

Biblical Counseling Training 201
Class 11 – June 3, 2018 // *Discerning Issues Biblically*

As a man thinketh, so is he. Proverbs 23:7

- I. Homework Review (from week 10, *Prayer in Counseling*)** **9:00-9:25**
- A. Share your memory verse, Hebrews 4:16
 - B. Discuss your thoughts about or ideas appreciated from article on **Prayer in Counseling**.
 - C. On your case study, how did you decide to:
 - 1. **Build involvement and gather data?**
 - 2. Three ways you would **give hope** to this counselee.
 - 3. **Identify the issues** they are facing in biblical language, as well as what you believe an accurate way of thinking biblically might change.
 - 4. What are things you think they **need to be taught** and what are some pieces of **homework** you would want to assign, even over 4-5 sessions?
- II. Discerning Problems Biblically – What is it?** **9:25-9:40**
- In some ways, this is a review of one of the six basic steps of biblical counseling. But we are doubling down on it because it is one of the steps most people have a hard time with. As we move towards the 301 class (our final and generally most advanced), this skill becomes all the more important for each of us to appreciate and work towards.**
- A. Isaiah 55:8-9 – *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.*
 - B. Col. 2:8 – *See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.*
 - C. Romans 12:2 – *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*
 - D. Proverbs 16:25 – *There’s a way that seems right to a man, but the ends thereof are the ways of death.*
 - E. Jeremiah 17:9 – *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick. Who can understand it?*
 - F. 1 Cor. 2:14-15a - *But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things.*
 - G. The battle in the Christian life is first a battle for the mind. Since people are what they think (see verse at top of the page), your goal as a biblical counselor is to help train and coach and encourage them to think about themselves, about God, about others and about their circumstances as God does.

- H. The result of someone learning to think that way is that she/he will experience “life and peace,” regardless of the challenges they face. **That is what Romans 8:6 promises.** The result of someone thinking God’s thoughts after Him is that they will be “restored, wise, marked by joy, and enlightened in understanding.” **That is what Psalm 19:7-12 promises.** If a secular counselor could guarantee their client will be marked all that, they would be on every television talk show. Yet God offers that and more, and we are passing it on to them.
- I. **Our goal in these courses is not to slam counsel derived from sources other than God’s word.** We know that some things from other sources may assist people in some circumstances. But, since the church is the “pillar and support of the truth,” and since our mandate is to make disciples who bear much fruit and become like Christ, that is what our counsel does.

III. Discerning, Identifying or Interpreting Issues Biblically – Why is it? 9:40

- A. When someone asks for counsel, they are **always asking a question.** The anxious person is wondering what can be done to make their anxiety go away. The frustrated parent of a teen is wondering what can be done to reduce the difficulty they face with their teenaged son or daughter. The couple who argues without resolving conflict wonders if there is a way to get along without so much drama. Those questions they ask are what counseling calls “issues.”
- B. To **help your counselee get answers** for their questions, you **need to clarify the questions** they are asking. However, since **your goal** in meeting with them is to teach, exhort and encourage them to **determine** and to **obey** what **God wants** them to think, to believe and to do in response to their questions (Deut. 28:1-14; Psalm 1; 119; Proverbs 3:5-6, 11-12; 19:20; Jer. 9:23-24; Matt. 7:24-27), you need to clarify/identify/discern/interpret their questions in *biblical language*.
- C. We want to help them find what God has for them because we operate from a conviction called “*biblical sufficiency*.” That means that we believe God has supplied in the Bible what we need to know and do in order to “respond to”, “fix” or “live with” all non-organic challenges we face.
- D. In order to help them find what God wants them to think, believe and do, the questions they are asking need to be translated **from “natural questions” into “biblical questions.”** That may sound odd, but if the answers we are seeking are going to be biblical, then the questions themselves also must be biblical. If the struggle a person has cannot be identified or discerned within a biblical framework, then we will be unable to find the Bible’s sufficient answer for dealing with the problem. We take the position that every non-organic question/issue has biblical answers – *even if the answers are less complete than we might wish.*

IV. Discerning/Interpreting Issues Biblically – How? 9:50

- A. For me, this is the hardest of the six counseling skills to teach, the skill new counselors struggle with most, and the skill most likely to keep growing throughout the rest of your life. It is also the skill which benefits the most from being part of a biblical counseling community and from continuing to read. Although all six steps are affected, this may be the skill most affected by your own walk with God.
- B. Teaching this requires examples and letting you practice. You learn by doing and by seeing. It also involves learning to turn a struggle into a question.

