

**Christian Meditation for Repetitive Negative Thinking:
A Four-Week Preventative Program¹**

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¹ This four-week preventative program is based on the empirical study by Knabb, Vazquez, Wang, and Bates (in press). Some of the content in this manual has been slightly adapted from the Knabb et al. article, as well as Knabb (in press). Also, we have utilized a similar structure as Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2012), with a theme, tasks, and handouts for every week.

Week 1: The Relationship Between Repetitive Negative Thinking and Emotional Disorders

Verse

“Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” (Matthew 14:29-30)

Theme

As a Christian who is struggling with negative thinking, you may feel like Peter in his futile effort to walk towards Jesus on the water. You want to faithfully follow Jesus, but quickly begin to sink when you notice the choppy waves around you. Likewise, when you get stuck in repetitive negative thinking—whether dwelling on the past or worrying about the future—you might feel like you are sinking, struggling to walk with Jesus along the roads of life. Yet, we believe that the Christian tradition has quite a bit to offer in helping you to focus your attention on God, pivoting away from your preoccupation with the past or future and yielding to God’s active, loving presence. In this four-week program, you will formally practice two different types of biblically-based Christian meditation in order to develop a more focused, long-term strategy for dealing with the negative thoughts that seemingly get in the way of life. By practicing repeatedly turning your attention to Jesus, trusting in Him in the process, we believe you will be in a better position to live the life for which you were made, rather than becoming entangled with negative thinking. In the first week, you will learn about the role that repetitive negative thinking (i.e., rumination and worry) plays in the development of depressive and anxiety disorders, including a strategy for shifting your focus from the stormy waters of life to God’s active, loving presence. We call this form of consenting to God, which is grounded in the Bible and Christian writings, detachment.

Goals

1. Understand the specific types of thinking patterns (i.e., rumination, worry) that are involved in repetitive negative thinking.
2. Understand the relationship between repetitive negative thinking and emotional disorders (i.e., depression, anxiety).
3. Explore the role that Christian meditation plays in helping you to effectively respond to the ruminations and worries that may be keeping you stuck in life.
4. Get to know the types of repetitive negative thinking that you struggle with the most throughout the week, and see how they might distract you from living the life you want.

Tasks

1. Complete the measures for the first week via your laptop or smartphone.
2. Get into groups of two to introduce yourself to your classmates, providing your first name and what you would like to get out of the four-week class.
3. Review the verse and theme for the week.

4. Review the four-week program (Week 1: Handout 1 and Week 1: Handout 2).
5. As a group, discuss the handouts, including any comments or questions.
6. Review the homework handout (Week 1: Handout 3). You will be recording your negative thoughts throughout the week to get a better sense of the form of repetitive thinking you struggle with.

Week 1: Handout 1²

Repetitive Negative Thinking, Emotional Disorders, and Christian Meditation

Introduction

Anywhere from 4% to 17% of American college students may struggle with an anxiety or depressive disorder,³ with about 50% struggling with the required symptoms for any psychiatric diagnosis.⁴

Repetitive negative thinking is a type of thinking that has been linked to anxiety and depressive disorders, which, when combined, are referred to as *emotional disorders*.⁵ People who struggle with thinking about past or future events in a negative way can be more vulnerable to emotional disorders.⁶

There are two types of repetitive negative thinking we will be focusing on in this four-week program—*ruminat*ion and *worry*.

- *Rumination* involves dwelling on negative thoughts about yourself (e.g., “I’m worthless”) or painful emotions (e.g., “Feeling sad is unbearable”), without taking action to change these inner experiences.⁷
 - Why do we ruminate? The purpose of rumination is to think about past conversations, relationships, events, and so forth, along with current inner emotional states, in order to prevent yourself from behaving in a way that may lead to future mistakes.⁸
- *Worry* involves repeatedly thinking about a worst-case scenario happening in the future (e.g., “I’m going to lose my job”) and rehearsing ways you might address it (e.g., repeatedly thinking about ways to solve the problem).⁹
 - Why do we worry? The purpose of worry is to achieve a false sense of certainty when you are facing an uncertain future.¹⁰

Repetitive thinking, whether ruminations or worries, involves getting stuck in a type of thinking where you fixate on the past or future. This process is sort of like a cow chewing cud in a field, with the mind constantly “chewing” the negative thought(s).

² This handout is adapted from Knabb, Vazquez, Wang, and Bates (2018).

³ Eisenberg, Hunt, and Speer (2013).

⁴ Hunt and Eisenberg (2010).

⁵ Ehring and Watkins (2008); McEvoy, Watson, Watkins, and Nathan (2013).

⁶ McEvoy et al. (2013).

⁷ McLaughlin and Nolen-Hoeksema (2011).

⁸ Watkins (2016).

⁹ Ehring et al. (2011); Fresco, Mennin, Turk, and Heimberg (2002); McEvoy et al. (2013).

¹⁰ Mahoney and McEvoy (2012).

- The purpose is possibly to gain a false sense of control through passive avoidance (rumination) or active problem solving (worry).

As you are ruminating or worrying, though, you may find that you get lost in these negative thoughts, which means you are unable to focus on the task at hand or the road ahead.

Even more unfortunate, many college students who struggle with these types of problems do not seek out professional mental health services.¹¹ However, without tools to deal with this kind of inflexible thinking, you may be vulnerable to developing anxiety or depressive disorders later in life. What is more, this type of distracting, distressing thinking can get in the way of the intimacy and communion you desire with God.

Meditation in the Bible

Meditation may be an effective tool for dealing with rumination and worry. Though some Christians associate all forms of meditation with Eastern religions, the Bible frequently addresses the importance of this practice. Two Hebrew words are translated as meditation in scripture. The Hebrew word, *hagah*, is used 25 times in the Hebrew Old Testament (see, e.g., Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2, 63:6, 77:12, 143:5; Isaiah 33:18).¹² Some of these passages are quite familiar to Christians:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is 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)

‘Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.’ (Joshua 1:7-8)

In Psalm 119, the longest chapter in scripture, the Hebrew word, *siyach*,¹³ is used for meditation, and occurs several times (Psalm 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 148). It also occurs in two other psalms: “I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds” (Psalm, 77:12), and “I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done (Psalm 143:5).

