



# Why Is It So Difficult For Me to Change?

*PART THREE:*

*Using Prayer and  
Christian Meditation to  
Change Your Brain*

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In Part I (Fall 2013)<sup>1</sup> and Part II (Fall 2014)<sup>2</sup> of this series, “Why Is It So Difficult For Me To Change?” we addressed several questions: Why do so many Christians struggle excessively in their Christian lives? Why do I have such a hard time forgiving people who hurt me years ago? Why do I have recurring problems in my marriage and other relationships? Why don’t I feel closer to God or sometimes feel so guilty, ashamed, anxious, or depressed?

We saw that recent scientific findings in the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology have shown that our earliest life experiences with our mothers or other primary caregivers actually impact the physical development of our brains. Traumas, abandonment, overly anxious, angry, or depressed parents, and difficulties with mother-infant bonding can actually kill off trillions of neural connections in our brains. Combined with our genetic inheritance and inborn temperaments, this loss of neural connections can predispose us to all sorts of emotional, relational, and spiritual problems in later life. These neurological structures program us to react in certain ways. This explains why many of our sinful problems and reactions are not simply a matter of our conscious choices. They are automatic responses triggered by our brains. Satan is ultimately behind all of our problems. He convinced Adam and Eve to sin, and that set in motion the generational causes of problems that now impact our brains and bind us into unhealthy patterns of thinking, feeling, and reacting.

After surveying how this process works, we looked at the fact that our emotional right brains come on line earlier than our rational left brains and are more deeply embedded. That explains why we sometimes can’t overcome our problems simply by gaining more information—even more biblical knowledge. We think, “I know God loves and forgives me,” but our emotional right brains scream out, “Oh no, He doesn’t! He couldn’t love me after what I have done!” This keeps us in bondage to our longstanding problems and emotional struggles.

We closed Part II with a discussion of how good teachers, pastors, and counselors use parables and metaphors to engage our emotional right brains, and how this type of professional counseling can help us resolve these deeply ingrained patterns and actually change our brains.

In this final article in our series we will explore how you can also use Christian meditation and prayer to change your brain and make major progress in growing in your Christian life.



## Rediscovering Prayer and Meditation in the Christian Community

Prayer and meditation are well-known practices in most cultures of the world. Recent scientific findings in brain research show that they can bring about changes in our brains and physical health, as well as in our emotional and spiritual lives. They can also lessen anxiety and depression. This should come as no surprise to Christians who value the Biblical emphasis on meditation and prayer and know scriptural passages like this one written by the Apostle Paul: "...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7, English Standard Version).

There are at least twenty references in the King James version of the Bible to the practice of meditation, including the well known verse: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2, King James Version). Unfortunately, the Western emphasis on secularism, narcissism, achievement, and consumerism and the hundreds of activities competing for our attention has often caused us to forget the biblical instruction to "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10, ESV). Our lives are so fast paced that if we walk into a Christian bookstore we can easily find several books on five-minute or less devotionals, written to comply with our pressured way of life. Certain monastic traditions within Catholicism and isolated emphases on meditative prayer among Protestants are the rare exceptions. Eastern religions have largely retained meditative traditions, but as we will see momentarily, these are actually quite different from biblically based prayer and meditation.

## Critique of Eastern Meditation

The Eastern pattern of meditation is centered in the self. It basically does not involve anyone else, including God. Theologian

Timothy Keller (2011)<sup>3</sup> wrote, "In Buddhism, the deepest consciousness of enlightenment is losing all sense that you are an individual self. The boundaries between you and the rest of reality disappear. The Eastern way to humility, to peace, is to actually lose the sense of an individual self" (para.14).

The goal of this type of meditation is to rid oneself of all thoughts, cognitions, and sensory input; to concentrate on rhythm, breathing, and relaxation; and to focus on pleasure, comfort, release of tension, and other self-oriented feelings. The individual attempts to become one with the universe, god (with a small g), and others—a state in which the boundaries between oneself and other people and things becomes less and less defined and distinct. This is called the "unitary continuum" and can include brief moments of transcending oneself and the world to arrive at a state of "absolute unity."

