

Welcome everyone! Today, we're in our **ALL** series talking about *loving God with our minds*.

Before Ravi Zacharias passed away last year, he was heralded as a Christian intellectual and was beloved by the Christian community for representing Christianity really well in secular spaces, amongst non-Christian thinkers. To say he was thought of as a stalwart in Christian circles would be an understatement! But shortly after he died, the floodgates opened.

A four-month investigation found the late Ravi Zacharias leveraged his reputation as a world-famous Christian apologist to abuse massage therapists in the United States and abroad for more than a decade. An independent firm was hired to look into all the allegations about him and they found that Zacharias sexually exploited and abused women at day spas both domestically and abroad. Not only that—the investigators also released details that Zacharias used tens of thousands of dollars of ministry funds dedicated to “humanitarian efforts” to fund his sexual escapades.

First, I want to acknowledge how news/info like that feels. Undoubtedly some of you feel anger. Me, too. Frustration? Same. Doubts over identifying as a Christian as in, “Oh boy, here we go. Another Christian messing up. More hypocrisy in the church. If that’s what Christianity is about, I’m out.” Those are all valid feelings. And I’m right there with you.

My question though is this: how does this happen? How is it that a prominent Christian intellectual like Ravi can be so well-versed in the Bible and theology but wind up sexually exploiting women for his own personal gratification?

Sin? Sure. The sickness of the human heart? Most definitely. Lack of accountability? Obviously. But I think there’s also more.

One of the women Ravi abused stepped forward and her interview gives a little insight into how this came about for Ravi. In an interview with Christianity Today, the woman said that when she was with Ravi, “He [Zacharias] called me his ‘reward’ for living a life of service to God.”

Welcome to church today. Awful yes, but I want you to notice something. There was a dissonance occurring for Ravi, a point of contradiction. And while it manifested itself in his actions, there was something happening in his mind.

What did he truly think? He thought this: because I do ‘x’ for God, I deserve ‘y.’ And women are objects that I can use to satisfy that sexual equation.

It was this sort of deeply internalized thought that ruled his life in this area. It was this deeply held belief that caused him to act the way he did.

And while it’s easy to stand at a distance, point, and yell “shame!” at someone like Ravi for doing what he did and thinking like he thought, what’s **HARDER** is looking in the mirror and noticing how we too sometimes have deeply-believed thought patterns running rampant in our own minds—thought patterns that lead us to into fractured relationships with God and others.

Because isn’t there a sense in which we’re similar? If you’re like me you often experience a gap—a gap between what we think about God, our self, and how to live life, and what we really think deep down.

By way of illustration to showcase the gap, there's a moral psychologist named Jonathon Haidt who talks about cognitive distortions (inaccurate or negatively biased ways of thinking), ways in which we experience that gap. So, let's have a little fun. Raise your hand—no judgment, this is a grace place—if you have ever, at any point in life, at one time or another, experienced one of these cognitive distortions. Ready? I'll give you just a few.

- Distortion #1: EMOTIONAL REASONING—letting your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. "I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out."
- Distortion #2: DICHOTOMOUS THINKING (also known variously as "black-and-white thinking," "all-or-nothing thinking," and "binary thinking")—viewing events or people in all-or-nothing terms. "I get rejected by everyone," or "It was a complete waste of time."
- Distortion #3: MIND READING—assuming that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts. "He thinks I'm a loser."
- Distortion #4: LABELING—assigning global negative traits to yourself or others (often in the service of dichotomous thinking). "I'm undesirable," or "He's a rotten person. "
- If your hand isn't up yet, you've transgressed bonus cognitive distortion #5: thinking of yourself too highly.

Ok, funny, but isn't it that gap, played in ways like we just mentioned, that is the cause of a lot of inner turmoil in our own lives? Isn't that gap the gap that causes us to worry and fear? To control? To get angry with God? Isn't it a lot of times that gap that fractures our relationships?

In Mark 12:30, Jesus confronts that gap. A lawyer comes up to Jesus and asks him, "Jesus, out of all the commandments we have to follow (all 613), which is the most important?" And Jesus responds, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

Now, that word "mind" is important. It comes from the Greek word "dianoia," referring to our ability to think or reason. It literally refers to our ability "to connect things up." This is a call from Jesus for his followers to think and think well.

