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## CHAPTER 1

# What Mindfulness Is, What It's Not, and Why It Matters

*Mindfulness in the Christian vision is to  
“let that same mind be in [us] that was in Christ Jesus.”*

—STEFAN GILLOW REYNOLDS

*In silence and in meditation on the eternal truths, I hear the  
voice of God which excites our hearts to greater love.*

—C. S. LEWIS

**THE STORY ACTUALLY STARTED** a few weeks prior to that phone call. My youngest daughter, Tiffany, was a year old at the time. It was Christmas morning, and as she sat in her highchair, I fed her pureed apple sauce. While cajoling her to eat, I noticed that her left eye quivered like Jell-O. My anxiety spiked and I showed my wife. Whatever Christmas cheer we felt was quickly dashed. Within a week we arranged an emergency appointment with a pediatric neurologist who assured us it was nothing to worry about. He ordered a routine CT scan “just to be sure.” That scan began our multidecade journey.

A few days later we took her to the hospital for the “routine” scan. After the scan we returned home, and as I was opening the front door, the phone rang. That’s when I rushed inside, picked up the receiver, and heard the news.

The doctor said, “Mr. Stone, we discovered a lesion.” I

thought, *A lesion . . . Certainly that's a simple problem that can be fixed with a simple solution.*

Then he clarified what a lesion was. I felt as though someone had stabbed me in the stomach when he said those words—words a parent should never have to hear: “Your daughter has a brain tumor.”

Life would now take on new urgency as we would fight to save Tiffany’s life. Within a short time, surgeons performed the first of more than ten brain surgeries she would eventually endure over the next twenty-nine years. She was hospitalized numerous times, received an experimental device implant in her brain, and had part of her brain surgically removed. However, after our long journey she is now doing quite well, and at the time of this writing, she is studying in seminary to become a hospital chaplain and counselor. My decades-long experience spurred me to pursue how our brains and mindfulness might intersect to influence our spiritual growth.

During one of our many visits to the hospital in Chicago where she was receiving treatment (when she was in her twenties), I experienced secular mindfulness for the first time. As a parent, my stress intensified each time we made a trip there for another surgery. During this particular hospital stay, my wife noticed a blurb in the hospital’s daily newsletter about a daily mindfulness class they offered.

I thought, *Wow. What perfect timing. I'll check it out.* So a few minutes before the class began, I took the elevator to the fifth floor. As I walked toward the classroom, next to a small sandwich shop, I immediately felt anxious. A fully glassed wall enclosed the classroom, and I couldn’t see inside because the glass was glazed. I paused and thought, *I wonder what they are doing in there?*

I considered turning around and skipping the class. But I mustered my courage, walked to the door, and slowly inched it open to avoid any squeaks that would alert them to my presence. What I saw quadrupled my anxiety. I first noticed the absence of chairs in the room and the subdued lighting. Then I saw that everyone was sitting on the floor cross-legged in the lotus position. Their palms lay on their knees, and their thumbs and forefingers had formed the “OK” sign. As I paused, I heard them droning in low-voiced unison, “Yaaaa-du. Yaaaa-du. Waaaaa-du. Waaaaa-du. The toe bone’s connected to the foot bone.”

Okay. Maybe I didn’t hear *Dry Bones* being sung. But I was freaked out by what I saw. I slowly closed the door, turned on my heels, and made a beeline to the sandwich shop, hoping no one saw my rapid exit.

I needed a drink, a strong one. A Diet Dr Pepper (and I don’t even drink Dr Pepper).

That was my initial experience with a secular approach to mindfulness. And that’s probably a similar image for many Christians when they think about mindfulness—sit on the floor in a weird pretzel pose, turn the lights down low, and hum, “Yaaaa-du. Yaaaa-du.” Fortunately, that does not accurately portray what I’m talking about in this book—noticing with a holy purpose.

### **The Art of Holy Noticing**

At the outset, it’s important to remember that our ultimate goal is not to use mindfulness simply to make us feel better—because science has discovered that it does just that—but rather to make us more like Christ (see Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:13; Gal. 4:19).

