Series*: KILLING ME SOFTLY—March 18, 2007*

YOU ARE WHAT YOU THINK
Romans 8:5-8

I. INTRO

A. When I was a kid, we had all kinds of cool put-downs for other kids. Some of the best were about the size of their brain. "If someone put your brain on a razor-blade, it would look like a pea rolling down the 401!" Or, how about this, "If brains were dynamite, you wouldn't have enough to blow your nose!"
-I later found out that brain size, brain power, GPA, SAT, and RAM has little to do with success. I heard someone recently say, "***A*** students teach ***B*** students how to work for ***C*** students." The brain ***is*** an amazing thing. After all, it fired off millions of commands to get me—and you—here this morning—that is, after it was fed some caffeine and sugar.

1. Read ***any*** study of the brain—and it blows you away. Really!
*The brain can hold the equivalent of 25 **million** books of information—which would take a bookshelf 500 miles long to hold them all. Try that on your hot computer!
*The brain performs 1000 trillion computations per second--and that's assuming that 10% of your brain cells are firing. How many of you have about 10% of your brain cells firing this morning. How many of you aren't sure? How many of you forgot the question?

*Your brain has a mental DVD player that can hold ***3 trillion*** pictures. And they are indelibly imprinted--there ***is*** no delete button.

2. But we ***still*** don't know how the brain works. A university professor, on one of his goofier days, hooked up an EEG machine to a bowl of Jell-O and got a readout on brain waves virtually identical to that of humans. God has a sense of humor!

B. The part that scientists have never been able to figure out is what ***thinking*** is, or what ***intuition*** or ***consciousness*** is. It's not your brain and it's capacity that is most amazing; it's your ***mind***. And, specifically, what you do with it; how you program it.
-Your mind is one of the most valuable gifts God has given you. You have the ability to think things through; to read tiny, almost unobservable changes in body language. The ability to store memories of your best moments--and your worst--to be replayed at will.

-But your mind can also sabotage your life if you let it go in the wrong directions. In fact, how you ***use*** your mind and train your mind and what you fill your mind with will ultimately determine the outcome of your life. So. You need to feed it well—and treat it carefully! And that's what I want to talk about today.

II. THE FLOW

A. I want to read a passage from the Bible that talks about ***mindsets*** and where they lead. Anyone here know what a ***mindset*** is? You know how concrete ***sets—***gets hardened? Well, minds get hardened in certain directions as well.
Read with me and see if you can pick that up in this passage from Romans 8:5-8.
Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. (The passage then goes on to describe where those two mindsets lead). **The mind controlled by the sinful nature is death, but the mind**

controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. The sinful mind is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (Rom. 8:5-8 TNIV).

1. Some of the best material on how the mind works is found in a book entitled ***Flow***, written by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi ('sik-sen-mihaly'). John Ortberg, in some of his writing and speaking has further explored this subject from a biblical perspective—and I'm indebted to both of these men for their research.

   -Here's the deal. **Your mind is this ongoing, ceaseless fountain out of which your life flows**. **It's a constant stream of consciousness-**--and that stream is flowing right at this very moment. It sounds a little like this.
   -"Hmmm, stream of consciousness. Gee, I sure was **un**conscious this morning--no brain activity there at all--until the alarm went off. Speaking of alarms, I wonder if I remembered to set the oven before I left? Oh well, if I didn't, we can go to Swiss Chalet. I actually hope we do. I think I'll skip the fries--I'm getting a little heavy in the southern hemisphere. But with these pants on, you can barely notice.
   I wonder if anyone has? Gee, that guy over there looks thinner than me. I wonder if he works out? Last time I worked out, the locker room sure smelled. Whoo-ee! The guy up there is talking again--I wonder when he's going to stop. Oh no! We just started!"

   -Your mind has this constant flow of thought and emotions—and it never stops. Ever! ***Never ever!***

2. The second thing this passage says is that, **over time, there are *patterns* to these thoughts. They tend to flow in certain directions, depending on your personality and other factors**.

   -For example, someone comes up to you and says, "You look great today!" People process that differently, depending on their personality—their flow of thinking. If you're an **optimist** you'll think, "Wow, what a friendly person!"
   -A **narcissist** will think, "I was just thinking the same thing. Tell me more. You fascinate me." A **pessimist** will think, "The lighting in here must be really bad." A **cynic** will think, "This person is probably trying recruit me into Kid's Branch at the church."

