

VIII. Suggestions for Avoiding Distorted Thinking.

As mentioned in chapter two, distorted thinking refers to “any reasoning process that distorts reality.”¹ We often distort reality for various selfish or “altruistic” reasons such as:

We do not want to do what we know we should do,
but if we do not do it we and perhaps others will regret it (Matt. 25:44; James 4:17).
We do not want something to be true,
but it is, or it did happen so we need to accept it, grieve it, and move on (Rom. 8:28).
We do not want ourselves or someone else to suffer or be hurt by trials and troubles,
but everyone will suffer—may this produce better character (John 16:33; James 1:2-3).
We do not want to admit we failed at something, or failed someone,
but we must be honest with ourselves and others to learn from our mistakes (James 5:16).
We do not want others to notice our immaturity, weaknesses or how bad we really are,
but we are weak and often do bad things (Rom. 3:23; 7:15-25; 2 Cor. 12:7-10).
We do not want to inform others of how bad they really are,
but they may really want or need helpful feedback (Gal. 6:1; Col. 3:8-25).
We do not want others to know that we are using them or taking advantage of them,
but we often do whether we realize it or not (Lev. 19:35; Phil. 2:2-4).
We do not always want to be given any advice, or any kind of criticism,
but we actually need it (Prov. 2; 3:1-18).
We do not want to be under anyone’s authority,
but everyone is under authority (Rom. 13; Heb. 13:17)
We do not want to be accountable to anyone,
but we will be accountable at least to God (Rom. 14:12; Gal. 6:7; Heb. 9:27; 13:4-9), and
more frequently than ever before some governments are holding people accountable for
their illegal financial and sexual behaviors.

Put simply, “truth is reality, what exists ... Conversely, what doesn’t exist can’t be true, even if we want it to be. ... truth separates what is real and what is not ... God designed us to live in reality.”² The steps below for overcoming distorted thinking will be of maximum benefit if taken in the order presented and if each scripture passage referred to is read, contemplated, and applied.

¹Peurifoy, Internet.

²Cloud and Townsend, 2001, 318, 322, 328.

Step One

The first step for avoiding distorted thinking is:

Humble yourself before God admitting your spiritual poverty (Matt. 5:3) by confessing to him your wrong motives, wrong choices, failures and sins in every area of your life as you become aware of them, and by recommitting yourself to love God and to love others (even enemies) as yourself.³

Ask God to search your heart and point out your failures (Ps. 139:23-24) even though he already knows your every thought and action because nothing is hid from him (Ps. 139:4-18; Ezek. 11:5; Matt. 6:8; John 2:24-5). The key here is to be transparent and honest about yourself—you are powerless to do what is right (Rom. 7:15), or to say “no” to temptation when you allow tempting thoughts to stay more than a second or so in your mind (2 Cor. 10:3-5; James 1:13-27). You may have failed to thank God for or rejoiced about the trial or temptation you faced (Phil. 3:1; 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16, 18; James 1:2-4). You may have failed to pray continually (1 Thess. 5:17), or prayed about what has made you worried or anxious (Phil. 4:6-7). You may have failed to ask God to show you his preference for your escape or failed to allow him to empower you to successfully take it (1 Cor. 10:13; James 1:5-8). You may have failed to honor God above all (Matt. 6:33), or failed to think as you should (Phil. 4:8).

This establishes the foundation for concentrating later on a specific type of distorted thinking you seek to overcome. This one step combines about five steps of the twelve-step recovery programs,⁴ but it encourages you to face reality as God sees it, not offering the option of allowing false gods or erroneous doctrines to “assist” in your recovery.

³2 Chron. 7:14; Prov. 16:18-19; 29:23; Matt. 18:5; 23:12; Phil. 2:8; James 4:6, 10; 1 Pet. 5:5-9.

⁴“Styles of Distorted Thinking by Adult Children Anonymous,” Internet. Besides the list of fifteen styles, this article also describes the twelve steps used in the main twelve-step programs.

Many people feel overwhelmed by the huge number of laws and guidelines in the Bible as well as in their particular government, culture, organization, or church which they are expected to obey or follow. We realize that we cannot possibly remember them all. But Jesus, fully aware of this confusion, made it easy for us by reducing them all down to just two in Matt. 22:37, 39-40:

- Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.
 - Love your neighbor as yourself.
- All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

If you could meditate upon these several times each day, you would more likely think first before speaking or acting with wrong motives. The proof that these two commandments are being obeyed can easily be noticed by others when the fruit of the spirit are clearly visible in your life (Gal. 5:22-23).

