

UPDATED EDITION

# good to great

IN GOD'S EYES

10 practices great Christians  
have in common

Chip Ingram



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## Foreword

What makes someone great? What does it take? How do you measure it? Perhaps more important, who measures true greatness?

These are the kind of questions I've been asking myself the last few decades.

I have written and thought much about the journey from success to significance. My book *Half Time* seemed to strike a chord in the hearts of many who were longing to move beyond success and make a difference in the lives of others. My passion, quite simply, has been to help people discover their *Core* (the best they have to offer), to create *Capacity* (make time and money available to fulfill their God-given calling and design), and to discover the *Context* (the unique role and place they fit to make the greatest difference) for the glory of God.

A few years ago God sent Chip Ingram to our Leadership Institute to explore the answers to those pivotal questions of Core, Capacity, and Context. I knew of Chip and had heard his teaching, but I didn't know the man, the passion, or the heart behind his vision. Thanks to twenty-six solid hours

together and some help from a handful of men, we launched a relationship that changed the course of Chip's life and allowed me to do what God called me to do—"grow fruit on other people's trees." My life mission is to grow 100X fruit on trees that God has designed to grow 100X fruit!

As Chip and I have partnered together we've seen God produce 100X fruit in the context he has been called to as a local church pastor and the president of Living on the Edge. Since our time together I've watched God place him in a context where he thrives. As a result, teaching resources and discipleship tools have been created that are now being used in millions of lives and thousands of churches across the country as well as around the world.

From my view, Chip's unique ability is to get people in the game. He helps us discover those God-given dreams deeply embedded in our hearts and then gives us practical, biblical, and inspiring tools to turn those dreams into reality. In an evangelical world filled with material designed for beginners, Chip's sweet spot is motivating and equipping high-capacity leaders and mature believers who really want to make a difference.

As I've worked with leaders over the years and men and women with great and godly ambition, I'm still amazed at how many start well and finish poorly. Whether it's the hubris of wealth, pride, or fame, or the discouragement that comes as dreams are refined and the souls of visionaries are molded by God, there seems to be a woefully high rate of attrition. This book provides the practices, not the theory, that great Christians have in common. This book is not for the slow of heart or weak of soul. It is not for the casual believer who wants a quick fix. It is for those who thirst for more, who want to go deep, who long to *become* even more than they want to *accomplish*.

This book provides a spiritual challenge that's covered in grace. It provides a mentoring pathway for growth but no cheap formulas for success. Chip provides hope and help for

those who are weary of “spiritual light” and long to turn their passion to make a difference into reality.

On the last night of Jesus’ life on earth an argument arose among his closest followers. The argument was about who was the greatest among them. Far from reproving them for their desire to be great, Jesus gave them a new paradigm and metrics for achieving greatness—greatness that would not be measured by fame, money, position, or intellect . . . but greatness in the eyes of God.

Oh that God would raise up a generation of young and old alike who would pray as George Whitfield did: “Oh God, make me a great Christian!” If your heart resonates with his, this book’s for you. I highly recommend it.

Bob Buford  
author of *Half Time*

## Introduction

This book's first edition was launched with a question that I've wrestled with on and off for most of my Christian life . . . Is it really wrong to want to be great? Is it self-centered to want your life to really make an impact? Does ambition indicate a spiritual problem? Am I "carnal" for thinking such things?

The answer emerged after tossing and turning for most of the night. Eventually, I got up, made some hot tea, found my wife's rocking chair, and stared into the fireplace, mentally reviewing all the things God had been teaching me. One idea in particular seemed to capture my attention: what does "greatness" in God's kingdom look like?

I had recently spent some time in Luke 22, a passage that raises this question. Near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, the disciples argued about which one of them was the greatest. Surprisingly, Jesus never rebuked them for their longing to be great. He gave them a completely new paradigm about what greatness is, but he didn't condemn their desire. I was intrigued by that.

I also had been reading *Good to Great*, Jim Collins' best-selling book about the practices of companies that are a cut

above the rest.<sup>1</sup> Collins and his team thoroughly researched hundreds of businesses and came up with a list of characteristics that distinguish great companies from good or mediocre ones. It has become one of the most popular business leadership books of all time. I was fascinated by the idea that such a small handful of principles can make such a huge difference in success.

As I sat up that night with these thoughts turning over in my mind, I realized that greatness is nearly everyone's ambition in nearly every area of their lives. Corporate leaders want their companies to be great; professionals want to have great careers; men want to be great husbands and fathers, and women want to be great wives and mothers; athletes want to be great competitors; scholars want to be great thinkers and researchers; artists want to create great art; and on and on. Mediocrity is almost no one's ambition.

I've asked a lot of people about their hopes and dreams, and I usually get unapologetic answers about their desires to be great at what they do. But when I ask believers if they want to be great Christians, they seem to be afraid to answer the questions. They become unassuming and deferential, concerned that an ambition to be great in this most important aspect of life would seem arrogant. To talk about ambition in following Christ sounds like the opposite of humble spiritual maturity.