During this type of meditation other people and objects beyond the self are ignored which causes one area of the brain (the Attention Association Area) to direct the brain's attention to the self and to block neuron flow to a different part of the brain (the Orientation part). In doing so, the ability to be aware not only of oneself, but also the physical boundaries of one's body and of physical space and objects outside of oneself, is impeded. Thus, transcendence of self is accomplished.

One Buddhist meditator described this "state of union" as "a sense of timelessness and infinity. It feels like I am part of everyone and everything in existence." Another put it this way: "Ztt! I arrived. I lost the boundary of physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I was standing in the center of the cosmos. I saw people coming toward me, but all were the same man. All were myself. I had never known the world before. I had believed that I was created; but now, I must change my opinion: I was never created; I was the cosmos; no individual existed" (reported in Hamer, p. 121)<sup>4</sup>.

This transcendental state is created because the meditation does not focus on specific images or objects, such as Christ, but rather on one's breathing, bodily feelings, and release of tension in different parts of the body. The goal of this state of "Absolute Unitary Being" is called Nirvana, Brahman-atman or the Tao.

Notice the blatant denial of the Creator God: "I was never created; I was the cosmos; no individual existed." This is the fundamental and tragic flaw of Eastern forms of meditation. By its very nature, Eastern meditation rules out God; meditators place themselves as part of the universe or "god." There is no God (capital G) because all are "gods" (small g).

## A Biblical Perspective

Before continuing our contrast of Eastern forms of meditation with Biblically based meditation and prayer, let's briefly review the Genesis story of creation.

First, remember how clearly God is differentiated from His creation. He is the infinite Creator; we are the limited, finite creatures. We were made in His image, but we are not "gods." This flies directly in the face of Eastern mysticism.

Second, God created men and women at the apex of creation. He gave us wonderful brains with the capacity to think self-consciously and be aware of ourselves in relation to our surroundings.

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We were not created to try to melt into the surrounding universe and become some vague, mystical aspect of it. We were to “have dominion over the fish of the sea...and over all the earth and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gen. 1:26). Adam and Eve were told to “multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). Far from being united into the universe as “gods,” we were distinct human beings tasked with ruling over God’s creation.

Third, when Adam and Eve sinned, the human race was thrown back onto itself to try to find its own identity and sense of selfhood, meaning, and existence. Adam and Eve hid behind fig leaves; Adam blamed God and Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. They experienced the beginning of shame, anxiety, and guilt (Gen. 3:6-19). Anxiety about death suddenly became a powerful emotion and people, now separated from God, would go to extremes to avoid or attempt to control this terrifying emotion.

Notice that Eastern mysticism with its emphasis on a state of non-being or unity with the universe is perhaps the most extreme of all methods used to avoid the anxiety of death and other problematic emotions. Bring yourself to a state of non-being and you needn’t fear death. You will exist forever as a part of the great cosmos. Eastern mysticism is actually a new psychology and serves as a defense against pain and death anxiety. One strives to avoid the reality of both one’s existence and even external reality itself. Abolishing all painful thoughts and emotions by denial and disavowal of fallen reality and replacing it with tranquility, pleasure seeking, and non-awareness of any negative emotions becomes the goal.

Meditation can be either passive or active. While Eastern mysticism emphasizes the passive and tends to minimize the active, Christian meditation emphasizes both. Consider Psalm 46:10: “Be still and know that I am God.” The Hebrew and Biblical concept of knowing as used in this verse is not an emphasis on cognitive or intellectual knowledge.

Instead, knowledge refers to something that has been actively internalized, processed, and committed to. To know God is to experience Him in one’s heart and emotions as well as in one’s mind. The psalmist calls believers to actively focus and concentrate attention on God’s character and person, and to understand Him fully, deeply, and intimately. Oneness with God or Christ is an intimate relationship that involves both active and passive meditation, but it does not call us to lose our place or our selves as separate persons in God’s universe.

As Christians focus in meditation and prayer on the cross of Jesus, for example, or God’s mercy or His character, information and energy can flow to the Orientation of Self part of the brain. This tends to fix the object of our meditation and focus in our mind, making it real and vital in our thoughts and emotions. It also intensifies the reality of the object (God) in our character and whole being.

## The Essence of Meaningful Christian Meditation

The primary focus of the Christian’s meditation should be God the Father as revealed to us in His Son, Jesus Christ, in Scripture and through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. If we want to

understand God, we look to Christ Himself. As the author of Hebrews put it, God “has spoken to us by his Son...He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint [perfect image] of his nature” (Heb. 1:2-3).

