

Practical Steps for Thinking Right

Romans 8:5

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Last week we discovered that the key factor that determines the course of our lives is our thoughts. If we think right, we'll act right. If we think wrong, we will go the wrong direction. Mindset is crucial. Our text in Rom. 8:5 puts it this way, "*Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that sinful nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires*" (NIV).¹ Everything depends upon what we set our minds on.

We discussed four principles regarding that: (1) We have a choice as to what we will set our minds on. That responsibility falls on us. (2) The thinking we choose to embrace is what drives our behavior (3) With our thoughts we cultivate desire—whether it be good desires or bad desires (4) Personal transformation occurs by the renewing of the mind.

When you were born again, your spirit was joined to Christ and made perfect through that union. Your body will one day be transformed at the resurrection of the just. In the meantime, God is working on your soul. He is maturing you and refining your character in preparation for your place in heaven. Rom. 12:2 tells us that those changes are brought about "*by the renewing of the mind.*" By the renewing of the mind: How do we cooperate with that process? What does the Bible tell us to do?

I hope in previous messages that we understand the necessity of grace in everything we do. "*For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9). But there are things we are told to do! Without God we can't do it; without our cooperation, He won't do it. That's why Phil. 2:12 tells us to "*...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" I thought it was by grace; how can God tell us to do it? because the next verse completes the other side of the equation. Verse 13, "*for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*" God is working His side of this. He tells us to in faith work out our side of it. There is definitely effort involved. It is a serious mistake to think that grace means that I am to be passive. What is needed is that I do everything in reliance upon God's divine enablement (grace). I am to take obedient action. That's what James means when he says, "*...faith without works is dead*" (2:20).

So here are a couple of practical steps toward the renewing of your mind:

I. Be Intentional about what you think about! Just because a depressing thought hits your mind when you wake up in the morning, doesn't mean you're going to be depressed all that day. It doesn't mean you allow that thought to lead you into a chain of thoughts that bring you down emotionally. It will take some effort, you have to be intentional about it, you have to decide to do it; but if you take that initiative in faith, the Holy Spirit will help you turn it around.²

So first, we learn to quickly discard thoughts that come from the sinful nature. The sinful nature produces selfish thoughts, lustful thoughts, angry thoughts, prideful thoughts, envy, unforgiveness, judgements of others. We could go on and on with the list. Galatians 5 describes the works of the flesh in contrast to the fruit of the Spirit. The moment one of those thoughts enters our mind, we want to cast it down. Dismiss it rather than dwell on it. 2 Cor. 10:4 "*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the*

¹ All Scripture quotes are in the New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

² This statement is addressed to the normal issues of depression people face. Other solutions are usually need with clinical depression and other medical problems.

knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” The main battle Christians fight is the one between their ears. The Devil is a problem and we have to learn how to deal with him. Other people can be a problem and we have to learn how to deal with them. But more basic than all of that is how I will deal with myself. My greatest enemy is my sinful nature. The first task is to bring *every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ*. You simply decide not to embrace the thought.

But don’t leave a vacuum. Don’t just try to get rid of wrong thoughts. Get your mind occupied with good things. The problem with fighting this battle just on the negative side is sometimes illustrated with the command to not think about an elephant. The more you concentrate on not thinking about an elephant, ironically the more you see an elephant. So it’s important to dismiss bad thoughts; but we can’t make that the focus of our strategy. We have to take the initiative and get our minds occupied with good things. Football teams don’t win games by giving the other team the ball and then defending the goal. At some point the offense has to take over. We take control of the ball and move it in the right direction.

Phil. 4:8 tells us to be proactive about what we will think about. Be actively engaged; be intentional about dwelling on the right kind of things. Phil 4:8 *“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things.”* And here comes the promise in verse 9, *“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”* See how we invite the peace of God in our lives? You set your mind on these things, and peace will come. Who has the responsibility to take action in Philippians 4:8? It’s something we are to do!

