

Mindfulness

Various passages

Last year, certain buzzwords started getting used more and more frequently in people's conversations, on TV and in the press and social media. 'Brexit.' 'Post-truth.' 'Mindfulness.' In a couple of weeks, I'll preach about a Christian response to the idea of 'post-truth.' This morning, as we look at responding to key ideas in our generation, we're going to look at the concept of 'mindfulness' with our Bibles open.

So what is mindfulness? Here's one explanation of it:

It can be easy to rush through life without stopping to notice much. Paying more attention to the present moment – to your own thoughts and feelings, and to the world around you – can improve your mental wellbeing. Some people call this awareness "mindfulness". Mindfulness can help us enjoy life more and understand ourselves better. You can take steps to develop it in your own life.

Mindfulness is about deliberately taking time to focus on what is in front of us in the present moment. Sitting silently to do this for a deliberate period is encouraged, as well as just 'living more mindfully' through everyday activities.

Now at this point, certain personality types will be thinking, 'what a load of rubbish' and have written off the next half hour because they don't know why I'd waste a sermon on this airy-fairy stuff. It's easy to write off mindfulness a little like this page from a parody book about it.

And others will instinctively react as Christians by thinking, 'we don't need all this meditation and worldly techniques... all we need is the Bible,' and will also not see why there's anything more to say.

But here's the reality. Mindfulness isn't just a cultural fad. It's a researched and applied form of care for mental health. The explanation I just read to you is from www.nhs.uk

And given that the World Health Organisation has found that 1 in 4 people in the world will suffer mental health issues in their lifetime (a statistic mirrored in Britain according to www.mind.org.uk), you might be prescribed mindfulness. Someone you love might be prescribed it. Your children are being taught it in school. The people you work for might offer it to their staff.

Whether mindfulness is something you ever engage with or not, a throwaway reaction to what is a growing phenomenon in culture and healthcare really won't do. Because people around you who really matter to God *will* engage with it. A thoughtful, biblically informed reaction to mindfulness is what we're aiming for today.

And in aiming for that, I want to thank my friend Doug Hutchison for providing most of the insights and reflections on this. Doug is a Clinical Psychologist with the NHS working in Inverness, and a Christian. Mindfulness is something that he uses with his patients in a professional capacity.

Let's start by trying to explain what mindfulness is, before we think about how the Bible might lead us to respond to it. Doug sums up mindfulness like this:

'Mindfulness is an attempt to cultivate awareness of the here and now, both inside and outside of yourself, rather than being preoccupied with the past or future.'

This might involve sitting silently and being aware of the things around you - the ticking clock... the sound of the wind outside... the warmth of the seat you're in... Or it might also be doing everyday things 'more mindfully.' As you walk to the shop, notice the feel of your coat, the air on your face, the sounds that are around you.

It sounds like small stuff, but the idea is that in deliberately focusing on these immediate things, you take your mind off auto-pilot, and out of the everyday rush. It can settle the mind and give it a break from what it's usually doing.

Similarly, practicing mindfulness about what's going on inside of yourself might involve sitting silently, and focusing on your breathing. And it involves 'stepping back from and watching your thoughts.' Noticing the thoughts that come into your mind, and looking at them as 'mental events.'

The idea is that you let every thought in, and rather than being defined by it, you think of it as a 'thought bus' that arrives and then departs without you having to get on it. Other images are used, like a conveyor belt, or floating bubbles. Every thought is allowed in and observed without a value judgement about its worth.

In all of these exercises of being mindful of what is both in and around, the mind concentrates on what is here and now, and is released from dwelling on

the pain of the past or the fear of the future. Doug finds that mindfulness can be useful for all sorts of patients.

People who report that their minds are just too busy find that mindfulness helps settle their thoughts. People who succumb to habits of multi-tasking stimuli - (for example, texting whilst eating whilst chatting whilst watching TV) find that mindfulness gets them to helpfully reduce stimulus.

Those who suffer recurrent bouts of depression can find that mindfulness helps them to spot the signs of becoming unwell again rather than simply crashing into it. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE for short) recommends mindfulness for people who have suffered 3 or more bouts of depression in the past.

And some patients who suffer from impulsive behaviours, like binge eating or self-harm, find that mindfulness helps them not to auto-react in these ways to the things going on in their lives.

The bottom line aim for anyone trying mindfulness is that it helps them to step out of mental auto-pilot. There is a deliberateness in their focus which helps them out of the things that bind them in their everyday way of thinking.

My impression of mindfulness is that it can be a useful tool for people, but it's not the solution to human wholeness. Doug would agree. And so would the NHS, and the key proponents of mindfulness. Cited on the NHS website, Professor Mark Williams, the former Director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, says this:

"Mindfulness isn't the answer to everything, and it's important that our enthusiasm doesn't run ahead of the evidence... There's encouraging evidence for its use in health, education, prisons and workplaces, but it's important to realise that research is still going on in all of these fields. Once we have the results, we'll be able to see more clearly who mindfulness is most helpful for."