Only God knows reality as it was,⁵ is, and will be. He can reveal to you through the Bible and through his followers all that you need to know to live a godly life (2 Pet. 1:3). As a fallen human being you are too easily prone to pride, self-protection, self-justification, and guilt, just as were Adam and Eve were (Gen. 3).

Perhaps you have allowed the world to squeeze you into its mold (Rom. 12:1, Phillips) and you have become insensitive to wrong and sinful behaviors or motivations. This may have led you to adopt one or more of several types of distorted thinking as defense mechanisms. You may have bravely attempted to keep up the image you desired others to have of you no matter what it may have cost you or anyone else. You may have exercised damage control when you “inadvertently” looked bad to others. You may have feared that others would not like you or have anything to do with you if they knew what you were really like, so you have devised

⁵It has been very popular for humans to rewrite history in order to persuade the reader’s or viewer’s mind to their way of thinking.

several distortions (half truths or worse) to cover up your “mistakes” or to earn their attention, interest, love, or forgiveness.

You may still be wearing a mask to prevent anyone from seeing the real you. The problem with masks is: no one can get close to you and you cannot get close to anyone so there can be no genuine love flowing between you and anyone else. It is time to remove the mask, accept your weaknesses, and ask God and others to empower you to love others and to do what is right (1 Cor. 13; 2 Cor. 12:9-10; Heb.13:4-9, 15-17).

In overcoming distorted thinking “our model is Jesus, who in his deprived state did not meet his needs through sin, but by dependence on God.”⁶ True, you have the sin nature which Jesus did not have since he did not fall (sin) as did Adam and Eve (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45-49), but you must look “beyond the sin nature to what is motivating and driving the sin”⁷—to discover the basis for the craving which tempts you to utilize a particular type of distorted thinking as a means to satisfy that desire as soon as possible. Then, ask God to show how the craving can be met in a way that would honor him.

Sometimes the reality is that you may actually value something that is not biblical, such as a strong distaste for any authority over you (contrary to Rom. 13; Heb. 13:4-9, 15-17). In spite of the written or stated goals you claim to be striving for as you work for others, you may discover that you continually sabotage them thus actually “winning by losing”—proving that you can do as you like and don’t actually have to submit to authority.⁸ But you have been liberated from the stranglehold of sin if you have surrendered your life and future to God who draws you to himself (Rom. 6).

⁶Cloud and Townsend, 1992, 308 (cf. Heb. 4:15).

⁷Ibid.

⁸Cloud and Townsend, 1994, 167.

If you actually have a hunger for God (i.e., if you are poor in spirit, Matt. 5:3) you need no longer feel separated from the life of God, because you are not enslaved to think and act like those who are still separated and who have lost all sensitivity to sin (Eph. 4:18-19). Instead you can soon experience within Christian community “support, connection, honesty, talents, healing, confession, repentance, correction, and discipline. . . . Strength and life [will] have replaced neediness.⁹ If God and others have forgiven you (even though you may not “feel” forgiven), then you must also forgive yourself, otherwise you are in reality claiming to be more just than God, though certainly less loving, merciful and graceful.

Summary of step one: After humbly confessing that you cannot think or live without distortions because you do not have an adequate understanding of reality without God’s guidance (which includes guidance through fellow believers), recommit yourself to love God and others as yourself and receive by faith his freely and graciously offered forgiveness (Matt. 6:12, 14-16; 1 John 1:9).

Step Two

Be patient, the fourth fruit of the spirit. It is actually a necessary ingredient for loving one’s neighbor as one’s self. Patience is needed because it may take time for you to reduce or eliminate specific types of distorted thinking. This trait is also needed toward those who are impatient with your progress or are trying to adjust to the “new” you (your soon to be transformed thinking; Rom. 12:1-2). For some distorted reason, many feel that they must respond quickly to whatever another person has said or done, perhaps even to the extent of responding in kind. But the Bible is clear that we should instead “be swift to hear, but slow to speak,” (James

⁹Cloud and Townsend, 1992, 309.

1:19) and that revenge (an “eye for an eye,” etc.; Matt. 5:38-48) is not our department, but God’s (Ps. 94:1; Heb. 10:30).

