

# Four Questions to Help You Examine Unwanted Thoughts

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Do you experience thoughts you don't want? Do you ruminate on beliefs about yourself, the world, or God that feel true even though you know they are not? Do you feel tormented by depressed, anxious, or intrusive thinking? Are you uncertain about what to do with some of the thoughts that enter your mind?

Unwanted thoughts come in many forms. Perhaps you are often worried or anxious. Maybe depressed, suicidal, and hopeless thoughts frequently cross your mind. You may struggle with thoughts that are irrational, sinful, intrusive, or self-deprecating. No matter the type of unwanted thoughts you experience, perhaps you feel stuck as you try to change them.

There is no single magic solution to changing our thoughts. When unwanted thoughts linger, we need a variety of approaches that draw on a range of biblically faithful strategies. One such strategy is described in Scripture as the process of *examining ourselves* (see Lam. 3:40; 2 Cor. 13:5). Examination is one way for us to "keep a close watch" on our lives and our doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). It is how we discern the accuracy and helpfulness of the thoughts that cross our minds.

We often think of examination as a process of searching our hearts for sin. But the goal of discerning our thoughts "is not to simply avoid the evil in this life; it is to learn what is good so that we might embrace and enjoy it."<sup>[1]</sup> Yes, one of our goals is to take sinful thoughts captive. But the larger goal of examination is for us to cultivate still and quiet minds filled with enjoyable thoughts that are pleasing to God.

You can practice examining your thoughts by identifying one unwanted thought you struggle with, looking at it curiously, and asking yourself the following questions.

## **Question #1: Is This Thought True?**

God directs us to think thoughts that are true (see Phil. 4:8). We can assess if a thought is true by seeing whether it aligns with Scripture (see John 17:17) and by asking people we trust if we are seeing things clearly (see Prov. 12:15). This is an important question because we experience much heartache and trouble when we hold on to thoughts that aren't accurate.

Untrue thoughts about our identity pull us into despair. *I am worthless*. False predictions about the future and inaccurate assumptions about other people enslave us in anxiety. *I'm going to fail that test. She must hate me*. Wrong beliefs about God and our standing in the world leave us wallowing in hopelessness. *God must not care that I am suffering. People would be better off without me*. The first step of examining a thought is to determine whether it is accurate.

## **Question #2: Is This Thought Helpful?**

It's not enough to think thoughts that are true. We have to apply wisdom and sensibility to our true thoughts by thinking them at the proper time in the proper context and with the proper motive.

It may be true that you have a meeting tomorrow, but the middle of the night probably isn't a helpful time to ruminate on what you will say. It's true that you struggle with sin, but it likely won't be helpful to think about your sin nature over and over again when you are feeling depressed. It may be true that your neighbor has a beautiful house that you wish you had, but fixating on this truth won't help your personal sanctification. After you determine whether a thought is accurate, your next step is to ask yourself, "Is it *helpful* to think this thought? Is it helpful for reducing my suffering? Is it helpful for increasing my holiness?"

## **Question #3: Is This Thought Appropriate to My Situation?**

When a difficult thought arises, we should also remember that our ultimate goal is not necessarily to make our thoughts more positive. It can be appropriate and biblical to think sad, negative, unpleasant, angry, or fearful thoughts.

If a bear is chasing you in the forest, you will hopefully and appropriately have thoughts filled with fear. Those fearful thoughts may keep you alive. If you witness abuse, it is appropriate to have thoughts filled with anger. Those angry thoughts could lead you to seek safety and justice for the victim. If you are facing extreme trials in life, it will often be more appropriate for you to let your thoughts wander

toward cries of lament than to force your mind toward positivity. Our thoughts should appropriately reflect our circumstances. Biblically faithful thoughts are sometimes difficult and unpleasant thoughts.

### **Question #4: Is This Thought Complete?**

Sometimes we assess a thought and find that it checks all the boxes. The thought is, indeed, true, helpful, and appropriate. But our examination should not end there. We still need to consider if the thought is complete on its own.

One reason we need this question is because we sometimes begin to think that half the truth represents the whole truth. In reality, “a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth.”<sup>[2]</sup> In your struggle with unwanted thoughts, what half-truths have you started to believe? Yes, it’s true you are a sinner. But what gospel truth do you need to hold in tandem with that reality? Yes, it’s true that you are suffering, but what truth about God might be helpful for you to hold beside your pain? Yes, your problems may be too big for you to handle, but what encouraging words are also true about your situation?

Asking ourselves, “Is this thought complete?” often leads us to remember or observe thoughts we had forgotten or down-played that are relevant to the situation. “This is sad” may be true, helpful, and appropriate. But “This is sad *and* God is faithful” is true, helpful, and appropriate and offers us a more complete perspective.

Here’s another way to ask this question that I have found helpful. As you examine a thought, ask yourself, “And what else?” I learned this question from a wise counselor, my friend Eliza Huie.<sup>[3]</sup> When we ask, “And what else?” it prompts us to consider other questions: What other thoughts are true? What other thoughts are helpful and appropriate to my situation? What noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy thoughts am I missing (see Phil. 4:8)?

### **Interrupt Your Thoughts in Real Time**

The more you practice asking yourself these questions, the more you will increase your ability to interrupt your thoughts when it really matters. Later today, you may get caught in a loop of anxious, worst-case-scenario thinking. *Everything always goes wrong for me.* If you have taken the time to practice, you may find yourself spontaneously pausing to ask, *Is this true?* Next week, an unwanted thought may come to mind. *I completely failed.* Perhaps this time you will stop and wonder, *Is this*

*thought complete?* You have just created space. You have just created a foundation for changing the unwanted thoughts that cross your mind.

## Questions for Reflection

1. What types of unwanted thoughts do you struggle with the most?
2. How can you remember to slow down and ask yourself these questions when unwanted thoughts intrude?

**Editor's Note:** Today's blog is an excerpt from *A Still and Quiet Mind* by Esther Smith, which can be purchased online from [Amazon](#).

[1] Esther Smith, *A Still and Quiet Mind*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Eliza Huie, "Changing Negative Thinking," ElizaHuie.com, accessed July 11, 2022, <https://elizahuie.com/2021/04/09/1066/>.