We all have different struggles to deal with depending upon many factors. Some people struggle with a lot of fears and anxiety, while others struggle with covetousness; some are particularly tempted toward pride, others may easily go into depression or self-pity; for some the major issue is unforgiveness and bitterness; for others it might be anger. You know where your major battles are. And you can deal with that by filling your mind with the opposite.

If you struggle with fears and anxiety, fill your mind with assurances from the word of God. God has promised to *“never leave you nor forsake you.”*³ Whoever believes on Him shall not be ashamed (Rom. 9:33 KJV). 2 Tim 1:7, *“For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind”* (KJV). Think about Jesus as your shepherd.

If you’re tempted toward bitterness or anger, think about God’s mercy toward you. Think about how longsuffering He has been during your life. Think about how He forgave you 70X7. Dwell on the cross He bore, the injustices He endured so that you could be with Him forever.

If you’re tempted toward self-pity, practice thankfulness in your thought life.

Reflect upon His goodness toward you. Go to Psalm 103 and start counting your blessings. Thank Him for little things that you have taken for granted. Wiggle your little toe and thank Him that you can do that.

So Phil. 4:8 instructs us to be intentional about our thought life. *“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things.”*

³ Hebrews 13:5; Isa. 43:1-5; Ps. 23:4.

II. Fill your mind with the Word of God!

This Bible is a revelation of the way God thinks. Basic to getting our minds renewed and getting our minds to think right is to get this word hidden in our hearts. In his discussion of the New Covenant, the writer of Hebrews quotes. *“This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds”* (Heb. 10:16). In the Old Covenant the laws of God were written on stones. But now God wants our hearts and minds filled with His word. He wants to change the way we think through the revelation He has given in the Bible.⁴ And the Holy Spirit will bring that about as we exercise the faith to do what He tells us to do about it.

A dusty Bible sitting on the shelf doesn't help us much. We need to have a close relationship with our Bibles—not to just to know what a book says, but to know the author of the book. To receive line upon line, precept upon precept a change in the way we think. As I prepared this message I thought about the influence technology has had on the way I use the Bible. I have a Bible on my phone, a Bible in my computer; I have study Bibles and several different versions. All of that is very helpful. But in the process I have lost the connection I used to have with my primary Bible. All the various resources are great; but I need one Bible that that is underlined in verses that are special to me, with my notes written beside a passage reminding me of what God has said to me about that. The primary Bible may have a few spots where my tears fell on the page as I looked to God for answers in my life during a crisis and maybe a coffee stain or two where I was getting my day started with it opened before me. I've got a few Bibles like that, that I wore out over the years. And I want to keep wearing out Bibles. Because that is where true wisdom is found

Let me give you seven ways we need to be using our Bibles.

(1) We need to simply read it to get the flow of thought first hand. In general what is the message? Job is talking about personal suffering and how to deal with that. Exodus is telling me about the way He delivered Israel out of bondage and Joshua tells about how they went into the Promise Land. (2) I need to study the Bible: understand the historical context in which the message was given, look at characters in the story, word meanings, and so forth. In my study I may compare on passage to other passages. There are a variety of ways to do the study. My purpose is to simply understand what the passage is saying. Gifted teachers can help us in this area, but do some study on your own. (3) Mediate on a few verses, maybe only one verse. Roll it over in your mind. Ponder the message. Holy Spirit, what are you saying to me in this passage? As I meditate and as the Holy Spirit makes it real to me, it moves from my mind to my heart, so that that word is written in both my heart and mind. Christian meditation is focused on an active engagement with truth. Don't confuse that with some Eastern meditation where people try to empty their minds and get into a passive state of mind. That leaves them wide open to deception. We're talking about intentional focus on what God has revealed to us in Scripture. God told Joshua to meditate on the torah (which was the Bible available to him). He was to meditate on the word day and night (it was to be continually on his mind) and he was to think about it (not just as an academic exercise) but it was to be done with the intent of doing what it says to do. God followed up that instruction with this promise (1:8) *“For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success”* (NKJV). Why would he have success? Because the influence of the word gets him to thinking right, and if we can think right we can make wise decisions, and those decisions put us on the road to success—not necessarily success as the world would define it, but success as God would define it. What I want when all is said and done is for God to view my life as the success He has designed it to be. Amen? Webster actually has a pretty good definition of what meditation is: “to focus