Yet what's the alternative? Should we aspire to be mediocre Christians? Is it really prideful to want to honor God with lives of great faith and excellent work?

Even after spending three years with Jesus, the disciples didn't seem to think so. They argued about which one of them was the greatest, and though Jesus had to redefine greatness for them, he didn't tell them they were being unspiritual or arrogant because of their intense desire and ambition to be great. Instead he laid out a clear but counterintuitive pathway that eleven of the twelve eventually fulfilled. And their greatness, as they followed that pathway, turned the world upside down in less than a century.



As for Jesus himself, he didn't seem prone to mediocrity either, did he? In fact, in a long prayer the night before his crucifixion, he said to the Father: "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4). He went on to ask that the Father glorify him and that his glory be shared with his disciples. Those are bold statements about greatness, yet we would never accuse Jesus of being arrogant and immodest. His statements were true, and from God's perspective, his desires were godly.

God's perspective. That's the context that makes greatness a desirable quality. It's one thing to be great in terms of financial success or popular opinion; that's usually a self-centered, immodest ambition. But to be great in God's kingdom? That's a noble desire. We are designed to be great in God's eyes. When he created humanity, he proclaimed us not just good, but "very good" (Gen. 1:31). We exist for his glory. That kind of purpose isn't served well by mediocrity or even by settling for simply being good.

No, God loves it when his people are zealous about making a difference for his kingdom. He eagerly looks over the landscape of this world to honor, empower, and strengthen those whose love and obedience bring him pleasure. Our greatness—as he defines it—is his desire.

Over the past decade, I have been thinking and praying deeply over this concept of greatness in God's eyes. How can we throw off false humility and fully embrace God-given desires and dreams that bring honor and glory to his name? In my journey, I've begun to observe that great Christians have certain practices in common. My research is less methodical and empirical than that of Collins and his team of researchers—after all, the complex characteristics of corporate culture are a little harder to discern than the practices of individual Christians. But as I have surveyed the lives of great men and women of faith, I have noticed certain patterns that I consider to be valid evidence of the difference between an ordinary and an extraordinary follower of Christ. When I see

the practices identified in this book in a Christian's life, the result is almost always a rare level of maturity and fruitfulness. Conversely, when I don't see those practices in a person's life, the result is almost always mediocrity. This pattern flows out of numerous examples from Scripture, church history, and current experience. Christians who develop these practices with the right motivation and a clear understanding of grace are powerfully used by God for his glory.

Many people have projected into the future what they think their career ought to look like: a certain salary and position in five years, then in ten, then in twenty. Most of us have had similar projections for family: when we want to get married, how many children we want to have, where we want to live. Those timelines may not be written out; they may not even be conscious thoughts. But most of us have them, at least for those core areas of life that are important to us.

What would a spiritual timeline look like for you? What are your ambitions as a follower of Jesus? Have you thought about the kind of Christian you'd like to be in five, ten, and twenty years? Have you deeply pondered what kind of impact you want your life to have for Christ? What would your life look like if you, in fact, fulfilled Jesus' prayer that you "bear much fruit" (John 15:8)? What would the fruit look like? How would the world be different? When you have run the race with perseverance and finally cross the finish line, what kind of assessment of your life do you envision the Lord giving you?

There's nothing wrong with allowing yourself to think in those terms. In fact, Jesus' zeal for his Father's house consumed him (John 2:17). There's also nothing wrong with developing a plan to get there. Your plans must flow out of your God-given passions and the Holy Spirit's leading, but being sensitive to the Spirit does not rule out having a clear target for your discipleship.

In reality, a haphazard, go-with-the-flow approach will almost guarantee a mediocre spiritual life. In order for God to accomplish a great measure of his highest purposes for

your life, you must give yourself permission to live out that passion with purpose and intentionality. George Whitfield, the great evangelist and teacher of the eighteenth century who led the Great Awakening, certainly understood this when he said, “I pray to God this day to make me an extraordinary Christian.” Your faith can’t be a random growth process. The Bible and experience are clear on that point. God urges us repeatedly in Scripture to be diligent about the disciplines and practices that lead to excellence, maturity, and impact.

I want to be clear about the specific role of these practices. They are by no means required for salvation. They will never earn you brownie points with God. They are not cause for spiritual pride, and they are not an obligation. This is not a ten-step plan to gain God’s favor or to impress other people.

These principles are, however, an opportunity to fulfill the highest and best purposes God has for your life. Great athletes don’t spend years practicing because they have to; they do it because they have a dream. Christians who want to live the average Christian life can do so, almost by default. None of the practices in this book are required for that. But those who dream of eternal impact in the kingdom of God, who envision crossing the finish line as one of God’s great saints, are motivated to do whatever it takes to know God deeply and be used by him powerfully.

