

Equipped to refuse the blame

Rowan, our English springer spaniel, puzzled us recently. While we were eating, he suddenly became extremely attentive. One of the ways he lets us know he wants out is by tugging gently on our sleeve. He did this a few times during our meal, so we gave him the benefit of the doubt and opened the door for him to go outside. Normally, he would settle down after coming back inside, but on this occasion he continued to jump up and tug at our clothes.

Let me fill you in on some background. A few minutes before our meal, a glass tumbler had fallen onto the kitchen floor and shattered. I was concerned that Rowan might stand on the broken glass, so I ushered him out of the kitchen while I cleared up the mess. We then sat down to dinner and Rowan began his antics.

Then it dawned on me! Knowing Rowan is a sensitive dog, I think he believed he was responsible for breaking the tumbler and his over-attentiveness toward us arose from a desire for reassurance. I suppose he interpreted being moved to another room as some form of punishment for this 'crime', when in reality, he was put elsewhere to protect him from the painful effects of walking on broken glass. He felt guilty about something he didn't do!

How many of us are like this sometimes? We take on board false guilt over circumstances completely outside our control. Maybe it's in a marriage relationship, where we blame ourselves for things not working out well, forgetting that there is another half to our partnership who may not be pulling his or her weight. Or perhaps we do this in a work context, thinking it's our fault that the boss is in a bad mood, when the reason for this might be nothing to do with us at all.

Our thinking really does impact how we feel and one way we can begin to manage our various emotions is to pay attention to what we allow ourselves to think. Over time, layers of faulty thinking build up in our minds and these can have a negative effect on our feelings. For example, when we believe something that isn't true, our thinking goes down a wrong route and we run the risk of responding in an emotionally inappropriate way. This happened to me a few days ago when I received no reply to an email I had sent to one of my friends. When my initial thought of "she's probably busy" began to change to "maybe she doesn't appreciate my friendship", I knew it was time to stop this faulty thinking! I had to remind myself that my friend has a lot of responsibilities which take up her time and the fact she hadn't yet got round to replying to me was no reflection on the quality of our friendship. When I took this more accurate perspective, I no longer felt irritable. However, even if my friend had made a conscious decision to ignore my email, I can still choose my thoughts, attitudes and emotions. It's good to know that none of us needs to be a victim of our thought patterns and emotional responses.

Think about your thinking...

...by asking whether a thought is true.¹ A lot of our stress in life comes from thinking things that aren't true. We find ourselves listening to (and perhaps believing) unconfirmed gossip; holding on to thoughts of false guilt; and speculating about the future.

...by acknowledging your thoughts and attitudes need to be renewed.² Let's not fool ourselves by holding on to those layers of faulty thinking that need to be peeled away.

...by allowing God to transform you by changing what you think about.³ This involves the continual re-programming of our minds to bring our thoughts back into line with the truth of God's word.

If we want to alter the way we feel, perhaps we should try identifying the thinking leading to that feeling. Hey, Rowan, did you get that?

¹ Philippians 4:8

² Ephesians 4:23

³ Romans 12:2