⁴ Jesus prayed to the Father, asking Him to *“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth”* (John 17:17). The transformation God brings about in believers' lives cannot and will not occur apart from the application of truth.

one's thoughts on: reflect on or ponder." The old English meaning was "to engage in contemplation or reflection."⁵

Four times in Ps 119 David talks about meditating on God's statutes and precepts. In verse 148 he said he even does that into the night. Ps 119:15-16 "*I will meditate on Your precepts, And contemplate Your ways. 16 I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.*" Ps 119:11 "*Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You.*" How does hiding the word in my heart protect me from sin? It corrects my thinking. It gets me to thinking right and remember from last week: thoughts drive behavior.

I want to stay on the subject of meditation because it is so neglected in our culture. We are such a fast-paced society that we have a hard time sitting still long enough for God to speak to us. Studying the Bible is important so that I don't go off on some tangent that is inconsistent with the overall message of the Bible. But to get the full influence of the word, I have to ponder a verse for a while. I need to let the verse speak to me personally—not just to understand what it is saying, but to understand what it is saying *to me*. You need some verses that the Holy Spirit has burned into your heart: life verses that are there in your heart when the night gets dark and you feel all alone.

Ps 1:1-3 "*Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,* (notice there are things we're not to be letting into our thinking. The world is constantly offering us counsel. It may come through a book, it may come in a sit com; it may be couched in an advertisement. But you can be sure, the world is speaking and most of society is listening. And after they all say it so many times and in so many ways, it begins to sound right. But the blessed man does not receive it and he does not live according to it. "*Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law (torah) he meditates day and night* (This has been incorporated into his daily lifestyle).

3 He shall be like a tree Planted by of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper" (NKJV). There again, the promise of success is tied to delighting in the word of God and meditating on it day and night.

Notice in this Psalm, his thought life made him like a tree planted by the water. The Holy Spirit is often symbolized by water in the scriptures. As I meditate on the word of God, there comes a supply of spiritual nourishment and refreshing. Jesus said, "*My words are spirit and life.*" "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*" God speaks to us through His word. He nourishes us by revelation from His word. You can be "*like a tree Planted by the water.*" The water supply is there in the Holy Spirit, if we will extend our root system into it by getting into the word. The result of that water supply is that I don't wither, I don't dry up, I bear fruit in due season. Is your root system deep in the word of God?

I've talked about (1) simply reading the Bible to get the flow of thought in a book or passage. I've talked about (2) studying the Bible to get an understanding of what it is actually saying. And (3) I've talked about meditating on the word so that the Holy Spirit can apply it to your heart.

(4) While you're meditating, Memorize Scripture. The passages that have helped me the most have been those that I have memorized and then brought that verse up in my mind over and over in life during those brief pauses while sitting at a doctor's office, or lying in bed trying to get to sleep, or waiting in a check-out line. If I don't get something like that rolling around in my mind while I am in long line at the store, I will go crazy. But if I can bring to mind a verse or two that I have memorized,

⁵ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed. (Springfield, MA, 1993) p. 722.

then I can occupy myself productively and calm down. The point is this: I need some scripture in my mind to recall. It may only be half a verse. *“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”* He maketh me stand in long lines at the grocery store so I will be renewed by that promise. Get a few verses in your heart and use them often. What has God made real to you in his word? Put some of it to memory.

