

EPIPHANY 5
ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
LOGANVILLE, GA
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LEARNING TO THINK LIKE GOD
(Matthew 5:21-48)

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from God our Father and from Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

In Isaiah 55:8, the Lord has this striking and condemning message: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.* Why are things the way they are in the world? Why do people hurt and harm, speak harshly and deal wickedly with one another? Why do marriages end in divorce so often and why are children murdered before they even take their first breath of air? Why are the poor neglected and the wealthy ridiculed? There are all kinds of reasons “experts” will give for such things, but the real answer is precisely what the Lord said in Isaiah 55:8 – man doesn’t think like God and so man doesn’t walk in God’s ways.

This is not to say that man cannot think like God. God created man in His image, and part of that image is to be righteous in our thoughts. Sin has corrupted our thoughts so that we no longer think as God thinks and no longer do as God does. By a miracle of grace, though, man can learn to think like God again. This is what happens as the Holy Spirit works saving faith in the heart of the individual sinner. The Bible speaks of this faith in all kinds of ways, but one of the more prevalent ways it refers to our faith is “a renewing of our minds.” In other words, by faith we begin to think like God again.

We learn to think like God by hearing His Word, which is one of the reasons we gather together each week. Primarily, we come to receive God’s forgiveness through Christ, but as we do, we are learning, little by little, to think like God. Our text for today helps us to address this aspect of God’s Word. We read from Matthew 5:21-48:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' (22) But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (23) So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, (24) leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (25) Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. (26) Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (27) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' (28) But I say to you that everyone who

looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (29) If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. (30) And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (31) "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' (32) But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (33) "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' (34) But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, (35) or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. (36) And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. (37) Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil. (38) "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' (39) But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (40) And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. (41) And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (42) Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (43) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (44) But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45) so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (46) For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47) And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48) You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Our text holds before us some rather striking theology. Now, don't let that word scare you off. Sometimes, when a person hears a word like *theology*, he almost robotically goes into "blank stare mode." *Theology is for theologians.* The guy in the pew just wants to hear something practical and applicable to his life. Theology, though, is extremely practical and applicable. The word *theology* is a combination of two Greek words: *theos*, which means God, and *logos*, which means right thinking. Theology, then, is God's right thinking. As we learn theology, we learn to think rightly like God. Our text demonstrates how practical and applicable theology is to one's life so that we think like God.

As Jesus proceeds with His Sermon on the Mount, He speaks of rather practical and applicable matters – conflict resolution, marriage and fidelity, proper speech, justice, treatment of enemies. As He does, He presents some contrasting thoughts – how man thinks compared to how God thinks on such matters.

Since God created human beings with a conscience, everyone has some knowledge about right and wrong. Everyone, for example, knows it's wrong to murder, to commit adultery, to curse and swear, to hurt and harm one's neighbor, and so forth. That knowledge is a good and useful thing. The problem comes when we start "thinking about" such things. See, no one wants to think of himself as being the bad guy. Everyone desires to see himself as the good guy in every situation. Like the lawyer who asked Jesus who his neighbor was, we all want to justify ourselves. That's why the guy who is driving slowly is a nitwit and the guy driving faster is reckless. I'm driving at just the right speed; everyone should drive like I do. We think the same way in a host of other areas – I'm right, my spouse is wrong; others are gossiping, but I'm just telling it like it is; my neighbor is rude, but I'm just letting him know how it feels. Everyone else is wrong and I am right. That's how we think – it's how we all think because of the corruption of sin in us.

We think we are just in the things we do and say and the way we treat others. If he hurts me, I will hurt him back. If she doesn't do good to me, then I won't do good to her. If I do it in the privacy of my mind, there is no harm. We make the level of love of others the deciding factor of how much we will love them in return. All the while, we refuse to acknowledge that we are accountable first and foremost to our Creator God. We are supposed to be as perfect as He is perfect, not as perfect as others.

So Jesus tells us how perfect our God is. His perfection is not just in regards to a few actions that depend upon the kindness of others first, but His kindness comes from His essence. In other words, He doesn't just do what is right, but He is righteous in Himself. So He thinks righteously. He thinks from love not from self-justification, and in love He brings forth His thoughts into action on our behalf. This is what He requires of us – to think like He thinks, in love for Him and in love for one another, and then to bring forth works that proceed from loving thoughts.

Think about that! God only requires us to do what He Himself does and is. Because of sin in us, we fail in all that we do. Our failures aren't just a few actions here and there that might cause some harm. Our failures – our sins – proceed from hearts and minds that do not think like God thinks, but think from the perspective of self-justification.

This is ultimately the point that Jesus was driving home in this section of His sermon. He wasn't telling us that it's possible for us to live up to God's perfect standard if we try hard enough, though we should certainly try to do so. He was revealing how impossible it is for sinners such as us to live up to God's perfect thoughts and ways. Why does He want us to know this? Because unless we do, we could never begin to understand how perfectly God thinks from love. Unless we are aware of just how far short we have fallen from the glory of God, we could never begin to grasp the loving thoughts of God that lead Him to send His only-

begotten Son into the world to make atonement for our sin. We could never begin to comprehend the depth of love which originated in the mind of God that would lead Him to become one of us to save us from our rebellion against Him. Because He thinks from love, He desires that we see our sin so that we also see and trust in our sin-bearer, Jesus.

This is what it means to learn to think like God – it means that we acknowledge our utter inability to do what God has required of us, which is to be holy as He is holy, and then to trust that He continues to think from love toward us so that He sent a Savior to suffer and die on the cross as the payment for our loveless thoughts.

I want to go back to that passage from Isaiah 55 for just a moment. It's important that we hear it in its context, because our text is God's thoughts about His Law, and it may seem that Isaiah 55:8 is that, too – a Law passage that only condemns. But here it is in its context:

(6) "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; (7) let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (8) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. (9) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (10) "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, (11) so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (12) "For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

These are the thoughts of God – grace, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, kindness, and peace. These are the thoughts God is instilling in you through His Word, so that you think rightly about Him and that you think like Him. In other words, you are learning to think rightly about God when you hear Him forgive your sins, and you also learn to think like God so that you forgive those who sin against you. You learn to think rightly about God when you come boldly to the throne of grace confessing your sins and trusting in His promised grace, and you are learning to think like God so that when the temptation to commit those same sins comes upon you think like God and look for the way of escape. You are learning to think rightly about God when you hear that, for Jesus' sake, He is at peace with you, and as you begin thinking like God you yourself do not harbor grudges in your own heart against your spouse, your neighbor, and even your enemy. These are God's thoughts, and by faith in Jesus, you are learning to think like Him unto eternal life. AMEN!