

Rethinking the Bible with Jack Pelham

Episode 1

Introduction: God Cares About How You Think

Welcome to Rethinking the Bible with Jack Pelham. This is an audio podcast, where we apply Reality-Based Thinking to the task of interpreting the Bible. Reality-Based Thinking is a method of thinking that seeks to make constant use of honesty, rationality, and responsibility in seeking out the reality of things. And in case you're wondering, we define reality as the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to one's perceptions, beliefs, wishes, or attitudes about them.

Thanks so much for listening to this introductory episode. I'm your host, Jack Pelham, and there's a lot to say about my perspective, and why I've started this podcast, but I'm eager to jump right into the Bible study in this first episode, because my goal today is to get your attention. So I'll just give you this one-liner about the "WHY?" of today's study, and then I'll jump right in:

Christians disagree considerably over how the human mind is to be used--over whether thinking is a good thing or a bad thing to do---so I'm going to show you a bunch of Bible passages that show that God wants us to think, and that he wants us to do it well.

So there's your introduction, and now let's jump in. I've selected several short passages of scripture that I think are good evidence about what God thinks about how we humans---and particularly, we believers---should be thinking. As we read, I hope you'll use the opportunity to consider your own thought life and to compare it to what the scriptures say.

We'll start with this one-liner from Haggai 1:7

[Haggai 1:7](#) This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways." (NIV)

I love this one-liner as a brief snapshot of part of what God is like. I hear lots of talk today from Christians who believe that thinking is some sort of unspiritual activity. They like to talk about it being carnal or counterproductive. They'll talk about overthinking, and they'll frequently tell thinkers things like "you think too much". But I think that God's example here is contrary to all that.

If we ponder it, we can infer some very useful information about God from this short quotation here. God's Temple in Jerusalem had been previously destroyed, and later, the people were living in nice houses while the Temple was still in ruins. He tells them this isn't right, and advises them to think about it carefully---about how their priorities were off. I doubt God would say this if it didn't think it was proper for humans to think about themselves. No, he's asking them to turn on the quality control center in their minds---if you will---and that's what some cognitive scientists would call the Reflective Mind---and to reassess how they've been living. And I think that you'll see that the promotion of this sort of self-assessment is a continuing theme throughout the Bible.

So, moving on in this whirlwind study, let's look at Isaiah 1:18, for another one-liner. Remember, the goal today isn't to do an exhaustive study on the topic, but to show you enough evidence to suggest that God really does want us thinking, and thinking well. So here's Isaiah 1:18:

[Isaiah 1:18a](#) Come now, and let us *reason* together, says the Lord. (ESV)

I love this passage for several reasons. In another place in the same book—in Isaiah 55:9—God says:

[Isaiah 55:9](#)

For as the heavens are **higher** than the earth, so are my **ways higher** than your **ways** and my thoughts than your thoughts. (NIV)

And surely, God’s mental capabilities far exceed our own. But look what he’s saying to them back in chapter 1. Again, he says:

[Isaiah 1:18a](#) Come now, and let us *reason* together, says the Lord. (ESV)

This is not a God who thought that humans were wasting their time to try to use their minds. Even though his mind is greater, he wants them to use THEIR minds. And it’s not just to say they did. No, he seems to be aimed at getting them to settle on the RIGHT conclusion. Indeed, look at how the NIV puts it:

Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, let us **settle** the matter,” says the LORD. (NIV)

Interestingly—and in case you’re wondering what the discussion was about in this passage, God was trying to get their attention about their behavior. He was reminding them of his long-standing promise that if they continue to sin against him, they’ll be condemned, but that if they repent---that is, if they change their minds about how to run their lives---they will be blessed. And while there had been some notably-faithful Israelites among them over the centuries, most of the Israelites had had long resisted thinking this through to its reasonable ends. So here he calls them to “settle the matter” rightly---rather than to keep leaving it up in the air, as if God’s predictions to them about what would eventually become of them may or may not have been true. They were supposed to think it through and draw some correct conclusions about how they were to live. Again, it just doesn’t seem that God wants humans to be mindless and careless, but thoughtful and careful and reasonable. He’s trying to get them to break their habitual assumptions, and to do some new thinking---some deliberate thinking.

He doesn’t say, “Come, let us assume together”, but “let us reason together” —and reasoning takes a LOT more mental energy and effort than assuming does. And he doesn’t say, “Come, let us default to tradition together.” No, he wants them actively engaged in thinking for themselves. He doesn’t even say, “Come, let us RECITE something together. No, again, he wants them actively thinking---and I don’t think he was just talking to the leaders; I think he wanted all people to be thinkers in this matter.