Clearly, the Bible invites us to learn how to meditate on God’s word, character, works, creation, and ways, among other attributes, actions, and so on. Over the centuries, Christians have

¹¹ Hunt and Eisenberg (2010).

¹² Strong (2001a).

¹³ Strong (2001a).

developed a variety of strategies to honor this exhortation. In this program, we will focus on two main approaches that are helpful in changing the way you relate to repetitive negative thinking.

Two Types of Christian Meditation for Repetitive Negative Thinking: *Kataphatic* and *Apophatic*

Within the Christian tradition, there are two types of meditation that can help you in your struggle with rumination and worry. Regarding the future, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christianity teaches that what lies ahead is only fully known by God, who is omnibenevolent (all-good), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnipotent (all-powerful). Because God's *providence*—his protective care—applies to you as one of Jesus' followers, you are called to trust in Him, yield to Him, and place your faith in His loving hands.¹⁴ In fact, Jesus instructed His followers to not worry because God cares for us, and to deny ourselves as we learn to follow Him.¹⁵

This is easier said than done. You may be struggling with naturally turning from your own efforts to control the inner and outer world to trusting in God's providence. This struggle is normal, even for mature Christians. Perhaps you are stuck with repetitive forms of thinking. Instead of finding peace in the moment through consenting to God and recognizing that He will protect you, you may be ruminating or worrying, even though these are unhelpful strategies for achieving a sense of certainty. Developing the mental muscle required for meditative practice does not happen by accident. It takes time and effort to form any new habit. On the other hand, think about whether dwelling on the past or worrying about the future is draining you of energy.

We suggest that worry and rumination do not provide the self-protection they advertise. Rather, they are likely keeping you stuck, and are possibly leading to added exhaustion. Therefore, we want to teach you how to shift these passive or active control strategies to yielding to God by way of what we call *detachment*.

- *Detachment* in the Christian tradition is a flexible, humble ability to do the following:
 - Let go of your own attempts to grasp onto or push away repetitive negative thoughts about the past, the future, or yourself.
 - Turn from these repetitive negative thoughts to God's active, loving presence by handing over everything to Him.
 - Shift from "earthly-mindedness" to "heavenly-mindedness" in order to let go of inner experiences that get in the way of an awareness of God, freeing you to live with "earthly-effectiveness."
 - Develop an attitude of self-denial, reminiscent of Jesus' submission to the will of the Father in the gospels.

The way we believe you can develop this attitude of detachment is through two distinct, yet overlapping, types of Christian meditation—*kataphatic* and *apophatic*.

¹⁴ De Caussade (2007).

¹⁵ Matthew 6:24-34.

Kataphatic. *Kataphatic* meditative practices involve using words and images. The form of *kataphatic* practice we will be teaching you is called “scriptural meditation.” It comes from the Puritans, Protestants from England in the 1500s and 1600s who believed strongly in turning to God’s Word, the Bible, to faithfully follow God’s will for their lives. In scriptural meditation, you will be learning to let go of your “earthly” preoccupations in order to shift to “heavenly” thoughts about God. In other words, you will be learning to submit to God, including His providential care. In this process, you will be getting to know about God, and thinking deeply about God through God’s Word, the Bible. We will be helping you to learn how to dwell on God’s Word in a formal, positive way so that your thoughts will be focused on Him, rather than on negative ruminations or worries that keep you stuck in life.

Apophatic. *Apophatic* meditative practices involve wordless, imageless contemplation. You will learn to submit to God, in love, rather than overly relying on words to spend time with Him. Scripture highlights this type of meditation (see Psalm 46:10; Isaiah 30:15), as well as more well-known *kataphatic* meditation. The form of *apophatic* practice we will be teaching you is called contemplative meditation, and comes from the 14th century Christian book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Contemplative meditation of this sort is simply learning to “rest in God,” a phrase that comes from Gregory the Great. In this process, you will be spending time with God, in silence, just like you would spend time with a loved one that you truly know, without pressure to say anything as you are enjoying the one-on-one time.

