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The Stress-Buster and Women's Ministry Motivator



The Power of Right Thinking **Mary Southerland**

Key verses: Philippians 4:8 (NIVB) Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.

A family of five, a husband and wife and five beautiful children were found dead in their home. Why? The parents had both lost their jobs and the husband, unable to find work, shot his wife and children before turning the gun on himself. It seemed as if there was no solution and no hope.

The darkness of depression breeds wrong thinking. Irrational thought, fearful thinking, contemplation of destruction and death grow abundantly in the pit of darkness. In the light, these thoughts seem absurd and harmless, but the cloak of darkness hides their danger. The reality is that if we think wrong, we will live wrong. The opposite is also true, that if we want to live right, we must think right. A right thought life produces a right life!

Will Rogers once said, "What the country needs is dirtier fingernails and cleaner minds." A famous scene in Peter Pan illustrates the power of thoughts. Peter is in the children's bedroom. They have seen him fly and want to fly, too. They have tried it from the floor, then the beds! The result is failure. Finally, John asked, "How do you do it?" Peter answered, "You just think lovely, wonderful thoughts and they lift you up in the air."

In a sense, the same is true for the believer. You can change your life by changing the way you think. As I sat in the pit of depression, I began to see that my destructive thought patterns had become the greatest source of apprehension and anxiety in my life. My thoughts had become a vicious cycle of self-condemnation and insecurity. The cycle had to be broken. I began to pray for direction, asking God to take control, knowing that only He could accomplish what I was asking. The steps that follow have literally reprogrammed my thinking processes and transformed my life.

Step one: Recognize the power of thoughts.

Proverbs 23:7 (NASB) says it this way: "For as he thinks within himself, so he is." In other words, what we think about we will become!

The greatest battlefield for the Christian is the mind. My husband, Dan, was a youth pastor for many years. One night, as he was teaching the truth that we become what we think about, a young man in the back of the room raised his hand to ask, "Dan, does this mean that I am going to become a girl?" Not exactly!

Thoughts are real and powerful! Our actions, our attitudes, our habits are born in the mind ... in our thought life. We can literally change our lives by changing what we think about. Isaiah 26:3 promises, "You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose thoughts are fixed on you!" Peace and joy involve both the heart and the mind. Wrong thinking will lead to wrong living. The first step toward a right thought life is to recognize the power of our thoughts.

Step two: Know God's standard for our thought life.

Paul words are like God's garbage disposal for the mind, a purification system for our thought life, a benchmark by which we can measure every thought and determine if it is worthy to dwell in the mind of God's child. Paul gives us five standards for our thought life.

- **First standard: true thoughts**

"True" literally means "genuine, authentic, or sincere". The word "sincere" comes from two Latin words meaning "without wax".

The artists of Middle Eastern countries created very expensive statuettes from fine porcelain. These figurines were so fragile that they would often crack when fired in a kiln. Dishonest dealers would buy the cracked figurines at a much lower price; then fill the cracks with wax before selling them. The honest merchants would display only the figurines that had no cracks and would post signs that read "Sine Cera" which meant "without wax." Our thought life must be sincere. We must train our minds, harness our thoughts and make them dwell on truth! We choose what occupies our mind. If our mind is not filled with good, the enemy will fill it with bad!

"(The Devil) was a murderer from the beginning and has always hated the truth. There is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies."

John 8:44

Orel Hershiser, the great major league pitcher who pitched many years for the Dodgers, describes an encounter with his manager, Tommy Lasorda that changed his life! Lasorda called him into his office and shouted at Hershiser, "You don't believe in yourself! You're scared to pitch in the big leagues! You've got good stuff. If you didn't, I wouldn't have hired you. I've seen guys come and go, son, and you've got it! Be aggressive, be a bulldog! Starting today, I want you to believe that you are the best pitcher in baseball. Look at that hitter and say, 'There's no way you can ever hit me.'" Two days later, Orel pitched and in three innings, He gave up only one run. Lasorda's talk had worked! He calls it his "Sermon on the mound".

