

Introduction and Chapter One

Introduction

The principles in this book can change your life. I became convinced of this several years ago during a deep personal trial. Scripture was my anchor, but I also read other books, both Christian and secular, to find ways of managing my painful thoughts and emotions. As I read, I began to see common themes which were actually tools that could enhance the way I looked at my problems and my life. These tools continue to benefit me, even though the crisis has passed.

I originally gathered these principles into a faith-neutral book, hoping it would be valuable to people from any faith background. However, as a follower of Jesus, I understood that for Christian readers, these encouraging and life-changing ideas should be presented from another perspective. After all, the framework undergirding our lives is worlds apart from that of people without faith in Christ. The Christian believer has *special assistance* . . . access to the Almighty Father as well as His Holy Spirit and His promises. That's an enormous advantage in transforming our thoughts and habits into a way that fits with God's truth *and* our authentic selves.

I wrote *Mental Habits for Believers* to encourage Christians toward developing good mental habits within a Christian framework, acknowledging and utilizing the special help God offers us. This new edition comes a few years later, so my hope is that my additional years of understanding God's truth will spill over, making these principles even more helpful. These habits are powerful tools capable of aligning thoughts in the right direction.

In a quick survey of Christian nonfiction titles from a major distributor of Christian books, roughly half of the books help readers with some aspect of their lives. Topics included managing thoughts, changing habits, managing anger and pursuing goals. Maybe you've read some of them and had disappointing results. These themes and more are discussed in this book but are presented in the context of developing better mental *habits* within the framework of God's relationship and commitment to us.

Because of God's grace in the world, people can benefit from truths He has put into place, whether they follow in Him or not. For example, telling the truth is a good principle and benefits the person doing it through good outcomes and a good reputation. People usually know it's the right thing to do. The Christian has additional reasons to be truthful. He doesn't want to grieve God, doesn't desire to sin, wants to have a good testimony before others, wants to have unbroken fellowship with God, and wants to follow Christ. All of these other reasons are based on his or her *relationship* to God. This relationship gives holy energy and motivation to our ability to acquire new habits.

As you read and study *Mental Habits for Believers*, remember that you have a relationship with a heavenly Father who cares about you. This contrasts with religious

principles or rituals that get filed away in our minds. Our relationship with God enables the following helpful principles to become divinely powerful ones in our lives since God is always interacting with us *and* empowering us. You'll find that the habits you are about to discover *coordinate* and *activate* God's truth in our lives.

Another way to make new mental habits a lifestyle is to study this book in a group. You'll find group discussion questions for each habit toward the end of the book.

I hope that this journey will help you know yourself better, especially in the area of your mental habits. Some of your habits (many of which are unconscious) may have blocked you from having a fulfilling life and healthy relationships. Some may have even created sinful patterns that cast shadows over your daily relationship with God and your desire to live an effective Christian life. There are many reasons to improve mental habits. Just know that they are every bit as important as the other good habits you cultivate each day. And even more so, since they guide everything you do and feel.

Some assumptions that undergird this book

1. God loves us and desires our happiness. *John 10:10* God is for us. Have no doubt about that. He wants you to have the best, happiest and most on-target life you are meant to have.
2. God created all humans with value, whether they believe in Him or not, because He made them, and they are in His likeness. That means we have value even before we come to know Him because He made us. *Gen. 1:31*
3. Working on our own lives is a good and healthy way for us to "tend the garden" that God has given us. It isn't selfish. We all acquire bad habits in our lives. It's inevitable in this fallen world. That includes our habits of *thinking*. Do you believe God wants you to improve them, with His help? He *does* want it and will rejoice in your progress! Changing mental habits is a way we can bring our thoughts into alignment with what is "true, honorable and right." *Phil. 4:8*

Each chapter has reflection questions to help you to apply what you've read. I encourage you to answer them right in the book (for the paperback) or buy a small notebook, if you want more space or are using an eBook or audiobook. Write your answers as well as any other reflections that the reading and Scriptures trigger for you. If you create a method for recalling and applying throughout the day what you've learned, this will lead to more lasting change.

I have no doubt that if you reflect on these principles and make them into regular habits, they can help you change your life and assure you a better future.

Kyle Hunter

Day One

Do I Have Mental Habits?