If you fit that description, the practical steps set forth in this book will help you attain a greater measure of Christ-likeness and usefulness. If the honest desire of your heart is to stand before God one day and, like Jesus, tell him, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4), these ten practices will make a huge difference in your life. They will put you on an uncommon path to greatness. The emails, letters, and phone calls I have received from men and women all over the world who have read this book and put those principles into practice remind me that God delights to do extraordinary things through ordinary people.

There are ten specific principles in this book, and though this list isn't exhaustive, it's quite thorough. You may think of another common denominator in the lives of great Christians or find a great Christian who didn't practice one or two of these principles. But in general, you'll find these patterns to be consistently present in the heroes of our faith. Consider them to be a reliable starting point, and cultivate them however God leads you to do so. An interactive study guide at the end of each chapter and a companion small group DVD (to purchase the DVD, go to [LivingontheEdge.org](http://LivingontheEdge.org)) allows you to grow in the context of biblical accountability and community. Let them lead to a lifestyle of making more and more impact as a believer.

You will find at the end of each chapter ideas to help you implement what you've learned. Because these chapters are about practices, it will probably be helpful to spend some time actually practicing each one before moving on to the next chapter. Remember that applying truth to your life is first a matter of quality; quantity comes second. God is not nearly as interested in your ability to learn truth as he is in your willingness to apply it. The action plans at the end of each chapter are designed to help you begin integrating what you've learned into your lifestyle.

God invites you to be a world-changing, kingdom-shaping follower of Christ. The desire to be great was planted in your heart by the one who made you. But desires remain only desires if there's no follow-through, no plan to accomplish them. My hope and prayer is that this book will serve as a blueprint for building the life God has designed you for and fulfilling your highest desires. Most of all, I long to see you and thousands of others like you become Christians who live like Christians and experience your deepest desire to be "great" in God's eyes!



# think

## GREAT THOUGHTS

Life consists of what a man is thinking about all day.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The actions of men are the best interpreters of their thought.

John Locke

Nothing limits achievement like small thinking; nothing expands possibilities like unleashed thinking.

William Arthur Ward

You are today where your thoughts have brought you. You will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you.

James Allen

Dr. Jack Haskins, a professor at the University of Tennessee, spent twelve years researching the effects of media on how people think.<sup>1</sup> One of his

studies attempted to determine the impact of a five-minute radio program that was filled with negative news stories: seventeen children blown up on a bus, an earthquake that killed thousands, riots in the streets of a large city, and so on. One group listened to negative programs like this daily, while a control group listened to more positive and uplifting news.

After evaluating the listeners who were daily exposed to five minutes of bad news, Haskins discovered four discernible effects on them: (1) they were more depressed than before; (2) they believed the world was a negative place; (3) they were less likely to help others; and (4) they began to believe that what they heard would soon happen to them. Simply by receiving and reflecting on the information from the radio program, their perceptions of the world and their outlook on life were adversely affected. Their concept of reality was shaped by their thoughts.

How could five minutes of negative thinking each day have that kind of influence? The old axiom, “You are what you eat,” is true not only physically but also psychologically and spiritually. The thoughts we entertain in our minds become the thoughts that guide our lives, for better or for worse. And if five minutes can have such a dramatic impact, can you imagine what six or seven hours of TV every day does to someone’s mind? The stream of negative news and skewed values that pours so freely into many of our minds clearly can change the way we live.

“As he thinketh in his heart, so is he,” Proverbs 23:7 (KJV) tells us. When we put positive, winsome ideas into our minds—for example, “I am deeply loved by God,” or “This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24)—we have positive emotions. When we put discouraging, depressing ideas into our minds, we end up with negative emotions.

Whether we like it or not, what we think influences what we do. The thoughts we have, the feelings we feel, the experiences

that shape our understanding—these things steer the ship of our lives. We act out of the perceptions we have, so those perceptions become a critical battleground.

Don't believe it? Just ask advertisers. Sales people know that once you are emotionally hooked on a car, a house, or anything else, your decision to buy will soon follow. The entire advertising industry is based on the fact that behavior flows out of whatever moods and thoughts we have, and everyone in the industry contends for them. So do politicians, philosophers, and preachers. We even try to influence ourselves.

Consciously we may trivialize the importance of our thoughts, but we obviously recognize their power. When we get depressed or anxious, we spend a lot of time, energy, and money on changing our emotions. We undergo counseling and take medications to get our moods and feelings back on course. We also spend a lot of time, energy, and money on fixing our behaviors. We turn to counseling, medication, accountability groups, training courses, and a number of other aids to control a habit or a personality flaw. But almost always, beneath the emotions we want to improve and the behavior we want to correct is a pattern of thinking that needs to change.