Much like the stuff we looked at last week, where we'd headed next with this is to say that, as useful as mindfulness might be to some, the good news that Jesus Christ has for human beings has much more to offer.

Have you any knowledge or experience of mindfulness? What is your impression of it?

So how might following Jesus' lead and being shaped by God's Word affect our view of mindfulness? Well, the first thing to say is that the aim of releasing human beings from the pain of the past, fear of the future and being overwhelmed by the present is absolutely consistent with Jesus' agenda.

Jesus came, lived, taught, died and rose again so that human beings could be set free from the guilt, pain and baggage of the past. We looked at that in some depth last week. Paul sums it up like this:

2 Corinthians 5:17

'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!'

And in setting people free from dwelling on the past, Jesus was adamant that people don't look back there, but press on with Him:

Luke 9:62

'Jesus replied, "No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God."'

Neither did Jesus want people to be worried about the future. There is an eternal security that Jesus provides people with, and having that assured, He would have us let go of concerns about the 'what ifs' of a few months from now, and focus on what's happening here and now around us today.

Matthew 6:25-27

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to His life?'

It's in that same chapter that Jesus teaches us this in the short prayer basics lesson that we call the Lord's Prayer...

Matthew 6:11

'Give us today our daily bread.'

Just consider the day before you and ask God for what is needed for it. Instead of occupying the mind with the maybes of the future, notice what's going on for you (and perhaps more importantly for other people around you)

right now, today. And pray for God to resource *that*. Because, as Jesus also says in this chapter:

Matthew 6:34

'Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.'

Jesus would have us let go of the past, trust Him about the future, and focus on what's in front of us today. And if mindfulness helps people to do it - great!

I've said a few times as we've been looking through Luke's gospel that the Mission of God is this: To release human beings from everything that detracts from human wholeness. Including sin, death, illness, debt, oppression... and stress, anxiety and depression.

So far as mindfulness is consistent with God's way of doing things, it's not something for Christians to fear, reject or disdain. It appears to be very helpful for some people in bringing about release from burdens about past, present and future. That's something that Jesus was absolutely *for*.

God is pro-joy. He is pro-peace. He is pro-life-to-the-full for us. No Christian I know rejects medicine for physical human afflictions, but rather sees these human inventions as God's gift to us as He has inspired those He made in His image to help and heal one another. Might that not be true for prescribed care for mental human afflictions too, including mindfulness?

How would your prayer life change if you were to focus more on praying for 'daily bread'?

Having suggested that the aims of mindfulness are in keeping with Jesus' project of releasing human beings, we'll finish by looking at how the Bible suggests that we don't accept mindfulness uncritically.

Looking at just two short passages from Paul's letters, there are at least four flags to raise to make sure that if we're going to engage with mindfulness, we're doing it in a way that honours our King and keeps Him first in our lives. Let me read first of all from 2 Corinthians, the same letter from which we read that those in Christ are new creations.

2 Corinthians 10:5

'We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.'

Flag 1 - Don't let mindfulness become a back door to another religion

Mindfulness as a concept is relatively new in Western thinking. It has been researched and applied in Western Psychology and Psychiatry since the 1970s, with a huge boom in the last few years, but it's fair to say that its origins both as a word and a concept are derived from Eastern religion, and in particular, Buddhism.

The idea of sitting to meditate silently for a time, being aware of inner and outer sensations, comes from this root. The notion of simply observing your thoughts non-critically reflects the non-judgemental vision of the illusory nature of reality that Buddhism teaches - suffering and happiness, good and evil, are all illusions.

If mindfulness is employed as a mental technique and it's beneficial, great. But a Christian should make the conscious decision not to sleepwalk into mixing religions, taking a bit of Christianity here and a bit of Buddhism there. Nor a bit of dependence on Jesus, and a bit of dependence on secular modern therapy, for that matter.

Jesus leaves no room for that. He calls for total dependence upon Him. He made it very clear that He and He alone is the way, truth and life; and anything that distracts or competes with that is to be rejected. We are to reject '...every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.' Not least Buddhism, which teaches that there is no God.

Flag 2 - Don't be uncritical about your thoughts

The approach taken with mindfulness techniques about what's going on within involves observing the thoughts that emerge in your mind without any critique or value judgement being placed on them. But 2 Corinthians 10:5 instructs us to 'take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.'

Throughout God's Word, we learn about the kind of actions, words, thoughts, attitudes and behaviours that God calls sin - morally wrong, an offence against Him, detracting from human wholeness. Idolatry - letting anything be bigger in heart and mind than God. Greed. Anger. Malice. Jealousy. Adultery. Slander. Guilt. Fear. Impatience. Murder.

