

Keeping God Before Our Minds

By Dallas Willard



The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds. David knew this secret and wrote, “I have set the Lord continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will dwell securely” (Ps. 16:8-9, NASB).

Now we need to understand that what simply *occupies* our mind very largely governs what we do. It sets the emotional tone out of which our action flows, and it projects the possible courses of action available to us. Also, the mind, though of little power on its own, is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. This is true in both a direct and an indirect sense. Of all the things we do, we have more freedom with respect to what we think of, where we will place our mind, than anything else. And the freedom of thinking is a direct freedom wherever it is present. We need not do something else in order to exercise it. We simply turn our mind to whatever it is we choose to think of. The deepest revelation of our character is what we choose to dwell on in thought, what constantly occupies our mind – as well as what we can or cannot even think of....

This is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in thus practicing the presence of God is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to Him. In the early time of our “practicing” we may well be challenged by our burdensome habits of dwelling on things less than God. But these are habits—not the law of gravity—and can be broken. A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us. Soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He will become the pole star of our inward beings.

We first receive God into our minds by receiving Jesus. The way forward then lies in intentionally keeping the scenes and words of the New Testament Gospels before our minds, carefully reading and rereading them day by day. We revive them in word and imagination as we arise in the morning, move through the events of the day, and lie down at night. By this means we walk with Him moment by moment—the One who promised to be with us always.

As a beginning step in this “practicing” process, we can choose to practice constantly returning our minds to God in Christ on a given day. In the evening then we can review how we did and think of ways to do it better the next day. As we continue this practice, gently but persistently, we soon will find that the person of Jesus and His beautiful words are “automatically” occupying our minds instead of the clutter and noise of the world—even the church world.

Our concentration on Jesus will be strengthened by memorization of great passages (not just verses) from Scripture. Passages such as Matt. 7, John 14-17, 1 Cor. 13, and Col. 3 are terrific “soul growing” selections. This practice of memorizing the Scriptures is more important than a daily quiet time, for as we fill our minds with these great passages and have them available for our meditation, “quiet time” takes over the entirety of our lives.

God's word to Joshua, as he undertook the great task before him, was, “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success” (Josh. 1:8, NASB). Psalm 1 demonstrates that this became a part of the recognized practice of spiritual living among the Israelites. Meditation on Him and His Word must become an integral part of our lives too.

But how does the law get in your mouth? By memorization, of course. It becomes an essential part of how we think about everything else as we dwell on it. Then the things that come before us during the day come in the presence of God's illuminating Word. As the Living Word and the written Word occupy our minds we naturally—and supernaturally—come to love God more and more because we see, clearly and constantly, how lovely He is.

When we come to the task of developing disciples into the fullness of Christ, we must be very clear that one main part, and by far the most fundamental, is to form the insights and habits of the student's mind so that it stay directed toward God.

Spiritual Practice: Memorize a verse or the entire passages mentioned in this article: Matt. 7, John 14-17, 1 Corinthians 13, and Colossians 3.

Lord, I sometimes wander away from you. But this is not because I am deliberately turning my back on you. It is because of the inconstancy of my mind. I weaken in my intention to give my whole soul to you. I fall back into thinking of myself as my own master. But when I wander from you, my life becomes a burden, and within me I find nothing but darkness and wretchedness, fear and anxiety. So I come back to you, and confess that I have sinned against you. And I know you will forgive me.

From Aelred of Rievaulx (1109-67)