   -Your ***flow*** identifies your personality--and it pretty much determines the way you will experience reality. Ultimately, it will pretty much set the course of your life. It really depends on what the flow is made of. It can be a river of life--or it can be a muddy stream--or it can just be toxic waste.

B. So, we have to make a choice. Which direction will **my** thinking flow?
Will it be the mindset of the sinful nature, or the mindset of the Spirit. **Every thought has the power to move me in the direction of the Holy Spirit or close me off from it.** That's what Jesus was getting at when he said that it is out of the ***heart*** that everything flows--and it always bears fruit. Good fruit, or bad fruit.

-The choices you make on what you let your mind feed on, where they're voluntary and involuntary, will make a profound difference. Our thoughts have the power to move us into

the flow of the Spirit—and bring good things, good fruit. **Or**…move us away from the Spirit and bear bad fruit.

1. So, what feeds the mindset of the sinful nature? Psalm 1:1 gives some insight into that. It says: ***Blessed are those who do not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers (Psalm 1:1 TNIV)***
   -What exactly is the ***counsel of the wicked***? We think, "I don't ask murderers or child molesters for advice!" You'd be surprised at what the ***counsel of the wicked*** is. It's just ***the way most people think!*** Why? Because, in our world, the ***way most people think*** points in the opposite direction from what God has to say.
   -See, most of what you and I are exposed to ever day are other people's opinions, viewpoints and opinions. And the media through which these are funneled are pretty indiscriminating. It can range from Barbara Walters to Walt Disney to Wal-Mart. It comes at us incessantly almost every minute of every day.
   And unless it is internally sifted, weighed, and judged—it will ***set*** our minds.
2. The ***biggest obstacle*** is that this stuff ***sounds*** normal and right. Want to know why? It's because we're naturally bent toward the sinful nature. Think about it: When you're driving in messy traffic, how many of you tend to think more about blessing than cursing--you just freely pass them out, "Bless you, O child of God. Yes, you too--and you! I see that hand, yes." When you're having an argument, how many of you ***naturally*** tend to think, "Hmmm. I ***could*** be wrong!"

   -My sense is that, left to ourselves, we are almost irresistibly drawn to junk, like flies to garbage. We are drawn toward suspicion, resentment, hopelessness, selfishness, apathy, greed and jealousy.

3. So—***How does that change?*** We think, "You know, if I had better experiences, if people were nicer, if I had more good things happen to me, a good job, a spouse who was easier to get along with, if only my kids would listen—or more channels available on my TV--I would find it easier to have joyful and positive thoughts."
   a. Know what the latest and best research shows? That **it is *in fact* a person's <u>flow of thoughts</u> that brings authentic joy and peace, not their circumstances**. A person by the name of Dr. Janoff Bulman did a fascinating study of two very different groups of people. They studied 22 people who won the lottery--which in our culture is kind of considered the definition of the good life.

      -Know what they found? Within 6 months, these people were almost precisely at the same happiness level they had been at ***before*** the lottery win.
   b. What is even more amazing is the study they did of 29 people who had been in accidents that left them as quadriplegics. Within six months, this group was ***also*** at the same happiness level they had been before the accident—and ***they*** had more hope for the future than the lottery winners!
   c. Write this down somewhere, cause it's profoundly true: **Your flow of thoughts, your <u>mindset</u>, will *determine* how you feel about life!**

C. So, if ***the way most people think*** is going to lead us in a bad direction, what's the alternative? Well, it's the ***mind controlled by the Spirit***. Psalm 1 tells us that this kind of mind finds its source in the truth that God has given us about life, where it's called ***the law of the Lord***. It's called that because it's truth that forms the foundation for all life on this

planet. When you detour away from that stream of that truth, you are out of balance with the way God set life up on his planet. The image used in Psalm 1 of life in the flow of God is a tree planted by a stream. Imagine what would happen to that tree if you ripped it out by the roots. You ***want*** to be in the flow of what God is doing.

1. David seemed to be in the ***flow*** of the Spirit more than any other person. Let me modify it a little. ***Blessed (joyful, fulfilled) are those who do not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers…***
   …but who delight in the law of the LORD and meditate on his law day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers (Psalm 1:1-3 TNIV).

   -This is the bottom line. God wants our minds to be filled with a flow of life-giving thoughts. The clear alternative--the intentional contrast the Bible gives is the ***sinful mind***. These thoughts ultimately lead to death--wasted time, wasted opportunities, destructive habits—and a mind filled with self-pity and resentment.
2. What we are left with is trying to desperately change all of our circumstances--our finances, our location, the people around us--in this attempt to bless ourselves. How many of you think it is possible to ***bless your own life?***
   -So, somehow, we need to interrupt this constant negative flow of ***the way most people think***. How does a person do that? How can we get the ***flow*** of thoughts going in the right direction?