Now I want to jump ahead to the New Testament to show you a similar passage, but this time, the speaker is Jesus. This is in John 7:24:

[John 7:24](#) “Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.” (NIV)

Having read many books in cognitive science, this one really gets my attention, because Jesus is addressing a very specific cognitive error with the Pharisees. That is, he’s not only disagreeing with some conclusion they have drawn, but is counseling them about their WAY of thinking---their METHODS of processing information and of drawing conclusions. And that’s very interesting to me. They were already using their minds to make a judgment in a matter—regarding whether he should have healed

somebody on the Sabbath or not—but they were using the wrong method for making that judgment. They had judged him as being guilty of sin—not because the healing itself was a bad thing, but because it went against their tradition---so they said---to do this on the SABBATH.

It seems from the story that they were simply looking for a reason to find fault with Jesus, and they found something they could pretend was a fault---but it wasn't a correct judgment, was it? No, he had done a wonderful thing. And since they had a rule against working on the Sabbath, they just decided to call Jesus' healing "work", and to condemn it on the basis of their Sabbath traditions, even though they themselves allowed circumcision on the Sabbath, and did not consider THAT to be work. Jesus makes this point to them to show the inconsistency of their judgment—that is, of their final conclusion in the matter.

But there's something more here---something really big to be noticed. What does he tell them to do? He tells them to "judge correctly". This implies that they had NOT judged correctly in the matter so far, but it also implies that he believed they were CAPABLE of judging correctly. So think about that. Some people say that man is simply **incapable** of thinking straight, but Jesus doesn't seem to buy into that here. And further, God doesn't seem to have bought into it in the two passages we looked at before this one. No, he expects them to get things right when he says "come let us reason together" and when he says "give careful thought to your ways". In neither case does he seem to believe they were incapable of drawing reality-based conclusions.

So here's Jesus criticizing their manner of thinking. And while he doesn't use modern cognitive science words to say it, he's telling them about a mental skill that some cognitive scientists today would call "decoupling". Let me explain decoupling. The first thing to come to mind in any given situation is not always the most accurate thing. But if we're the sort to be fixated and obsessed with the first thing that comes to mind, then we're going to get lots of things wrong---not everything, mind you, but lots of things. So he's telling them to decouple from their first impression---or from "appearances"----in order to think the thing through in a reality-based way, rather than in an impression-based way. He's asking them to THINK rather than to just "go with their gut". He's asking them to process the thing, rather than merely to assume. He's challenging their traditions, and calling for some new mental work-----as if he were the same God who had previously said "come let us reason together" and "give careful thought to your ways". And indeed, he was that same God.

After giving lots of thought to the importance of our thinking these past few years, I've developed a useful saying about us. I say this:

Nothing is more "You" than the way you think.

Some people seem to want to believe that human thinking is not our most quintessential human characteristic, but I think it is. I don't think there's anything deeper down inside of us than what we do in our minds. And you don't have to be a genius to know that it's possible to do or say one thing on the outside, and to have something totally different in mind on the inside. So which is more important? The inside or the outside? Well, I think I can make a good case that to God, what's on the inside is even more important than what's on the outside. And that's why I say that "there's nothing more YOU than the way you think." Now I want to show you one of the passages from which I get this idea. It's in Proverbs 23, verses 6 and 7, and Solomon makes a point in passing here, but we can catch it if we pay attention:

[Proverbs 23:6](#) Do not eat the bread of a miser,
Nor desire his delicacies;
⁷ For **as he thinks in his heart, so is he.**
“Eat and drink!” he says to you,
But his heart is not with you.

This one’s a little harder to see, but I think it’s saying that the real person is the one that’s happening in the inner thoughts, and not necessarily in the outward actions. It says:

For **as he thinks in his heart, so is he.**

If you want to know what the man’s really like, you’ll need to know what he’s thinking in his heart----or his mind----and in biblical language, these are both the same idea. They used the word “heart” figuratively just as we often do---although in our scientific age, we’re much more likely to use “heart” literally, since we know more about physiology than they did back then.

So, back to the point: the most important thing about the person is how he or she is thinking on the inside.

Jesus gets into this himself one day, while fussing at the Pharisees again. (And we should probably thank these people, for they gave occasion for Jesus to voice many of the things he taught!)

This is in Matthew 23, starting in verse 25:

²⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! **First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.** ²⁷ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So **you also outwardly appear righteous to others,** but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

This one’s pretty easy for us all to get, because we have all run into people who put on a show outside that’s different from what’s going on on the inside. And what is the most important thing to these people? It’s the outside. It’s the show. And more specifically, it’s what other people think of them. But what’s the most important to Jesus? It’s the inside. It’s the reality of what we are like in our private thoughts and intentions. And look at this fantastic promise he makes them: “First clean the INSIDE of the cup, that the outside also may be clean.”