Balancing Words and Silence When Spending Time with God

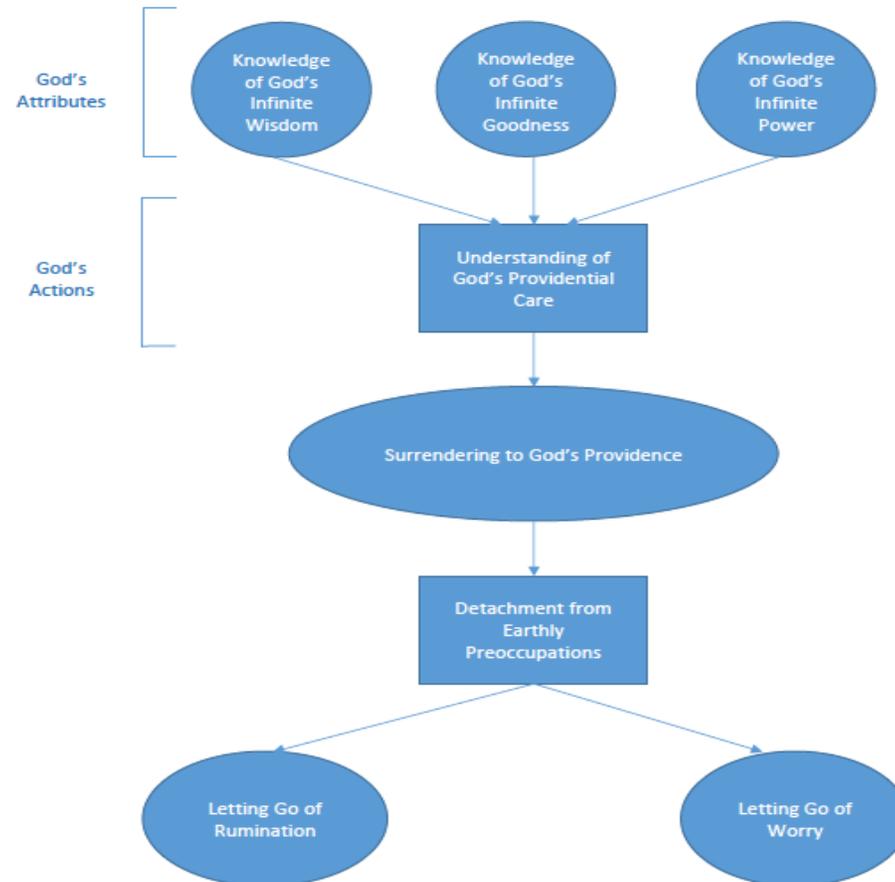
Through the use of these two forms of meditation, we believe you can develop an attitude of detachment, allowing you to shift from repetitive negative thinking to an awareness of God’s active, loving presence. By starting with the practice of scriptural meditation, our hope is that you will be getting to know who God is by way of His character, attributes, and actions, especially His infinite goodness, wisdom and power. The more you come to know God and these three attributes, we believe you will find that you can trust in His providential care as you turn away from your own control efforts and towards Him.

After practicing scriptural meditation with God’s Word, we will be teaching you how to sit with God in silence—contemplative meditation—just like you would get to know a close friend. First, you would get to know *about* your new friend through information that captures who he or she is (as in scriptural meditation). Next, you would get to know him or her through having direct conversations with your new friend. Finally, you would have more and more experiences of enjoying your friend’s company without having to always fill the time with talking, surrendering to the moment (as is the case with contemplative meditation). Along the way, you would be learning to focus your attention on him or her, given that your friend is the most important thing to you. When this happens, you would be able to tune out information that is less important, like you will be learning to do when you shift from focusing on ruminations and worries towards consenting to God’s active, loving presence through detachment.

In this ongoing process of letting go through both forms of meditation, you will be focusing your eyes on God, just like Jesus asked Peter to do in Matthew's gospel when Peter started walking towards Jesus on the choppy, stormy waters. When you begin to sink in the waters of life by ruminating and worrying, we believe these two types of Christian meditation can help you to refocus on Jesus, yielding to Him as you detach from worldly concerns.

Week 1: Handout 2

The Relationship Between God's Attributes, God's Providence, Yielding to God, Detachment, and Repetitive Negative Thinking¹⁶



¹⁶ Adapted from Knabb et al. (2018).

Week 1: Handout 3

Repetitive Negative Thinking Form¹⁷

Once per day during the next week, please keep track of the types of repetitive negative thinking you struggle with. Set a specific time once a day to do this, and set a reminder on your smart phone to keep the regular time. Include all of the necessary details (i.e., fill out all six columns). If you do not have access to the form at times, please record this information elsewhere (smart phone, computer, etc.) and transfer it to the form at a later time.

| Date/time | Specific thought | Type of repetitive negative thinking (rumination or worry) | Negative thought rating (0-10; 0 = not distracting/distressing at all; 10 = extremely distracting/distressing) | Behaviors/tasks/activities negatively impacted by repetitive negative thinking | How, if at all, has this repetitive negative thinking impacted your relationship with God? |
|-----------|------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Day 1: | | | | | |
| Day 2: | | | | | |
| Day 3: | | | | | |
| Day 4: | | | | | |
| Day 5: | | | | | |

¹⁷ Adapted from Dugas and Robichaud (2007).

| Date/time | Specific thought | Type of repetitive negative thinking (rumination or worry) | Negative thought rating (0-10; 0 = not distracting/distressing at all; 10 = extremely distracting/distressing) | Behaviors/tasks/activities negatively impacted by repetitive negative thinking | How, if at all, has this repetitive negative thinking impacted your relationship with God? |
|-----------|------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Day 6: | | | | | |
| Day 7: | | | | | |

Week 2: Scriptural Meditation

Verse

“Finally, brothers and sisters, 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)

Theme

We all think about things throughout our day. It is easy to allow our minds to wander. In fact, recent research revealed that 50% of a sample of adults reported their mind was wandering when they were supposed to be focusing on a specific task.¹⁸ Unfortunately, mind wandering can lead to repetitive negative thinking, which can lead to a long-term battle with depression or anxiety. Interestingly, we also tend to meditate on things all day long,¹⁹ with meditation simply defined as thinking deeply about a specific topic. Yet, what we choose to meditate on can either help us to feel love, joy, contentment, and so on, or result in rumination, worry, sadness, and anxiety. This week, you will have the opportunity to practice a form of *kataphatic* meditation, called scriptural meditation, focusing on God’s characteristics, attributes, and actions, including His infinite wisdom, goodness, power, and providence. We believe these attributes and actions of God, when regularly meditated upon, can begin the process of deepening your relationship with Him, and, simultaneously, help you shift your focused attention from negative thinking to yielding to God’s active, loving presence via detachment. When practiced over time, we hope that daily scriptural meditation on God’s Word, the Bible, can help you to think about things that are noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. As a result, you will be attempting to shift from what the Puritans call “earthly-mindedness” to “heavenly-mindedness.”²⁰

Goals

1. Define “scriptural meditation” (based on Puritan writings), “earthly-mindedness,” and “heavenly-mindedness,” and discuss the ways in which these terms relate to submitting to God’s providence via detachment.
2. Learn about the potential benefits of scriptural meditation, including its possible role in helping you with repetitive negative thinking.
3. Differentiate “occasional” and “deliberate” forms of Christian scriptural meditation (as defined in the Puritan literature).
4. Break down the specific steps of scriptural meditation in order to learn how to think deeply about God from a Christian perspective.
5. Practice scriptural meditation (both in class and outside of class) by meditating on God’s attributes and actions, including His infinite wisdom, love, power, and providence (see

¹⁸ Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010).