We’re still talking about getting your thinking right by filling it with the word of God. The 4th way to profit from Scripture is to put it to memory.

(5) Pray the Scriptures. This engages you with the word and it positions you to receive nourishment from it by the Holy Spirit. It also gives substance to your prayer life. If all we’re doing in prayer is make petitions, we will run out of energy pretty fast. Most Christians don’t engage in enough different expressions of prayer to keep it vital and interesting. When you pray scriptures you tend to get that word in your heart. And you know you’re praying in the will of God because you’re praying God’s own word. We will probably do this some during our Wed. evening prayer service.

(6) Practice the word in your daily lives. We made mention of that intention when we talked about Joshua 1:8. But James is very direct about this issue in his epistle when he says, *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does”* (James 1:22-25). There is understanding of the word that only comes in the doing.⁶

(7) Share the word with others. It will reinforce it in you and it will strengthen them. In 1 Tim 4:13-16 Paul wrote, *“Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. 14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. 15 Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. 16 Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.”*⁷

So here are seven ways you get the word of God in your heart and mind. (1) Read it (2) Study it (3) Meditate on it (4) Memorize it (5) Pray it (6) Practice it (7) Share it.

Our engagement with the word of God is not a duty; it is a privilege. It is an opportunity to lay hold of something that cannot be gotten any other way. Imagine someone giving you a treasure map. If you follow that map, you will find inconceivable wealth: gold, silver, and precious stones. You would not lay that map aside. You would not view it as an unreasonable demand to study that map. You would be eager and anxious to read it and get on with the journey. The value of what God has for us in His word, far exceeds any and all earthly wealth. Hear the comparison in Prov. 8:10-11 *“Receive my instruction, and not silver, And knowledge rather than choice gold; For wisdom is better than rubies, And all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her.”* Prov. 4:7 *“Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding.”* Have you set your heart on getting understanding from God’s word? Make sure it’s on your priority list. In all your getting, get into the

⁶ Ray S. Anderson provides a scholarly explanation of this principle in his book, *“The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). On p. 17 he writes, *“...Bonhoeffer laid the groundwork for a praxis-oriented theology through an ethic of discipleship and obedience, where theory emerges only through engagement with truth as an ethical demand in the form of the claim of Christ through the other person.”* In his explanation of praxis says, *“...in the performing of the tasks, meaning is discovered, not merely applied”* (p. 47).

⁷ Col 3:16 *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”*

word and get wisdom. (Prayer that God would give us hunger for His word and help us keep our priorities in order).

Outline Practical Steps for Thinking Right

Intro:

Text Rom. 8:5, “*Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that sinful nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.*”

How do we cooperate with God in the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2)?

I. Be INTENTIONAL about what you think about!

A. Discard thoughts that come from the sinful nature (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

B. Occupy your mind with the right things (Phil. 4:8).

II. Fill your Mind with the WORD of God!

A. Bible is a Revelation of the Way God Thinks.

Heb. 10:16

B. Six Ways to Use your Bible

- 1) Read it to get the flow of thought.
- 2) Study it to understand its meaning.
- 3) Meditate on it to get application to your life.
- 4) Memorize it to make it available all the time.
- 5) Pray it to bring its substance into your prayer life.
- 6) Practice it in your daily life.
- 7) Share it with others to strengthen them.

Discussion Questions

1. What is God speaking to you through the message this morning?

2. Have you been able to counter thoughts of depression, anger, lust, envy, greed, etc. by dismissing the thought and setting your mind on something more productive?

What struggles did you have?

What worked for you that might be helpful to others?

3. Why is it important to get our minds occupied with something constructive rather than just fight off negative thoughts?
4. Do you think the Bible is a revelation of the way God thinks?
If so, how does filling our mind with its truths help reconstruct the way we think?
5. Seven ways to use your Bible are suggested in the outline above.
How have you found each of these to be helpful in your life?
Which area do you want to work on most in the immediate future?