That’s fantastic! He’s giving them the true key for REALLY being outwardly righteous----it’s to be righteous on the inside---where one’s thoughts and beliefs and attitudes and intentions live. If the inside had been important to these men, they wouldn’t have been constantly putting on a show for others to see. And if you read the whole chapter of Matthew 23, you’re going to see that they did not get everything about that outward show RIGHT. Not surprisingly, they had made some errors in their assessment of what righteous behavior would look like. But if they had been the sort to be truly

mindful, BOTH of the inside, and of the scriptures, they would have caught the error before having put it into practice.

So, Jesus was teaching a righteousness for the inside **and** the outside. And how could that not include the way we think? Indeed, it does!

So let's look at yet another encounter Jesus had. This one's in Matthew 12, starting in verse 33. This time, he had done another healing—it was a boy who was demon-possessed, blind, and mute. The Pharisees, it appears, did not have the power to drive out the demon, nor to heal the blindness or muteness, and it appears that they resented the fact that Jesus had this power, where they did not. Have you ever known anybody like that?

So they said that it must be by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that Jesus had done all this---as if it could not possibly have been by his own power that he did it. Well, this led to quite a lengthy discussion, which I don't think the Pharisees enjoyed very much. Their main tactic was to put on a show---which consisted largely of words carefully chosen to put them in the best possible light---as they understood it, anyway. But Jesus wasn't content to focus only on what came out of their mouths. Rather, he wanted to talk about their hearts. And this kind of behavior that Jesus does here---if you don't know this already---is very aggravating to those who are hiding sin in their minds, and putting on an outward show. So he tells them this in Matthew 12:33 and following---and he's using some parabolic language here, so we have to work a little bit at understanding him well, but it's not that hard. He says:

Matthew 12:33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for **a tree is known by its fruit.**³⁴ Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For **out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.**³⁵ A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.³⁶ But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.³⁷ For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

He really lets them have it here, and he won't let them hide in their words; he takes the focus to their hearts—their minds—to what was going on privately on the inside. It looks like he would have agreed with the proverb about that miser telling you you're welcome to eat and drink from his table, when really, he begrudges it. He seems to see the Pharisees in the same way, and he warns them that this is not OK with God.

I find it very interesting, too, that earlier in this discourse, we are told—in verse 25
Matthew 12:25a But Jesus knew their thoughts...

He wasn't just going off at them because he didn't like them. No, he completely knew what he was talking about. He, of course, was the perfect judge of what they were like, and he did not let them control the conversation by what they chose to say to him. No, he blew past all that and got down to what they were like on the inside. Now, you and I may or may not have much insight into people like this—and unlike Jesus, we may be wrong **sometimes** in how we read people's hearts or minds. But it's very instructive to us here that Jesus didn't just handle the conversation by correcting their false accusations and practices. Rather, he wanted to talk about what was going on inside of them. In fact, he tells them that this is how their inner qualities are judged---by what happens on the outside. He says it this way:

A tree is known by its fruit.

And they probably would have liked that saying, because they thought they were putting out good fruit. But they were making errors of judgment in that regard, doing some things----not everything, mind you, but doing SOME things bad, and mistaking them for being good. So we have to be a little careful here how we interpret all this. If we're not careful, we might think that Jesus here is saying that the OUTSIDE is more important than the inside, because he talks about the tree and its FRUIT---and we can all see the fruit hanging on the outside of the tree. But he's telling them that their fruit is in fact NOT good like it would be if they were righteous on the INSIDE. Was some of what they did good? Sure. But not all of it. And he doesn't seem to have made a habit of rebuking these people for what they got RIGHT. Rather, it was for what they got WRONG---what they let slide----what they neglected to correct in themselves. So he's talking about their overall "fruit" here---the whole set of their outward deeds and sayings. And he's telling them that if righteousness were their true inward ambition----if that were their true disposition in their hearts and minds, that they'd only be putting out good fruit.

In another argument in Matthew 23, he points out their inconsistencies as evidence that something is wrong in their hearts. You may remember the conversation where he says to them:

Matthew 23:²³ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. **These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.**²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

Being unrighteous, but wanting to appear to others as if they were righteous, they had decided to do some of the of the righteous requirements of the Law of Moses---and he doesn't rebuke them for that; he rebukes them for the weightier matters that they had neglected to do. So he finds their deeds incomplete, and rebukes them for that. And I think it's this same way of thinking that's driving his words to them back in Matthew 12, where we were just discussing.