You have probably heard that the mind can be a battlefield. Maybe you have lots of first-hand experience with this truth. It isn't hard to believe, given the negative influences all around us daily. How effortless it is for us to develop unhealthy mental habits, ones that are counterproductive to our deepest desires for our lives. These negative mental habits can hover in the background even as we do our best to follow the Bible. They end up hindering or even sabotaging our attempts to live a faithful Christian life.

The book you are reading contains a collection of mental habits that form the basis of mental health. Both Christian and secular psychologists as well as many pastors agree on their importance in leading people to satisfying lives and relationships.

Here is a startling fact we might not realize: *How we think controls how we live*. Our thoughts and mental habits are a command center for our entire lives, not just the daily bits, but the long trajectories into the future. Developing healthy mental habits is essential for mentally healthy lives, contentment, good relationships and good futures. "Guard your heart above all else for it determines the course of your life." Proverbs 4:23

It is important to emphasize that mental habits are *tools* to help us with our thought processes, but they in no way replace God's Word or His leading in our lives. If we stay in open communication with Him and attempt to follow His truth the best we can, mental habits will help us do that. Good mental habits work to promote our primary love relationship with our Creator.

Have you ever thought about *how* you think? Not necessarily how you solve problems or learn, but how your thoughts flow when you aren't paying attention? We all have mental habits, ways of thinking that are as much a routine as how we get ready in the morning or which way we go to work. Even if we have been Christians for years, we may have deeply rooted mental habits that undermine us and block the flow of joy God has for us. We may have integrated these habits into our lives over decades or years, without even knowing it. They may come from our families, giving us predispositions to certain beliefs; they may have grown out of difficult situations, leading us to believe that most people are dishonest and will hurt us.

I am choosing to call them habits, not beliefs, and here's why. Have you ever noticed how a belief guides your actions and even your feelings? These actions and feelings recur many times daily and over months and years, leading to a habit. That's called a *mental habit*. Like other habits, you repeat it regularly. And like a habit, it is often unconscious. But it *can* be changed.

Why would you want to change a mental habit? *Because what you think about determines your life experience*. Do you want the best possible life you can have? God surely wants that for you. Your mental habits can help direct the course of your life

according to your unique gifts and desires. And they can help you live according to God's truth.

It might be easy for you to recognize negative mental habits in other people, especially those who annoy you! Maybe you can even recognize some negative habits in yourself, or lies you believe without knowing it. That's much harder because we all have blind spots. Pride or even low self-esteem can block us from an honest view of ourselves.

The idea that we all have negative mental habits isn't a criticism, whether of you or others. It's simply a fact we can't escape. Usually, we aren't aware of our habits and how they might be making us unhappier or less successful than we ought to be or affecting people we care about in a negative way. A shift in these habits can transform our lives and relationships.

Mental habits can be positive or negative, productive or destructive. An example of a positive mental habit is to frequently consider yourself better off than many people in the world and to feel thankful. Studies have even shown that thankful people are generally happier people. Being thankful on a regular basis leads to good feelings and positive attitudes toward other people and about your life in general. It also helps you feel closer to God and more able to trust Him as you think about what He's done for you or has given you.

Positive mental habits can lead to a greater sense of well-being and peace. They can even help you make friends, find love, get the job you want, overcome weaknesses and accomplish your life dreams. Though many teachers and organizations promote these habits, you'll soon see that they are Biblical. Researchers, motivational coaches, pastors and psychologists have identified the benefits of positive mental habits. What and how you think CAN change your life, your emotions and your future.

We are all imprinted with negative influences, whether they come from family, media, friends or our work environment. These can lead us to unhelpful mental habits, hardened ruts in our mental infrastructure. Whoever you are and whatever your situation, you can improve your daily thought habits, and this will improve your life. Your habits are not a pre-ordained sentence. Positive mental habits can be learned, and unhelpful ones can be deleted. We can change our mental habits just like we can change other habits.

No one said it is easy, however. It takes time and persistence. In fact, it might be harder to change a mental habit than to change a physical one. It may be more challenging to stop worrying than to stop eating pastry every morning for breakfast. Some mental habits can be more damaging to your health, both mental and physical, than an excessive pastry habit. Changing your breakfast menu will require a specific set of disciplined behaviors. Changing mental habits will require *mental* discipline.

