughts about others. He explains that thinking evil includes forming unjust opinions, being envious, suspicious, or malicious, and dwelling on the faults of others. Finney highlights that a charitable mind is characterized by kindness, a lack of revenge, and a tendency to see the good in others, while evil thinking leads to unhappiness and discontent. He warns that evil thinkers not only harm themselves but also negatively impact their families and communities. Ultimately, he calls for a transformation of the mind to align with the principles of love and charity as taught in Scripture.

Transcript

Charity thinketh no evil. --1 Cor. 13:5

The context in which these words stand is doubtless familiar to many of you; but it may not be amiss for me to read it. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

You observe that I have selected for my text but one of the many attributes of charity;--namely, that she "thinketh no evil."

In considering this attribute more extensively, I propose,

I. TO INQUIRE WHAT IT IS TO THINK EVIL IN THE SENSE OF THE TEXT;

II. TO SHOW THAT IN THIS SENSE CHARITY THINKETH NO EVIL;

III. TO GIVE SOME OF THE EVIDENCES OF EVIL THINKING;

IV. TO ADDUCE SOME EVIDENCES OF THAT CHARITABLE STATE OF MIND WHICH THINKETH NO EVIL.

I. 1. Thinking evil in the sense of the text includes thinking unjustly. Forming unjust opinions of others, and giving indulgence to feelings in correspondence with our unjust opinions is certainly evil thinking.

2. So is thinking enviously. When envy governs our opinions of others, we are guilty of evil thinking.

So of suspicious thinking. It is another modification of thinking evil. When we are suspicious of others' motives, we think evil of them.

The same is true of all malicious thinking. Thoughts of malice are of course evil.

Nor can we say less of revengeful thoughts. They are evil and only evil, continually. Unkind and ill-natured thoughts partake of the same general character. None can doubt that all such thoughts are intrinsically evil, and not good.

Again, dwelling upon others' faults, real or imputed, is evil-thinking. Even if those faults are real, it is not wise to dwell upon them, certainly not unless we can answer the ends of benevolence by so doing. If we can devise means to correct them, so much thinking as may be necessary for this purpose may be good; but thinking of others' faults for any other than a good object is certain to work evil.

What then shall we say of brooding over those assumed faults of others which are not real but only imputed? Perhaps they owe all their apparent evil to the tinge they get from your morbid imagination, or your jealous heart. In such a case what can be worse than the fermentation of such a mind as yours? It not only wrongs others, but terribly corrodes your own mind. There can be no peace to him who indulges such evil-thinking.

Thinking over personal injuries, whether real or imaginary, is evil. In such a world as this it will often happen that men are really wronged. But even then why should they double and treble the evil resulting to themselves by dwelling upon it, poring over it, talking about it till they get every sensibility of their being on fire? What is the use? None at all. He only spoils his own peace, and the peace of as many others as he can bring under his poisonous influence. Such thinking is surely a great evil.

Worse still if the supposed injury is only imaginary. Then wrong is done to the assumed authors, besides all the mischief to the self-tormenting sufferer who perhaps is himself the only cause of all the evil, resulting first to himself, next to his friends, and last but not least, to the man wrongfully accused of the imaginary injustice. Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth! Is not all thinking which kindles up such fires, "evil?"

II. Charity thinketh no evil.

The word here rendered charity means love. This is its legitimate meaning, and in other passages in the Bible it is usually rendered love. It refers especially to love as the action of a renewed heart--to holy love, and not to any form of the social or domestic instincts. Of this holy love, it is said that it "thinketh no evil." This is popular and not strictly metaphysical language; for in strict phraseology, charity does not think at

all; nothing can think except a mind. The meaning therefore is that a charitable mind thinketh no evil. This is plain, and very true.

It is not however implied that charitable men are blind to facts, or that they are incapable of thinking of things as they are. God's mind is all love--supremely under the control of benevolence; and yet He sees evil none the less; thinks of it and estimates its real nature none the less accurately. So of the human mind under the control of love.