And while there's all kinds of applications of thinking well, one aspect of that I want to stress today is centered on how loving God with our minds means that we think accurately about reality—reality as it pertains to who God is, who we are, and how we ought to live. Easy enough, right? Maybe not. Let me give you 5 problems.

Problem 1: The problem of our psychology

As humans, we have two primary ways of thinking. We have a side of our thinking that is intuitive, automatic, unconscious. And we have a side of our thinking that is strategic, slow, and conscious. This is what the famous psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls System 1 and System 2 thinking. The difference between these two ways of thinking is similar to the difference between your "conscious thought" (system 2) and your "gut reaction" (system 1).

Consider Peter. He's a system 1 guy. The prime example of this is when Jesus tells his followers that he needs to go to the cross to be crucified and the text says that, "Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him" (Mark 8:32). What happened here? Jesus said a thing. It didn't register with Peter's ideas of what a Messiah should be like, and he began rebuking/correcting Jesus without ever considering that maybe he was the one in the wrong. He never stepped foot into system 2; he was only in system 1.

The issue comes in for us because life is so unbelievably complex that we operate, more often than not, with system 1 thinking, which is good in some respects, but awful in others. When reality looks like this, but I operate out of a picture of reality that looks like this (see sermon video for photos), I'm going to have problems. But that's just the way it goes.

Sometimes our psychology is a problem in thinking accurately about reality.

Problem #2: The problem of desire/arousal

You know that your thinking is influenced by your desire. Here's a dumb, completely hypothetical example: you can have accurate thoughts as you rove through the grocery store that the pack of double stuff Oreos is unhealthy. In fact, you might even know that 2 cookies is 140 calories. And since you can't only ever eat just one, you know that eating 6-8 cookies is 420 calories. So you'd think you'd walk away knowing that this exorbitant amount of empty calories are no bueno. But no. Your desire has you rationalizing the caloric adventure you're about to embark upon (you worked out today, you burned 300 calories just this morning, you had salad for lunch, your day was kinda hard, this will make you feel better, etc, etc, etc.). And five hours later, you've got milk dripping off of all five digits because you just scrounged to the bottom of your cup to get the piece of cookie that broke off. Like I said—completely hypothetical.

Desire precedes our thinking and our thinking follows our desire.

And it gets worse when we're aroused. And I don't just mean that in the sense that would get me kicked off stage. Arousal is like desire microwaved. Arousal is what happens to you when you walk into Kroger and you see they've got a "Buy 10 cases of Coke get 10 cases free" sign. And you're like, "BABE, BACK THE TRUCK UP!!! We're SET!" Or you walk into your favorite clothing store "just to see if there's anything you need" and they're having blowout sale with everything 70% off, and they've got you. You walk out with three shirts, two pairs of shoes, six pants, and some perfume sitting on the shelf next to the cash register.

Desire can be a problem because most of the time we use our brains and our thinking to justify what it is we truly want deep down. This goes back to week 1 of this series where Dan talked about our hearts.

Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3 describes this kind of thing. He tells his protégé Timothy, "The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."

What is your deepest desire? What are your loudest desires? Our desires get in the way of us thinking accurately about reality. That's problem #2.

Problem #3: The problem of distraction

I had a moment a couple weeks ago where I was distracted to the nth degree. I was sitting at home on the couch with Reese's on the end table (ok not so bad), the TV on with Spotify music playing (ok, peanut butter cup and a ballad, still good), laptop open with college football playing (ok, we're sweating now), phone in hand checking Twitter and Instagram. It gets worse because I had my Kindle in the other hand!

And I thought to myself, "What am I doing? I am distracting myself into oblivion!" So I got up, showered, and stepped out the front door with a book. I felt like Frodo stepping foot out of the Shire that

moment, out of the dark, technological ghetto and into the fresh sunshine and sidewalk trail system of an Indianapolis apartment complex. Funny, but still!

The author of Hebrews says, “Fix your eyes on Jesus...” (Hebrews 12:2). When you fix on something, you’re not allowing yourself to be fixated on other things. My point here is that there is a war for our attention. One of the reasons why it’s hard to think accurately about reality is because everything (Facebook, Doordash, Fitbit, Duolingo, Nike Run Club, Zillow, FoxNews, ESPN, CNN, etc.) is vying for your attention. That’s a problem.

