Mind Games, Part 2: Responding Wisely

Joel Thomas · Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 15:10-20; Luke 6:43-45

AT A GLANCE

In part two of Mind Games, Joel Thomas builds on last week's teaching that our brains rush past raw emotion into judgment, now tracing where that skipped emotion goes: it lodges in the heart and eventually spills into our words and reactions. Using Jesus's teaching on defilement and the wisdom of Proverbs, he argues that responding wisely requires naming the true emotion beneath our judgments before it resurfaces as conflict, withdrawal, or despair.

- Your brain skips over raw emotion to make a fast judgment, and what gets skipped doesn't vanish—it gets stored.
- What you call feeling neglected, abandoned, or judged is usually a judgment hiding a truer emotion: hurt, fear, or guilt.
- What's stored in your heart eventually spills out in conflict, withdrawal, or despair, whether or not you ever named it.

> *"You have coffee all over you because that's what was inside the cup."*

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

> Proverbs 4:23 — Above all, be careful what you think because your thoughts control your life. (ERV)
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> Matthew 15:10-20 — [10]Jesus called the people to him. He said, "Listen and understand what I am saying. [11]It is not what people put in their mouth that makes them wrong. It is what comes out of their mouth that makes them wrong." [12]Then the followers came to Jesus and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees are upset about what you said?" [13]Jesus answered, "Every plant that my Father in heaven has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. [14]Stay away from the Pharisees. They lead the people, but they are like blind men leading other blind men. And if a blind man leads another blind man, both of them will fall into a ditch." [15]Peter said, "Explain to us what you said earlier to the people." [16]Jesus said, "Do you still have trouble understanding? [17]Surely you know that all the food that enters the mouth goes into the stomach. Then it goes out of the body. [18]But the bad things people say with their mouth come from the way they think. And that's what can make people wrong. [19]All these bad things begin in the mind: evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual sins, stealing, lying, and insulting people. [20]These are the things that make people wrong. Eating without washing their

hands will never make people unacceptable to God." (ERV)

Luke 6:43-45 — [43]"A good tree does not produce bad fruit. And a bad tree does not produce good fruit. [44]Every tree is known by the kind of fruit it produces. You won't find figs on thorny weeds. And you can't pick grapes from thornbushes! [45]Good people have good things saved in their hearts. That's why they say good things. But those who are evil have hearts full of evil, and that's why they say things that are evil. What people say with their mouths comes from what fills their hearts." (ERV)

The argument

The Brain Rushes To Judgment Before It Feels — the anagram game as a live demonstration of last week's cycle

Joel Thomas opens by running the room through a live anagram game, deliberately rigging some puzzles to be unsolvable. As hands shot up in triumph or slumped in defeat, he named what had actually happened: 'An event happens in life… that leads you to feel something… and then your brain immediately made an interpretation, it made a judgment.' Building on last week's teaching, he reminds the room that the reticular activating system filters incoming data through preconceived beliefs rather than facts, and that the prefrontal cortex goes offline just long enough to short-circuit real evaluation. The point isn't the game itself but the mechanism it exposed: your brain rushes to judgment and skips over the emotion, which is efficient for survival but leaves something unresolved.

> **Insight —** *Reactions reveal the judgment your brain already made, not the facts of what actually happened.*

The Heart Is The Wellspring Everything Downstream Depends On — guarding the heart as neurological instruction, not just poetic image

Turning to Proverbs 4:23, 'Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life,' Thomas insists the image is not merely poetic but physiological. He points to the vagus nerve connecting heart, gut, and brain, noting that 'eighty to ninety percent of the signals that travel along this vagus nerve travel up to the brain from your body'—which is why he calls the heart and gut a second and third brain. What's stored in the heart doesn't stay contained; like a contaminated spring, it flows downstream into thoughts, beliefs, and actions, affecting relational, professional, and personal life. Proverbs named this three thousand years before neuroscience could describe the wiring behind it.

> **Insight —** *What you carry unaddressed in your heart doesn't stay there—it becomes the source everything else in your life draws from.*

Defilement Comes From The Heart, Not The Hands — Jesus's anatomy lesson to the Pharisees

When the Pharisees accuse Jesus's disciples of eating with unwashed hands, Jesus calls the crowd together and reframes reality: 'It's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you… on the contrary, you're defiled by the words that come out of your mouth.' Pressed by Peter to explain, he gives what Thomas calls an anatomy lesson: food 'passes through the stomach and goes into the sewer,' but words 'come from the heart, and that's what defiles you'—evil thoughts, murder, adultery, theft, lying, slander. Thomas notes the irony that the hand-washing law, which the Pharisees had turned into a righteousness test, was actually God's provision against sickness millennia before germ theory—good instruction misapplied as a spiritual defilement.