Again, he says in Matthew 12, 35 and 36:

.³⁵ A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. ³⁶ But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.

It's not hard to reason that Jesus would have been a terrible aggravator to them. Not only did he keep bringing up facts (about their hearts) that they were actively trying to ignore and to squelch, and not only does he criticize the inconsistencies in their performance, but now he's promising them that they will indeed be accountable for their moral negligence on the day of judgment. And to what extent would they be accountable? Well, listen to what he says: "for EVERY idle word". Not just some of them. Not just the MOST idle word. No, he says "for EVERY idle word".

No wonder these guys wanted him dead. They were heavily invested in protecting evil in their thoughts, while he was heavily invested in exposing that evil so that they might repent of it. In the conversation we read just before this one, back in Matthew 23, he told them the way out. He had said:

First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

And some of them---some, mind you, and not all---some of them would follow this advice that Jesus kept giving them in all these encounters. Indeed, we know of some pharisees who came to Jesus to make things right. And Paul had been one of this sort. And when Jesus confronted him, Paul actually repented---that is, he changed his mind. And he became the sort of person who would write in Ephesians 5:11:

Have **nothing** to do with the *fruitless deeds of darkness*, but rather expose them.

Do you see that he learned this from Jesus? Because that's what Jesus was doing here. He was not going to buy into their rhetoric and excuse their evil deeds. Rather, he was going to expose it. And that's what his true disciples did, too. Not Judas Iscariot, mind you, for he remained the sort to hide the evil in his own heart, rather than to purify his heart by "cleaning the inside of the cup", as Jesus put it.

And we could examine cases like this all day long---and with great effect---for these are the same life choices that face us today---about how we shall manage what goes on in our own minds. About whether we will WANT to be righteous inside or not. About whether we will respect Jesus' righteousness, and want to emulate it ourselves, or whether we'll just pay lip service to him, while secretly not wanting to be like him ourselves.

Well, that was the battle in the First Century, too. And there's a LOT of talk in the New Testament about what goes on inside of people. I want to share some short passages to highlight the fact that just like in the Old Testament passages we read, the people were supposed to "give careful thought to (their) ways". Consider these three one-liners:

[1 Corinthians 11:28](#) Let a person *examine* himself.

[2 Corinthians 13:5](#) Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; *examine* yourselves!

[1 Corinthians 11:31](#) But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. (NIV)

These may be surprising or even unsettling to some who've not thought about it enough. These passages seem to show a pattern by which we can see that the Christians were expected to keep a regular watch on themselves. Also, we may infer that Paul (who wrote all three of these) also believed, like God and Jesus, that people were **capable** of rendering an accurate judgment—even of themselves! Otherwise, it would have been torturous to tell them to do it! No, they were capable of discerning how they were doing as followers of Jesus. In fact, one measure of doing well that Jesus and his apostles were teaching seems to have included this very habit of self-inspection. And in that last verse, Paul even suggested that if they would examine themselves properly—keeping themselves in line—this would be the very way to avoid falling under God's judgment.

And all that paints quite a different picture than do those who would have us believe that God really doesn't want us using our minds, or doesn't want us paying much attention to ourselves. I remember being in a highly-evangelistic church that would constantly chide its members about how much time they spent in self-inspection because the leadership thought that the evangelizing was more important. They would accuse them of "navel-gazing". But that was a big mistake to teach that the evangelistic things were more important than the actual qualities of one's own heart before God. They should have taught the members to do **both**, rather than to criticize the one in deference to the other. But they fell into this trap of choosing only PART of God's overall routine, to the neglect of other parts of it. And it's a lot easier to **measure** the number of visitors at church on Sunday than it is to measure how much progress each member has made in becoming like Jesus that week. So they began to measure their success as a church by how the membership grew, rather than by how the membership **MATURED** in the godliness of their minds. They had replaced the question, "What kind of people are we?" with the question "How MANY people are we?" And they had forgotten that the renewal of the human mind is central to the kind of religion that Jesus and his apostles had in mind for us. Consider Romans 12, verse 2:

Romans 12:² Do not be conformed to this world,^[c] but **be transformed by the renewal of your mind**, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.^[d]

That testing and discerning---those deliberate cognitive activities---would lead to transformation and renewal of the human mind---and it was THOSE people who would figure out what God wanted from them. The ones who were unwilling to do the thinking would NEVER figure it out. And that's how you get to be like one of those Pharisees your whole life---even if you're very diligent about doing the outward things. It's because you're unwilling to surrender over your inward life to God and his righteousness.

