

**August Fitness Challenge: Mental Fitness**

1 of 4

Romans 12: 1-2

08 07 2011 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

**Introduction to August Fitness Challenge Series**

**Self-improvement** is a multi-billion dollar industry. Print ads, direct mail, commercials, infomercials, Internet sites, and e-mail spam all promise a “*new and improved*” you. The results are guaranteed or your money back—minus shipping and handling along with hidden fees in the mice type. After the hype and hyperbole, however, the “*new and improved*” you strongly resembles the “*old and unimproved*” person.

So a worship series entitled ***August Fitness Challenge: How to Become a Better Person in 31 Days*** must be approached with some degree of skepticism. What difference could one month make?

However, God is in the business of changing lives. In Christ, we can become new creations in whom the old has passed away and the new has come. Our ultimate goal is to become more like Jesus Christ in every aspect of our lives. I believe that August can be a time that transforms us as individuals and a community of faith.

During our *August Fitness Challenge*, we will explore four vital areas in the Christian disciple’s life. They include:

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|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1) Mental Fitness     | 3) Physical Fitness  |
| 2) Relational Fitness | 4) Spiritual Fitness |

**Scripture: Romans 12: 1-2****I. The Mind of Christ**

**Mental fitness** is the first step in our extreme makeover; but the transformation of the mind is quite a challenge. Our sinful, human nature opposes God’s will in our lives. In Romans, Paul wrote that humanity has “*a depraved mind*” (1:28) and “*the sinful mind is hostile to God.*” (8:7)

God’s people are challenged to **change our minds**. In Ephesians 4: 22-24, Paul compared the process to changing clothes: “*You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*”

Our ultimate goal is “*to have the mind/attitude of Christ.*” (see 1 Corinthians 2:16 and Philippians 2:5) Romans 12: 2 challenges God’s people: “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*”

Changing our minds to gain the mind of Christ is a life-long process. The Christian walk is a pilgrimage with milestones along the way. Today we are examining some ways we can open our minds to God’s transforming grace.

**II. Monitoring Our Thoughts**

Mental fitness begins by **monitoring our thoughts**. The mind controls life like a pilot controls a plane. Pilots constantly scan their instruments to check everything is functioning correctly. We imagine ourselves sitting in the cockpit, determining life's direction—except it doesn't always work that way.

You may recall an incident in October 2009 when a **Northwest Airlines** plane overshot its Minneapolis destination by 150 miles. The pilots were out of contact for 1 hour 18 minutes, and F-16s were placed on alert in case of a terrorist incident. Authorities later determined that both pilots dozed off, and the plane kept going.

We often find ourselves asleep in the cockpit of our minds. The autopilot follows a preprogrammed route with little oversight. We are supposed to control our thoughts, but out-of-control thoughts often control us.

We have butterfly minds that drift from one thought to another on impulsive breezes. We sing a hymn that reflects the undisciplined nature of our thoughts: *“Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.”*

In order to have the mind of Christ, we need to monitor our thoughts and think about our thinking. As a spiritual exercise, I invite you to commit a day to monitoring your thoughts. Pretend you are a court reporter making a verbatim record of your internal dialogue. I imagine that we will all be surprised—and perhaps dismayed—at the old, worldly ways of thinking that still persist in our minds.

### **III. Divine Thoughts**

After monitoring our thoughts, the next step is to allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds so that our thoughts are centered on God. Colossians 3: 1-2 directs us: *“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”* Setting our minds on things above rather than below is a two part challenge.

#### **Remove the Negative**

The first challenge is to rid our minds of **negative, worldly thoughts**. We are so engrossed in the world about us that we oftentimes focus upon it exclusively. We are captivated by what our five senses experience. What are we “feeding” our brains?

**GIGO** is a well used computer programming term which is an abbreviation for the phrase: *“Garbage In, Garbage Out.”* Programmers know that output is dependent upon input. If you code garbage, then the software will return garbage.

What garbage are we feeding our mind? What is the content of the Internet sites we visit? The TV programs we watch? The songs we hear? The books we read?

**Hazardous material removal** has become a big business with the recognized dangers of asbestos, lead paint, and other toxic substances. Technicians in hazmat suits carefully dispose of the toxic waste in a safe way. We need to remove the toxic waste in our environment that is poisoning our brains.

#### **Cultivate the Positive**

The second step is to fill our minds with **positive, eternal thoughts**. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul expands upon this thought: “*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.*” (Philippians 4: 8)

Our thoughts shape us. God calls us to focus upon what is lasting and not passing. Thought control comes down to a simple question: “Is what I’m thinking about pleasing to God and beneficial to my soul?” When we focus upon the true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable, this is what we become.

#### **IV. Attitude Adjustment**

The third way God changes our minds is through an **attitude adjustment**. A key element of Christian living is attitude. The primary meaning of this word is a mental or emotional outlook on life. In Philippians 2: 5, Paul declares: “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*”

Attitude is also a technical term used by pilots. It describes the position of an **airplane** relative to the horizon or the ground. A plane's attitude is extremely important. If the nose is too high, the plane stalls. If the nose is too low, the plane dives. If the wings are not level, the plane flies in circles or can even become inverted.