¹⁹ Hall (2016).

²⁰ Burroughs (2014).

Week 2: Handout 2). Keep track of your meditative practice with the weekly log (see Week 2: Handout 3).

Tasks

1. Review last week's log (Week 1: Handout 3).
2. Review the verse and theme for the week.
3. Review the handouts for the second week (Week 2: Handout 1 and Week 2: Handout 2).
4. As a group, discuss the handouts, including any comments or questions.
5. Practice scriptural meditation for 10 minutes with the corresponding audio recording.
6. Get into groups of two or three to describe the experience and share any questions or concerns with the larger group.
7. Review the homework handout (Week 2: Handout 3). You will be practicing scriptural meditation every day for the next week, and recording your efforts on the handout (Week 2: Handout 3).

Week 2: Handout 1²¹

Scriptural Meditation

A Definition of Scriptural Meditation

As noted in the first week, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word, *hagah*, is often used for meditation, whereas the Greek word, *melatao*, is sometimes used in the New Testament.²² Among the Puritans, a group of Protestants from England in the 1500s and 1600s who believed strongly in turning to God's Word, the Bible, to guide life, meditation was defined in several different ways:

- “[Meditation] is the steadfast and earnest bending of the mind on some spiritual and heavenly matter, discoursing on it with ourselves, until we bring it to some profitable point, both for the settling of our judgments, and the bettering of our hearts and lives.”²³
- “Meditation is the soul's retiring of itself, that by a serious and solemn thinking upon God, the heart may be raised up to heavenly affections.”²⁴

In terms of a more contemporary definition, we define scriptural meditation (based on Puritan writings) as follows:

- “A focused, sustained cognitive process derived from Puritan Christianity that shifts the mind from earthly- to heavenly-thinking in order to cultivate a corresponding feeling state that leads to Christ-like behavior and action.”

Types of Scriptural Meditation

Scriptural meditation (as defined by the Puritans) can be *occasional*, meaning you might say very brief meditations throughout the day; or, scriptural meditation can be *deliberate*, which involves a more formal practice, in solitude and for a set amount of time.²⁵ Although we recognize that these two forms of meditation may overlap, we distinguish between the two with a focus on *deliberate* meditation this week by asking that you choose a specific time each day to engage in the practice. In the fourth week, we will discuss the ways in which you can add occasional meditation to your day.

²¹ The language in this handout is slightly adapted from Knabb (in press).

²² Strong (2001a, 2001b).

²³ Ball (2016, p. 25).

²⁴ Watson (2012).

²⁵ Beeke and Jones (2012).

Reasons for Daily Scriptural Meditation

There are a variety of reasons to use scriptural meditation in your daily life, including, but not limited to, the following:

- It is rooted in scripture (e.g., Psalm 1:2).
- It can help you to shift your focus from negative thoughts to God.²⁶
- It can help you cultivate a deeper awareness of God’s active, loving presence.²⁷
- It can help your mind to find rest.²⁸
- It can help you to develop focused, sustained attention,²⁹ which can help with repetitive negative thinking.
- It can help you to meditate on the right things, given that we are always meditating on something.³⁰

Possible Benefits of Daily Scriptural Meditation

From our perspective, scriptural meditation can help you to gain a deeper awareness of God’s active, loving presence, especially when meditating on God’s infinite goodness, wisdom, and power. In addition, meditating on God’s providential care can help you to begin the process of learning to trust in Him when you are stuck in repetitive cycles of thinking by shifting from “earthly-mindedness” to “heavenly-mindedness.” In other words, as you learn to meditate on God, you are simultaneously learning to pivot away from rumination and worry so you can untangle yourself from repetitive thinking cycles that get in the way of living life.

Scriptural Meditation: A Nine-Step Process

In order to simplify the meditative process, we have organized the various instructions from a range of Puritan writings³¹ into nine clear steps for you to practice in 10-minute blocks of time, once per day. Also worth mentioning, remember to select a set time each day, find a quiet space, free from distractions, silence your smart phones/tablets/computers, etc., and sit up straight with your eyes closed.

1. Choose a short biblical passage/verse (or topic) to focus all of your attention on.
2. Say a short prayer to God, asking Him for guidance during the next 10 minutes.

²⁶ Ball (2016).

²⁷ Ball (2016).

²⁸ Ball (2016).

²⁹ Ball (2016).

³⁰ Hall (2016).

³¹ These nine steps are integrated from Ball (2016), Baxter (2015), Beeke and Jones (2012), Hall (2016), and Watson (2012). The language is slightly adapted from Knabb (in press).

3. Shift your focus from “earthly-mindedness” to “heavenly-mindedness,” letting go of rumination and worry and pivoting towards a single point of focus—the short passage/verse in scripture that reveals the biblical topic.
4. Repeat the passage in scripture with focused, sustained attention.
5. When your mind inevitably wanders to something other than the pre-selected verse, practice grace toward yourself by non-judgmentally refocusing your attention on the biblical passage.
6. Begin to move from your “brain” to your “heart,” focusing on the feeling that corresponds with the biblical topic and short passage in scripture.
7. Deeply experience the feeling that corresponds with the biblical topic and passage in scripture.
8. As you conclude the meditation, make a commitment to act on what you have just focused all of your attention on in a Christ-like manner.
9. Say a short prayer to God, thanking Him for revealing Himself to you via the biblical topic and short passage in scripture.