Prayerful, careful, and patient consideration about the two greatest commandments must be done first to insure as much as possible that any subsequent thoughts, words, or actions will not be regretted later. The objective is not to tear someone down or get even with them but to patiently evangelize them, encourage them or build them up in the faith (Matt. 28:19-20; Eph. 3:16-19; Col. 2:2; 2 Tim. 3:16), and when necessary to appropriately reprove, rebuke and exhort them with patience and sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:2). The benefit of patiently loving your neighbor as yourself is that you are not constantly focused on yourself and your own problems. This will enable you to see your problems from a broader perspective, i.e., you are not the only one with your particular problems (1 Cor. 10:13). Others have had the same or similar ones and have made progress in resolving them. Perhaps they could shed some light on the nature of the particular problem you have yet to resolve.

Realize that you will never successfully overcome every type of distorted thinking in every situation within your lifetime.¹⁰ However, you can make major progress and become more tolerable and perhaps even more enjoyable to be around than you were before becoming aware of your self-protective and self-justifying distorted thinking patterns (Prov. 25:11; Col. 3:12-25; Heb. 13:5-9).

Summary of step two: Be patient with yourself and with others before forming any conclusions, verbal responses or taking any action. Also be patient with yourself and with others to make the changes which need to be made as you all grow together “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

¹⁰Cohen, 8.

Step Three

Pray that God will enable two or three people who already know you to have the patience, concern, and confidentiality to encourage and challenge you to greatly reduce or eliminate the types of distorted thinking ruts you so easily fall into. These are the type of people who can provide a relatively safe community which can listen, support, and provide helpful feedback without judging or condemning you. There may be little if any motivation to eradicate one's main types of distorted thinking in isolation since they may remain (or become again) your blind spots.

Even if one or more of these is not yet a believer, he or she may still be of some assistance in helping you overcome a particular distortion that they recognize as harmful. They may eventually yearn for a relationship like what you or others have with Christ in the process as you or they follow him more closely. Meet as regularly as possible with these people so that you can make significant progress within the next year or more.

Summary of step three: Prayerfully solicit the assistance of two or three trusted friends. Potentially they should be trusted people who can help you determine your most damaging types of distorted thinking and assist you in successfully designing a strategy to eliminate or at least minimize them as discussed in the next step. If you are married, ideally, your spouse could be one of these if he or she is not an enabler or co-dependent.

Step Four

Identify the types of distorted thinking you or others notice that you tend to use and devise a plan to overcome them. Remember, "the truth is, there are many times when all of us

engage in distorted thinking or are misguided by our irrational beliefs.”¹¹ As you may have seen in chapter five, Jesus confronted many of these types. Most are based first and foremost in an erroneous understanding of God, the result of a nonexistent, shallow, or less than optimally intimate relationship to him. Unfortunately, distorted thinking is a deep and dangerous rut that even “mature” Christians today still easily fall into. Much distorted thinking can be overcome and avoided within Christian community without the expense of professional counselors. It is possible to break out of those unhealthy ruts and learn to think more like Christ who is our model for thinking and living in this world.

Problems in general, though, may be very difficult to overcome if they are not at least adequately described or defined. Being aware of the different types of distorted thinking and of how insidious and destructive they actually are to you and to others may provide sufficient motivation to overcome them. Look over the list in chapter five with your confidential friends and select one or two that you all agree you may likely have success with in a relatively short time, and then gradually tackle the more difficult ones one at a time. If you have difficulty selecting one or two from the list of fifteen, perhaps you could concentrate on one of Ferguson’s list of seven which tend to be very destructive to relationships. These are listed in the appendix.

A proven strategy is the ABCDE approach which involves keeping a written account of the:

Activating events which occur that elicit your targeted type(s) of distorted thinking,
 Beliefs you have about the event (your self-talk),
 Consequences – your “emotional (feeling) or behavioral responses to the situation,” and
 Disputing of the untruths you have told yourself with more rational, truthful thoughts to tell yourself. Then,
 Enjoy more positive or appropriate responses.

¹¹Karen Siegfriedt, “Distorted Thinking vs. Love Command,” 15 July 2001 [sermon online]; available from <http://www.saintjudes.org/src/Sermons/20010715ks.html>; Internet; accessed 10 January 2003.

As you honestly and truthfully record the ABCD aspects, you will discover that you can better evaluate the truthfulness and healthiness of your beliefs in light of scripture and guidance of the Holy Spirit when you express them in written form. Though it may be humbling to keep a record of attitudes and beliefs you have had to discard, it will enable you to more confidently empower others you encounter to discard the same or similar unhealthy attitudes and beliefs.

Then share with one of these significant members of your group what you have written in your journal—the activating events, your self-talk, your feelings or responses—and whether or not you successfully disputed the untruths and replaced them with truthful thoughts. If you have a spouse, you may make quicker progress by discussing this at an agreed upon time each day or night or at least several times each week.¹² The cost of the phone calls or email messages if separated due to schedules will be worth the investment not only for progress in this area but also for the entire relationship.