III. INTERRUPTING THE FLOW

A. A couple of weeks ago, I talked about eating. I have a confession to make. I like to eat before I go to bed! Now, I've reformed some on this, but Lori would sometimes say to me before we would go to bed, "Are you done ***grazing***, yet?" That's not exactly a compliment. The word ***graze*** is an interesting word. It basically means to move and eat, move and eat, move and eat.

1. Our minds ***graze***. We really don't even think about it. Our minds graze on the internet, TV, shopping malls.
   Every day, they snack on advertisements, conversations, magazines, cars that drive by, music. And then it chews on this stuff. **Meditates--**on it. Graze, chew, digest. It's an unconscious process.

   a. The basic law of eating is that what you feed on has a profound effect on the interior of your body. And you **become** what you ***think***. It's the ***law of exposure.*** I've talked about this before--that what you expose yourself to, you will think about. And what you think about will ultimately shape who you become.

   b. Think for a minute about what creates people like Paul Bernardo, the Hitler, the Osama Bin Laden, the Eminem? The law of exposure. They are the culmination of where they grazed; what they fed their minds—and then ***thought*** about.

      -But the law of exposure doesn't just create brokenness and evil; it also has created people like Martin Luther King, Billy Graham, Mother Theresa--and

you. What you've been exposed to, what you've taken into your heart, what you've thought about in your private moments has made ***you*** the way you are.

2. Friends, it is ***so*** important to understand this; the ***law of exposure*** is not only true, it's fairly rigid. And yet people act surprised by it. No one gets surprised by the law of gravity. Ever hear someone say, "Wow! I dropped the bottle on the sidewalk and it's so weird! It smashed into a thousand pieces! Whodathunkit?" But people act all shocked when this law of exposure affects the things they do and their attitudes toward life.
   -Don't you find it a little strange that entertainment moguls believe in the law of exposure when it comes to advertisements, and yet plead innocence when someone points to how their portrayal of sex and violence on TV is corrupting the moral fabric of people? You can't have it both ways!

3. Now, individually, there may not be a whole lot you and I can do about this law of exposure's effect on our culture--on what it treats as normal and what it rejects. If people want to graze from garbage cans and drink from sewers, no President, Prime Minister or lawmaker is going to stop them with legislation. But the truth is, ***every single person in this room can do something about what they are PERSONALLY exposed to.***
   -You can do something about what you are feeding your mind—grazing on. And we will be held accountable for how the ***law of exposure*** either moves us toward death, or toward the flow of God—the mind controlled by the Spirit.
4. Here's our temptation: To not think much about it and leave the barn door open. To be lazy--and just let the pigs, chickens and goats stray in and out at will. Fascinating, isn't it? We would never leave our cars unlocked or invite pigs into our family room. But ***sometimes*** with the most sensitive, most important part of our lives—our minds—the part that will literally chart our destiny--it's ***Ollie, Ollie oxen free!*** In our world, we sometimes call it, ***having an open mind.***
   -Frankly, the first step toward counteracting the negative effects of this law is telling yourself and ***believing in your heart,*** "I am not immune from the law of exposure." Let's practice that together. Say, ***I am not immune from the law of exposure!*** Now, turn to the person next to you and say, as you nod your head knowingly, ***You are not immune from the law of exposure***. Good job. You've just exercised the spiritual gift of ***exhortation***.

   a. If you're a parent, you ***will*** have trouble reinforcing this in your home. We have set pretty strict standards about what videos and DVDs we allow in our home. And there have been times when, part way through something, we've realized that the rating on the cover hasn't accurately reflected the content. Man, the howling and wailing and gnashing of teeth when we shut it down!
   b. Some of you hang with a group of friends—and you do a lot of stuff together. And when the gang decides to do things or talk about stuff that defies what you say you believe is true or good—you'll have to make some hard decisions.

   c. Some of you may have some negative people in your life that are constantly putting others down, slandering, gossiping and hating. When you're with them, it's like they stick a siphon hose in your encouragement tank and drain it in 20 minutes. Anyone ever have that happen?

How many of you can't say, because that person is sitting right next to you! You may have to pull their hose out of your tank!