We must refuse lies and fill our mind with absolute truth - God's Word. As we digest it, as we take it into our lives and saturate our thoughts with it, we will be able to discern between truth and lies. Life changing power is found in the Word of God! I read once of a tourist who, while traveling to Alaska during the building of the Alaskan pipeline, came across a road sign that read, "Be careful which rut you choose. You'll be in it for the next 200 miles." We often allow negative thoughts to create a rut in our minds, giving them access to our lives. By filling our mind with scripture, we fill in those old ruts with peace and create new "ruts" that soon become right thought patterns. We are then thinking God's thoughts, and when we begin to think God's thoughts, our thoughts will become true.

One of the fiercest parts of my battle with depression is in my thought life. Yes, Satan is a liar! He wants to control my mind through lies because when I believe truth, the Holy Spirit takes over. When I feed my thought life a steady diet of truth, I am inviting the Holy Spirit to work! When I believe a lie, Satan steps in! He sticks his hairy toe (I have never seen it, but I just know it is ugly and hairy) in the walls of my mind, hurling his destruction into every step I take. Friend, the enemy will lie to you about the way you look, your relationships, your worth and identity, your fears and dreams and your God. Do not surrender one inch of your thought life to him. Choose truth instead and stand firm!

"The mind is a garden that could be cultivated to produce the harvest that we desire.

The mind is a workshop where the important decisions of life and eternity are made.

The mind is an armory where we forge the weapons for our victory or our destruction.

The mind is a battlefield where all the decisive battles of life are won or lost.” (Author unknown)

As you go through each day, identify and record any negative thoughts. Read each thought aloud. Determine why it is negative. Apply a promise from scripture to each thought and pray, asking God to retrain your mind.

While my eyes were riveted to the television screen, my heart went out to the handcuffed woman clad in an orange jumpsuit as she meekly followed the policemen escorting her to jail - a pastor's wife, accused of murdering her husband. My emotions stumbled over each other as anger warred with compassion, confusion with condemnation and justice with mercy - and I was certainly not alone in my emotional battle.

Newscasters vacillated between understanding the horrific and callous act she had committed because, after all, this woman was the wife of a pastor. Church members were stunned; some at a loss for words while others could only stare at the camera in a daze of pain and disbelief. Words like “perfect” and “ideal” were used to describe the Winkler family.

Then it happened. Mary Winkler raised her face slightly, long enough for me to gaze into hauntingly familiar eyes, eyes filled with emptiness and death. While I can neither condone nor even understand the actions of Mary Winkler, I can understand the road that brought her to the dark place where she felt her only option was to commit a heinous crime. The pit of clinical depression is a place of devastation - the playground of Satan and the forces of hell. When I found myself sitting at the bottom of that same dark pit, I was at a place of desperation for God, pleading for deliverance. After two long, hard years of painful emotional work, fierce spiritual warfare and complete brokenness, I stepped into the light.

As God has allowed me to share my story across the world, I have been amazed at how many women struggle - in painful silence - with depression. I have good news for you, my friend! There is a way out of that pit and freedom from the darkness. I want to share some of the truths God taught me in the darkness that have revolutionized my life in the light. One of the most important truths is that we can change the way we live and minister by changing the way we think.

As I sat in the pit of clinical depression, I began to see that my destructive thought patterns had become a vicious cycle of self-condemnation and insecurity. That cycle had to be broken. I began to pray, asking God to take control, knowing that only he could accomplish what I was asking. The steps that follow have re-programmed my thinking processes and literally transformed my life.

- **Second standard: noble thoughts**

“Noble” literally means “worthy of honor and respect”.

The word “noble” is used only four times in the New Testament. Each time it is used it is linked to self-control, specifically to control of tongue.

1 Timothy 3:11 “Women must be respected by others. They must not speak evil of others. They must be self-controlled and trustworthy in everything” (NCV).

“Admirable” is similar to noble and literally means “fair speaking” or “worth talking about”. In other words, if we think right we will speak right! Statistics say that the average person spends one-fifth of his or her life talking! (For us ladies it might be a slightly higher percentage!) If all of our words were put into print, the result would be this: a single day's words would fill a 50-page book; in a year's time, the average person's words would fill 132 books of 200 pages each!

What kind of book did you write today? Was it one of encouragement or condemnation, love or hatred, peace or anger? Proverbs 16:24 reminds us that “pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (NASB)

I heard about a couple attending church one Sunday when the pastor was teaching on this verse. After reading the passage, he added, “You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” The man’s wife leaned over, put her head on his shoulder and softly whispered in his ear, “I just love to watch your muscles ripple when you take out the garbage.” Yes, indeed, the spoken word is powerful! Words are just like seeds. What we plant will grow.