And how do people get stuck going to church all their lives, and still never surrendering themselves over inwardly to God? Well, part of the reason is that they also refuse to examine carefully what their hearing from the pulpits and from other teachers. I believe there are many today who get these things wrong---who don't understand (or don't like) how God wants us to be authentic through and through, and who teach their congregations to minimize their thinking to some extent.

Well, not only do we need to think through our own way of life, but we also need to think through the things others tell us about God. Let me demonstrate this point by way of the wisdom of Solomon in Proverbs 18:17, where he makes a matter-of-fact observation:

[Proverbs 18:17](#) The first to plead his case *seems right*, until another comes and *examines* him.

This seems to be put forth in the language of the court. And the point seems to be that you don't necessarily have the right picture just from hearing whatever somebody puts forward. Rather, it should be tested by examination if you want to be sure it's true. And while this may have been court language, this is certainly true as well for what comes out of the pulpits today---and from Facebook posts---and from watercooler conversations at work. Sometimes you'll hear some great things that are 100% accurate. But that's only sometimes. Other times, the things people tell us aren't so accurate, and if you will examine it thoroughly, you'll see that it's not all as true and accurate as it might seem at first blush. You'll see that Jesus was right when he told them to stop judging by mere appearances, and to make a right judgment.

So again, it seems that God wants us to examine things---within and without. And I think that the Bible is filled with evidence that there is indeed some objective manner of thinking and examining and judging that God has in mind. Again, and again, he calls for good judgment—even in the cases where so many cynics today would like to think it's impossible. Here's another passage showing what they were taught about sizing themselves up accurately. It's Romans 12:3, which continues just after the verse we were reading earlier about being transformed by the renewing of the mind.

[Romans 12:3](#) Do not think of yourself *more highly than you ought*, but rather think of yourself with *sober judgment*.

Isn't it obvious by now that not only does God want people to use their minds to examine things, but that he wants it done **well**? Here he calls for sober judgment in self-examination. And he specifically calls out one of the most common thinking errors: the overestimation of one's own knowledge, skills, abilities, or attainments. He says "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." Well, what's the "ought" here? That is, how highly OUGHT these people to have thought about themselves? We don't have time to get into similar passages in this episode, so I'll just give this suggestion for your consideration. I think that the proper view of themselves was to be a reality-based view. It was to be a view that reflected how they ACTUALLY were, as opposed to how they might wish to view themselves.

You know, in my conversations with people, cognitive bias comes up a lot. Now, a cognitive bias is a mental shortcut---a way to avoid actual situation-specific thinking. Instead, the one having this bias just runs a mini-program in the mind---and they have themselves conditioned to run this mini-program of thinking whenever some certain topic or situation or memory or mood triggers it. An obvious example is the bias, "All Italians are thieves." This bias is simply false, of course, because it's an absolute statement about Italians, stating that every one of them is a thief. Now, it's true that some Italians are thieves, but it is false that **all** Italians are thieves. Imagine, though, that Billy was robbed by an Italian once, and that it happened a year later that he was robbed by another Italian. And how does Billy sum this up in his mind? Does he say, "I was robbed by Italians twice"? No, he decides to take the cognitive-miser / moral-miser lazy way, and the way he tells the story to himself, it's "All Italians are thieves." This is an irresponsible overgeneralization, of course, but Billy doesn't care. He's happy to take this view, even of innocent Italians who are not, in fact, thieves. He is morally and mentally sloppy, and this is mismanagement of the mind. But Billy's moral standard is low enough that he doesn't care if he has got this wrong.

And we can easily recognize this cheating when we examine how Billy does it---and if you happen to be an Italian, you can probably see it even faster than those of us who are not! Yes, it's pretty easy to see the cheat when Billy does it, but do we see this kind of cheat when we do it ourselves? Well, God and Jesus and the apostles and prophets were calling for people to voluntarily turn themselves in---to do the work themselves of analyzing their own minds and keeping themselves accountable. And this is extraordinary, for a LOT of people cheat when it comes to sizing up their own characters and their own ways of life. Rather than to take a "sober" view of themselves, they take an irrational and dishonest view, minimizing their own faults, and maximizing their virtues. Not everybody does this, mind you, because some people are honest in this. But many do cheat in this. And those are the sorts of people who are just going to dismiss these next two directives about how God told them to purify their own minds, and to become mature in their thinking. We'll look first at James 4:8:

[James 4:8](#) Purify your hearts, you *double-minded*.