Picture a train, if you will. The engine is our thinking, and it pulls first the car of emotions, then the car of behavior, and then the car of consequences. Good thoughts will influence our emotions for good, which in turn will influence our behavior and produce positive consequences. Negative thoughts have the same influence in the opposite direction. What we think will determine the course of our life.

wrong      negative      unwise      devastating  
thinking → emotions → behavior → consequences

right      positive      wise      fruitful  
thinking → emotions → behavior → consequences

Great Christians think great thoughts. Augustine spent his academic life studying the works of great philosophers and conversing with the leading rhetoricians of his day. After he embraced the truth of the gospel, his well-trained mind turned its attention to eternal realities. His writings demonstrate a thought life constantly wrestling with lofty concepts and deep reflections. He has influenced Christian theology perhaps more than any post–New Testament figure because he thought great thoughts.

Centuries later, one of Augustine's admirers radically impacted Christian thought and helped spark the Protestant Reformation. As a monk, Martin Luther spent long nights and anxious days deep in thought about the nature of salvation and the practices of the church. To a large degree, the Reformation in northern Europe was a product of his thought life. We still reap the benefits of this mind, which was long ago captivated by the deep things of God.

Augustine and Luther are just two examples among many—Blaise Pascal, C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, to name a few—whose thoughts have changed the course of history and enriched the Christian faith. And lest you think this practice applies only to the intellectual giants I've mentioned, great thoughts have powerfully influenced many who considered themselves intellectually ordinary. Dwight Moody, for example, had very little formal education, but his life was consumed with a thought expressed by an evangelist he met in Dublin: "The world has yet to see what God will do with and for and through and in and by the man who is fully consecrated to him."<sup>2</sup> Moody wanted to be that man, and because that great thought was deeply rooted in his heart, Christian history has been (and continues to be) profoundly affected by his ministry.

The truth is that a mind flourishing with the deep truths of God is a powerful tool in his hands. Conversely, it simply isn't possible to have a mind filled with flawed, pessimistic, cynical thinking and live an influential, fruitful life for the kingdom



of God. If you want your life to dramatically change—to get out of a rut of destructive emotions or bad habits—it all begins with what goes into your mind.

## God Commands Great Thinking

Paul's letter to the church at Philippi emphasizes the importance of great thoughts. Throughout the course of the letter, he urges the Philippians to think of themselves as citizens of heaven, to be joyful, to have a mind of humility, not to have a complaining attitude, not to be intimidated by their adversaries, and so on.

Chapter 4 especially addresses a believer's thought life. Paul helps a couple of church members resolve a conflict and reminds the fellowship to rejoice in everything. He acknowledges that there will be difficulties in life accompanied by anxiety and fear, but he tells them to respond by getting rid of anxiety and turning to thankful prayer. The result will be the kind of peace that transcends all understanding or human knowledge.

Having dealt with the negative thoughts surrounding difficulties in life, Paul then turns to a more positive, proactive approach: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things" (Phil. 4:8 NASB).

In doing a word study on *dwell*, I found that the Greek word *logizomai* (translated "dwell" in Phil. 4:8) is not a casual word. It means "to deduce, to reason, to calculate, to ponder, to deliberate, to subject to protracted analysis or thought." It implies thinking about a matter long enough to take into account its character and realize its implications for your life. Paul is telling believers that whatever is characterized by these godly qualities is worthy of a lot of active meditation. In other words, he tells them to think great thoughts.

Let's take a look at each of those words Paul uses in his description of great thoughts:

- *True*—think about things that are objectively true, things that conform to reality. Before you put something in your mind, ask yourself: Is this true?
- *Honorable*—this word also means “grave” or “worthy of respect.” It refers to those things that reflect the serious purposes of a believer's life. Before that movie, commercial, or conversation goes into your mind, ask yourself: Does this honor God and reflect his purposes for me?
- *Right*—the word implies justice and righteousness. In the New Testament, it's used to refer to the character and actions of the Father and of Jesus. It is a picture of duty. Before you spend time thinking about something, ask yourself: Is this right or wrong?
- *Pure*—it comes from the same root word as *holy* and means to be pure from defilement of immorality. It carries the idea of internal integrity. Ask yourself: Am I thinking on things that are pure and holy?
- *Lovely*—this is my favorite word in the list. It means attractive, winsome, or beautiful. It pictures things that call forth a response of love and warmth from within us. Ask yourself: Is my mind filled with beauty?
- *Of good repute*—the general sense of the word is “admirable,” but its literal meaning is “fair speaking.” In other words, are these thoughts fit for God's hearing?
- *Anything of excellence and worthy of praise*—these last two thoughts are a summary category for anything that has moral excellence, motivates us to godly behavior, or encourages others to walk with God.

Paul urges his readers to practice these things as they have seen them in him, and the God of peace—that transcendent, beyond-understanding peace—will be with them.

What is Paul saying? Get your thoughts right and the emotions, behaviors, and consequences of peace will follow. A spiritually trained mind will align everything else to such a degree that emotional issues will begin to be resolved and behavior will begin to fall into place.

The Bible is very clear about this dynamic in other places as well. Romans 8:6 says that a mind set on the things of the flesh will bring forth death, but a mind set on the Spirit brings forth life and peace. Colossians 3:2 says, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (NASB). And Peter tells his readers to prepare their minds for action (1 Peter 1:13). We are to get in the habit of thinking the right thoughts.

