

CHANGING YOUR THOUGHT PATTERNS

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These and other similar statements and questions are constantly brought up as I counsel with people. What they are asking basically is, "How can I change? How can I bring my thoughts under control and develop new attitudes?"

Experiences we have had, including childhood ones, make impressions on us. These experiences cause us to respond in certain ways to situations we face later in life. This is a common pattern for all of us. One person never experienced an outward manifestation of affection from his father, and now struggles with a deep need for that kind of expression. Another was made to feel he could never do anything properly, so today he battles with a sense of uncertainty and inferiority. Another was deeply hurt by someone to whom he reached out, and now finds it difficult to trust anyone. But there are also the positive experiences. Many people experienced love, acceptance, support and encouragement as children. They are able, as life develops, to relate more easily to people and circumstances.

Where the patterns are negative and destructive, the person needs change so he can find release and experience a new freedom, freedom that comes from knowing the truth and how to apply it. "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). Where the patterns have been positive and affirming, they can be developed and reinforced by utilization and specific, planned action.

The important fact to recognize is that our thought patterns and habits can be changed constructively and we can experience release from reactions and responses that continually defeat us.

Let's look at a typical pattern of thinking in this type of situation. First, we recognize that there is a need to change an attitude, whatever that attitude may be. Maybe it's an attitude toward an individual or an attitude toward a situation. In order to change his attitude, the Christian resorts to prayer. He hopes his attitude will change as a result.

We have been instructed that the way to change is through the means of prayer. After we pray, somehow something is supposed to happen and our attitudes change. We may not say it that way, but there is the implication that some mystical process takes place and attitudes change when a person reads the Bible or prays.

We recognize that there is a certain truth to that concept. The Bible says it, so we know that there has to be truth in it. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Thy Word" (Psalm 119:9). God is the only One who can bring about real change in our thought patterns. We must always keep that in mind.

However, people repeatedly struggle in vain for results in this pattern—they pray and ask for help but nothing happens. No change of attitude takes place. They continue to struggle with the same basic conflicts. When this happens a pattern of defeat begins.

Of course, the enemy takes advantage at this point and begins accusing, "You see, there must be something else wrong or this attitude would change." So people look deeper, pray harder, spend longer periods of time with the Lord, and still many of these attitudes don't change. This is a real issue which we are going to encounter continually in our relationships with people.

In considering this we want to be very careful to avoid any idea of a so-called "do-it-yourself" Christianity. *We* do not make the changes in our lives. Only *God* has the power to make deep inner changes. We want to emphasize that so that there is no misunderstanding.

On the basis of Proverbs 4:23, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life," and other Scripture, we encourage people to saturate their hearts—their minds basically—with the Word of God. We believe that the more saturation takes place, the more people's conduct and way of thinking are going to be affected. Again, this is a true concept. But to experience change, we must put into practice the truths with which we are saturating our minds.

In order to begin to understand how this applies to the concept of changing our thought patterns, let's examine one little phrase from Paul, "Be transformed by the *renewing of your mind*" (Romans 12:2). Every one of us must seek to answer the all-important and practical question, "How do I renew my mind?"

Let's use a hilltop as an illustration. When rain falls on a hill, the water drains off. How does it drain off? In rivulets. Initially, they are just small rivulets, but each time rain falls, the rivulets cut deeper and deeper. They can become deep chasms.

Now let's compare these rivulets with thought patterns in our minds. The longer we think along any given line, the stronger that thought pattern becomes. Every time we react in a certain way, we reinforce that thought pattern. This is how habits are formed.



If we want to get rid of rivulets on a hill, we could take a bulldozer and cover them up. We could also build a little dam where the rivulet begins so that the next time it rains the rivulets will change course. While we can't cover up our thoughts with a mental bulldozer, we can build a dam in our minds when certain thoughts begin. We can refuse to think them. We can say, "I will not allow myself to think that."