To meditate on God is to meditate on the person of His Son, who shows, explains, and demonstrates God’s character in His teachings, dramatic actions, and redemptive death and resurrection. It is not sufficient to meditate on the words of Scripture on a page. We are called to get beyond the written Word to an actual encounter with Christ, the living Word. He must be the ultimate focus of our meditation or contemplation. As Christ himself told us, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me” (John 15:26)...he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14).

All of Scripture testifies to the character of God, and all of the characteristics of God’s personality are contained in Christ. Specifically, we might meditate on the fact that God is personal and that through Jesus we receive his personal forgiveness, acceptance, and adoption. The list can go on and on.

To summarize up to this point, when we pray and meditate, we are to see Jesus, face to face, behind every event in the Gospels and to ask him questions like, Lord, how should I apply this teaching or action of yours to myself? How does what you said or did impact my relationship with you and our life together? The same applies to any truth in the Epistles. There is not a verse in any epistle that is without Jesus standing behind it, desiring to have us respond personally to Him. The same can be said of the Old Testament, especially the prayer book of the Psalms, for Jesus is present in every part of Old Testament history and teaching. As Catholic theologian von Balthasar (1989)<sup>5</sup> put it:

The movement from the written word before me...to the living Lord seems to be difficult for many, although it is really very simple. I stand before my Lord, and he turns toward me personally. He himself is this turn-toward, inasmuch as he is the Word, the Word of the Father in all its human forms, whether speech or silence, jubilation in the Father or tears over Jerusalem, warning or consolation, a humble or a sovereign bearing. In every case he is Word, and now he is Word just for me (p. 34).

How do we apply this magnificent truth to our busy daily lives? David MacIntyre<sup>6</sup> writes, “**The equipment for the inner life of prayer is simple, if not always easily secured. It consists of a quiet place, a quiet hour, and a quiet heart**” (p. 30).

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Let's take a familiar event in the life of Jesus and see how we could meditate on it in a quiet place, during a quiet hour, and with a quiet heart. Jesus was invited to the house of Simon the Pharisee to dine, that is, to have table fellowship. At the very least, Simon was apparently trying to humble Jesus and question his theology. When Jesus entered Simon's house he wasn't given any of the courtesies of mid-Eastern culture. His feet were not washed. He wasn't given olive oil, the "soap" of the day, for his face and hands. And the common greeting of a kiss, usually on the face, was absent. The hostility of Simon as a host was shocking.

A woman, known to be immoral and probably a prostitute, had heard Jesus' Kingdom message of love, forgiveness, and compassion, and repented in response to his message. Referring to her later in the story, Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much" (Luke 7:47).

In that culture, townspeople who were not invited to the meal were allowed to sit around the walls of the dining room, away from the couches where invited guests were served food. The woman, sitting against the wall, observed the rude and hostile behavior of Simon, and was deeply moved. She had with

her a vial of costly perfume, a common item of her former professional life, and went to the feet of Jesus as he reclined, kissing them, cleansing them with the perfume and her tears, and wiping his feet with her hair.

Simon was critical that Jesus allowed this demonstration to take place and declared that Jesus certainly was no "prophet." Jesus replied, confronting Simon's hostility, with a parable declaring that those forgiven of many sins love their forgiver more than those forgiven of few sins. His message showed that Simon himself, even though he

is an apparent law-abiding sinner, needs forgiveness more than this woman, a well-known law-breaking sinner.

With this story in mind, let's see how we might prayerfully meditate on it in a way that could impact us deeply. First, we would find a quiet place and a quiet time where we would not be interrupted and could quiet our heart. We could picture Jesus directly facing us, asking or telling us how we might respond. He might be saying, "I have also forgiven you; let overflowing love and gratitude be more real in your response to me, as it was in this woman's experience." He might be implying that we are standing in the shoes of Simon, with a negative, contemptuous attitude toward those we think are beneath us or more sinful than us. Or he might be saying, "You, like this immoral woman, are filled with guilt and shame. Even as you have accepted my atonement intellectually, please let in my total pardon and cleansing of you at a deeply personal, emotional level."

