

“Stinkin’ Thinkin’”

Romans 12:1-8

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts

First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest

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There’s a term you may have heard of that has gained popularity in therapeutic settings, including 12-step programs called “stinkin’ thinkin’.” Stinkin thinkin describes those internal conversations we have with ourselves throughout the day which lead us toward negative conclusions about ourselves, others and the world around us. Almost all of us engage in this kind of thinking, but for some, stinkin thinkin can come to dominate the landscape of our minds, resulting in convictions, choices and behaviors which prove destructive to ourselves and the people around us. Trying to change these behaviors without addressing the thoughts and emotions which drive them inevitably falls short of freeing us from the prison of our own negativity. What is needed is a transformation of our thinking: the renewal of our minds.

Davie Burns, MD in his book “The Feeling Good Handbook” identifies 10 Types of Stinkin’ Thinkin’, the first of which is “All-or Nothing” thinking. All-or-nothing thinking happens when we see things in black-or-white categories. You place second at the swim meet and you’ve utterly failed. You get a B on the Final and you’re a no-good Dummy. After seven straight quarters of leading your company in sales, you slip

to No. 2 and decide it's time to change careers. After losing 15 lbs. on your diet, you gain back 3 and quit trying to lose weight altogether, convinced you have failed. All-or-nothing thinking is stinkin thinkin: it takes you to places where your perception of things gets distorted and where your judgment of yourself and of others is harsh. All-or-nothing thinking is what's meant when you hear it said that "the perfect is the enemy of the good."

Another kind of stinkin thinkin is when we arbitrarily "filter out" the positive things happening in our lives in favor of dwelling exclusively on the negative. You give a presentation at work and receive many favorable comments, but one person wishes you had addressed something you did not include. You spend the rest of the day obsessing about this one person's reaction while ignoring the appreciation offered by everyone else. That's stinkin thinkin and we've all been there. Stinkin thinkin happens when we discount the positive by focusing exclusively on the negative. If we do a good job, it isn't good enough. If we make a mistake—we're NEVER going to get it right! It's like looking through a pair of binoculars that magnify our problems and shortcomings, and then reversing our grip to look through those same binoculars backwards, minimizing everything that is good about our lives. We're just not seeing things the way they truly are...

"Labelling" is another form of stinkin thinkin. You don't land that job and you say to yourself, "I'm a Loser." You're unlucky in love and you call yourself a Fool. You look at yourself in the mirror and say, "I'm fat," or "I'm ugly," or "I'm old." Really? Some of the youngest people I know are in their eighties; and since when did true beauty have anything to

do with the size of your nose? So you think you are fat? Fat compared to what? A Barbie-Doll? Labelling distorts and disfigures the truth about ourselves. And when we label others—it serves to degrade and dehumanize people by turning them into caricatures.

Finally, stinkin thinkin can embrace both “Personalization” and “Blame.” Personalization happens when you hold yourself personally responsible for something beyond your control. You get an email that your child is having problems at school, and you say to yourself, “See, this proves what a terrible parent I am.” No... this means that your child is having problems at school and your child is a person like everyone else. Blame works the opposite way. You blame others for circumstances that you yourself are a part of, refusing to take responsibility for your own choices and actions. If your marriage is struggling, it’s your spouse who’s to blame. If the country is going to hell in a hand-basket, it’s the fault of “those people” with whom you politically disagree. If you haven’t succeeded at something, life is unfair. Personalization leads to feelings of shame and inadequacy. Blame leads to feelings of resentment, anger and self-pity. Both take a toll on our spirits.

Stinkin thinkin has been around for probably as long as we’ve been able to think at all, and all of us have experience its effects to a greater or lesser degree. The world around us doesn’t necessarily help us to think clearly or realistically about ourselves, for it can place great pressures upon us to conform to its standards of what it means to be winners or losers, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong. The pressure to conform to these worldly standards is found at every level

of society and is particularly virulent to adolescents and children. From a Biblical standpoint, these ways of negative thinking constitute a potent part of the body of sin, because they do not reflect how God thinks about us, loves us, and accepts us, and is willing to forgive us. Jesus said it's what comes out of a person's heart and mind which defiles us—that's where the problem originates. Stinkin thinkin is that part of our sinful nature that can literally imprison us within a jail of our own making, blinding us to the truth about ourselves, our God, and the world around us. This is serious business! Because the way we think will drive the actions we take, actions which are life-affirming, or actions which lead in the other direction, imperiling our souls. This is what Paul was talking about in Chapter 7 of his Letter to the Romans, when he said, "For we know that God's law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I don't understand my own actions...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" The purpose of the entire epistle is to give the only sufficient answer to Paul's question: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ will rescue us from the death that lies within us, by changing the very way we think. He can open the bars of our self-made prisons and lead us back to the light. I ask you, who would not want such a gift of grace as this? Yet there are many who refuse it, choosing to remain locked into the familiarity of their own negativity than risk becoming someone different altogether. Which brings us to the turning-point of Paul's magnificent appeal...

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

These are the ringing words which begin Chapter 12 and drive everything else which follows. In the worship of the Temple, animals were formally “presented” to God by the priests, facing the Holy of Holies beyond the doors of the Inner Sanctuary, before they were slaughtered. Paul is exhorting us to present ourselves in same way—and we don’t need a Temple or priest to do it. God’s not waiting to punish us...God is waiting to comfort us like a parent who comforts a child. Because of what Christ did for us, despite all our brokenness and sin, we are accepted. Are you listening? We are acceptable to God—precious and holy in God’s sight. Our transformation begins when we turn away from our false and distorted ways of thinking about ourselves, admit our shortcomings and lack of power over them, and face toward God. Presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice means offering to God our whole selves in thought, word and deed, to live before God all our days. This is our “spiritual worship”—literally in the Greek—our “rational service,” which frees us from servitude to the world. “Do not be conformed to this world (that’s stinkin thinkin!) but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” The word Paul employs is ‘noos’—meaning our intellect, our reason, our understanding of who we are and the world around us. Wow. What wouldn’t we give for a renewal like that? Yet it is God’s free gift to us in Christ, a gift waiting for each and for all, like a beautifully-wrapped present with your name written on it, held by Christ himself as he looks toward you, smiling...

Friends, it’s an easy-enough thing to reset your smart-phones by sweeping away all the places you’ve been. The renewal of your mind works a little differently. It begins with spiritual modesty: with honest judgment about yourself. Paul says, “Don’t think more highly of

yourself than you ought to think, but think with sober judgment according to the measure of your faith.” Each one of us is gifted—uniquely so! When we use our gifts not for our own body but for the Body of Christ, of which we’re a part and to Whom we belong—something beautiful begins to happen.

Serve one another in love, for that is the heart of worship, and that’s what it means to be a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” How often have you heard someone say that serving others has brought with it a blessing out of all proportion to what was offered? That is the saving power of the Gospel. When we present ourselves to God just as we are, trusting in God mercy; when we open the door of our heart to Christ, who is waiting to come in; when the love, joy and peace of the Holy Spirit not only renews our thinking but amends our living...!

Well, that’s what even a modest measure of faith can bring forth, changing us by degrees until that glad and glorious day when we stand before Christ and hear him say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master. Welcome home.”