James 3:2 “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well” (NASB).

An ancient fable tells about a monster known as Proteus who had unusual power. Proteus could assume many shapes and appearances. He could become a tree or a pebble, a lion or a dove, a serpent or a lamb and had little difficulty in changing from one form to another. Proteus reminds me of the human tongue. It can bless or curse. It can express praise or whisper slander. It can speak a word of encouragement or become an instrument of destruction! The control of the tongue begins in the mind! The bridle for our tongue is a controlled thought life...a thought life that is admirable...a thought life that is noble...a thought life that is filled with light instead of darkness.

You are not alone! Yes, God is with you! Yes, I am praying for you and committed to your journey into the light! Take a risk. Share your burden with another, knowing that we were created to need each other and that a shared load is a lighter load.

- **Third standard: right thoughts**

“Right” literally means “conformity to God’s standards” and comes from the same root word as “righteous”. Our world majors in gray standards, running from those things that are black and white, trying to rationalize away what is black and white truth! Right thinking is neither gray nor borderline. It does not ride a spiritual fence but willingly conforms to God’s standards. We must make a choice about the control of our thought life. If we do not choose the power of God to control our mind, we will become double-minded and unstable. James warns us with these words: James 1: 8 (NIV) “He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.” The New Living Translation says it this way: “They can’t make up their minds. They waver back and forth in everything they do.” E. Stanley Jones states that “if you don’t make up your mind, then your unmade mind will unmake you.”

When an immigrant comes to America, before he can become a citizen, he must renounce all of his commitments and allegiance to his former homeland and pledge one hundred percent allegiance to America. Then, and only then, will he be granted American citizenship. While we have come to Christ and are citizens of heaven, our thought life still smells of hell ... our old homeland!

We allow our minds to drift. We do not take charge of our thinking processes. We are undisciplined mentally. Undisciplined thinking will always flows to our greatest weaknesses. The human mind will always set itself on something! We just have to decide what the setting will be. A mind filled with wrong thinking becomes fertile soil for temptations of all kind.

A woman was married to a miser who never wanted her to spend any money. One day she told him she was going window-shopping! He said, “Look, but don’t buy!” A few hours later, she came home with a new

dress! “What is this?” her husband asked. She explained, “Well, I saw this dress and thought I’d just try it on for fun. When I did the devil said, “It sure looks good on you!” Her husband said, “Right then you should have told him, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” “I did,” she answered. “But when he got behind me he said “Honey, it looks even better from the back!”

We laugh about temptation! We have become flippant about sin. We need to understand that the goal of the enemy is the total destruction of our lives! James 1: 14-15 tells us “Temptation comes from the lure of our own evil desires. These evil desires lead to evil actions, and evil actions lead to death.” Satan wants us to stay in the pit! Darkness is his specialty! He delights in peering over the edge of the pit, mocking and taunting us, admiring his handiwork. The front line of the battle against him and against depression is first waged in the mind! Many times our thought life is an open invitation to the enemy! We need to renounce those old ways of thinking! We need to choose against wrong thinking and actively pursue right thoughts. When we do, darkness flees and light comes!

The longer I walk with and serve God, the more I realize the importance and power of simply making right choices. We cannot trust our emotions or base truth on feelings. All truth must be based on facts - and the facts are compelling. Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth as man. He understands our innermost thoughts and feelings. He died, providing payment in full for our sin. Jesus rose from the grave, conquering darkness and death and He is coming back to take us home, a place where there is no darkness ... only light! Amen!

- **Fourth standard: pure thoughts**

“Pure” literally means that which is “wholesome, not mixed with moral impurity, innocent and morally undefiled.” It is a worship word, the picture of a sacrifice without blemish, fault or weakness. In other words, our thought life should be a sacrifice acceptable to God and fit to be brought into His presence as part of our worship to Him.