## You Are What You Think

To express our thought life in terms of a *habit* seems unspiritual to a lot of people, but much of our thinking is undeniably habitual. In fact, most of our behavior is made up of habits, including many we aren’t even aware of. Most of us go to bed at a certain time each night. We get up in the morning at a regular time; we brush our teeth a couple of times a day; we grab a cup of coffee at a predictable hour; we get in a car and drive to work, usually the same route every day. No one tells us to do all of these things. We don’t even have to remind ourselves of most of them because they’re habitual.

It’s easy to see the application of this truth physically. If we spend our lives eating donuts and candy bars, drinking several cups of coffee and several cans of soft drinks a day, and never getting much exercise, we can predict a certain level of health down the road. What we put into our bodies is going to determine the quality of life our bodies have.

Paul is simply saying that the mind works the same way. There’s a certain kind of thinking that ought to become habitual for us because it will lead to godliness and peace. The

presence of God attends to such thoughts. As with our bodies, we may not see the results of our nutritional plan right away, but we will see it over time. Everyone, whether in the flesh or the Spirit, reaps what he sows. John Stott, in his commentary on Galatians, put it this way: “Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny.”<sup>3</sup> Eventually, we will be the product of our thinking.

### **What's Your Mental Diet?**

For many people, the practice of meditating on Scripture and spiritual insights seems difficult. I've heard faithful believers tell me they don't have the discipline or the concentration to memorize verses or focus on God's truth for long periods of time without getting distracted. But everyone knows how to do this. Most of us do it when we're anxious and worried; we can concentrate on problems and fears for hours at a time, picking apart every detail and obsessing about every contingency. Thinking great thoughts means taking that incredible ability to focus on negatives and using it for more positive and truthful purposes. Instead of obsessing about the quandaries you're stuck in—or might possibly be stuck in if every variable turns out for the worst, as you expect—try filling your mind with truth instead.

What do you think about when you drive? What do you listen to at home? When the remote control is in your hand, what channels do you turn on and allow to flow into your mind? If you feed your mind on a diet of mental junk food, your spiritual health will reflect it. If, however, you feed your mind on a diet of eternal truths, the character of God, the promises he has given, his track record with his people, and everything else that is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and worthy of praise, your spiritual health will, over time, prove stronger and more consistent and lasting than you ever thought possible.

We are people who have been called to ultimate transformation. Romans 12:2 tells us not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind, with the result that we will prove and experience the will of God. Though we live in a fallen world and fight in a daily battle, God's will for us is good and pleasing. According to Scripture, we can only experience it through a renewed mind. And we can only experience a renewed mind by filling it with great thoughts.

### Sources of Great Thoughts

How do we begin to think great thoughts? In a world that overwhelms us with endless varieties of philosophies and values, where do we learn the thoughts of God?

*Start with Scripture.* For me, John 8:32 is key: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." It's a familiar verse, but I don't think we always realize how broad its promise is. If I want to be free of anxiety, of fear, of the expectations of others, of habits that enslave me, and of negative emotions—and, positively, if I want to be all God longs for me to be—I've got to saturate my mind with truth.

Let me emphasize that I'm not simply talking about a Bible-reading program. A lot of people have a checklist to keep them moving through the Bible in a daily reading plan—which can be very helpful, by the way—but a reading plan alone is not going to get great thoughts into your mind. Absorbing the Word of God, thinking it over when you lie down and get up, and lingering in the depths of his revelation will cultivate great thoughts. Charles Spurgeon urged his students, "Let us, dear brethren, try to *get saturated with the gospel*. I always find that I can preach best when I can lie a-soak in my text. I like to get a text, and find out its meanings and bearings, and so on; and then, after I have bathed in it, I delight to lie down in it, and let it soak into me."<sup>4</sup> That's how God wants to fill your heart and mind with the truth that is in Scripture.

If you will soak in that truth and drink deeply from it, you are going to be free.

The alternative, of course, is to believe a lie. If we're like sponges, absorbing any billboard, magazine, movie, song, book, and so on, we'll naturally take in a lot of deception along the way. That may sound like an overreaction to media influences, but the course of many lives has been influenced by such casual absorption. Thinking great thoughts is a deliberate, intentional process of informing our mind with truth.

Think again about how deliberate we can be when it comes to our physical nutrition. Thirty years ago, if you pulled a can of vegetables off the shelf, it listed one ingredient: the vegetable itself. Today you'll find a breakdown of protein, carbohydrates, and fat, as well as how much fiber and vitamin content is in there. Fast food restaurants have charts telling us exactly what's in the food we're eating. Those labels and charts are there in large part because of popular demand. Many people today are extremely fastidious about counting calories and nutritional milligrams. We can be downright obsessed with our intake.