By regularly meditating like this in a quiet place during a quiet time and with a quiet heart, we can move beyond the mere words of the Bible into a deeper personal connection with Christ in the middle of the actual experiences of our lives.

## Steps in Meditation

Catholic church father Ignatius Loyola proposed one Christ-centered approach to prayer that many have found helpful. It is called the Examen and follows a five-step sequence or progression for meditative prayer.

**First, give thanks.** Reflect on the blessings that your Heavenly Father has bestowed on you. Begin with your position and identity of being "in Christ." Focus on his death on the cross, his grace, acceptance, love, and forgiveness for you. Then remember particular blessings you have received over the last day or two, both large and small. It might be a particular event or circumstance, a relationship, or a time of rest and reflection that reminds you of the Father's care and concern for you. James Manney<sup>7</sup> writes, "Gratitude is the hallmark of Ignatian spirituality" (p. 33). This echoes the Apostle Paul who continually expressed gratitude and thanks for all the circumstances he encountered, both good and bad. "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:18).

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Giving thanks calls us into reflection and contemplation. It pulls us into a meditative mood and way of entering into a deeper focus and concentration on the presence of Christ in our immediate experience. This

leads to **step two: asking for the Spirit of Truth**. Christians know that we are in constant need of Christ's presence. This comes to us through the work of the Holy Spirit who is called the "Spirit of truth" and whose primary work is to testify to Christ. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13-14). Praying and meditating help us picture things from God's perspective.

Asking Him to aid us during a prayer time is asking Him to reveal truth to us—truth about Him and truth about ourselves. God's perspective is different than ours and we need to be aware of how we distort our own emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. Seeing the reality of our relationships, our personalities, our sins, and our self-deceptions is necessary in order to pray effectively. "When you ask [pray], you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3, New International Version). How urgently we need Christ's

Spirit to enlighten our hearts and lead our prayer and meditation to achieve the results and fulfillment that he desires for us.

**Third, face reality and review.** Review refers to examining the day, either behind or before us, and remembering and reliving all of its significant events and encounters and the accompanying emotions and feelings. If we follow our feelings, they will lead us to the good and the bad of the day's happenings. If we allow Christ's Spirit to guide us, we will want to carefully focus and reflect and note the significance of those emotions and the triggers that activated them: How did I act or react? What could I have done differently? How might seeing my reactions through the eyes of Jesus change my view of others or myself? We may become aware of realities about ourselves that we regret and wish we could do over. Perhaps we might feel contentment or a sense of healthy satisfaction about how we handled ourselves.

David prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me" (Psalm 139:23-24, ESV). What a great model for reviewing our day! Notice that David focuses on analyzing his heart and inner emotions and motives. Notice also that he is particularly concerned that his evil, harmful, and deceitful ways be brought to the light of his awareness. Since we, like



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David and every single person since Adam and Eve, try to hide from the realities of our real selves, seeing our sins and selfishness can be both difficult and painful. **That leads to the fourth step, repentance.**

As we face the truths about ourselves, which the Lord has revealed, we become increasingly aware of how far short we fall and we more freely and naturally turn to the face of Christ in repentance. We thank him for forgiveness and for working in us "to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13, ESV). In other words, in response to knowing that Christ paid the ultimate penalty for our sins, we have both a desire to do the things he wants us to do and experience his strengthening. We are promised that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

**Fifth, resolve.** In light of the progression of God's help in raising our consciousness

of Christ's love, forgiveness, and acceptance, we gain the freedom to face the new day, assured of his presence with us in everything we do. We don't try to imitate His behavior, but rather know that He is participating with us in our hearts to implement intimacy and closeness which in turn leads to changed behavior. **Simply resolving to change our habits or behaviors won't work. God's design is that changed behavior comes from within our hearts. Once our hearts are changed in response to God's love and forgiveness, our outward actions and speech will follow.** Jesus himself put it this way: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks forth" (Matt. 12:34).

In conclusion, the Examen is one excellent way for us as Christians to meditate in a way that not only changes the neurological functioning of our brains but also deepens our relationship with Christ and brings internal changes like lessened anxiety, depression, and anger. It also helps us increasingly gain a more accurate understanding of God's perspective on our lives, our emotions, and our relationships with others.

God wants to work in every area of our lives—from our brains to our behaviors and everything in between. As Paul wrote, God wants you to experience "...Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

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