Have you ever watched an icicle as it is formed? A few years ago, we joined our best friends, Michelle and Jay Johnson, for a winter vacation in Vermont where a heavy snowstorm had arrived just ahead of us, dumping several inches of snow. Everything was covered in a rolling, soft blanket of white. Icicles hung like fragile crystal ornaments from tree limbs and rooftops. One morning, I decided to be lazy and sat, curled up in front of a crackling fire, gazing out at the beautiful postcard scene before me. I watched the softly falling rain gradually turn to long strands of ice. The icicles formed one drop at a time until they were a foot long or more. An interesting process unfolded before me. If the water was clean and pure, the icicle was formed clear, sparkling like a finely cut diamond in the sun. If the water was unclean and impure, the icicle looked muddy and its beauty was spoiled!

Our lives are formed ... one thought at a time ... one attitude at a time. The purity of our thoughts determines the purity of our lives. Darkness feeds on impure thoughts. The battle plan against depression must include a direct assault on impure thoughts. David, in Psalm 101:33, issues this challenge: “I will refuse to look at anything vile and vulgar.” Notice the word “refuse”. We can refuse dark thoughts. We can choose against negative attitudes. This standard needs to be the ongoing commitment of our thought life! To keep this commitment, to control our thoughts requires us to control all *outside* influences.

- Movies
- Books
- Television
- Music
- Relationships
- Conversations

Our prayer should be like David's in Psalm 51:10, "Create in me a new, clean heart, O God, filled with clean thoughts and right desires" (The Message).

A clean mind will produce right desires. Right desires will produce right habits, and right habits produce a life of power and joy, a life that is pleasing to God ... a life that is right and lived out in the light of His power and purpose for each one of us! The old adage is true: "Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny!"

Think pure thoughts! It is so easy to let impurity creep into our thought life through a word of gossip, a trashy novel, movies that exalt everything that opposes God and our own deliberate choice to think thoughts we know dishonor God. I can only imagine what those choices do to the heart of God. I know it is hard to take a stand for purity but remember that silence is agreement. I encourage you to join me in choosing to be a woman of integrity by choosing to think pure thoughts.

- **Fifth standard: lovely thoughts**

"Lovely" literally means "beautiful or attractive" or "that which calls forth love".

The way we live is determined, to a large degree, by the "setting" of our minds, a setting we must deliberately and diligently choose every day in each circumstance. Minds set on unlovely thoughts such as revenge, anger or criticism will produce lives that are magnets for more bitterness and resentment. The result of this deadly cycle is often darkness and depression.

How do we change this destructive pattern? The only way to reprogram our thoughts is by changing the setting of our mind. Colossians 3:2 (NIV) tells us to "set our minds on things above, not on earthly things." This same verse in the New Living Bible is translated "let heaven fill your thoughts". I love that perspective! When "heaven" fills our thoughts, when our gaze is on God and our glance on our circumstances, our mind will naturally be filled with Him and His peace. By choosing the setting of our mind before we encounter a crisis or trial, we are more likely walk through that crisis in victory instead of defeat. Dark thoughts will find it hard to dwell in a mind that is set on light.

In our key passage, the apostle Paul is saying that the mind of the Christian should be set on things above, the "higher" things in life such as kindness, gentleness, love, patience, self-control. The result will be a godly beauty, an inner loveliness that can only come from Him.

Have you noticed that the world in which we live is forever in search of beauty? Last week, when I took our daughter to the orthodontist, I had to wait while the hygienist cleaned her teeth. A stack of magazines caught my attention. As I mindlessly flipped through the pages, I suddenly realized how many of those pages offered products promising to erase every line on my body, take away my appetite until I become a size "nothing" and make every slightly yellowed tooth in my head a dazzling white that will stop people in their tracks, compelling them to stare in amazement! Right! Yet, I found myself digging an old grocery receipt out of my purse to copy down brand names and phone numbers where I could purchase these "miracle" products. Been there? You are definitely not alone!

According to one survey, every year, in the United States, we collectively buy each minute:

- 1,484 tubes of lipstick (at a cost of \$4,566)
- 913 bottles of nail polish (\$2,055)
- 1,324 mascaras, eye shadows, and eyeliners (\$6,849)

- 2,055 jars of skin care products (\$12,785)

That's \$1,581,300 an hour, all in the pursuit of beauty! For some of us, it is still not enough! Beauty is from within and grows from the source of a thought life that is lovely, a thought life that is right!

