

Vain Imaginations

Not long ago, I attended a retreat at which a college student, freshly discovering his call to an intercessory prayer ministry, spent hours every night praying by name for everyone on the retreat. The last morning when I ran into him, he said, "Sue! As I was praying for you, I received a word from the Lord for you."

Uh-oh. I'd heard this before. And every time I had taken it to the Lord, asking if there were anything to it, the answer was no.

My defenses up, I smiled and said, "I'm listening." He got a very thoughtful look on his face and said, "I have to get it exactly right. . . OK, the words were, 'Guard against vain imaginations.'"

I thanked him for this and promised to immediately take it to the Lord. I had barely breathed, "Lord, is there anything to this?" when the lightbulb came on in my spirit and I knew EXACTLY what this was about.

Oh yeah. This was from God, all right.

For about a year, my husband and I had been carrying around an open wound on our souls. We had been deeply hurt by several people we had trusted and loved, and it is not exaggeration to call it traumatic. Every single day of that time I had engaged in fantasy conversations in my head with the people who inflicted so much pain—except they weren't really so much conversations as monologues, with me lecturing on how badly they hurt us and how dishonoring their actions were to us and to God. . . yada yada yada.

Vain imaginations. Yep, this word was right on the money.

And God was so incredibly tender and grace-ful to merely

exhort me to “guard against” them. Not, “You bad girl, you’ve been sinning against my sons in your mind. Repent!” Not, “And who are YOU to set yourself up as judge and jury? Look at your own fleshly heart, kiddo!”

Just, guard against them.

So I confessed my sin of indulging in self-vindicating fantasy, and resolved not to go there again. It didn’t take long, of course, before my mind returned to what had become a familiar and comforting indulgence—an emotional “binkie.” I stopped and said, “Well Lord, what am I supposed to do instead?” He didn’t even have to say anything, just wait for me to connect the dots since I already knew. “Oh. I should be praying for them instead, huh?”

Okay. Fleshly sigh.

The biblical pattern for changing behaviors is to replace and displace the old with something new, and eventually the temptation to indulge in vain imaginations about this issue faded with disuse. It still pops up occasionally, but I know what to do with it.

“Vain imaginations” is a good term for a lot of popular mental sin we so easily rationalize: engaging in internal arguments with people who aren’t even there, the lusting that accompanies sexual pornography for men or emotional pornography for women (steamy romance novels). We all spend time thinking about things that are empty, fruitless, and harmful to our spirits.

And we all need to guard against them.

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