- C. Generally speaking, there are accurate ways to discern the questions people bring. However, no one ever completely gets this “right” because there are usually more biblical issues going on in a given event or situation than any of us can identify. Our goal is (out of all they say) to identify clearly the most impactful issue for things like
1. Their walk with God,
 2. Their safety and the safety of others,
 3. The unity of their marriage (where applicable).
- This list of “things like” is not comprehensive. It is a way to illustrate that when you look for what needs help, you have to zero in on some of the most important issues.
- D. Here are a few examples for you to consider:

Presented Issue	Natural Interpretation	Biblical Interpretation
Joseph’s brothers get rid of him by attempted murder and forced slavery which led to suffering.	They intended to harm him. Can’t blame him if he collapses internally from the rejection or retaliates.	God intended it to me for good, for the blessing of many others. (Genesis 50:20)
Ten spies say the land is good but that victory is impossible, while two spies say that with God, it is certain victory.	If 10/12 spies say we cannot win, then we probably cannot win. We’ll protect ourselves and doubt God. (Numbers 13:31-33)	God + zero is a majority. This is exactly what He promised. Let’s trust Him and move into the land. (Numbers 13:30)
“Jim Smith” says he is tired of his wife’s anger and demandingness. He wants nothing to do with her. She needs to clean up her act.	If Jim’s assertions can be verified, we need to meet with “Becky” and help her deal with her anger in a more biblical fashion.	Even if true, whether we meet with Becky or not, God can teach Jim in this situation. (1 Cor. 10:13; Eph. 5:25, ff.; 1 Peter 3:7)

E. Here are a few examples for you to work on as a table:

10:05-10:25

Presented Issue	Natural Interpretation	Biblical Interpretation
Amy Crestfallen shares that she just found that her husband Tom is into pornography. He is a supposedly committed believer. She is crushed, scared, angry and wants to know what to do.		
Oliver Downcast has been struggling with depression for 15 months, since he was laid off. He feels abandoned by the Lord and hopeless. He is 53.		
Penelope and Elmer Snit come in detailing conflicts without resolution. 38 years old, three kids in elementary and middle school (one with special needs), and a house under water, Elmer with diabetes and a weight problem. New to church.		

V. Homework

- A. **Memorize Proverbs 23:7** (top of page one)
- B. Select **two interactions you have this week** and **fill in the empty places on this chart**. *What was the presented issue? What was the natural interpretation or identification? What was a biblical interpretation or identification? (That is, what was really at issue, biblically? How important was it? Be ready to share with a table mate, but don't embarrass anyone in the process. 😊*
- C. Read **either article** (pp. 5-6 or pp. 7-12) and **underline or highlight your 4-5 favorite lines or quotes and be ready to share with your table next week** what they were and why.

**Why is Biblical Counseling So Concerned about the Labels Used to Describe People's Problems?
From Jay Adams, *The Language of Counseling*, Chapter 4, pp. 51-57**

(Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1981) Used by permission

Labeling is an area in which abuses have created problems for biblical counselors.

There are two extremes that must be considered. On the one hand, there are those who, fed up with abuses, reject labeling outright. Karl Menninger is one good example. Much of what he has said against abuses is informative and correct. But when Wallace Hamilton writes, "... we know that the name of a thing doesn't matter," I must dissent. On the other hand, there are those who think that they have achieved the acme of counseling when, as Erik Erikson put it, they engage in "diagnostic name calling."²

Both extremes are wrong. Names and labels for persons, things, situations, problems, and conditions are absolutely necessary not only for biblical counseling but also for carrying on everyday conversations with God and one's neighbor.

Labeling is Inevitable

Labeling is inevitable. God required Adam to give labels to the animals by which he classified them and made meaningful communication concerning them possible. God Himself calls some of us saints, others unbelievers; He speaks of drunkards, homosexuals, gossips, the slothful, etc. (see 1 Corinthians 6:9ff.). God labels. What we want, then, is not to eliminate labels; instead we want appropriate and accurate labels, labels that help because they tell the truth. The fundamental problem with labels is that, as sinners use them, labels often tell lies.

The Need for Accuracy

Labeling that is accurate helps the counselee to get a handle on his problems so that he can begin to do something about them. I can remember one counselee who was describing a problem he said he somehow couldn't put his finger on. After listening for a while I said, "Why, what you've been describing to me is just plain, old-fashioned pride!" Instantly, his eyes lit up and he shouted, "Ah! That's it! Now that I have a name for it, I know what I must do about it." The label enabled him to get a grasp of the problem and pointed to its solution.

The difficulty with labeling isn't that diagnosticians call names. The trouble comes (1) when they carelessly gum the wrong label on someone's file, (2) when they don't warn about the fact that labels often refer to temporary, changeable states of being, and (3) when they substitute labeling for genuine help as though a label were an end in and of itself rather than a means to an end. Labels identify, direct, classify, and enable us to understand and communicate. Labeling began in the garden of Eden, before the fall, as a good activity in which man was required to participate for his welfare and for the honor and glory of God. That it has been abused and done harm is a consequence of human perversity since the fall.

Why has there been such a ready acceptance of false labels? Because of man's basic nature, because of his thirst for knowledge and order, he must have labels. But because of his sin he will settle for the wrong ones. A wrong view of life leads to false classification. The combination of these two factors spells trouble.

Dangers

Because poor labeling is so dangerous, it is important for us to know ahead of time some of the misuses and abuses that arise in counseling. We must also be able to point out the insidious influence of poor labeling in the lives of our counselees and to avoid all such usage in our own counseling.