> **Insight —** *The real danger isn't what touches you from outside, but what's already stored inside and waiting to come out.*

What Is Stored Determines What Spills Out — the law of integrity in Jesus's fruit-tree metaphor

In Luke 6:43-45, Jesus extends the same point with an earth-science metaphor: 'No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit… a good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.' Thomas calls this the law of integrity: what's inside eventually surfaces, the way a banana's peel promises a banana within. He illustrates it with a morning collision in a hallway—two people spilling coffee on each other isn't caused by carelessness or lateness; 'you have coffee all over you because that's what was inside the cup.' Life's bumps only reveal what was already stored.

> **Insight —** *Circumstances don't create what's inside you; they only reveal what was already stored there.*

Behind Every Judgment Word Lies A Truer Emotion — naming hurt, fear, guilt, and shame beneath neglect, abandonment, judgment, and embarrassment

Drawing from his own marriage counseling, Thomas names the specific move that keeps negative emotion locked inside: mistaking a judgment for a feeling. 'You felt neglected—that's not an emotion, that's a judgment about somebody's behavior. What you really felt was hurt.' He works through the pattern: betrayal masks anger, abandonment masks fear, feeling judged masks guilt, embarrassment masks shame. Left unnamed, these don't disappear—they crowd out positive emotion and resurface as conflict, withdrawal, escape, rumination, or addiction. Shame left unaddressed drifts into isolation and self-loathing; guilt into regret and despair; fear into anxiety and obsession. The remedy isn't suppressing the judgment but going underneath it to name what's actually there.

> **Insight —** *Naming the true emotion beneath your judgment word is the first step to keeping it from resurfacing uninvited.*

Cross-references

- 2 Corinthians 10:5 — referenced as last week's key teaching on taking every thought captive, carried forward as the foundation for today's message

DEVOTIONAL

A coffee cup spills only what was poured into it. That's the plain, almost embarrassing truth Joel Thomas leaves ringing in the room: you don't get coffee on your shirt because someone bumped you in a hallway. You get it because that's what was already inside the cup. Most of us live convinced that our reactions are dictated by what happens to us—the slight, the delay, the offense. But Scripture, and apparently the vagus nerve, tell a slower, harder truth. What's stored in the heart is what surfaces when life jostles us, and most of us are storing more than we know: hurt disguised as neglect, fear disguised as abandonment, guilt disguised as being judged, shame disguised as embarrassment. We've become fluent in the language of judgment and illiterate in the language of feeling. Proverbs calls the heart a wellspring, and wellsprings don't ask permission before they flow. Whatever sits at the source eventually reaches every downstream thing—your marriage, your patience, your prayers. Jesus, teaching in a dusty courtyard about unwashed hands, wasn't dismissing hygiene; he was locating the real threat somewhere hands can't reach. Not what enters you, but what's already lodged within, waiting for its moment. The good news buried in this diagnosis is that naming isn't the same as drowning. To call hurt by its name, guilt by its name, fear by its name, is not to be ruled by it but to finally see it clearly enough to bring it to the only one who can restore what's been stored too long. Grace doesn't ask you to pretend the cup is empty. It asks you to let it be poured out and refilled.

Reflection

- What judgment word—neglected, betrayed, judged, embarrassed—do you reach for most often, and what truer emotion might be hiding beneath it?
- Where in your life have you noticed something 'spilling out' of you—conflict, withdrawal, rumination—that might be revealing what's stored rather than what just happened?
- What would it look like this week to bring an unresolved emotion to God in prayer instead of letting it sit unnamed in your heart?

Closing prayer

Lord, for the one here whose cup has been so full for so long that there's little room left for anything but what spills out under pressure—release them from believing something is wrong with them. Much of what we store was done to us, not by us; even so, let your grace be enough. Give us the ability, beyond our own capacity, to see what's actually going on inside us, and the courage to face it and bring it out.

Supply what only you can supply—grace and mercy through your people and your love—to restore what's been stored, for our good and your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

Naming the true emotion beneath a judgment word is not weakness—it's the first honest step toward letting God restore what you've been storing.

This week

This week, when you catch yourself using a judgment word—neglected, betrayed, judged, embarrassed—pause and ask God in prayer to help you name the truer emotion underneath it, then bring that, not just the judgment, to him honestly.

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