Again, charitable minds may misjudge, but cannot really think or do any evil, subjectively considered. In a charitable state they can not consent to say or do anything wrong. For example, charity can not be subjectively unjust. It can never intend injustice. It will always form its judgments honestly, according to its best light. It may form opinions objectively wrong, that is, wrong as to fact--wrong in themselves considered; yet even in forming these it will be subjectively right because under the control of love. For the same reason charity can not be envious or suspicious. There will be the greatest simplicity in such a mind. Conscious of its own uprightness, it will not be looking out for hypocrisy in others. It is remarkable how simple-hearted the charitable mind will always be; so truthful, so upright;--it has no thought of suspecting others, for it seems a stranger to the idea of wrong. But the uncharitable mind is the reverse of this. It is an old adage--"Set a rogue to catch a rogue." He seems to have the art of suspecting, and knows a world of things about the ways and works and signs of the rogue that no honest man should be expected to know.

When you see a man very suspicious, you may usually suspect him. If he is a hypocrite he will suspect others of being hypocrites, for he is very familiar with that state of mind. If he is a liar, a thief or a counterfeiter, it will be easy for him to suspect others of some equally scandalous form of vice.

But on the other hand, the charitable mind is eminently simple-hearted and unsuspecting.

Again, charity cannot be revengeful. It naturally abhors revengeful thoughts. Suppose the charitable man has been injured:--what then? Shall he study revenge? No. He "suffereth long and is kind." It is in his nature to be not revengeful, but kind. Who does not know this? He is inclined to put the best possible construction upon the acts and the motives of others. You do not find him brooding over all the apparent wrong he sees, and magnifying it in his imagination. For example, think of the conduct of parents who really love their children. You do not see them dwell exclusively upon their children's faults, to the entire neglect of their excellencies. Love never does that. Nor can candor and honesty do it. What should you think of a man who should get a telescope of sufficient power to reveal to him one black spot on the sun's disc, and who then gazes at this till it fills his whole vision, and the whole face of the sun seems only black and dark as midnight? You would think him no better than crazy. His mind labors under a hallucination, and does not by any means see things as they are. So of men who gaze at their neighbors' faults till their own minds become so green as to give a greenish hue to every thing they see. The mind seems in some peculiar circumstances to have a wonderful power of unconsciously imparting its own moral complexion to the character it contemplates. Hence a very charitable mind often puts upon the conduct of others a more charitable construction than strict truth will sustain; and much more often on the other hand does an uncharitable mind impart its own dark and foul type to the character which it pretends to delineate.

That is always an ill-natured state of mind which loves to dwell upon others' faults where no interests of benevolence demand it. Think of a husband who is for ever poring over the faults of his wife and has no heart to notice her excellencies. He has only evil and not good to say of her, and the more of evil he finds to think of and talk about, the more his mind is fed and feasted. Is not he a monster? Do you believe that

he has the heart of a man within him? Of one thing you may be very sure; he has none of that charity which "thinketh no evil." The charitable husband would be grieved to notice her faults, and certainly would never speak of them unless compelled by the sternest necessity.

The same principle is often developed in the hearing of sermons. Some men notice only the faults they can find; and if a sermon has ninety-nine good qualities and but one of a questionable character, the latter is the only thing thought of, and no pains are spared to discuss and display its demerits. Of course such hearers are only cursed, never benefited, by hearing sermons; no sermon can ever be good enough to bless their souls. They will lose all the good by watching for anticipated and desired evil. Of course you would not say that such hearers are in a charitable state of mind.

A charitable man cannot dwell upon injuries received. It grieves him to think of them, and he will of choice banish them entirely from his mind unless some important interests or rights are so involved as to demand his attention to them. He finds more pleasure in dwelling upon the good received than upon the evil.

III. Some evidences of evil thinking next demand our attention.

Some things under this head have already been anticipated. Hence I shall be the more brief now.

Evil speaking of course evinces a state of evil thinking; for "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."