Week 2: Handout 2³²

Meditating on God's Attributes and Actions

Each day this week, once per day, you will meditate on God's infinite goodness, wisdom, power, or providence. Therefore, you will have the opportunity to practice meditating on each of these attributes/characteristics/actions of God at least one to two times. Remember to set a specific time each day to meditate, find a quiet place, free from distractions, silence your smart phone/tablet/computer, and meditate for 10 minutes. Close your eyes, and sit up straight as you meditate on the pre-selected Bible verse. You will be using the corresponding audio version of the meditation to guide your practice (see "Tracks 1-4" at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/x2dbubld3p7zhmz/AACE6HVCXMELLpgdH50LZlf1a?dl=0>).

Meditating on God's Attributes: God's Infinite Goodness (see "Track 1")

1. For the next 10 minutes, you will be focusing on the Bible verse, "God is love" (1 John 4:8).
2. Say a short prayer to God, asking Him for guidance during the next 10 minutes.
3. Shift your focus from "earthly-mindedness" to "heavenly-mindedness," letting go of rumination and worry and pivoting towards the "God is love" Bible verse.
4. Repeat this passage in scripture with focused, sustained attention.
5. When your mind inevitably wanders to something other than the "God is love" verse, exercise a spirit of grace toward yourself by non-judgmentally refocusing your attention on the biblical passage.
6. Begin to move from your "brain" to your "heart," focusing on how your heart feels as you consider that He is infinitely good.³³
7. Allow yourself to deeply feel the love of God that corresponds with His infinite goodness.
8. As you conclude the meditation, make a commitment to act on this deeper awareness of God's infinite goodness in a Christ-like manner.
9. Say a short prayer to God, thanking Him for revealing His infinite goodness to you.

Meditating on God's Attributes: God's Infinite Wisdom (see "Track 2")

1. For the next 10 minutes, you will be focusing on the Bible verse, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (Romans 11:33).
2. Say a short prayer to God, asking Him for guidance during the next 10 minutes.
3. Shift your focus from "earthly-mindedness" to "heavenly-mindedness," letting go of rumination and worry and pivoting towards the "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God" Bible verse.
4. Repeat this passage in scripture with focused, sustained attention.

³² The language in this handout is slightly adapted from Knabb (in press).

³³ Ball (2016).

5. When your mind inevitably wanders to something other than the “Oh, the depth...” verse, exercise a spirit of grace by non-judgmentally refocusing your attention on the biblical passage.
6. Begin to move from your “brain” to your “heart,” focusing on how your heart feels as you consider that He is infinitely wise.³⁴
7. Allow yourself to deeply feel the sense of calm that corresponds with this awareness of God’s infinite wisdom.
8. As you conclude the meditation, make a commitment to act on this deeper awareness of God’s infinite wisdom in a Christ-like manner.
9. Say a short prayer to God, thanking Him for revealing His infinite wisdom to you.

Meditating on God’s Attributes: God’s Infinite Power (see “Track 3”)

1. For the next 10 minutes, you will be focusing on the Bible verse, “Great is our Lord and mighty in power” (Psalm 147:5).
2. Say a short prayer to God, asking Him for guidance during the next 10 minutes.
3. Shift your focus from “earthly-mindedness” to “heavenly-mindedness,” letting go of rumination and worry and pivoting towards the “Great is our Lord and mighty in power” Bible verse.
4. Repeat this passage in scripture with focused, sustained attention.
5. When your mind inevitably wanders to something other than the “Great is our Lord...” verse, exercise a spirit of grace by non-judgmentally refocusing your attention on the biblical passage.
6. Begin to move from your “brain” to your “heart,” focusing on how your heart feels as you consider that He is infinitely powerful.³⁵
7. Allow yourself to deeply feel the safety and trust that corresponds with His infinite power.
8. As you conclude the meditation, make a commitment to act on this deeper awareness of God’s infinite power in a Christ-like manner.
9. Say a short prayer to God, thanking Him for revealing His infinite power to you.

Meditating on God’s Actions: God’s Providence (see “Track 4”)

1. For the next 10 minutes, you will be focusing on the Bible verse, “In all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28).
2. Say a short prayer to God, asking Him for guidance during the next 10 minutes.
3. Shift your focus from “earthly-mindedness” to “heavenly-mindedness,” letting go of rumination and worry and pivoting towards the “In all things God works for the good of those who love him” Bible verse.
4. Repeat this passage in scripture with focused, sustained attention.

³⁴ Watson (2012) noted that meditating on God’s wisdom “would sweetly calm our hearts.”

³⁵ Watson (2012) and Ball (2016).

5. When your mind inevitably wanders to something other than the “In all things God works...” verse, exercise a spirit of grace by non-judgmentally refocusing your attention on the biblical passage.
6. Begin to move from your “brain” to your “heart,” focusing on how your heart feels as you consider God’s providence.³⁶
7. Allow yourself to deeply feel the peace that corresponds with God’s providence.
8. As you conclude the meditation, make a commitment to act on this deeper awareness of God’s providence in a Christ-like manner.
9. Say a short prayer to God, thanking Him for revealing His providential care to you.

³⁶ Flavel (2016) noted the following: “Two things destroy the peace and tranquility of our lives; our bewailing past disappointments, or fearing future ones. But would we once learn prevision and provision to be divine prerogatives...it would greatly conduce to the tranquility of our lives.”

Week 2: Handout 3

Homework Form: Meditating on God’s Attributes and Actions³⁷

Please fill out this form each day of the week, noting the date, whether or not you practiced, and anything else that comes up in the “comments” section. Please remember to use the corresponding audio recording (see “Tracks 1-4” at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/x2dbubld3p7zhmz/AACE6HVCMELlpgdH50LZlf1a?dl=0>).

| Day/Date | Practice (Yes/No) | Comments/Any Actions Taken Corresponding to the Focus of the Meditation |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Wednesday Date: _____ | Scriptural Meditation (God’s Goodness): | |
| Thursday Date: _____ | Scriptural Meditation (God’s Wisdom): | |
| Friday Date: _____ | Scriptural Meditation (God’s Power): | |
| Saturday Date: _____ | Scriptural Meditation (God’s Providence): | |
| Sunday Date: _____ | Scriptural Meditation (God’s Goodness): | |
| Monday Date: _____ | Scriptural Meditation (God’s Wisdom): | |
| Tuesday Date: _____ | Scriptural Meditation (God’s Power): | |

³⁷ This form is adapted from Segal et al. (2012).