Building a dam in the mind, however, is not enough. That is, saying "no" is not sufficient by itself. We also need to provide a new course for our thinking. We should not just suppress thoughts; we should redirect them. We should change negative thought patterns into positive thought patterns.

We find a good illustration of this in Paul's words: "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in

need" (Ephesians 4:28). How does a thief stop being a thief? Is it just by not stealing anymore? Not quite. Certainly that is part of it. That's saying "no" to a negative, destructive habit. It's building the "dam." But it's not enough. In order to change, the thief is told to get a job and earn money honestly. Then he is to give to others in need so that perhaps they won't be tempted to steal. *Now the process is complete.* The negative habit has been dealt with by an act of the will which chooses to stop it. But the will must also choose to replace that with the corresponding constructive action in order that the change in thought patterns may be complete.

And so it becomes clear that in order to change these thought patterns we must do two things. First, we must build the dam, that is, refuse to allow wrong thoughts. Second, we must redirect the flow and develop a new way of thinking. Eventually the old patterns will fade. They may never disappear, but they will fade and will become less and less influential in controlling our thinking.

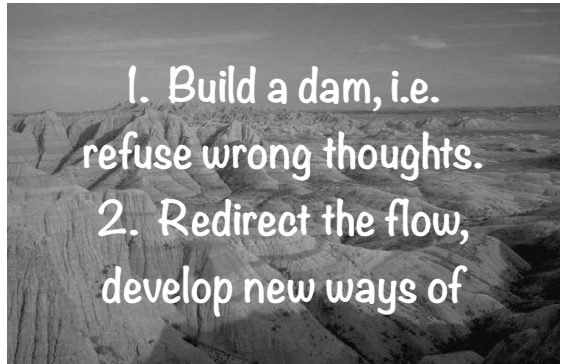
We need to realize that this takes place by an act of the will, not by wishful thinking and not solely by devotional meditation and prayer. Meditation and prayer are necessary, but we must move beyond that to an act of the will.

Paul gives us some helpful thoughts on the subject, "Set your minds on things above" (Colossians 3:2), a declarative statement that involves an act of the will. *You* set your mind. "Put to death . . . whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires" (verse 5), "*You* must rid yourselves" (verse 8), "Put on" (verse 12, NASB). Changing thought patterns is not just "putting away" by building dams, but also "putting on" by building new patterns. It is not just suppressing, but redirecting our thoughts into healthy, positive ways of thinking.

What does "put to death" (verse 5) mean? The old thought patterns do not just die naturally; it would be great if they did and we never again had this desire or that temptation. But because "the heart is more deceitful... and is desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9), and because the flesh is the flesh and lusts against the Spirit, these battles go on continually. Therefore, the statement "put to death" requires a continual action. We must put old thought patterns to death every time they rear their heads. We cannot just put immorality to death, and then no longer have immoral thoughts. They will continue to come up and every time they do, we have to stop them right at the headwaters with that dam. *Every time!* The more times we put those wrong thoughts to death and put on the new ones, the less our thoughts tend to flow in the wrong direction.

Paul commands us to develop healthy, positive, spiritual ways of thinking (Colossians 3:12). We are to "put on" certain positive thought patterns as we "put off the wrong ones. These two steps are essential if there is to be genuine change. We have looked at the illustration of the changed thief (Ephesians 4:28). In the same passage Paul gives another helpful illustration of "putting off and "putting on." He states that the liar is to stop (put off) lying, but immediately reminds us that he must speak (put on) the truth (4:25). Not only does the liar stop lying, but he begins telling the truth. The two steps are clear—"put *off*" and "put on."

Paul deals with this concept in his letter to the Romans (chapters 6-8). It helps to have some one-word titles for these passages. Romans 6 describes our "provision." We have been delivered from the power of sin. "Our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (verse 6). "Because anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (verse 7). "Sin shall not be your master" (verse 14). "You have been set free from sin" (verse 18). *Provision* has been made so that we might overcome the power of sin.