It's amazing to me that our culture can be so smart and deliberate about physical nutrition and so mindless about the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional content of the ideas we consume. We're casual about what goes into our minds and then end up in therapy desperately trying to change what's in there. I'm convinced that if we took half the care to guard our minds that we do to guard our bodies, in about five years we would be amazed at the transformation that has taken place in our heart and relationships.

*Dwell on great truths.* In addition to Scripture, many people have learned valuable truth from their experiences in life. One example is a famous quote by Jim Elliot, one of the five missionaries who died at the hands of the Aucas of Ecuador in the 1950s: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose." That's a truth I don't want to forget. I want to meditate on it and let

it soak into my mind and become a part of me. As I live in a materialistic society and watch all the advertisements that tell me I'm missing something, that I don't look right, that I'd be happy if only I had this car or that mouthwash, I need a constant mental reminder that I'm living for eternal values. Great thoughts like that of Jim Elliot serve as that reminder.

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep  
to gain what he cannot lose."

*- Jim Elliot*

Another example is a well-known prayer of St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy. . . .

And it goes on with a treasure of inspiring thoughts. My mind is inevitably going to be filled with something; why not let it be filled with a prayer like that instead of a song on MTV, a half-hour of sports talk, the last commercial I saw, or the plot of tonight's sitcom?

*Take time to notice beauty.* Another source of great thoughts is beauty. When I lived in Santa Cruz, I could see the ocean from my house. In seven minutes, I could be in the Santa Cruz mountains and see the tallest trees in the world. When life got really busy, I could find a place to get away and

sense the grandeur of creation. Sometimes on Sunday morning, I'd feel like my sermon preparation and notes were ready to preach but my heart wasn't. So I would get a cup of coffee, sit overlooking the bay, watch the waves crash, and just stare. I would think of how I could only see a little part of a big ocean, which is only one ocean on this little planet, which is part of a small solar system in one galaxy, which is only one small galaxy among billions. And here I am, a tiny little guy uptight about what people might think about my sermon.

"The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1). It's impossible to dwell on the beauty of creation and continue to be self-absorbed. My times of soaking in the grandeur reminded me how small my focus had gotten and how big my God is. It restored great thoughts to a mind that had become overwhelmed with a lot of trivial ones.

Once I've spent some time considering the enormity and goodness of God, I find it encouraging to focus specifically on some of his promises. Great thoughts about the Promiser always lead to great thoughts about the promises. Remember, for example, that the one who said all power in heaven and earth had been given to him is the one who said he goes with us until the end of the age (Matt. 28:18–20). When you don't feel like going to work because of what you'll face there, remember his words: "I am with you always." When you need to confront one of your kids and you know there will be a big blow-up, remember: "I am with you always." When you've made some really bad decisions and now there isn't enough money at the end of the month, remember: "I am with you always."

Those words mean a lot any time, but when you've meditated often on the grandeur of the one who spoke them, they are energizing and inspiring. They have the power to pull you out of an emotional pit. So do Jesus's sweeping promises about prayer or his blanket assurances about the future welfare of his people. A high view of God elevates his words in your mind and builds in you the faith to believe them.



*Meditate on spiritual insights.* Finally, great thoughts can come from personal insights God has given you in specific situations in your life. The Holy Spirit has a way of working life lessons into your heart, and they become more and more a part of you as you meditate on them and let them sink in. One of mine, for example, was the realization that I'm not the only person in the world who is desperately insecure. Everyone is. That was a lightbulb that came on in my mind long ago, and it has taken a lot of pressure off ever since. I stopped worrying about positioning myself in a meeting so everyone would think well of me or of dressing the right way and saying the right things to impress the right people. Once I understood that everyone is insecure, it gave me the freedom to acknowledge my hang-ups, assume others have similar hang-ups, and just be authentic with people. I could look for my security in Christ rather than in the opinions of others. That's an insight I want to keep and dwell on so it becomes more and more a part of who I am.

A high view of God elevates his words in your mind and builds in you the faith to believe them.

Another insight I keep coming back to is that God loves me at this moment as much as he ever has and as much as he ever will. My performance isn't going to change that. It is true on good days and on bad days. There are blessings that will come with obedience, of course, and consequences that will come with disobedience, but God's love doesn't change. I'm as loved right now as I ever will be, and nothing will ever diminish that love.

I'll share one more insight that has changed my life: comparison is at the core of carnality. That comes straight out of 2 Corinthians 10:12, so there's nothing groundbreaking there. But when I internalized that truth, it made a huge difference in my life. I realized that when I compare my gifts with

someone else's, there are only two places to go: inferiority or superiority. I either become envious or arrogant. It's the same when I compare personalities, success, possessions, relationships, or anything else. There's no spiritual benefit to doing that, and it comes out of a carnal, self-centered heart. This universal human tendency to compare can result in all kinds of emotional struggles. What's the solution? To think about the truth: we are accepted in Christ by his blood; we're the object of his affection; we are so precious to him that he gathers our tears in a bottle (Ps. 56:8 NASB), and he went to the cross while we were still sinners. We are accepted in the Beloved, and the life we now live is a response of gratitude, not a labor of guilt or a desperate attempt to impress. The Christian life flows out of a whole different way of thinking.