“Rationalizations and distorted thinking will come like second nature to your mind as you work through withdrawal pains. Lean on your support network as you maintain your sobriety.”¹³ The more success you have, the more you will be motivated to assist others so that they too can experience more freedom and joy in the Christian life (John 10:10).

Summary of step four: List the types of distorted thinking you and others notice you employ, and plan out a strategy to overcome them beginning with the most damaging ones one at a time.

¹²Ferguson, 1997, 162-3

¹³Rosenau, 364.

Step Five

Express your thankfulness and gratefulness to God and to others (2 Thess. 5:18): “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Thank God also for your network. Thank God not only when you succeed, but also when you experience the inevitable relapse; not only when others appreciate you, but also when they ridicule, or mock you. Remember that God is able to use successes as well as failures to his advantage (Rom. 8:28). Relapses are not the end of the world—they simply remind us that we need to be more dependent on God, more interdependent (not co-dependent) with others in Christian community and be relentlessly loving in our honesty and truthfulness. You may have lied so much as you lived your secret life that truthfulness may not come naturally at first.¹⁴

Step Six

Commit yourself to deepen your relationship with God and with your significant others such as spouse (if married), family, and close friends. Genuine close intimacy with God (or a mate) cannot be achieved without regularly exercising the disciplines of simplicity, silence, solitude, and surrender.¹⁵ This will require a daily investment of time in honest prayer and meditation on the guidance God provides through scripture and reflection of helpful conversation with others who know him deeply. If you have not already done so, read through the first two books of the Bible, Genesis and Exodus, and then Matthew, or Luke, followed by Acts, and Romans to get an overview of God’s will and plan for people on this planet. Studying the book of Romans and other books written by the Apostle Paul can also help to improve your thinking process. When you finish these continue to read other books that you may find interesting and

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Charles Swindoll, *Intimacy with the Almighty* (Nashville, TN: J. Countryman, 1999), 74-5.

helpful, such as Psalms which record some of King David's struggles to overcome distorted thinking. Reading through the book of Proverbs, one chapter a day, will encourage you to seek for wisdom as for treasure and will remind you of the importance of honesty with yourself, as well as with God and others. Married couples could benefit greatly by doing much of the above together as well as by praying together openly, honestly, and lovingly at least once each day or evening (different from normal meal times).

If you are not already involved in a church which is committed to understanding and practicing the Bible, pray that God will lead you to one. Ask to be involved in a growth group (may also be called cell group, small group, study group, or community life group). Boldly go where you have never gone before by asking advice or counsel of godly men and women about whatever is troubling you as you seek to follow Christ.

If you have been attending or leading in such a church for some time and were pretending to be more righteous than you are, come "out of the closet" and admit to a few others (who are not part of a rumor subculture) that you are a fellow struggling human being seeking to allow God to transform your mind and your lifestyle (Rom. 12:1-2). Join a small group of Christians and grow together in Christ-likeness. Even seasoned pastors and Christian leaders need a safe environment to open up and be real with others about their struggles if they are serious about making progress in overcoming the types of distorted thinking they tend to use.

Do not invest large sums of money even on good Christian books, because owning them will not improve your thinking unless you actually read and apply what is in them. Many of them could be borrowed from others or from libraries. Then buy only those which you've read that would be helpful to reread. This is all about becoming a good manager of the resources God has provided you. As you learn more about stewardship of finances, perhaps you could include a few

missionaries in your prayers, correspondence, and in your investment portfolio for the Kingdom of God. They too struggle with various types of distorted thinking and may not have what they feel is a safe environment to open up and be real with others about their struggles.

Restatement of step six: Commit yourself to deepen your relationship with God and with significant others (i.e., with your family—especially with your spouse if you have one—and with at least two or three same-sex, godly friends or mentors).

Step Seven

Finally, and from now on, keep a list of those you have deliberately or inadvertently offended, defrauded, abused, etc., as well as those who have done so to you and check with your group regarding the appropriate extent, if any, of restoring each relationship. Those which are not possible or appropriate to restore should be forgiven and should be removed from your list. For those relationships which should be restored, prayerfully design a plan (in consultation with those committed to your improvement) to do or say what is conducive for reconciliation.

Remember the Dick Innes' poem about distorted thinking:

“As ‘every unshed tear is a prism through which all of life’s hurts are distorted,’ so every unresolved conflict is a filter through which all of my beliefs about life, myself, others, friends, love, and about God are distorted too.”