Living up to the Wrong Label

First, there is always the danger that some persons who have been inaccurately labeled will try to live up to the label. This can happen when one is looking for an excuse to get out of work or to justify his sinful behavior; or, as we so often tragically discover, the label shapes the person's life as he closes out options that the label doesn't allow him to enter. In all such cases counselees must be shown that the label doesn't really fit. A label may add a complicating problem to those that already exist.

A False Sense of Permanence

Secondly, to some, labels imply a permanence that does not actually exist. Always apply a label in a hope-giving way: "Thank God that you are a 'drunkard,' John, and not a so-called diseased 'alcoholic.'" Christ didn't come to deal with the fictional disease of alcoholism, but He did come to deal with the sin of drunkenness."

A Cover for Ignorance

Thirdly, often labels are given to cover ignorance and disagreement. Labels so used are sometimes also substituted for investigation, work, or careful analysis of a person's problem. In some cases they are used merely to enhance the ethos of the one who pins them on another. Be wary of one who will not explain a label; he may be trying to put something over on you. In the field of counseling this precaution is doubly apropos because of the widespread ignorance among practitioners, many of whom are very proud of their status. Such sinners, rather than admit ignorance, will sometimes resort to labeling.

But a similar thing can happen among Christians, even pastors, who get caught up in label usage that really doesn't grow out of understanding but out of ignorance. The next time you hear a Christian say someone has a "guilt complex," ask him what he means by that. Chances are he means no more than a sense of guilt. But that isn't what a so-called "guilt complex" is supposed to be. Yet many pastors and others use such words, seemingly because they sound more profound than simpler (but clearer) terms. The question, "What do you mean by that?" rarely can be overworked when you are discussing labels. More often than you might like to think, when you press the question, you will get a vague, unintelligible response from the one who a minute or so before was affixing labels with a flourish.

An 'Umbrella' Designation

Fourthly, watch out for umbrella labels like "schizophrenia," "neurosis" (a label dumped by the A.P.A. but still used by many), and "psychosis." These labels are bad because many different problems are categorized under each of them. Take "schizophrenia," for example. The same effect (bizarre behavior) can be generated by organic or by inorganic causes. To use the common label schizophrenia to cover all varieties of both, therefore, is foolish and certainly not helpful. One word to cover problems stemming from sleep loss, hallucinogenic drugs, brain tumors, chemical imbalances of various sorts, camouflaging, fear, inappropriate habits, etc., is, to say the least, confusing. Certainly, it is not helpful. And it can be quite misleading both to the counselee and to those who are treating him.

*In a book on schizophrenia, *The Construction of Madness*, where chapters are contributed by various writers, no two chapters are in agreement. The term schizophrenia disguises these differences of opinion and the ignorance involved, so that a counselee has little or no idea of the vast range of problems that may be the possible cause of his difficulty and the large variety of interpretations of these held by those who practice counseling. Terms covering up differences of opinion, then, can induce a counselee to submit himself for treatment when he ought not to do so without a thorough investigation of what the counselor means by the terms he uses and what the particular practitioner intends to do about it. Moreover, the common umbrella term tends to keep the practitioner from making a complete investigation of the problem himself. It locks him into his theory and tends to close out other options, when it is essential to investigate what, in each particular case, is behind such an instance of behavior.*

A Conceptual Limit

Fifthly, note that labels limit. It is possible to use a label in such a way that one blinds himself to other factors. Often, a problem is multi-caused; there is no one cause, but a combination of several features lies at the bottom of the difficulty. A label can eliminate these far too easily. The simple statement, "John is a farmer," for instance, limits. One tends to think of him as a farmer only and not as a husband, a father, and an elder in the church. The label brings one feature into such prominence that others are lost sight of. Of course, the same thing can happen when a biblical counselor says, "John is an adulterer." Some are repentant adulterers, some are not. You know little about John's farming or his adultery by that sentence alone. You must remember to deal with each case as John Smith, farmer, or John Smith, adulterer. The category word is not useless; it teaches you something. But it must not be allowed to limit you so that you do not investigate all the facts of each case individually.

Take the phrase, "out of touch with reality," that is so readily attached to people in cases that are labeled "catatonic schizophrenia." This label in conjunction with that phrase can keep a counselor from pursuing communication with the counselee ("If he's out of touch, why bother?"). It structures the relationship and limits counseling. You get from a counselee no more than what you expect, and what you expect is what you look for. But, if, on the contrary, you believe that a person like this, so long as he has suffered no physical damage, is indeed fully in touch with reality, and yet chooses to behave as though he were not, that in turn structures quite a different relationship and dictates counseling of the most intensive communicative sort.

For these, and other similar reasons, the Christian counselor will be careful about his acceptance and use of labels. Whenever possible, he will use biblical labels or labels that clearly express biblical concepts. And he will be careful to use them as the Bible does.

CHANGING YOUR THOUGHT PATTERNS

BY GEORGE SANCHEZ

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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.