For example, in the last few decades, scientific research has discovered that exercise is good for you. Exercise is exercise, though. We don't split it into secular exercise and Christian exercise. It benefits Christians and non-Christians alike. However, a believer can take exercise a step beyond. We exercise not simply to feel better and keep our hearts healthy (and that's a fine motive) but fundamentally to honor God. Because Scripture says that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, when we exercise, we do it for God's glory. Our bodies are gifts entrusted to us by the One who created us. We honor Him when we take care of our bodies. And with healthy bodies, we can serve Him better.

Holy noticing is similar to exercise, but so much more. Although it brings tangible benefits such as a healthier brain (which, again, is a fine motive), it ultimately helps us love God and love others better. And even though some practices may resemble secular mindfulness (like slow breathing), we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater by rejecting science-based practices that may benefit anyone. Essentially, God created our brains to respond to these mindful practices in several positive ways. Holy noticing quiets our brain's circuitry when bombarded by afflictive emotions, negative thinking, and reactivity and amplifies our brain's circuitry to help us more consistently apply living out the mind of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

As I explained in the introduction, my definition of Christian mindfulness is *the art of holy noticing—noticing, with a holy purpose, God and His handiwork, our relationships, and our inner world of thoughts and feelings.*

This spiritual discipline is an art (there isn't just one right way to do it) that involves noticing with a *holy purpose*. We don't notice *just* to notice. We don't notice *just* to benefit

ourselves. We notice, however, with God's purposes and perspectives in mind. What we notice first and foremost is God Himself. That involves noticing His handiwork, what's happening in our relationships, and our inner world of thoughts and feelings.

God models this pattern of noticing because He Himself is a perfect noticer. Nothing in our lives is too small or insignificant for Him to notice. He knows the number of hairs on our head (Matt. 10:30). He noticed the Hebrews groaning under Egyptian bondage (Ex. 2:25). He notices our pain, our joys, our heartaches, and our happiness. The psalmist writes, "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book" (Ps. 56:8 NLT). God's sovereign nature reminds us that He knows and notices everything about us. Jesus modeled holy noticing in the Sermon on the Mount when He directed His hearers' attention to birds and flowers that we often overlook in our worrisome lives (Matt. 6:25–34). He also used the phrase, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11:15; Mark 4:9 ESV), to challenge us to pay close attention, to notice, to listen. The writer of Proverbs even admonishes us to notice things as tiny as an ant (Prov. 6:6). Holy noticing is a way to bring intentional awareness in the present moment to what and who is around us and what we're doing, thinking, and feeling—all from God's perspective.

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A practical way to learn and practice this mindful lifestyle is with the easy-to-remember acronym BREATHe. Each

component of this model begins with one letter of this word. The last letter, *e*, is actually the most important aspect of holy noticing. It ties everything together.

Holy noticing—noticing with a holy, God-focused purpose—means noticing your

- **B**ody: being aware of your physical body states and sensations;
- **R**elationships: assessing the health of your relationships;
- **E**nvironment: taking notice of your current surroundings, including sights, sounds, smells, and God’s creation;
- **A**fflictive emotions or **A**ffect (a general term for emotions): acknowledging how you’re currently feeling;
- **T**houghts: being conscious of your current thoughts;
- **H**ear: paying attention to the state of your spiritual life and the Holy Spirit’s whisperings or impressions on your heart; and, to tie it all together,
- **e**ngage: engaging the world like Christ, practicing holy noticing in the mundane, the everyday, the ordinary.

One helpful way to describe this “noticing” posture comes from two neuroscientists<sup>2</sup> who created the counseling approach called acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). They explain that we can choose from three different

perspectives in our immediate experience: participant, participant-observer, and observer. We shift between these perspectives during our waking hours and none is necessarily better than the other.

They illustrate these perspectives with an amusement-park roller coaster. As a participant, you'd be in the front car simply to experience the thrill of the ride. You don't necessarily care about who's around you. For you, it's all about the immediate experience.