Our attitude determines the manner in which we go through life. Attitude is also the perspective or the lens through which we view the world. The glasses we wear. Important because our attitude not only affects **how** we see but also **what** we see. People with differing attitudes focus upon and see different things in life.

One of the people who preached the importance of a positive attitude was **Norman Vincent Peale**. His classic, **The Power of Positive Thinking**, has been a best seller since its publication in 1952.

Peale called his approach “*applied Christianity*” (Introduction). He believed a people of faith claim God's presence in their lives and view the world with a positive attitude. Our Scripture lesson today from Romans 12:2 was a central part of his teaching: “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*”

#### **V. Christian Visualization**

Another spiritual exercise that can change our minds is Christian **meditation** combined with **memorization** and the modern sports science of **mental imagery**.

##### **Meditation**

We are familiar with the spiritual discipline of **meditation**. It is closely akin to prayer. Time is set aside to meditate upon the goodness of God and the call of discipleship. We create a space and place where our spirit can commune with the Holy Spirit. There are a number of devotional books that help teach this practice. In a hectic and frantic world, this is a crucial element in our spiritual formation.

Psalm 1:2 describes the Godly person as one who meditates on God's Word day and night. What are our first thoughts that begin a new day? What are our last thoughts as we go to sleep at night? And for those of us at a certain age, what thoughts fill our minds when we awake in the middle of the night?

### Memorization

Meditation can be fruitfully combined with **Scripture memorization**. This is a spiritual discipline we often ignore in the modern church. The old days and ways of "Sword Drills" have often become things of the past.

We have more access to the Bible now than ever. Although most of us still use printed versions, we can also access multiple translations on the Internet or download it to our cell phones. This enables us to carry the Bible with us wherever we go.

However, the best access is to have God's Word inscribed upon our hearts and souls. The Scripture that we memorize becomes ours in a personal, intimate way. This is the only way that we can follow the Psalmist's example of meditating upon God's Word day and night.

### Mental Imagery

Meditation and memorization can be practiced in combination with **mental imagery**. In some ways, this is a secular variation of meditation that has primarily been used in sports. Coaches for years have taught that success in sports is both a physical AND mental discipline. Mental imagery is one way that athletes prepare themselves to achieve their highest potential.

Athletes are taught to relax and imagine performing a task successfully. They visualize excelling in some aspect of their sport. The vision should engage all five senses as they see, hear, feel, touch, smell, and taste what the event would be like in real life.

Golfing legend, Jack Nicklaus, used mental imagery his entire career. He wrote:

*I never hit a shot even in practice without having a sharp in-focus picture of it in my head. It's like a color movie. First, I 'see' the ball, where I want it to finish, nice and white and sitting up high on the bright green grass. Then the scene quickly changes, and I 'see' the ball going there: its path, trajectory, and shape, even its behavior on landing. Then there's a sort of fade-out, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous images into reality. Only at the end of this short, private, Hollywood spectacular do I select a club and step up to the ball.*

Although mental imagery cannot replace actual practice, studies have shown that both professional and amateur athletes perform better when they practice visualization. One scientist wrote: "*Mental imagery is intended to train our minds and create the neural patterns in our brain to teach our muscles to do exactly what we want them to do.*" In lay terms, disciplined imagination creates "grooves" in our brains that makes the visualized action create mental memory that translates into muscle memory.

This discovery has tremendous implications for the Christian faith. An old proverb states: *“The thought is the mother of the deed.”* Jesus understood the connection between thoughts and deeds when he preached the Sermon on the Mount. He said that a little lust is like a lot of adultery. Hatred is akin to murder. Not only does the thought lead to the deed, but the thought is the same as the deed. And the thought makes the deed much more likely.

In the positive sense, we can use spiritual visualization in partnership with meditation in Christian growth. Our baptized, blessed imaginations can visualize a life free of physical addiction, illicit relationships, nursed grudges, overwhelming anxiety, senseless prejudice, explosive tempers, and hateful rumors. These visions pattern our minds and hearts into a new reality that leads to action.

## **VI. God’s Will**

Another benefit of cultivating the mind of Christ is that it helps us to become more sensitive to **God’s will** in our lives. Listen to the second half of Romans 12: 2: *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. **THEN** you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”*

This naturally occurs in our earthly relationships. Long time couples or friends know what the other person is thinking and how s/he will react. Oftentimes, they can finish one another’s sentences. Imagine this same sort of relationship with our Lord. Knowing his will for our lives becomes as natural as thinking.

## **VII. The Peace of God**

The final benefit of attaining the mind of Christ is we cultivate **God’s peace**. On Jesus’ last night with his disciples, he promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit. He said:

*But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14: 26-27)*

Earlier we heard Paul’s words in Philippians to fix our minds on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. The verse immediately prior to it says: *“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4: 7)*

## **Conclusion**

Christians are a born-again people who have become new creations through Jesus Christ. God begins the process of renewing our minds so that we might cultivate the attitude of Christ in our lives.

By God’s grace, the Holy Spirit can change our mind. The old ways are discarded like dirty rags as we put on holy clothes of righteousness. God’s children no longer

conform to this world but are transformed by the renewing of our minds through Christ Jesus.