Those are great thoughts. Those are the kinds of thoughts that lead to a sense of security that allows people of faith to dream great dreams and take great risks. Great thoughts like that relieve the knots in your stomach when you go to a meeting, and they allow you to give your teenager what she needs instead of what she wants, even if peace in the home suffers for a moment. When we meditate on the truths of the gospel, we eventually internalize them. And when they become internalized, they are life-changing.

I saw amazing proof of this principle in college when a guy named George Dzundra began coming to a Thursday night Bible study I attended. George wasn't very cool. He was one of those socially awkward people that every group seems to have. He spoke with a lisp, he was already balding, he had zero self-esteem, and he was terribly insecure. Being around him was okay on Thursday nights in a Christian group where everyone's supposed to be accepted. But when I hung out with guys on the basketball team, I was embarrassed to be seen with him. If he came up to me and started talking, I'd get out of the conversation as quickly as I could.

At some point during college, someone taught George the power of thinking great thoughts. He began to memorize

Scripture, and he didn't do it halfway. I didn't see him for a few months, and when I ran into him again, his pocket was full of index cards with memory verses on them. He had memorized all of James and the Gospels of John and Matthew, as well as a couple of Paul's letters. He filled his mind with the promises of God and had begun dwelling on his identity in Christ rather than his own insecurities. Having the Word of God so deeply in his mind had completely changed him. He was rooted in the knowledge that God loved him, and it showed. He was much more confident and mature. He radiated God's Spirit.

Before long, guys who normally wouldn't even associate with someone like George began coming to him for advice. He listened to their problems and shared God's wisdom with them. I found myself asking if he and I could hang out together, and spending time with him taught me a lot about what God had been doing in his life. George was the most amazing transformation I had ever seen in such a short period of time.

I shared that story without using George's last name when I was teaching a few years ago. Not long afterward, I received an email from George's wife asking if I could possibly be the same Chip Ingram who had attended West Liberty State College in West Virginia—and if the George I was talking about could possibly be her husband. Turns out he had gone to seminary and become a pastor after college. I wrote back and told her how deeply her husband had impacted me. He made a lasting impression on how the power of renewing the mind with great thoughts can change the course of a person's life.

## **Key Areas for Cultivating Great Thoughts**

Learning to think great thoughts is a constant, lifelong process—and, for a lot of people, it is a random process. I've found the following seven areas to be the most foundational

and the most critical for bringing our minds into alignment with truth.

1. **Think great thoughts about God.** A good passage to start with is Romans 11:33–36:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and  
knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!  
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?”  
“Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay him?”  
For from him and through him and to him are all  
things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Spend some time trying to wrap your mind around all the implications of that passage, and you'll end up with a rather high view of your Creator.

2. **Think great thoughts about yourself.** It seems unspiritual to think about yourself at all, doesn't it? But unless you understand something about yourself, you can't really understand God's love for you. You need to understand just how much you need his mercy, and you need to understand just how much of it he has given. Let Zephaniah 3:17 stretch your mind:

The LORD your God is with you,  
he is mighty to save.  
He will take great delight in you,  
he will quiet you with his love,  
he will rejoice over you with singing.

What if you woke up each morning thinking about the God of the universe singing a song of rejoicing over

you? What if you thought about yourself as the object of the eternal God's love, regardless of whether you have your act together today? Would that change your life? Do you think your self-perception would remain *good*? Or would it improve drastically to *great*?

3. **Think great thoughts about others.** How does God look at people? According to 1 Samuel 16:7, “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

What do you think would happen to your relationships if you began to see people as God sees them? Most people try to see into the heart but still get caught up in external appearance, status, success, or possessions. God sees who we really are inside. If you looked for the beauty of each person's heart and began forming relationships on that basis alone, you'd end up with more friends than most people can imagine. You would also find yourself in a position to minister God's love in ways you never have before.

4. **Think great thoughts about life.** After Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, and Peter got it right by identifying him as the Christ, Jesus told them how he would suffer. Then he described his perspective on life: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” (Luke 9:23–25).

Life isn't about acquiring, accumulating, impressing, or exploiting. It's about discovering God's agenda, taking up your cross, and following Jesus. You lose your life in the process, but you gain his life. That's a great thought, and it's radically different than anything the

world teaches. When that great thought sinks in, you begin to live with an entirely new perspective.