Along with mental discipline, as mentioned in the Introduction, you'll need to exercise self-awareness. Self-awareness is vital to growth and advancement in all areas of your life, spiritual, relational, emotional, professional—*all* areas. Self-awareness will help

you identify, over time, bad habits and even lies you've believed for years, bringing the unconscious to the conscious level so you can change them.

This might sound difficult, but as believers we have first-class assistance. The power of the Holy Spirit resides in us, and He will turbo-charge our efforts to do something good for ourselves that's aligned with His will. (Romans 8:26, Phil. 4:13.) If you are looking for a life coach, you can't do better!

Helping you develop positive mental habits is the purpose of this book. Maybe you aren't sure if you have unhelpful mental habits. You might not consider them necessarily harmful, but you know you could be happier and have more peace if you got rid of a pesky mental habit, such as worry or low self-esteem.

The first step is to identify some of your habits. Are they positive, neutral or counterproductive? We will look at eight more positive mental habits in all (after you Essential Habit), focusing on each one for between two and four days. This will give you time to reflect on each one and consider ways to change them. Over the course of the next 28 days, you'll see your thought patterns go from unconscious to conscious to improved.

All these habits form a roadmap that can lead you toward greater joy in your life. You'll feel better and accomplish more of your objectives. Everyone wants that, right? And God wants that for you too. But you'll have to do the hard work of thinking and being honest with yourself.

As mentioned, each chapter includes reflection questions, exercises and relevant Scriptures. The chapters aren't too long to read, but you'll want to allow enough time to reflect on what you're reading as well as work through the thought questions. You can take this book with you on the bus or subway or read it during your lunch hour. You can read it on your phone, tablet or computer. You might not have enough time, money or motivation to work through a 300-page book written by a famous psychologist, but you DO have time for this, a little at a time, especially if it's important to you to improve your mental habits. (By the way, the principles in this book are echoed by most well-known psychologists and self-help teachers.) If you're still not sure, just try one chapter and do the exercises. See if you don't think and feel better already!

You'll learn a lot about yourself as you work through each day's reading. Buy a spiral or other type notebook. Keep a journal of your observations, things you want to go back to, or questions you have for yourself. Jot down any thoughts or questions triggered by what you read. This is your private workbook, an *investment* in your own growth and contentment. Its benefits are longer-lasting and less expensive than a day at the spa!

The following list contains some important skills you must bring with you on this journey, skills you already have or are willing to develop:

1. Self-honesty. Many people aren't used to the idea of emotional or personality *growth*. Don't let that idea intimidate you. All it means is to improve some area of your life so that you can live an even *better* life. Honesty with yourself in your private thoughts is an absolute requirement, because you can't change a negative mental

habit if you won't admit it is there. The more honest you are with yourself, the more you will grow personally and benefit from this book.

2. Awareness of your feelings and mental state. This is a hard one for some people, who aren't used to tuning into their emotions, unless they blow up in anger or fall in love. Once you develop this awareness, you'll be able to catch yourself with a negative habit (or a negative emotion triggered by a particular bad mental habit) and know what to do. Each chapter contains suggestions on changing unhelpful habits. Ask God to help you become more aware of your feelings, thoughts and habits before you start each day.

3. Persistence. Your mental habits have developed over a long time. Like other habits, won't change in a day or two. That said, you'll likely see improvement in a short time. Persevere for long enough to go from deliberate, consistent effort (which will be necessary) to a nearly automatic habit. Many experts say it takes 21 days to form a new habit. If you focus on one habit for 3 weeks then move onto the next one, you can develop new mental habits in all of these areas within 6 months. You may wish to focus on just certain ones, where you know you have a weakness or where other people may have pointed out to you that you need improvement.

If you're in a dark phase of life, it might seem more challenging to make these good habits stick, but it's all the more vital, so don't give up. Undergird your efforts with prayer and keep moving ahead, despite and through the pain. Decide that you *will* develop healthy mental habits. They won't necessarily remove the discomfort of your current circumstances, but they will absolutely help you get through them with more grace and optimism. Then later, as things calm down, you'll have an arsenal of helpful habits for whatever season of life you are in.

Changing some or all of these mental habits will enhance your quality of life for your *entire future*, if you are willing to make a time investment now.

So, let the journey begin!