Problem #4: The problem of culture

I’m not a doomsday-er. I just want to be realistic. Our thought life is constantly being formed. It is formed through the ideas, images, and information we take in. And we take in exorbitant amounts of ideas, images, and information every single day—an estimated 74 GB of info each day, akin to 16 movies!

And everything around us—the movies we watch, the music we listen to, the TV shows we binge—is either forming in us a way of thinking that is congruent with the way of Jesus or it’s not. My contention is that it’s not. In fact, I’d say it’s actually forming in us an alternative thought life, an alternative mental map of reality. It’s giving us an alternative theology, an alternative anthropology, and an alternative ethics. Instead of giving us the same way of thinking that Jesus had, it’s forming in us the same mental maps as that of Wolf Blitzer or Tucker Carlson, the way of thinking of Clint Eastwood or Oprah, the way of thinking of Joe Rogan or Jordan Peterson, the way of thinking of Michelle Obama or Brené Brown, the way of thinking of Olivia Rodrigo or Lil Nas X, ways of thinking from HBO producers or Apple producers or Netflix producers.

I’m not saying don’t watch or listen or read things. Where there is beauty, goodness, and truth, take it in! All I’m warning against is this. In Revelation 2, Jesus is talking to a church in the ancient city of Thyatira and He says to them, “I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first” (Revelation 2:19).

I can imagine the church high fiving each another, but He continues: “Nevertheless, I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet” (Revelation 2:20). Jesus says you’ve got all this stuff going for you but you can still tolerate a Jezebel in your midst! And you’re allowing it to muck everything up and you don’t even notice! Jesus says, “She looks like a prophetess,” but really look at her. “By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.”

Look—The Creek can have love and faith and we can fill up the Generous buckets and have awesome student ministry and we can do all this stuff, but what if Jesus is looking at us and He’s like, “I have this against you—you have a Jezebel in your midst. You’re tolerating Jezebel!” And what if Jesus is looking at us and saying, “Look at what it’s doing to you—it’s eating people in your church alive. It’s seducing you into immorality.”

The problem of culture is a problem. But that’s not all. This is like the cherry on top because not only do we have a psychological problem, a desire/arousal problem, a distraction problem, and a culture problem, we also have problem #5.

Problem #5: The problem of a spiritual enemy

In John 8, Jesus gives us some teaching on the Devil and He says this starting in verse 44: “He [Satan] was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks out of his own native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Notice how Jesus describes Satan here: he’s a “murderer” yes, but what’s his means? He lies. And when he lies he speaks out of his character. It’s just his nature to lie, because Satan is a liar and he is the father of lies. Meaning that he is the center point and the genesis of all deception and deceit!

I mean isn’t this what happens in Genesis 3 with Adam and Eve? God creates a good world. He puts Adam and Eve in it to tend to His good creation. He tells them to rule over it and name animals and take care of the earth, but not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because if they do they shall surely die. And then Satan comes in and says, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Genesis 3:4-5).

Notice Satan doesn’t come after Adam and Eve with a tank, with literal weapons of destruction. What does he come at them with? Deception! He comes at them with a deceptive idea. In asking that question, “Did God really say?” Satan is saying to Adam and Eve, “Maybe God’s holding out on you. Maybe you could really be gods yourselves. Maybe God doesn’t want what’s best for you. Maybe He doesn’t know best.”

Not only do we have a psychological problem, a desire problem, a distraction problem, a culture problem, now we also have a spiritual enemy problem. And that gets me/us into trouble sometimes. It leaves us prone to believing lies instead of truth.

Just like Ravi Zacharias, I believe deceptive ideas and those ideas play to disordered desires. For the sake of transparency, let me let you in on what I struggle with. I’m prone to believing lies like:

- God is not near and I do not have any purpose or eternal destiny, which makes me act apathetic and cynical towards others.
- Unless I am perfect in every area of life, others will not accept me, which keeps me relationally and emotionally distant.
- The outcomes of my life are on my shoulders and I’ve got to control them, so I have that constant pressure on my life, which causes me stress and anxiety and is disruptive to my relationships at work and home.

But that’s just me. We’re tempted to believe all kinds of lies:

- Lies that God can’t or won’t come through.
- Lies that we’re meaningless, unlovable, and unworthy of relationship.
- Lies that because of our past we are irredeemable.
- Lies that my loudest desires are my deepest desires.
- Lies that in order to live a meaningful life, I must consume and acquire and buy and have.
- Lies that it’s our body and we’re adults and we can do what we want and that anything contrary to me expressing what I truly feel is oppressive and a power move.

