

IN THE MARGINS: Thought distortions

By Tony Martin

Editor

Let's have a heart-to-heart about something we all struggle with but don't often name: thought distortions. If you're not familiar with the term, let me explain. Thought distortions are those sneaky, unhelpful ways of thinking where our interpretation or prediction isn't based on fact. Two big flags to watch for are: 1) it's unhelpful thinking, and 2) it's not grounded in truth. Sound familiar? It sure does for me. We've all been there.

Here's the thing: these thought patterns can feel so real. But just because they feel true doesn't mean they are true. That's why it's crucial to hold these distortions up to the light of God's truth. Let's unpack this together.

Common Thought Distortions

First, let's name some of these culprits:

1. **All-or-Nothing Thinking** This is when you see everything in black and white. Either you're a complete success, or you're a total failure. There's no in-between. For example, if you didn't finish your Bible reading plan, you might think, "I'm terrible at staying consistent in my faith." Hold on there, friend – one slip-up doesn't define you!
2. **Catastrophizing** This is jumping to the worst-case scenario. Got a tough email from your boss? Suddenly you're convinced you'll be fired. Or you have a small disagreement with a friend, and now you're sure the friendship is over. This kind of thinking can take over

quickly if we let it.

3. **Emotional Reasoning** You feel it, so it must be true. Ever thought, “I feel unworthy, so I must be unworthy”? That’s emotional reasoning at work. But feelings aren’t facts.
4. **Labeling** When you define yourself or someone else with a single negative label. For instance, “I’m such a procrastinator” or “They’re just selfish.” We reduce people (including ourselves) to one word, forgetting the nuance and grace God offers.
5. **Mental Filtering** This is focusing only on the negatives and ignoring the positives. Maybe you’ve had a productive day, but you’re stuck on that one thing you didn’t get done. Sound familiar?
6. **Mind Reading** Assuming you know what someone else is thinking – usually something negative about you. You might think, “They didn’t say hi to me at church; they must be upset with me.” Odds are, they were just distracted.
7. **Overgeneralization** This is when you take one experience and make it a universal truth. For example, “I messed up this presentation; I’ll never be good at public speaking.”
8. **Personalization** When you take responsibility for things outside your control. If your child has a rough day at school, you might think, “It’s all my fault; I’m a terrible parent.” But life is more complex than that.

Why Thought Distortions Matter

Here’s the kicker: thought distortions don’t just make us feel bad; they keep us from growing in our faith. As Christians, we’re called to renew our minds (Romans 12:2) and to dwell on what is true, honorable, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8). Thought distortions pull us in the opposite direction, making us believe lies instead of standing on God’s promises.

Evaluating Thought Distortions Through God's Truth

So, how do we combat these distortions? We hold them up to Scripture. Let's break it down:

1. **Identify the Distortion** The first step is awareness. Pay attention to your thoughts. If you find yourself spiraling, pause and ask, "Is this thought helping me? Is it based on fact?"
2. **Challenge the Distortion** Compare the thought to God's truth. For example, if you're caught in all-or-nothing thinking, remind yourself: "I'm not perfect, but God's strength is made perfect in my weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).
3. **Replace the Distortion** Replace the unhelpful thought with a truth from Scripture. If you're labeling yourself as a failure, remind yourself: "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

Why This Matters

Thought distortions are more than just mental hurdles; they're spiritual battles. The enemy loves to sow lies in our minds, but God calls us to stand firm in truth. When we let thought distortions run unchecked, we're not just hurting ourselves – we're stunting our spiritual growth.

But when we bring these thoughts into the light, we experience freedom. We start to see ourselves and the world through God's eyes. And that's a game-changer.

A Personal Note

I'll be honest with y'all: I've battled my share of thought distortions. There have been days when I've catastrophized, labeled myself, or let emotional reasoning take the wheel. But every time, God's truth has been my anchor. It's not always easy, but it's always worth it.

If this resonates with you, I want to encourage you: you're not alone. And you don't have to tackle this on your own. God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105). Lean on it. Let it guide you.

So, what about you? What thought distortions are you battling today? Let's name them, challenge them, and replace them with God's truth. Together, we can break free and grow into the people God created us to be.

Be blessed.