Right off the bat, we can infer that James, too, along with God and Jesus and Paul and Solomon, believed that people had control over what goes on in their hearts and minds. More specifically here, we see that James thought it possible for a person to purify his own mind—which simply means to remove the impurities from it—or as Jesus had put it, to “wash the inside of the cup”. And he uses a fascinating term here that excites the cognitive-science student in me. This term, “double-minded” is used three times in the Bible. You can tell by the context in each case that the writers who use the term don’t think that double-mindedness is a good thing. The term itself conjures up a picture of having two competing minds—or more specifically, to have two competing beliefs operating in the mind at one time—hence, the “double” in double-minded. That is, they are of THIS mind and THAT mind, both at the same time, regarding the same subject. Cognitive scientists today would call this “cognitive dissonance”. And if you think about that term, cognitive dissonance, and if you know much about music, it might well bring up the idea of playing two notes on the piano at once, where they are immediately next to one another, just a half-step apart. In music, it’s almost universal that people will tell you this is an ugly sound, and that the notes “clash”. When it comes to thinking, though, I find it amazing how many people are operating some level of cognitive dissonance—or double-mindedness—and don’t seem to be bothered by it very much. They don’t seem to think it’s ugly, like the music, or that their competing ideas are indeed clashing with one another.

And how do you get to a place where you can have competing inner thoughts, and yet not be aware of it? Well, you just shut down your mind. That’s how. You just quit thinking. Don’t use it. Find something else to do. Keep repeating biases to yourself. Quit reflecting.

So let’s take a moment to look at what happens when we don’t fully process things in the Reflective Mind. Let me demonstrate that in logic, it’s possible for two thoughts or beliefs to clash. For example, consider these two thoughts that someone might have about his school principal:

1. “Mr. Smith is a wonderful principal.”
2. “Mr. Smith doesn’t seem to have any idea what’s going on on campus these days.”

A person might run these two thoughts or beliefs simultaneously in his or her mind, whether he or she realizes or not that the two don’t really go together. Suppose that we were to ask this person the following question:

Would a wonderful principal know what’s going on on campus?

We’d most likely get a “yes”—generally speaking—or at least we would if the person we’re questioning didn’t suspect they were being set up somehow. Suppose, then, that we were to ask this follow-up question:

Could a principal be wonderful in some ways, and yet need improvement in some other ways?

Again, we’d probably get a “yes” in response. But the person in question hasn’t gotten this sophisticated in his or her thinking. They’re not reflecting enough to make these finer distinctions. Instead, they’re keeping this messier view in mind—and these are the same two thoughts we saw earlier:

1. “Mr. Smith is a wonderful principle.”

2. “Mr. Smith doesn’t seem to know to have any idea what’s going on on campus these days.”

The person who will maintain both of these beliefs at once is mismanaging his or her thoughts—perhaps because they’re just lazy, or perhaps because they want to avoid the truth (that Mr. Smith is not a perfect principal). Either way, it’s bad---whether it’s a cognitive weakness or a moral one, or both.

Good management of our minds, however, is a skill that requires training. And I believe it was expected by God that believers would learn to do it. Here’s another short passage that I believe backs up this idea. It’s 1 Corinthians 14:20.

[1 Corinthians 14:20](#) Brothers, do not be children in your *thinking*. Be infants in evil, but *in your thinking be mature*.

In this passage, Paul really sets the barre pretty high. He doesn’t just say, “try to think better”, as if he had some relativistic view of it. No, he seems to have had in mind that there is indeed a mature way of thinking—and he chides all of the Corinthians to go after it. He doesn’t just say, “Well, do your best” or “Do your personal best.” No, he calls them all to that same standard of maturity. And this is very interesting, because it differs considerably from what you’ll hear from many today, who try to ignore many of these scriptures about the need not only to think, but to think well.

When we were kids and we got in trouble for doing the dumb things our playmates did, we often tried to reason our way out of trouble with the defense that, “Well, all the other kids were doing it.” This is before we had completely learned good and evil---before we had learned that however convincing this excuse might sound, it is not in fact a good one. But if we had mature parents, that excuse didn’t fly. Once it got down to the “come, let us reason together” moment with our parents, we weren’t allowed any longer to deceive ourselves into thinking that being part of a group was an ample excuse for bad behavior. Even if we thought it sounded good as it escaped our lips, our parents (hopefully) had the means to convince us otherwise by intervening in our business. They went out of their way not to let us fool ourselves as to right and wrong.

And this is a very good thing. And more than that, it’s a godly thing. People who really know what it means to love and to help are going to provide this service to one another---whether they are God, or parents, or friends, or preachers.