Those are hard to combat. I don’t know about you, but every day it feels like a war in my soul. It’s like the forces of evil and the forces of good have found a battlefield in which to have the climactic battle—the battle to end all battles—and the field of battle just so happens to be my mind. It’s emotionally exhausting and mentally depleting. Because of these lies, I’m prone to feeling like I’m hanging on to following Jesus like a rock climber—I’m halfway up a rock face, I’m tired and worn, I’ve got so far to go—but my forearms are burning and my grip is about to go.

And it's like, how in the world are we supposed to love God with our minds with all this going on? How are we supposed to think accurately about reality—about God, our selves, how to live? How are we supposed to bridge the gap in our lives so that the things we know to be true are the things we really think deep down?

Well, it begins with ceasing to strive. I thank God that my salvation and your salvation are not dependent on you and me thinking accurately about reality, about theology, etc. Those things are important, no doubt, but we are saved by the exertion of Christ, not through mental exertion of our own. That being said, Paul still exhorts us to:

- “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).
- “Take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).
- “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8).
- “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2).

And Peter tells us we ought to “prepare [our] minds for action” and “be sober-minded” (1 Peter 1:13).

Rabbi Jesus invites us into the life of the kingdom of God—into God's reality. One of the central places the kingdom comes first is in our thought life.

So, how do we do that? What's the practical how? Well, three ways:

1. Ask the question.

Is the core, burning desire of my heart to see Christ formed in me? That's the question. And we better be honest, lest we deceive ourselves!

2. Identify the lies.

What lies—about God, about my self, and about the good life—am I believing that do not align with reality?

3. Supplant lies with truth.

This we do through Scripture. This past week, I emailed one woman in our church, Beth, who decided really to allow Scripture into her life. Here's what she said about her experience memorizing THE WHOLE BOOK OF JAMES:

I spent April and May memorizing chapters 1 and 2, got chapter 3 accomplished in June, and chapters 4 and 5 in July and August. Those printed pages from my Bible app followed me everywhere. I memorized James while doing some of my most normal daily tasks (laundry, dishes, cleaning, yard work, etc.) and also some of my most favorite things (walking, hiking, and sitting on the beach). It took me much longer than I anticipated, but I know now that it's exactly what God intended.

Because of her memorization she says,

For really the first time in my life, I was spending time in His word no matter my schedule. I could recite and rest in His word anywhere and at anytime. And the most important impact it's

had on my life is the effect it's had on my mind. How could it not when I spent six months resting in the same 2,304 words? Instead of letting negative thoughts or self-defeating babble swirl in my mind (which I often struggle with), I used the Word to pierce through that darkness. Instead of being righteous in my own thinking and motives, I checked myself against what James had to say first. Now when I spend time in His word, I'm no longer self-focused—my focus is on Him! Now, my mind is truly a place where I can see spiritual transformation manifesting and for that I'm so grateful to our Lord! It's just the beginning!

We don't just read Scripture to check off the box or to learn that Methuselah lived 969 years. One of the reasons we read Scripture is so that our ways of thinking will be molded into thinking rightly about reality.

I'll end with this: many of you know who Alexander Solzhenitsyn is. Some of you may not. He was a prisoner, sent to Soviet Union prison camps, known as gulags. He won a Nobel Prize in literature for interviewing prisoners and documenting the atrocities that occurred during the communist regime. He recorded his findings in three books called the Gulag Archipelago, which is a tour de force unveiling the vast network of Soviet labor camps and their tens of millions of victims.

After his books were released, the Soviets orchestrated a deliberate campaign to smear his reputation, to stamp him out. So he wrote an essay in which he appealed to his countrymen to resist the “lie” of communist ideology. This essay has sometimes been referred to as his “moral testament.”

In it, he says this: “Our way must be: never knowingly support lies! Having understood where the lies begin—step back from that gangrenous edge!”

And he continues:

And thus, overcoming our temerity, let each man choose: will he remain a witting servant of the lies (needless to say, not due to natural predisposition, but in order to provide a living for the family, to rear the children in the spirit of lies!), or has the time come for him to stand straight as an honest man, worthy of the respect of his children and contemporaries?

It will not be an easy path, perhaps, but it is the easiest among those that lie before us. Not an easy choice for the body, but the only one for the soul.”