One of the biggest factors in my battle with depression was the fact that, since childhood, I have thought of myself as ugly and could not fathom the love of a God who repeatedly tells me in His Word that I am beautiful. I suspect that the erroneous pursuit of outer beauty and the approval of man is a major part of the struggle with depression that many women experience. It is time for us, as women in ministry, to embrace our beauty in His eyes. In doing so, we will not only be set free from the lies of the darkness but will then be able to lead others into the light of the truth that, in the eyes of God, we are beautiful.

Step three: Choose to practice right thinking!

Philippians 4: 8b-9 "If anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

In the key passage, the apostle Paul describes the standard God has set for our thought life as "excellent" and "praiseworthy" which literally means, "worth commending to others". Don't miss this truth!

Our thought life should be a model and a pattern that others can follow!

We should never waste the magnificent, God-created power of the mind on anything less! God is challenging us to "raise the bar" in our thinking, refusing to allow the "low things" of this world to inhabit our minds. We need to be relentless in directing our thoughts in the paths of excellence! We cannot separate our inner thoughts from our outward actions. We will live out our thought life. Yes, we are in a great battle. In order to win that battle, we must take our thought life captive! In 2 Corinthians 10:5 (NASB) Paul writes "We are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. The New Century Version of the Bible gives even more power to this verse: "We capture every thought and make it give up and obey Christ."

The first and greatest commandment is to love God with our whole mind - not a part of our mind, not most of our mind, but with our whole mind. To love Him with our whole mind requires our obedience to the standard that God has given. Knowledge is never enough. God is not pleased with our knowledge of the truth if it doesn't result in the practice of that truth lived out in daily life. He calls us to take action in response to His truth because action sets truth free in our lives to work and to transform. We are told in James 1:22 that "it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don't obey, you are only fooling yourself." When we are confronted with the truth, we need to hear it, receive it, learn it and then put it into practice! To know that our thoughts must be excellent and worthy of praise is not enough. We need to employ these standards as the referees over every thought.

When our children were young, Dan coached a coed soccer team on which both kids played for several years. During that time, we have learned which referees were good. Some referees just showed up for the game. They did not take charge or make calls until the game was out of control and I was forced to step in and help! (My kids hated that!) However, one referee was exceptional! When he walked onto the field, there was no doubt about who was in charge! He was tough and called everything! The kids sometimes complained about his firm handling of the game, but they were also glad to see him because of the sense of security and peace he brought to the field. Everyone knew his motto: "I don't allow any junk!"

That is exactly what God's standard for our thought life will do if we choose to practice it. God's standard will make the right calls. It will toss out the "junk" and bring a security and peace to our lives. Several years ago, a submarine was being tested and had to remain submerged for many hours. When the ship returned to harbor, the Captain was asked, "Do you have any damage from last night's storm?" The captain looked at him in surprise and said, "Storm? We didn't even know there was a storm!" The sub had been so far down that it had reached the area of the ocean known to sailors as "the cushion of the sea". Huge waves and winds can whip the ocean, but these waters below are not even stirred! The thought life that pursues these standards will find a "cushion" from the storms of life! It is a hedge of protection against the darkness and a source of unshakable peace!

A powerful deterrent of depression is a thought life fully surrendered to and controlled by God. How's your thought life? Using Philippians 4:8 as your standard, take a minute to evaluate your thoughts.

My thoughts are:

- _____ true
- _____ noble
- _____ right
- _____ pure
- _____ lovely
- _____ admirable
- _____ excellent
- _____ praiseworthy

Do you want power - peace - victory? Paul instructs us to "think on such things". My father-in-law collects antique irons. I have been with him at flea markets and garage sales as he carefully examines each iron before buying it. These irons are usually very rusty, sometimes covered in dirt and extremely old. To be perfectly honest, they all look the same to me - worthless. One day I finally asked him, "Dad, how do you tell if an iron is any good." His answer held great wisdom. He said, "I have learned that the iron is only as good as its handle. If the handle is solid, then the iron is valuable."

The "handle" for your thought life is a willingness to recognize the power of your thoughts, a commitment to God's standard concerning the mind and a choice to practice right thinking. Darkness cannot stand against the power of a thought life totally surrendered to the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

We began this series talking about Mary Winkler, the pastor's wife in Tennessee accused of murdering her husband. I know there are stressors in your life that others can neither see nor understand - but God does! I pray that the Father does a fresh work of healing in the life of this broken woman. I also pray that He does the same for you and for me. Amen.