So let’s pause for a moment and let me ask you a question. Suppose that when God created humankind, he had in mind that we were supposed to be the sort to give careful thought to our ways---to reason things out---to draw sound conclusions---to see ourselves soberly---to be able to examine carefully what others say---and to be able to purify what’s in our minds---and to interpret the scriptures accurately---and to be accountable for not only what comes out of our mouths, but for what goes on in the privacy of our own minds---to be responsible for ourselves and to keep pushing on to maturity in how we manage our own hearts and minds. Suppose that this was his plan for us, but that some of us did not LIKE that plan. Suppose that somebody were to resent that, and to be sour about having this responsibility cast on him, when he didn’t ask for it. Suppose it were somebody’s disposition not to want to expend any effort on thinking well and accurately. Suppose he didn’t want somebody like Jesus poking around into what his thoughts were, and whether they were true and reasonable and responsible and godly or not.

Here's my question: Would a person like that be tempted to deceive himself about all this? Would he enjoy pretending that it's not really so, and that God does not really hold us accountable for how we manage our inward selves? Would he be tempted to lie to himself about these things?

After having studied so much of cognitive science, my answer would be: Are you KIDDING? Of **course** he'd be tempted! In his excellent book called The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty, cognitive scientist Dan Ariely demonstrates how a great many people do indeed give into the temptation to lie, cheat, or steal. Interestingly, he observes that people tend to self-regulate as to how **MUCH** they will lie, cheat, or steal, and that the key motivator of this self-regulation is that they want to be able to maintain at least a semblance of self-respect. So, when it starts getting too hard to feel good about themselves, they'll cut down on the amount of lying, cheating, or stealing that they're doing. It's as if they're saying: To do more than this much lying, cheating, or stealing would be bad, but to do it at this level, or at any lesser level, is OK.

And to the relativist, this may sound perfectly reasonable. But Jesus was no relativist. He didn't come here with a goal of simply sinning LESS than everybody else. No, his goal and his accomplishment both were not to sin at all. And the Christians were called to resist sin, too, even if it meant that it would cost the shedding of their blood---as through persecution.

But there would be a constant temptation to pretend that Jesus had not in fact, set that barre so high---and that God would be pleased with some lesser view of personal morality and responsibility---and that they could please God with a much lower standard of personal behavior. And this is why I think there are so many warnings---particularly in the New Testament, to keep on the straight and narrow---to keep the faith---to keep anticipating the judgment---and to keep in mind not only God's kindness but ALSO his sternness---and to stay focused on pleasing him with both our inward and outward selves.

So I want to share four passages that address the temptation to deceive oneself about such things. I don't intend to discuss the context of each one, although that would be quite fascinating if we had time. Rather, the point here is really simple; it's to show that the Bible authors and speakers knew that self-deceit is a common problem, and that people need to be reminded not to do it:

[James 1:26](#) If anyone *thinks* he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but *deceives his heart*, this person's religion is worthless.

[Jeremiah 37:9a](#) ...Thus says the LORD, Do not deceive yourselves...

[1 Corinthians 3:18a](#) Let no one deceive himself. ...

[James 1:22](#) Do not merely listen to the word, and so *deceive yourselves*. Do what it says.

There are many other passages about this sort of self-deceit, but these happen to use rather explicit language about it. And the theme is rather clear: Don't deceive yourselves.

They weren't simply supposed to gather knowledge, but to put it into practice. They weren't simply supposed to hear God's word, but to take it to heart. They weren't simply supposed to TALK about good friend, but to bear good fruit by putting it into practice. They weren't just supposed to like the idea of being godly, but to **actually live** in the godly way---starting in their hearts and minds, and continuing into their words and deeds. How they thought mattered to God.

What they heard from God was supposed to be adopted and implemented and practiced regularly. They were supposed to pay attention to God---deep and deliberate attention--- and they were to be

working diligently to understand what he had said and to put it into practice. And this brings up the topic of how we ourselves go about considering and understanding the Bible. Scholars use the term, hermeneutics, to talk about whatever rules and methods we have for how to interpret the Bible correctly. But even so, scholars, being imperfect humans, too, make interpretive mistakes sometimes, too. Not all the time, mind you, but sometimes.

Now, the extremist will want to say, "Of course they make mistakes, because we're all desperately corrupt, and are capable of nothing but error!" But I don't think that that idea fits the preponderance of evidence in the Bible. We've already contradicted it with many of the verses we've been discussing, but let's go one more and look at this example of a man who was present one day as Jesus was preaching. Notice what Jesus says to the man. This is in Luke 10, starting in verse 25:

Luke 10: ²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

I see several interesting things here. First of all, Jesus did not condemn the man (as some might) for asking a question. Rather, he engages the man quite genially—as if he's quite willing to reason things out with people. And that in itself is a wonderful story, that the Creator have any interest at all in communicating with his own creatures---that he would be the sort to stoop down to reason with mankind. And that's exactly the sort that God is.