Evil treatment makes the same development. Some men don't like to speak out all they think, but they can not easily prevent its working itself out in their actions. Their looks and their whole demeanor will show it. Perhaps they refuse to exchange the common tokens of civility, and will not even shake hands--their state of mind is so uncharitable.

A disposition to find fault with others is an evidence of evil thinking. How remarkable that some men say almost nothing else but in the way of fault-finding. If they attempt to speak or pray, fault-finding is uppermost. If they speak in a church meeting, you can anticipate the strain of their remarks--always some form of fault-finding. It seems as if the man was forever brooding over the faults of his brethren. He sees no bright spots ever in any brother or in any church. His temper is morose and crabbed;--he is a natural-born Arab;--his hand is against every man and every mans' hand against him. You may always know that his bosom is the prey of perpetual evil thinking.

A disposition to complain of the ill-treatment received from others is another evidence. Fall into conversation with him where you will, he is complaining of having been injured. Somebody has injured him, and it engrosses his mind to the exclusion of almost every thing else. This man is given to evil thinking.

Another evidence of evil thinking is a disposition to complain of being neglected. Some persons have a world of trouble on this score--alas, they are always overlooked; nobody cares as much for them as in their humble opinion they deserve. This state of mind becomes a source of great uneasiness. It proves that they are given to evil thinking.

Others show their evil thinking by a disposition to question the purity of other's motives. You see some people who can scarcely ever believe that their neighbors and acquaintance are really what they profess to be. It seems most natural to them to assume that every body besides themselves is dishonest. It may happen that all appears right in their neighbor's conduct. "Well," in such a case they will say--"that will

do--if--IF he is honest in it." Now you may know without an if that such men are evil thinkers. Their very souls are putrid with jealousy and suspicion. They can not even put a good construction upon what appears unexceptionable.

The same is true substantially of those who are always disposed to question the piety of others. A man may do some things which are entirely wrong, and yet his general character may be so good that you have no sufficient reason to question his piety. In such a case let charity prevail.

You sometimes see the evidence of evil thinking in a slowness to credit professions of repentance and sincerity. Sometimes there may be good reasons for being slow in this matter. I speak of cases where the backwardness is not really warranted by anything in the individual's character, or in the present circumstances.

Evidence of evil thinking is seen sometimes in a readiness to question the truthfulness of others. On this point it should be considered that men may state what is really false, and yet be in heart entirely truthful. They may misapprehend the real state of the facts, may truthfully state the case as they understand it. I have heard during my life thousands of men state things which I knew to be false; yet I did not for this reason feel authorized to say they lied. To assume that they lie is uncharitable--so long as it may be the case that they misapprehend the facts. Memory is sometimes at fault, and sometimes the man may be in real fault for lack of care to inform himself of the certainty of what he affirms; but charity forbids us to put any man down a liar till we are well assured that he affirms for truth what he knows to be false.

The disposition to impute lying to a man on the slightest occasion should be reprobated as in the highest degree uncharitable. Often the mere fact of a man's stating what is not true affords scarcely the shadow of evidence that he lies. We must not believe the man lies unless the circumstances utterly forbid the charitable conclusion.

A readiness to hear evil is another indication of a state of mind which thinks evil. Sometimes persons will not allow themselves to originate evil reports, but will take them up, believe and circulate them without scruple. It is remarkable that the Bible places these two classes--the originator and the receiver of evil reports--on the same footing, for it promises an abiding place in God's holy will to him "that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbor, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor." Whoever therefore takes up a reproach against his neighbor, saying, "Aha, aha, so would we have it"--may be known as one that "thinketh evil."

Moreover, when men manifest a readiness not only to hear but to believe evil reports of others, you may know they are evil thinkers.

An unhappy state of mind is often an evidence, for it is a development of thinking evil. From the very laws of mind, such persons are always unhappy. You never see persons of evil thinking habits whose countenances shine with the joy of their hearts. Show me an uncharitable man, and I will show you an unhappy man.