"Struggle" is the key word in chapter 7. We struggle all the time. We struggle about how to get the provision of chapter 6 into our lives. The solution is the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 25). He is always the final answer. We all believe this. We preach sermons on it. We teach it. But too often we have not told people how to experience it in a practical way.

Chapter 8 tells us how. One phrase is repeated several times. Different versions state it in different ways, but the idea is the same. They all refer to "setting the mind." "Those who are according to the flesh *set their minds* on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, [*set their minds* on] the things of the Spirit. For the *mindset* on the flesh is death, but the *mind set* on the Spirit is life and peace, because the *mind set* on the flesh is hostile toward God" (verses 5-7, NASB).

Add to that these words of Paul, "*Fix your thoughts* on what is true and good and right. *Think about* things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. *Think about* all you can praise God for and be glad about" (Philippians 4:8, *Living Bible*).

There, in essence, is the whole concept of what is commonly called the power of positive thinking: "fix your thoughts." It is a statement of command which requires a response of the will—to fix our thoughts—to set our minds on these things.

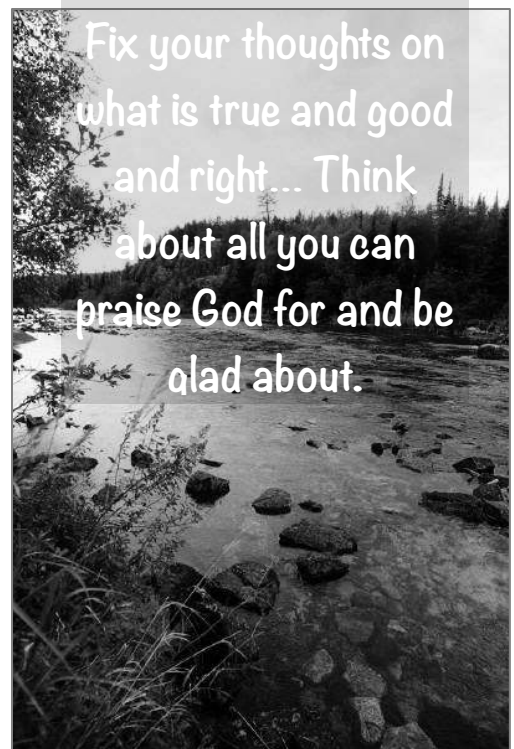
The practical application of this concept is this: "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to do what pleases Him" (Philippians 2:12,13). This statement presents the chronological process of the effective outworking of Romans 6-8. Another version states, "For God is the Energizer within you, so as to will and to work for His delight" (verse 12, *New Berkeley*).



A light switch can be used to illustrate the Christian's responsibility in this process. As the light switch is moved, it turns the light on and off. That switch connects to a wire that goes through the house and out to a power line that eventually goes to a generating plant. Millions of volts of electricity are being produced there. The source of energy is enormous. The power comes through the lines to the wall switch. Whether the light is illuminated by the electrical energy depends on the position of the switch. The switch is a circuit breaker.

In the same way what happens in the first part of Paul's statement determines whether the energy in the second part comes into our lives. Continually working out our salvation has to do with what we think—what we fix our thoughts on, what choices of will we make. In effect Paul says, "You do your part. You do what you know is right." This means we should renew our thoughts, and not allow them to continue following negative patterns. This is difficult and requires personal discipline. Thus we are turning the "switch" on for God's energy to flow whenever we choose not to allow wrong thoughts to continue.

Thought patterns are so ingrained that we don't recognize the stimulus that sets them off. And before we know it, one of our old thought patterns is off and running



downhill. We respond to it as fast as a snap of the fingers. For example, when we hear the word "fireplace," we immediately see an image—good, bad or indifferent. The words "ocean beach" immediately bring a specific picture to mind. These words are stimuli which induce an immediate thought pattern.