5. A ***huge*** influence on our lives—sometimes quite negative--is TV. It just is. TV distracts us; it keeps us from having to be alone. And that's why it's so addictive, even though it does almost nothing for our minds. Anyone here, who after a whole evening of channel surfing gets up in the morning and says, "Wow! Last night was so great! I lead such an amazing life! I can't wait to come back and do this again tonight!"

6. If you know anything about wells, you know that you have to occasionally have the water checked for bacteria. Proverbs 4:23 says, **Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Prov. 4:23 NIV).**
-Know what the truth is about us? It's not like someone else drops a rat in our well or pours arsenic or raw sewage in our well. ***We contaminate our own water supply***!
   a. One of the things that will poison the well of your mind is bitterness and unforgiveness and contempt for others—whether you're expressing it—or listening to it recreationally in the form of gossip and slander. It will make you into a negative person. Anyone here who likes hanging around really negative, pessimistic people? That's what I thought!

   b. Something else that will poison your thinking patterns. Self-pity. Self-pity is toxic!
   It's a form of selfishness that leads to all kinds of relational sin--like envy and jealousy. And it could make you a ***very*** lonely person. See—people ***love*** parties—but no one rsvps on the invitation to a pity party. Self-pity will contaminate your thinking patterns.
   c. Let me mention one more form of contamination that is absolutely rampant in our culture among men and women. Pornography and other forms of sexual fantasy—chatrooms, websites—I mean, the list is almost endless. **Forty-seven percent** of Christian families in North America say that pornography is a problem in their homes. Almost half—and this includes men and, increasingly, women.
   -A lot of people get into this stuff simply out of curiosity—but it's a baited hook with a barb in it. And the hook won't come out. This stuff presents people with souls, lives, hopes, dreams like they're there to be consumed—like a bag of potato chips.
   -And it's extremely addictive. It burns images and thoughts right onto the hard drive of your brain, and it will ultimately twist your view of life and the opposite sex. I know this stuff creates incredible shame—you need to know that you ***can*** be free. Jesus, when he spoke about lust, said that it many time takes radical surgery. To get free, you may have to take drastic action. Confining limitations on your computer or TV—or whether you even ***have*** one.

   -You may need the help of a good Christian counselor. There are whole ministries devoted to helping people get free from porn addictions. But don't wait. The Bible tells us that we need to ***run*** from this stuff.

B. I know what I've been talking about is uncomfortable stuff. This is the bottom line. You and I need to expose our minds to the right things--and get the law of exposure working ***for*** us. In 2 Cor. 10, Paul implies that our thoughts need to be under **our** control; that letting them run

rampant is like having a loose cannon, rolling back and forth on the deck of a pitching ship. Friends, ***it takes the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives to make that possible!***

1. When it comes to the issue of ***what*** to feed your mind, the Bible gives us this amazing grid to pass stuff through:
   Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse (Phil. 4:8 Msg).
   -Is it ***true?*** Is it ***noble—***or is it ***bottom-feeder*** stuff? Is it ***reputable—***would you want others who respect you to know? Is it ***authentic? Compelling?*** Is it ***filled with grace?*** Are you thinking ***the best?*** Is it a ***beautiful*** thought—or ugly? Is it full of ***praise?*** Like, could you worship God and be **grateful**? Would you want it put on a screen for others to see?

   -Now, I have some great news for you. ***You and I can do this! We really can.*** But not in our own strength. Again, it happens **in the power of the Holy Spirit**. Increasingly, you can think in new ways--and as your mind is renewed—as you think in new ways, the Bible says that you will be transformed. The word used is ***metamorphosis.*** No more crawling around, munching whatever's in front of you like a caterpillar; you can ***fly***. You can have a ***beautiful mind.***

2. Your brain, your mind is a sophisticated instrument. Be careful what you use your mind for—and what you put into it! You don't put junk gas in high performance engines. You don't let your teenager practice parking in a lot full of BMWs. No person with a brain ***I've*** ever met uses a $2000 laptop to hammer nails. You don't eat twinkies, fudge and hot wings and then run a marathon.
   -And this amazing mind of yours and mine needs to be loved, treasured, treated properly.
3. Let me give you some suggestions about how to love your mind.
   a. I've already mentioned one. **Treasure it**. Others may not. Your math teacher may think you'd do better if you had a brick or a sandbag in there--but that's ***their*** problem. Don't limit it. Don't put it down. Don't let it get junked up or slowed down or paralyzed with prejudice, resentment, fear, or other thoughts that ignore the power and purity of God.
   b. **Challenge it**. When someone, like James Cameron, proclaims that they have just found the bones of Jesus and his wife and family—or that Jesus was part of a secret fertility cult—or is proclaiming some new conspiracy theory—***think! Don't just swallow this stuff uncritically.*** Challenge it. The media makes their money off of bad news, controversial stories, new angles and twists—and you believe it uncritically—you ***are*** using your brain for a hat rack. We tell you all the time—don't check your brain at the door here, either!
      -Challenge your own opinions and pre-suppositions and prejudices. Ask yourself, "Why do I think like that--about men? About women? About my siblings? About work? About being fully devoted to Christ?"
      -Sometimes our minds are lazy. We have to force them to think beneath the surface about life, about relationships, about eternity, about what's true and what's not true.