Men who are discontented with their present position are wholly given to evil thinking. Mark those men who cannot bear the neighborhood they live in; those students here who are forever uneasy, rasped, vexed, discontented--who want to get away, and are forever restive for some change; mark them I say; for if you could know the bottom of their hearts, you would find evil thinking there. They are brooding over the dark features of others' character and conduct, and practically forget that there are many good things in

almost all men and all situations. Uncharitableness breeds misery and discontent.

A general want of confidence in others betrays a heart of evil thinking. You see some who seem to have lost confidence in every body. The Psalmist once said in his haste "all men are liars." If you read that psalm and mark his state of mind you will see that he seemed not to know whom to trust. He didn't believe any body is pious. He has no confidence in any man. The trouble lies--at least in part with himself; his heart is thinking evil continually.

Another evidence is the absence of pain in view of any exhibition of uncharitableness. For example, if you hear persons speak uncharitably and it does not give you pain, you have great reason to suspect yourself of an uncharitable mind. If your own mind were deeply imbued with love, you could not fail of being shocked whenever you hear uncharitable speaking.

An indisposition to pray for others is yet another evidence. I do not now allude to cases where Christians have no ill feelings at all towards others, and yet for reasons to themselves unknown seem to gain no access to God in prayer for them; but I allude to cases in which men have such a state of uncomfortable feeling towards certain persons that they feel no spirit to pray for them. Such a sign is ominous.

Finally, evil thinkers may be known by their not rejoicing at the prosperity of others, and not mourning in their adversity. Whoever finds this to be the case with himself may know that he has an uncharitable mind.

IV. The evidences of a charitable state of mind, which thinketh no evil, are the very opposite of those which I have just been adducing. Where men do not speak evil of others, but speak well, where their treatment of others is benevolent and kind; where instead of fault-finding, you see a disposition to vindicate, apologize for, and commend; where there is no apparent love of dwelling upon others' faults, but a delight in dwelling upon their virtues; in all such cases you see evidences of a charitable spirit.

The charitable man is not morose, but cheerful; wishes no man evil but every man well; if ill-treated, does not complain, nor is disposed to dwell upon it; don't know as he has any enemies,--certainly does not feel as if he had; for although he may know the fact as Christ did in his own case, yet like Christ it is in his heart to say--"Father, forgive for they know not what they do." He loves to overlook injuries, and is by no means disposed to dwell upon them.

Some men always think they are persecuted and wronged--suppose everybody is their enemy; while others seem never to dream of any such thing. You hear them remark--such a man thinks ill of me, but he is misinformed; he doesn't mean any wrong. You have seen such persons; their state of mind is so sweet that they don't seem to think any body can do them any harm. In a charitable state of mind, it is very natural that they should take this view. They manifest no disposition to regard themselves as neglected by others. A pastor who visits his people occasionally, has often a good opportunity to notice the great difference which obtains among persons in this respect. I call on one family, and in the course of our conversations I observe, "It is a long time since I have seen your family at your own home." "Yes," the reply is, "I thought my pastor had neglected me. I began to think he never would visit us again."

I call on another family; I remark to them that it seems a long time since I have seen them; but they have not a word to say about being neglected; no they say--"We know you have a great deal to do--so much to do that we could not expect you to turn aside from your urgent and more important duties, to see us; we are all exceedingly glad to see you--but really we never could blame you if you should not call upon us." Sometimes such a family will go much farther in excusing me than I can in excusing myself, so that I have

often felt ashamed and condemned by their apologies for me. Now all this is natural for a charitable mind; but if the mind is in an uncharitable state, every thing is horribly distorted.

Again, those whose minds are charitable have no disposition to question the purity of others' motives. They love to put the best admissible construction upon every man's conduct. Herein is fulfilled that truthful and beautiful sentiment--"Charity shall cover a multitude of sins."

REMARKS.