In the same way, therefore, there are many things that "trigger" or set off wrong thought patterns. We need to ask God to alert us through His Holy Spirit the minute these negative thought patterns begin.

That is all we can legitimately ask Him to do. When we ask God to change our thought patterns, we are asking Him to do something for which He has already said we are responsible.

Let's consider conflict in an interpersonal relationship as an illustration. One person says, "I have prayed for months, literally, for love for that person but I just can't love him." However, when God says we are to do something, it is never a question of "can't" but "won't." God commands us to love others, whether or not they are our enemies, whether or not they have mistreated us. We are to love each other. No matter how we feel, God commands that we demonstrate the qualities of love (I Corinthians 13:4-7) by an act of our wills in obedience to that command. As we act in obedience, our feelings will respond accordingly. "A new commandment I give you: Love one another" (John 13:34). The issue is not "can't" but "won't."



There are many similar areas where we often find ourselves asking God to change something when He has told us what to do. He tells us clearly that it is our responsibility to "fix our thoughts" and "set our minds." We have the right to ask God to alert us to be sensitive to the beginning of that negative thought pattern, but as soon as He alerts us, then the responsibility to take action is ours.

For example, one of the areas that men have a great deal of difficulty with is their eyes—what they look at. We teach men that it is their responsibility to control their eyes. And while that emphasis may be proper, it presents a problem. The problem is that we are asking them to suppress a normal reaction. The Bible refers specifically to this. We are told in the words of the Lord Jesus that if a man looks on a woman to lust after her he has committed adultery in his heart. Jesus didn't say it was wrong to look at a woman. He said it was wrong to look and lust. There is a difference.

Jesus never condemned seeing what normally crosses our line of sight. Yet, *we* do. We ask a man to act contrary to normal reaction and we produce a conflict immediately. The moment that a man looks at anything that might cause lust, he feels guilty. It is as though he shouldn't see or is supposed to wear blinders. It produces a tremendous amount of frustration.

What we should do is help men realize that looking at someone or something that is attractive is normal. However, how a man handles his subsequent thoughts is important. If he allows himself to dwell on lustful desires for that person or thing, according to Jesus, he is sinning. But I would emphasize that the same stimulus can be used to produce a positive response as well as a negative one.

Years ago when I began to realize this, I learned for the first time how to have real victory in this area of my own thought life. I remember how revealing and liberating it was. Whenever I would find myself looking at an attractive woman who could have generated thoughts that were wrong, I would admit them and control them by saying, "Thank you. Lord. Thank you that I am healthy, that I have normal responses, that I am made the way you intended me to be made, and thank you for a wonderful wife with whom I can enjoy what You have given me."

It only took a split second, but a dam was built and a new positive channel was being produced. It happened very quickly. By the grace of God that has become a thought pattern now.

If I were a single man I would say the same thing, but the last phrase would read, "And thank You that in Your own time You will allow me the privilege of enjoying this part of my life, if that is Your plan for me." In either case, the principle is the same. That is, utilizing the same stimulus that could produce negative thoughts to produce positive responses instead by choosing that which I am going to allow my mind to think about.

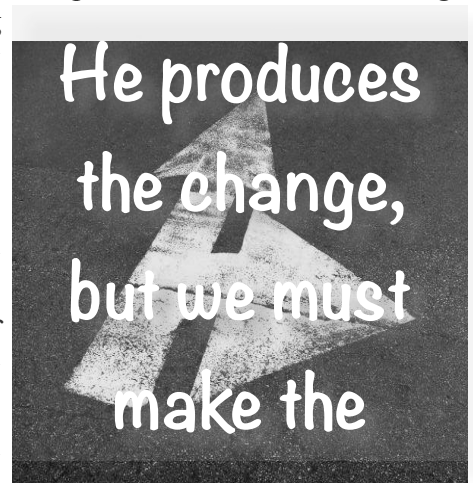
I did not suppress those feelings. I did not say, "Come on, George, you are not supposed to think that way." That only reinforces the negative response which I am trying to overcome. *Suppression reinforces negativism.* Sublimation or redirection reinforces a positive replacement of that negative thought. So, the same stimulus can produce positive results, if we are alert to catch them the moment our thoughts begin a negative pattern. We do this by building a "dam" by saying "no" to the destructive thought and saying "yes" to a positive, constructive alternative.