And then he asks the man for a determination of fact: "What is written in the Law?" And here we may infer that he thought the man was indeed capable of accurately ascertaining this fact from the texts.

And then further, he asks him to INTERPRET what the scriptures say---which is very interesting, because that requires the use of the Reflective Mind and the Algorithmic Mind, and of those less-advanced mental capabilities that are required for merely repeating hearsay or tradition. This calls for the use of memory, as well as for the use of several sets of mindware, such as hermeneutics and logic and certain linguistic skills, such as decoding and encoding. So the lawyer runs these processes and he gives an answer to Jesus. And Jesus says he got it right!

Think about that. Jesus must have thought it was possible for the man to get it right. And if he didn't already think that---and I'm not saying he didn't---he would pretty much have to admit the possibility when the guy does indeed get it right! Interestingly, though, many believers today will not admit it. They can read just like you and I can that Jesus said this man got it right, yet they will continue in the sloppy belief that humans are incapable of good thinking. (This is an example of cognitive dissonance, just like in our previous discussion of the school principle.) In this case, the competing/conflicting beliefs would go something like this:

1. This guy got it right, and I know this because Jesus said so.
2. Nobody ever gets anything right.

A person can believe both of those things at once, whether they realize or not that the two can't both be true. Now, to go back to some of these earlier scriptures about examining oneself and giving careful

thought to things and reasoning through things, let me say this. The reflective person who gives thought to his or her own thinking will catch conflicts like this. They'll figure it out eventually, even if they don't happen to spot it right away---- and they'll say something to themselves like, "Wait, if it's true that nobody can get anything right, then how did **this guy** get this right?" So, at least they've figured out that there's a logical conflict. And that's great, but they're not finished yet with the mental quality control. No, they're not done yet until they obey this directive, that we looked at earlier:

[James 4:8](#) *Purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

That is, if they don't get that error corrected---if they don't throw away the false belief--- they're going to remain double-minded. So they have to actually DO something here if they want to please God in this. They have to remove whichever belief (or beliefs) are false. If they're smart, they'll keep the belief that says:

1. This guy got it right, and I know this because Jesus said so.

And they'll get rid of the belief that:

2. Nobody ever gets anything right.

But if they continue to maintain BOTH beliefs, they're going to have lots of problems with doctrine and practice alike. And sadly, there are a great many people who are like this---who know better, but who won't correct their habitual thinking and their habitual self-talk. In fact, many of them, even though they know better, will repeat these false ideas to others as fact. And this is not good. But we'll deal specifically with that in a future episode, so for now, let's get back on topic.

Do you see how this whole thread of thinking passages in the Bible also gets into how we interpret the scriptures themselves? Jesus suggested that this guy would find the right answer to his question by correctly interpreting the scriptures. And the guy did that, and it worked.

So before we wrap up the Bible study portion of this first episode, I want to look at one more passage about interpreting scripture---and it shows just how nasty things can get if we allow ourselves to remain double-minded or otherwise corrupted in our thoughts.

We're going to look at 2 Peter 3, starting in verse 14, where we pick up on a conversation that mentions Paul and his writings---and the way that some people misunderstood them:

2 Peter 3:14 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. ¹⁵ And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. **There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.** ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, **take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.** ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We could spend all day on this one, but since we don't have that much time, let's be sure to get these basics in mind. First of all, Peter makes it plain that Paul's wisdom had come from God, and that his writings were indeed "scripture". And then he talks about people who make errors in interpreting those scriptures. He says that it's the "ignorant and unstable" and "lawless" people who "twist" the scriptures into something Paul did not say. He warns that even stable people can be "carried away" in error, and he counsels them to keep growing in their knowledge, presumably to prevent this from happening. This is a far cry from what some moderns would do—which would be to warn them to avoid knowledge and reading and study. But I think that Peter's advice is the better advice, and that the views expressed in these passages by God and Jesus and Solomon and Paul and James and Peter are superior to a lot of what comes out of the pulpits and the Christian bookstore today.

So, then, that concludes the Bible study I wanted to kick off this series with today. And I hope it has convinced you that God cares about how we think. There's so much more to be discussed about all this, but we'll continue throughout all the episodes, regardless of their exact subject matter.

So that concludes Episode 1, and I can't wait to get back into it the next time!

I hope you'll listen to episodes 2 and 3 right now, as they complete the "start here" introduction to this podcast. In Episode 2, I give a brief bio for myself, so that you can understand my perspective better. And in Episode 3, I'll roll out the real talent, bringing on my wife, Kay, and our son James for a discussion of the study we just finished here today. So these first three episodes together will constitute the full Introduction to this podcast.

I'm so glad you've joined in!