Week 3: Contemplative Meditation

Verse

“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 earthly things.” (Colossians 3:1-2)

Theme

Like getting to know a friend on a deeper level, knowing about God, including His attributes and actions, can be helpful in developing a more intimate relationship with Him. Yet, time spent with God does not always need to involve words. In fact, many of us struggle with doing all of the talking when we are spending time with God. When we overly rely on our thoughts, in turn, we may travel down the path of rumination and worry, fixating on distracting thoughts that can get in the way of the safety and peace that come from sitting at Jesus’ feet to find rest. This week, you will learn about a form of *apophatic* meditation—contemplative meditation—which involves a wordless, silent, imageless form of prayer. In your time spent with God, you will be practicing pivoting from ruminations and worries and towards a prayer phrase—“let go”—which can help you to learn to “set your heart on things above...not earthly things.” To do so, you will be learning about a meditative method taught within the *Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th century writing that is rooted in the Christian tradition.³⁸ As you learn to focus your attention on God’s loving presence within the “cloud of unknowing,”³⁹ you will be simultaneously practicing placing everything else, including ruminations and worries, beneath a “cloud of forgetting.” This exercise in detachment can help you to find rest in God, rather than getting tangled up in repetitive thinking patterns.

Goals

1. Define Christian contemplation, including contemplative meditation, and discuss the ways in which these terms relate to yielding to God’s providence via detachment.
2. Learn about the potential benefits of contemplative meditation, including its possible role in helping you with repetitive negative thinking.
3. Break down the specific steps of contemplative meditation, as revealed in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, in order to learn how to “rest in God,” a phrase used by Gregory the Great.
4. Practice contemplative meditation (both in class and outside of class) by using your short prayer phrase—“let go”—to yield to God’s providence via detachment (see Week 3:

³⁸ Worth mentioning, *centering prayer* is another contemporary version that integrates the teachings from the *Cloud of Unknowing*, with a large number of books in circulation and an organization (contemplativeoutreach.org) that promotes centering prayer. See Knabb and Frederick (2017) for an eight-week program that utilizes centering prayer for chronic worry.

³⁹ Simply put, the “cloud of unknowing” is the psychological space between you and God during contemplative practice, wherein you are reaching out to him in love, rather than knowledge.

Handout 2). Keep track of your meditative practice with the weekly log (see Week 3: Handout 3).

Tasks

1. Review last week's log (Week 2: Handout 3).
2. Review the verse and theme for the week.
3. Review the handouts for the third week (Week 3: Handout 1 and Week 3: Handout 2).
4. As a group, discuss the handouts, including any comments or questions.
5. Practice contemplative meditation for 10 minutes with the corresponding audio recording.
6. Get into groups of two or three to describe the experience and share any questions or concerns with the larger group.
7. Review the homework handout (Week 3: Handout 3). You will be practicing contemplative meditation every day for the next week, and recording your efforts on the handout (Week 3: Handout 3).

Week 3: Handout 1⁴⁰

An Introduction to Contemplative Meditation

The form of contemplative meditation that we teach in this four-week program comes from the 14th century Christian writing, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁴¹ In this writing from over 500 years ago, the anonymous author discusses the use of both knowledge and love to connect to God. Reading the Bible and deeply considering its themes, for example, are especially important in developing knowledge of God in preparation for contemplative meditation.⁴²

As a result, last week, you practiced thinking deeply about God via scriptural meditation, which is consistent with the *kataphatic* tradition. From our perspective, just like slowly getting to know a good friend over time by first learning about him or her, you have been thinking deeply about God's attributes and actions. Now, you will be learning to find rest in God in a state of silence, similar to enjoying a quiet moment with a friend, realizing words are not necessary to enjoy the moment in that you already know your friend on a deeper level.

The instructions for learning to sit with God in silence come from the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and are firmly rooted in the *apophatic* Christian tradition. Within this tradition, contemplative writers such as St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the *Cloud* author have argued that, at a certain point, human words fail to fully capture God, including our love for Him. This experience may be akin to looking up into the night sky, speechless in the midst of a seemingly infinite number of stars that are brightly shining before your eyes. In the Bible, this is reminiscent of Moses' experience of God telling him, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:4). Ultimately, similar to sitting on the porch of your home with a close friend, enjoying a sunset in silence, words can sometimes get in the way of basking in the moment. To be sure, since you already know your friend on a deeper level, you do not need to think *about* your friend when you are in his or her presence.

For the *Cloud* author, reaching out to God in love is especially important, letting go of over-reliance on our own knowledge of God in the process.⁴³ Through this process of detachment, the author argues that reaching for God in love leads us to experience God in a proverbial dense cloud. This is reminiscent of Moses approaching God in a "dark cloud" when God revealed the Ten Commandments to him (Exodus 20:21). This is to say that when we are able to let go of overly relying on our own knowledge about God, we are able to, instead, rely on love to cultivate a deeper intimacy with Him as we sit in His presence.

The *Cloud* author further explains:

⁴⁰ This handout is slightly adapted from Knabb (in press).

⁴¹ Bangley (2006).

⁴² Bangley (2006, p. 49).

⁴³ Even though our knowledge of God is true, it is never exhaustive—God is always more than we can know. Because God is infinite and we are finite, there will always be more to know about God than we can grasp.