1. Many think evil who do not speak it. Often such persons take great credit to themselves for not speaking evil, when really they are thinking a great deal of evil. The reason they do not speak evil is not because their hearts are full of love and good will; but perhaps because they have not a good opportunity, or because some motives of policy restrain them. It is a great mistake to be proud of such virtue.

2. Many forget that charity thinketh no evil. It seems to escape their minds that the law of love reaches to the heart and to the most secret thoughts.

3. Evil thinkers are for the time being impenitent. Theirs is not a religious state of mind. This is most manifest, for nothing can be religious which is not charitable. The uncharitable man, remaining such, can have nothing really good about him.

4. This state of mind is exceedingly deceptive. The uncharitable man dwells so much and so intensely upon the faults of others, and gets so much excited by his own thinking and talking on the subject, that he makes himself think that he ought to be uncharitable. Oh, he has been so egregiously wronged; he would forfeit all self-respect if he did not resent it and manifest his indignation. Those fearful wrongs done himself--how they fill the whole field of his vision, and seem to be the greatest wrongs that ever fell to the hard lot of any mortal. And can it be wrong for him to dwell upon them and condemn their author?

5. Those who sympathize with each other in this state of mind can see neither their own nor each other's faults. All being alike in an uncharitable state of mind, they are unfit to judge correctly of the moral quality of their own, or of each others' moral exercises. The same causes which blind the uncharitable man to his own sins, blind him also to the sins of his neighbor, provided those sins sustain and vindicate his own. Hence where a church falls into an uncharitable state of mind, there is the less hope of any remedy originating from themselves. Hand joins in hand, and heart sustains heart in defense of uncharitableness. Their moral state becomes dark indeed, and the prospect of any improvement is gloomy.

6. The manifestations of this state of evil thinking are often odious and shocking. Sometimes men make these manifestations without being themselves aware of it. I recollect the case of a minister who once spent some time at our house. After he had gone, one of the children said, "Don't you think Mr. _____, has a bad spirit?" "Why do you ask that question?" "Because he is finding fault with every body." If ever I see him again, I mean to tell him what impression his conversation made on my children. I have warned him against this practice of evil-speaking, and I can not acquit my conscience without rebuking him again.

It is astonishing that a man can be so blind as not to see such things in himself. But there are men who will manifest a spirit which will shock even a child, and yet be quite unconscious of being in a bad state of mind.

7. Our own blindness and self-conceit make us think ourselves abused when we are not. Hence a man may regard the treatment he received from others as wholly wrong, when it is really occasioned by his

own position and circumstances. If this man is honest and candid, and should come to see things as they are, he would cry out--"I certainly have deserved a thousand times more than I have received. I once thought myself wronged, but I have changed my views. I now see that the wrong was chiefly and perhaps wholly on my side." I have known cases of this sort. Men are sometimes so blind to their faults, that they cannot bear to have others say of them what is most just. It is hence common for men to attribute to others a bad spirit, when if they saw things as they are, they would see that themselves are chiefly in fault.

8. Just apprehensions of ourselves would often remove the temptation to think hard of others. When you come to estimate yourself rightly, you no longer wonder that men should think evil of you. So I have found it in my own case. Hence, when men feel themselves tried, they would do well to say--Is there not a cause? This is always wise; for it may be that a candid self-scrutiny will put the whole matter in a new light before our own minds. It certainly can do no harm for us to ask--Now really, am I not full as bad as others think me to be? In very many cases you will find by honest searching of yourself, that there lies the cause!

When persons find themselves tempted to take a wrong view of a matter, instead of brooding over the wrong, they should ask--What does God intend by this in his providence? Lord, search me--let him say--Lord search me, try me, and know my thoughts, and let me see whether these people are not thy rod. As Shimei cursed David, and David said--"Let him curse; the Lord hath bidden him"; so we should look upon those who speak evil of us, when we are ourselves conscious of having occasioned it. In such a case what have we to do that we should retaliate? God has designed it for our good, and it becomes us to receive it from his hand. Let us then inquire--May there not be some truth in these charges or these insinuations? Is it not for some good reason that the Lord has permitted the tongue of evil men to run loose against me? What is the lesson which God in his providence would teach me by these things?