c. One of the most difficult things you and I face with our minds is the need to control the negative voices that lead us into places we don't want to be. Our minds develop ruts; patterns of thinking. Sometimes it's a comment our Dad made, or a professor made, or a boyfriend made—and plays over and over and over.

*I've had voices like that—and they tormented me for years—until I finally asked the question, ***Is it true?*** It wasn't! So, ***ask!***

*There are times when you need to burn the CDs of conversations, and the DVDs of stuff you've put on your hard-drive. Whenever that stuff starts to play, talk to God.
Ask Him to gather it all up and burn it. If they play again—burn them again.

*Maybe the best recommendation I can give is to get some help from a great Christian counselor to work through these issues and move into your future!

d. There's one thing the Bible teaches as indispensable if we are serious about living and thinking in God-honoring ways. We need to offer ourselves completely to God—as an act of worship. Then these words:
-**Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect (Rom. 12:2 NLT).**
-It's not like we just need a few more ***good*** thoughts in our minds. We need to actively eject thoughts from our mind that are malignant. I think it was Martin Luther who said, "We can't keep the crows from flying over our heads, but we can stop them from building nests in our hair!

Sometimes we need to speak out loud to ourselves. Say, "No! This mind is ***God's*** property!" And talk to God about it. Say, God, I don't want my mind to graze in garbage cans! I want to reject all forms of slander, lust, greed, jealousy and self pity! Help me ***see*** it and ***stop*** it!" God hears us and begins to renew our minds.

d. Then make the law of exposure work ***for*** you. I don't know of any other way to say this—except that you and I need to find creative, disciplined ways to pour God's truth about life—as it's found in His Word—into our minds. It ***needs*** to be there to challenge the barrage of untruth that we face every day. That will take some discipline. I know.
-Think for just a minute. What would you say your weekly exposure is to ***the way most people think***? Think maybe 15, 20 hours a week? Probably more than that.

-You will not drift into taking the ***law of exposure*** seriously. So, you will have to make ***decisions*** and ***choices*** that will fill your mind with good stuff. It might not hurt to fast from electronics for a while and re-sensitize your heart. And then find a disciplined way to make sure you have a steady intake of truth

-How about it. Let's commit ourselves ***together*** –that we will not casually replace these gatherings and our intake of truth with recreation or whatever else happens to distract us, okay?

e. Let me up the ante. Parents, your kids get exposed every week to a ***lot*** of stuff. In school, on TV, in music, from friends. With all this exposure to what our world thinks about life—how's their exposure to what God has to say about it? They don't drive, you know—so they're dependent on you to bring some balance.
And they will live what you ***model*** for them! Would you commit yourself to being here?

3. Is it okay if I make a few more practical suggestions for loving your mind?
   a. First, give it the proper rest. We've already talked about this. Give it a break. Think in new ways!
   b. Let me mention one more thing. Your mind needs community--other people around. People who can know you and help you think straight when you're thinking crooked.
   -It's possible to get way down a path of cynicism, or paranoia or offbeat thinking--and begin to think it's normal. We don't share our most honest thoughts with people we don't know well. That's why being in a Roots group, a small group, helps the barriers come down. We need others to challenge our thinking and support change.

IV. WHAT *WERE* YOU THINKING?

A. This week, I want you to think about your mind--this amazing, irreplaceable gift God has given you. It's unbelievably sophisticated--it's amazing in what it can remember, and what it can selectively forget. It's God's amazing gift. And what you use it for, what you expose it to, what your mind grazes on--will chart your future.

B. So--offer it to God. Feed it well. Watch where it grazes. Get intentional about caring for it--and over time, it will be renewed, and you will be transformed. Your mind is one of God's most profound gifts! Take ***good*** care of it!