If you want to enter, live, and work in this cloud of unknowing, you will need a cloud of forgetting between you and the things of this earth. Consider the problem carefully and you will understand that you are farthest from God when you do not ignore for a moment the creatures and circumstances of the physical world. Attempt to blank out everything but God. (Bangley, 2006, p. 11)

Through humble detachment, we see that we can practice looking up to God in love, letting go of earthly preoccupations and finding Him in a “dark, dense cloud.” While we are doing this, we can place all of our earthly preoccupations and distractions, including ruminations and worries, beneath a “cloud of forgetting.”

This process is consistent with the overall approach we take in this four-week program. You can learn to hand over everything to God’s providential care in that He is all-loving, all-powerful, and all-wise. As you hand over your inner world to God, including your ruminations and worries, you are repeatedly pivoting from your own knowledge of God to a loving awareness of God’s providential care.

To do so, you will be employing a simple phrase—“let go”—to focus all of your attention on God, as *The Cloud* author reveals:

You may wish to reach out to God with one simple word that expresses your desire...Once you have selected the word you prefer, permanently bind this word to your heart. This word becomes your shield and spear in combat and in peace. Use this word to beat upon the cloudy darkness above you and to force every stray thought down under a cloud of forgetting. If a nagging thought pesters you, strike it with this word. (Bangley, 2006, p. 14)

Overall, the chosen phrase—“let go”—serves as a “shield and spear” to help you repeatedly pivot from negative thinking to an awareness of God’s active, loving presence. In the process, you are placing everything other than God beneath the “cloud of forgetting.” Over time, we believe you may be able to relate differently to your ruminations and worries, given you are cultivating focused, sustained attention on God and yielding to His loving care via detachment.

Week 3: Handout 2

Instructions for Contemplative Meditation⁴⁴

Select a set time each day for meditation, once per day. Find a quiet environment, with no distractions or background noise. Silence your smart phone and any electronic devices that might interrupt the practice. Sit comfortably in a chair, with your back straight and your eyes closed. You will be using the corresponding audio version of the meditation as a guide for practice (see “Track 5” at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/x2dbubld3p7zhmz/AACE6HVCXMELlpgdH50LZlf1a?dl=0>).

1. Say a brief prayer to God, asking Him to be with you as you hand over everything to Him during the next 10 minutes.
2. Begin to recite the chosen phrase, “let go,” in your mind, reaching out to God in love. This word serves as a way to focus all of your attention on God in an act of faithful submission, reaching for Him within the “cloud of unknowing” in love.
3. Place all other thoughts beneath a “cloud of forgetting,” gently returning to the chosen phrase, “let go,” when you notice you are thinking about “earthly things.”
4. When the 10 minutes have concluded, say a brief prayer to God, thanking Him for His providential care.

⁴⁴ These instructions are based on the directions in the *Cloud of Unknowing* (Bangley, 2006) and slightly adapted from Knabb (in press). In addition, the instructions are consistent with those proposed by Pennington (1982).

Week 3: Handout 3

Homework Form: Resting in God’s Presence with Contemplative Meditation⁴⁵

Please fill out this form each day of the week, noting the date, whether or not you practiced, and anything else that comes up in the “comments” section. Please remember to use the corresponding audio recording (see “Track 5” at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/x2dbubld3p7zhmz/AACE6HVCMELlpgdH50LZlf1a?dl=0>).

| Day/Date | Practice (Yes/No) | Comments |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------|
| Wednesday Date: _____ | Contemplative Meditation: | |
| Thursday Date: _____ | Contemplative Meditation: | |
| Friday Date: _____ | Contemplative Meditation: | |
| Saturday Date: _____ | Contemplative Meditation: | |
| Sunday Date: _____ | Contemplative Meditation: | |
| Monday Date: _____ | Contemplative Meditation: | |
| Tuesday Date: _____ | Contemplative Meditation: | |

⁴⁵ This form is adapted from Segal et al. (2012).

Week 4: Meditation Throughout the Day

Verse

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’ ‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’” (Luke 10:38-42)

Theme

In the story of Mary and Martha in the gospel of Luke, Martha is “worried and upset about many things,” whereas Mary is simply sitting at Jesus’ feet. In this four-week program, you have worked on learning to yield to God’s providential care, shifting from ruminations and worries to an awareness of God’s presence via detachment. Just like Mary and Martha, there is an appropriate time to sit at Jesus’ feet and a time to serve, sacrifice, and take care of daily tasks. Of course, knowing which approach to take and when to take it is key in daily life. From our perspective, practicing daily meditation (both *kataphatic* and *apophatic*) is an important part of learning to shift from repetitive negative thinking to consenting to God’s active, loving presence throughout the day by sitting at Jesus’ feet. In fact, over the course of a busy, stressful day, “occasional meditation” within the Puritan tradition can be a great way to shift your focus from repetitive negative thinking to God, as can repeating a short prayer phrase, such as “let go,” for a two-minute period of time within the contemplative tradition. In the fourth and final week of the program, you will learn how to carry *kataphatic* and *apophatic* meditation into your day in order to repeatedly pivot from negative thinking to an awareness of God’s providential care. We see this pivot as reminiscent of Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet, rather than being “worried and upset about many things,” like Martha’s preoccupied, anxious activity.⁴⁶

Goals

1. Practice a two-minute version⁴⁷ of both scriptural and contemplative meditation (both in class and outside of class) to yield to God’s providence via detachment when you are struggling with ruminations and worries and throughout the day (see Week 4: Handout 1). Keep track of your daily meditative practices with the weekly log (see Week 4: Handout 2).

⁴⁶ For a more detailed review of the relationship between the story of Mary and Martha and contemplation and action, see Knabb (2016).

⁴⁷ The two-minute version of both forms of meditation is influenced by the instructions provided by Segal et al. (2012).

