

Movie Message: The Great Debaters  
Philippians 4:8-9  
August 3, 2008  
St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
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Whatever controls your mind controls your actions. Do you believe this statement? Proverbs 23:7 makes it clear that we are what we think. Our actions are an outcome of our ideas.

The movie for today is The Great Debaters. Set in 1935 it is the true story of the all black Wiley College debate team in Marshall, Texas. The coach, Dr. Tolson, has chosen four students to be on the team. In this scene one of the students asks Mr. Tolson to tell them about himself. Tolson responds with what he thinks is all the students need to know. There is no profanity but you will hear the N word several times.

**Video Clip 26:06 – 28:08**

Willie Lynch operated on the principle that if you can control what people think, then it does not matter how strong they are -- such people are enslaved. History is filled with examples of people who controlled the actions of others by controlling their minds. Adolph Hitler was able to plunge Germany into a World War by changing the way people thought about themselves and others who were not like them. Jim Jones was able to force 900 people to drink poison in a mass suicide by controlling their thoughts.

We may not have similar diabolic efforts on a large scale in our culture today, but there are forces attempting to control what we think about on a daily basis. The constant barrage of information now at our fingertips thanks to the internet and wireless technology pummels our brain with data. Advertisers use subtle and blatant techniques to scream at us to think about their product when we shop store aisles.

Your computer has filters which can be set to screen out unwanted information. What about the filters on your mind? Are they set on LOW with the results that pretty much everything you see and hear comes into your mind? Our scripture for today says we should think about whatever is true, honorable, just, and pure. These are the filters Christians should consider installing on our minds.

I'm not sure many families talk about filters that protect their minds. For example, does your family set limits on movie ratings. The filter levels are pretty clear with young children, but what about teenagers? Some parents allow PG-13. Others allow R movies.

How much of the world should parents allow to enter the minds of children? My brother and his wife have sent their two girls to Christian schools. One of them attends a Christian college and plans to teach in a Christian school. Our children were raised in the public schools in Alaska. There are noticeable differences in the values and actions of our children. Who made the better decision?

One of my concerns about children today is that they don't know how to use their imagination when it comes to play. In this scene from the movie James has a crush on Samantha. He imagines himself dancing with her.

### **Video Clip 28:17 – 29:30**

It may be a tendency for us all to idealize our childhoods. But when I was a child we knew how to use our imaginations when it came to play. We could spend hours with a bunch of cardboard boxes creating all kinds of imaginary places. Modern toys are so realistic that they leave nothing to the imagination of a child.

The Bible admonishes us to think about things that are commendable and excellent and worthy of praise. The thoughts of our imaginations can work for our good or against it. I hate to mention this but it is applicable to the subject and a growing problem. I'm speaking of pornography. Last year I attended a workshop on this subject because no one else on the staff wanted to. Who could blame them?

I will say two things about how this practice captures and enslaves our minds. It can be a very real addiction. Because of the anonymous nature it can be difficult for people to seek help. Due to the workshop I attended and my brother who treats men with this addiction and who has a web site, I suggest that any man who wants help create an anonymous email address and send me an email. I won't know who you are and can refer you to resources to begin your recovery.

David DuPlessis was a significant Christian leader in the Pentecostal movement. A few years before his death, he was asked a pointed question by a young man. "I sometimes have struggles with my thought life. Could you tell me, sir, about how old I'll be when improper thoughts -- especially about women -- won't tempt my mind any longer?"

DuPlessis, whose purity of life and fidelity to the truth were legendary, looked squarely into the eyes of the young man, and then, in the 80th year of his life, said, "Son, when I get that old, I'll let you know!"<sup>1</sup>

No one can control their own thoughts 100% of the time. It's part of what makes us human. It's why we need God.

Back to the movie. The Wiley College debate team had been defeating every black college and was invited to debate the white team of Oklahoma City University. They are debating whether or not black children should be permitted to attend state universities. Samantha Booke makes an emotional point.

### **Video Clip 54:41 – 57:35**

One of the powerful themes of this movie was the injustice of racism. If you agree with Samantha that the time for justice is always right now, what injustice do you see that needs correcting? Does a neighborhood bully need to stop picking on other children? Does a supervisor at work need to treat all workers equally? Does a new law need to be written to right a wrong?

Christians who guard their thought lives and place good filters on what comes into it will have a greater capacity to distinguish right from wrong. By keeping their minds less polluted by the world they place themselves in a position to sense injustice. Of course the next step is to do something about it.

In the movie Dr. Tolson worked to organize the sharecroppers so they could address their poor working conditions. There were some at the college who thought he should not be stirring things up. This scene is a conversation between Tolson and Dr. Farmer, a prominent pastor.

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<sup>1</sup> -- Jack Hayford, *The Beauty of Spiritual Language: A Journey Toward the Heart of God* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 62.

**Video Clip 58:50 – 100:00**

Of course the Wiley debate team went on to phenomenal success. In the movie they beat Harvard which actually did not happen. I think it was actually USC or Stanford. What did happen was a ten year streak where the Wiley debate team was undefeated. James Farmer went on to become a leader in the civil rights movement. Samantha Booke became a lawyer and participated in civil rights protests. And Henry Lowe became a minister.

When you think about it God is building his kingdom beginning with hearts and minds...your heart...and your mind. What is the condition of your mind? What kinds of thoughts are you allowing to dwell there? The Bible says those thoughts should be true, honorable, just, and pure. May this be so for you and me.

**If time we'll watch the final scene: 1:58:41 – 1:57:22**