Right over against this is the other course--"I do well to resist and repel; somebody has spoken evil of me, and I am a grievously abused man." Now shall I take this course under reproach? No. I would as soon take arsenic. Shall I cry out--"Oh, I have been abused--My God, take my part, for I am greatly abused"? No; let me rather say--O, my God, what wouldst thou teach me? Wouldst thou have me pray for my enemy? Then let me do it. If a man has smitten out my right eye, let me first inquire what God means by permitting such an event. And moreover, let me also inquire, not only what provocations they actually have, but what they may think they have. How often have I wished that I could see myself through other people's eyes! I should love to place myself in their position, and ask how things look from their stand-point of observation. Perhaps they are so situated as to know only the evil things of my character and conduct. It was so even of Jesus Christ. Those who knew Him only through the wicked Scribes and Pharisees would of course hear no good of Him, and much evil--not indeed, in his case, evil that He had ever done, but evil that they alleged against Him.

9. Evil-thinkers are self-tormentors. This has been intimated before. A man who is continually brooding over the real or supposed faults of others, the injuries he has received, and the evil that others have done, is in any other than a desirable state of mind. He renders himself completely wretched, and from the very nature of mind can not be otherwise. We see some men in almost every community who seem to be always unhappy, discontented. They are complainers, murmurers, fault-finders, and are a source of vexation to themselves, greatly to be pitied, and greatly to be blamed.

10. Again, evil-thinkers are a curse to their families. If either fathers or mothers allow themselves to think evil, they almost of course become censorious and fill the minds of their children and all over whom they have influence with prejudices against others. They so often speak of the faults, real or supposed, of their

neighbors, and oftentimes of their nearest friends that they create the impression in their family that these persons are not to be trusted. Consequently the minds of the family become filled with evil thoughts, evil-surmisings and suspicions which work like poison itself through the moral heart and constitution of the whole family. It is remarkable to witness the state of religion in a great many families, owing manifestly, at least in a great degree, to the fact that some influential member of the family, perhaps the father or the mother, is in the habit of indulging evil thoughts, and of manifesting these thoughts either in conversation or in conduct to the family. A man can in scarcely any way be a greater and more sure curse to his family than by such a course as this. See that man who is a father. He seldom speaks in such a way to his family as to give them confidence and charity towards any of his neighbors. He brings home little else to their ears than the evil reports of the neighborhood in respect to every body about him. His family soon become a band of evil-thinkers and evil-speakers, and slander is the order of the day.

11. An evil thinker is a curse to the church of which he is a member. He does much to undermine Christian confidence, create prejudices and alienate feelings. He is a root of bitterness, springing up and troubling the church. He is suspicious of his minister, has little confidence in his brethren. He broods over their faults, without seeing or commending their virtues. He finds fault. He makes his minister and his brother an offender for a word, and overlooks what is excellent and of good report. The sooner a church can get rid of such a member, the better for them.

12. An evil-thinker is a great stumbling-block to the world. What can be a greater stumbling-block to the world, than for a professor of religion to overlook all the virtues, and retail all the failings, real or supposed, of his brethren. How greatly do ungodly men feel themselves strengthened in their opposition to the church when they get the countenance and support of such a man as this.

Again, a charitable mind insures peace and quietness of spirit. An individual who thinketh no evil, but who "hopeth all things and endureth all things," has that peace and quietness of mind to which all other persons are strangers.

Again, we see how to account for the discontent and unhappiness of a great many persons in the church and out of the church. You mark one of these discontented spirits when and where you will, and will find that they are evil-thinkers, that they are ready to say, or have said in their hearts--"All men are liars."

Again, how important it is to control the thoughts aright; important to our peace, important to our own usefulness, important to our own salvation, important to the peace and usefulness and salvation of all around us. A great many people seem to lose sight of the great importance to themselves and others of obeying this precept of the apostle, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

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