Thoughts around all these things and more are not morally neutral in God's Word. It's not okay to let the thought about sleeping with someone other than your spouse just float. It's not alright to watch the thought-bus marked 'what I'd like to do to them' come round the corner. There are certain thoughts that should not be left unchecked. They should be chucked out as you see them coming. Disposed of as seeds, rather than being allowed to take root, grow, and become weeds that take a lot of work to shift.

2 Corinthians 10:5 says this is what we are to do. And if God tells us to do something, He enables us to do it. It's not easy to train your mind to ditch sinful thoughts. But it's not impossible. You'll never be perfect at this. But, (and here's the key to it), *with the enabling that God's Holy Spirit in your life brings, you are able to increasingly take captive every unwholesome thought and reject it from your consciousness.*

I've grown in this from being a teenager who let thoughts go all over the place, as teenagers do, to steadily growing in discipline about my thoughts in the 15 years since. I've still a long way to go. But I can already tell you, *God makes this possible.*

So don't follow the counsel of mindfulness to allow in every thought, no matter how sinful God calls it. Whilst it might be informative to realise just how dark we are when we let ourselves go there, God would rather set about helping us live in the light that He has freed us for and called us to.

For our other two flags, let's come back to the passage from Philipians that we read earlier in the service...

Philippians 4:4-8

'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

'Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.'

Flag 3 - Don't be undiscerning in your choice of what to be mindful of

This is the other side of the last point - as well as actively choosing to reject some thoughts, Paul counsels us to be deliberate in choosing to dwell on

other things - things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy.

Not least, that means dwelling on God Himself. Being mindful of His character, His holiness, beauty, and goodness in your life. As you sit quietly in your room or under your tree or whatever, choosing to be mindful of the presence of God with you will be better for God's glory and your wholeness than being mindful of the feel of the grass or the creak when the heating comes on.

The things that God is doing in your life... The person or people He keeps bringing to your mind when you stop long enough to listen for His voice... the hope of Heaven energising and motivating your every day... the cross of Christ (oh, there is always so much to be gained for your soul in thinking again about the cross!)

Noticing incidental things about the space you're sitting in is okay. But noticing how God is at work within you, what He has placed around you today or this week, and even listening for what He wants to say to you when you're still - that's *better*. So even if you do the former, don't neglect to do the latter.

Flag 4 - Don't let mindfulness replace prayerfulness

Mindfulness can help with stress, anxiety and depression. But Philippians 4:6 prescribes *prayer* in response to anxiety. Again, you can do the former, but don't neglect the latter here.

Mindfulness tends to be suggested as an exercise that people might engage in by setting aside 20 minutes in a day to sit quietly for it. As well as that, people are encouraged to go through some everyday activities in a 'mindful' way throughout the day. This sounds a lot like the way Christians before me have taught me to pray. Deliberate time set aside. And praying as I go in walking, conversing, watching, working.

If I've got time to sit still for 20 minutes, I'll choose prayerfulness over mindfulness. If you're setting aside 20 minutes for mindfulness because the doctor told you to, that's good. But don't tell yourself 'I haven't got time for a quiet time with God in my day,' because you found it when a doctor told you that you needed it for something else. There's likely to be a lifestyle you can order that sees you fitting both activities into your week, if not your day.

Mindfulness is a discipline that gives you some temporary relief from the mental auto-pilot that you get bound up in. Prayer, too, is a discipline. But it's

more than that. It's a relationship, a conversation, an entering into the presence of the Holy God. It is to sit down with God and be made aware again of the permanent freedom from the past and the future that you've already been blessed with through Jesus.

It's an expression of love, dependence and trust that you are not alone, that there is One who can help you. It's a looking up to God instead of in on yourself. And the result of prayerfulness is greater than the result of mindfulness, Philippians 4:7 tells us. It is to receive the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, *guarding* our hearts and minds.

Prayer reshapes my thoughts, priorities and plans better than anything. Prayer dispels my fears, doubts and pain better than anything. And this peace we read of is an enduring thing in the heart and mind, something more than the relief and reordering of thought that mindfulness aspires to.

Like anything, if mindfulness becomes the big thing for you that you perceive as the answer to your stress, anxiety and depression - a thing bigger than God is in your life - then it becomes an idol. It becomes a created thing put in the place of your Creator in your heart. And that never goes well for us.

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So, with a few caveats, mindfulness is useful enough when we weigh it up with God's Word. Being free of the pain of the past and the fear of the future is good. But ultimately, there's only one person who brings that about wholly and fully.

And whether you practice mindfulness every day or never give it a thought after this morning, I pray that we'll each follow Jesus' lead for what to put out of our minds, and what to put in them, in prayerful dependence on the Father who is always, always mindful of us.