This is where Scripture comes in. Verses or concepts of Scripture can be used to build these dams which check our thinking. The next time that same thing stimulates our thinking we shouldn't say, "Don't think that way" but instead we should tell ourselves, "Don't think that way, *think this way.*" This redirects those thought patterns into positive directions. "Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right" (Philippians 4:8, *Living Bible*).

If we do what God requests (Philippians 2:12), then He promises to energize us (verse 13). We submit our wills to His. We decide by an act of the will not to continue in the old patterns but to let Him change us. He promises to do that. All we do is throw the switch by saying "no" to wrong thoughts and "yes" to the right ones, and the energy from His enormous source of power flows through us and energizes us to do the very thing we want to do and that He wants us to do. Thus, it is not by our efforts that this is accomplished. *He produces the change, but we must make the choice.*

Let's look at another personal example. I found that in my relationship with my wife, Florine, I am not beyond feeling impatient. I never will be. As long as I am in this body and have the heart of flesh that I have, I am going to have these tendencies. But I find now that I am able to recognize these impatient feelings.

Speaking of feelings, I think it's important to understand a few things about them. It seems to me that there is an emphasis which says, "Christians shouldn't have certain feelings." As a result, many sincere people find themselves struggling with guilt because they still have feelings that they are told they shouldn't have. Feelings are normal to every human being. In themselves they are neither good nor bad. They simply are. We all experience them—anger, resentment, envy, jealousy, defensiveness, lust and others. These are part of the temptations spoken of by Paul (I Corinthians 10:13). The important thing is what we do with these feelings. A follower of Christ is not to be controlled by his feelings. This is what is referred to in Proverbs 25:28 as self-control. Well then, how do we handle these feelings? This triad should help answer that:



1. *Our Emotions React.* As we've seen, we all have feelings that are set off by a variety of stimuli. It's important that we admit these feelings. It is destructive to try to deny or suppress them. But, as followers of Christ, we must not be controlled by these initial reactions.

2. *Our Intellects (Minds) Evaluate.* We are responsible to "set our minds" and think through on our emotional

responses and their possible results. It is at this point that the Bible is so important. The more we know of what the Bible says, the more truth we have by which to evaluate our reactions. This will also help us know what to do with the feelings we are experiencing.

3. *Our Wills Choose.* Having had the initial reaction and having evaluated, we now must choose our course of action. Here is the crucial step! Our evaluation may have told us that our feelings (reactions) are not biblical; they are neither constructive nor loving. In spite of this we may choose to act on the basis of our feelings. This would be immature response and behavior. It is also disobedience and sin (James 4:17). However, the mature choice, the one that we have been discussing in order to change our thought patterns, is to heed the evaluation and act responsibly as a result of the evaluation even though our feelings might be otherwise.

Now back to my illustration of my feelings of impatience. When I recognize them, I admit them to God, to myself and to Florine, so that she might understand and even give me added support. Then by an act of my will I determine, with God's help, to demonstrate patience because that is what love is. "Love is patient, love is kind" (I Corinthians 13:4). I have found that as quickly as I do that, God energizes me to be patient! I have been surprised to see the distinct change that takes place from one brief moment to another. It is not because of my ability, but because I choose to submit my will to God's will. As a result, God energizes me.

Paul is right when he refers to Christ as the One "who will rescue me from this" (Romans 7:24). The Lord Jesus Christ is the One. But first we must be willing to change our thought patterns—we must set our minds, fix our thoughts on what is true and good and right, and submit our wills to His. In other words, we must do our part. Then God can release the energy which He wants to give us to accomplish His purpose.