5. **Think great thoughts about the future.** Can you imagine living life without fear and anxiety, without worry about what tomorrow will bring and stress about how to make everything work out? You can live that way if you believe what God has promised in Jeremiah 29:11: “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” God is sovereign, and he has a plan not only for the universe but also for you personally. You can save all the energy most people expend thinking about terrorism, the economy, how your kids will turn out, and so forth and instead invest that energy in something more productive. Why? Because you have a promise that God is in control and he has your welfare in mind. That doesn’t mean your life will be problem-free, but it does mean you don’t have to worry about whether those problems will thwart God’s purposes for you. Worry and anxiety are not great thoughts; faith in God’s promise is.
6. **Think great thoughts about the past.** For a lot of people, their past has crippled their future. They have a hard time letting their mistakes go. Paul’s great thought on that subject was this: “Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13–14 NASB). The psalmist says that our sins are removed from us as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). That’s how God thinks about our past, and we’re supposed to do the same.
7. **Think great thoughts about challenges.** We let adversity get us down, turn us into a victim, make us angry at

God, or we live with nagging regrets. We allow ourselves to be eaten up about the raw deal we've been handed—the dad who left when we were young, the bad investment that left us with no financial security, and so on. We have no shortage of unhealthy ways to address the challenges of our lives.

Meanwhile, James 1:2–4 tells us this: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (NASB). That’s a radically different way to think, but if that thought drives us when we face a trial, our emotions, behaviors, and consequences will look much different than if our minds follow their natural, unhealthy course. In these and all other areas, when our minds are filled with great thoughts, our lives eventually bear great fruit.

### **Some Practical Tips to Get You Started**

As we've discussed, a transformed thought life doesn't just happen. It's a matter of practice and developing habits. There are very practical steps you can take to think great thoughts. In fact, the very first psalm gives us a picture of how to take those steps.

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the  
counsel of the wicked,  
Nor stand in the path of sinners,  
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!  
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.  
He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of  
water,  
Which yields its fruit in its season

And its leaf does not wither;  
And in whatever he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so,  
But they are like chaff which the wind drives  
away.  
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the  
judgment,  
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
But the way of the wicked will perish.

Psalm 1:1–6 NASB

How blessed is the person who does not fall in line with people going in the wrong direction, who does not put himself or herself in a position of absorbing the same lies, who has no need to look like, act like, and have the same things as those who do not know God. Notice the contrast: his or her delight is in the law of the Lord. He or she loves truth and meditates on it all the time. What's the result? "He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season." It's a picture of prosperity, and it's brought about by thinking great thoughts.

I'll close with a few suggestions for how to do this. They may seem kind of obvious, and I'm sure you can come up with many more that fit your personality and lifestyle just as well, but these will help you get started.

- *Memorize and meditate on Scripture.* This isn't an "ought to" that will make you feel incredibly guilty if you don't. It should be a "want to" that you can have fun with. Write down some verses on index cards, stick them in your pocket, and read them over whenever you have a little down time waiting in line or between meetings. Take a look at them before you go to bed and when you wake up in the morning—make them the first and last thing you put in your mind each day.



- *Use your drive time.* Do you really need to hear the latest sports talk or meaningless music? Listen to tapes of the Bible, or let your mind enjoy some silence while you ponder deep truths.
- *Listen to great music.* There's a connection between music and our emotions that I don't really understand, but the scriptural basis for making music is undeniable. The command to sing occurs surprisingly often, and David's music was able to soothe Saul's restless spirit. Refreshing and uplifting music can set the course your mind will follow.
- *Take walks in nature.* Go somewhere beautiful, even if it's in your own backyard. Wherever you live, you can find some aspect of nature to enjoy as you contemplate the marvels of creation.
- *Personalize scriptural truth and promises.* Write down some passages that address your specific issues, even writing your name in place of whatever pronouns the passage uses. Make it personal and applicable to your individual struggles and needs. I've got some of these on cards that I've carried with me for years.

When the truth resonates with your heart, you'll notice your emotions changing and you'll find yourself motivated to do things that surprise you. Thinking great thoughts will be just the first step in a radically changed life. Set your mind on the things above, dwell on whatever is true and honorable and right. And the God of peace will be with you.

### Talk It Over

1. As you think back over your family life growing up, how would you describe the thinking and attitudes of your parents?
2. Go back to page 22 to the list of things Paul says we should think about. Read over the descriptions and share which one of these you need to focus on.

3. What is a great truth (life lesson) that has shaped or influenced you?
4. Psalm 19:1–4 says

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they display knowledge.  
There is no speech or language  
where their voice is not heard.  
Their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world.

This chapter talks about taking time to notice beauty. Where in creation do you most connect with God?

5. Thinking great thoughts involves focusing specifically on the promises of God. What is a promise from God that is especially meaningful to you?
6. Go back to the list of practical suggestions on pages 36–37. Which one of these can you put into action this next week?
7. Where do you have to be careful with your thought life? What unhealthy thoughts or material can you be tempted by?

### Live It Out

1. Read through Romans 8 several times this week. Spend time dwelling on this great chapter and focusing on the blessings that are yours in Christ.
2. Set aside some time this week where you can focus on creation. Maybe it is a walk in the park or sitting outside gazing up at the stars. Spend time alone and let the majesty of God's creation remind you of God's greatness.