Tasks

1. Review last week's log (Week 3: Handout 3).
2. Complete the measures for the fourth week via your laptop or smartphone.
3. Review the verse and theme for the week.
4. Review the handout for the fourth week (Week 4: Handout 1).
5. As a group, discuss the handout, including any comments or questions.
6. Practice both two-minute versions of Christian meditation.
7. Get into groups of two or three to describe the experience. After some processing time, each group will consider how to handle situations where exiting to have two minutes of personal time for meditation would be difficult. Are there ways you can find to still meditate (either by finding the strength to leave or finding a way to get some personal space to meditate even while there)? Share any questions or concerns with the larger group.
8. Get into groups of two or three to describe the entire experience of the program. Then, Share your experience with the larger group.
9. Review the homework handout (Week 4: Handout 2). You will be practicing a two-minute version of both scriptural and contemplative meditation every day for the next week, and recording your efforts on the handout (Week 4: Handout 2). An example of a way to handle situations where leaving is difficult is included in the handout. Discuss other suggestions to help deal with situations where leaving might be hard and write these strategies on your handout.

Week 4: Handout 1

Christian Meditation Throughout the Day

In addition to practicing both forms of meditation (*kataphatic* and *apophatic*) formally each day for 10-minute blocks of time for the next week, our hope is that you are also able to practice a two-minute version of each meditative exercise over the course of a busy day. The aim is to shift from repetitive negative thinking to an awareness of God’s providential care whenever you notice you are stuck in ruminations or worries.

A Two-Minute Version of Scriptural Meditation

Find a quiet environment, free from distractions. Close your eyes, and continue the practice for two minutes. You will be using the corresponding audio version of the meditation as a guide for practice (see “Track 6” at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/x2dbubld3p7zhmz/AACE6HVCMELlpgdH50LZlf1a?dl=0>).

1. Recite the passage in scripture, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him,⁴⁸ and he will make your paths straight” with focused, sustained attention.
2. Deeply feel the peace that corresponds with God’s providence, and let go of everything else.

Sometimes, you may find yourself in situations where it’s hard to retreat to a quiet environment, though you want to do a two-minute meditation. If that’s the case, you may be able to create a quiet personal space through some creative use of your smart phone. Type the passage in the “Notes” section of your phone at the start of your day. When you’d like to take a two-minute meditation break, but you feel uncomfortable leaving the situation, just bring up the note, “look” at your phone, and mentally recite the passage for a couple of minutes. People generally will leave you alone while you’re “reading” your messages. It will allow an inner peaceful retreat for you when exiting is a problem. Perhaps you can discover other strategies that work for you as well.

A Two-Minute Version of Contemplative Meditation

Find a quiet environment, free from distractions. Close your eyes, and continue the practice for two minutes (see “Track 7” at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/x2dbubld3p7zhmz/AACE6HVCMELlpgdH50LZlf1a?dl=0>).

⁴⁸ Interestingly, the Hebrew word for “submit” means to “know him.” So, through our “ways” (i.e., events, experiences of life), we are to be attentive to God, look for him, and know him in these experiences (Kidner, 2008).

1. Recite the chosen phrase, “let go,” in your mind, reaching out to God in love. This word serves as a way to focus all of your attention on God in an act of faithful submission, reaching for Him within the “cloud of unknowing” in love.
2. Place all other thoughts beneath a “cloud of forgetting,” gently returning to the chosen phrase, “let go,” when you notice you are thinking about “earthly things.”

Similar to the above, create a smart phone note of “let go,” and act like you are looking at it while you create a quiet inner retreat when leaving a situation feels uncomfortable. You may invent other strategies that work for you as well.

Practicing Scriptural and Contemplative Meditation on Your Own

You are encouraged to continue to practice both scriptural and contemplative meditation in the weeks and months ahead. As has been demonstrated within this workbook, scriptural meditation includes a focus on a biblical passage/verse and topic. As you continue to practice this form of meditation, you may select the passages and corresponding topics of focus. In addition, in contemplative meditation, we used the phrase “let go” as a means to fix our attention on God’s active, loving presence. As you use this form of meditation, you are free to choose a word that will best serve to help you pivot away from negative thinking and toward God’s presence. Words such as “love,” “peace,” and “forgiveness” are all examples of terms that can be employed in the process of placing worries and ruminations beneath a “cloud of forgetting” as God is encountered within the “cloud of unknowing.”

Week 4: Handout 2

Homework Form: Christian Meditation Throughout the Day⁴⁹

Name: _____

Please fill out this form each day of the week, noting the date, whether or not you practiced, and anything else that comes up in the “comments” section. Please remember to use the corresponding audio recording (see “Track 6” and “Track 7” at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/x2dbubld3p7zhmz/AACE6HVCXMELlpgdH50LZlf1a?dl=0>).

| Day/Date | Practice (Yes/No) | Comments |
|--------------------------|--|----------|
| Wednesday Date: _____ | Two-Minute Scriptural Meditation (God’s Providence): Two-Minute Contemplative Meditation (“Let Go”): | |
| Thursday Date: _____ | Two-Minute Scriptural Meditation (God’s Providence): Two-Minute Contemplative Meditation (“Let Go”): | |
| Friday Date: _____ | Two-Minute Scriptural Meditation (God’s Providence): Two-Minute Contemplative Meditation (“Let Go”): | |
| Saturday Date: _____ | Two-Minute Scriptural Meditation (God’s Providence): | |

⁴⁹ This form is adapted from Segal et al. (2012).

| | | |
|------------------------|---|--|
| | Two-Minute Contemplative Meditation (“Let Go”): | |
| Sunday Date: _____ | Two-Minute Scriptural Meditation (God’s Providence): Two-Minute Contemplative Meditation (“Let Go”): | |
| Monday Date: _____ | Two-Minute Scriptural Meditation (God’s Providence): Two-Minute Contemplative Meditation (“Let Go”): | |
| Tuesday Date: _____ | Two-Minute Scriptural Meditation (God’s Providence): Two-Minute Contemplative Meditation (“Let Go”): | |

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