Or, you take the participant-observer perspective by sitting in a middle car and noticing not only your experiences but also the experiences and reactions of the other riders. What they do might even influence what you do. A brave soul might lift her arms, which might motivate you to do the same.

Finally, you could take the observer perspective by not getting on the ride at all. You simply stand on the ground below so you can notice the larger context, all the aspects of the ride and the riders, their screams, their laughter, the coaster's loops, and so on. You can even see what the participants can't—the death-defying loop just beyond the next turn.

Noticing is like being the observer on the ground. In mindfulness, noticing is the art you can learn to observe your body sensations, your relationship dynamics, the environment you're in, your affect (positive and negative emotions), your thoughts, and the state of your heart, without reacting to them.

In the pages ahead, you'll learn several important mindsets or skills that will help you gain the most from this way of living.

**Holy noticing is a way to bring intentional awareness in the present moment to what and who is around us and what we're doing, thinking, and feeling—all from God's perspective.**



It will take practice to make it a way of life, but over time you will begin to see discernable benefits. Several biblical attitudes form the basis of holy noticing.<sup>3</sup>

1. Avoid the temptation to judge every thought and emotion (and other people as well), and avoid trying to immediately change them, unless you immediately sense they are sinful (see Matt. 7:1–5).
2. Cultivate patience by avoiding the drivenness to move to a better moment. Try not to let the clock rule your heart (see Prov. 14:29).
3. Foster a beginner’s mindset by approaching your emotions and thoughts with childlike faith, curiosity, and wonder (see Matt. 18:2–4).
4. Trust in God’s goodness, timing, and providence since you don’t know everything (see John 14:1).
5. Embrace a nonstriving, restful posture to enjoy the journey of life, be less driven, and live in and appreciate the current moment better. This does not mean be lazy or passive (see Ps. 46:10).
6. Nurture acceptance as you learn to submit to your experiences, trusting that God is at work in them (see Ex. 14:14). This does not mean enduring abuse, sin, or injustice with passive resignation.
7. Practice letting go of what you think you need or must have, realizing that you aren’t at the mercy of your passions and desires. This doesn’t mean detachment from reality or nihilism (see Prov. 16, 32, 25, 28).

## What Holy Noticing Is Not

Just as I struggled with my preconceived notions about mindfulness, perhaps you have as well. Maybe you've had an experience similar to the one I had with the secular class in the hospital. Most websites show pictures of people sitting in pretzel poses on tiny cushions while they appear to hum unintelligible sounds. Holy noticing is nothing like that.

Much secular mindfulness is founded upon Buddhism. But I want to emphasize that holy noticing is not Buddhism in disguise. Major differences exist between Christianity and Buddhism, one of which is that Buddhism is essentially a god-less faith. You can be a practicing Buddhist and an atheist at the same time. And when Buddhists practice secular mindfulness, they seek detachment from self or personal identity. A believer who learns the art of holy noticing, however, emphasizes the value of the self as a reflection of God's image, rooted in our identity in Christ.

Holy noticing is not a New Age practice in which you strive to empty your mind, stop thinking, and thus subject yourself to malevolent spiritual forces. It is learning to pay attention to all the streams of information coming at you every day. Rather than giving us empty minds, this spiritual discipline helps us become *more* aware of our mental and emotional experiences while also recognizing Christ's presence in the moment. We don't stop thinking when we practice mindful living. Rather we stop *to* think. Rather than thoughtless, we become thought-full and mind-full of God's truth, power, promises, and presence.

This way of life is also not a self-absorbed, positive-thinking experience all about me and my happiness. On the contrary, it's a practice that helps us love others who are in need in tangible

**Holy noticing does not replace but rather complements other spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, and Scripture meditation.**

ways<sup>4</sup> as we see in the story of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25–37). It helps us see the needs right before our very eyes, not just what we want to see. It motivates us to take action.

Holy noticing does not replace but rather complements other spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, and Scripture meditation. It's a way to make other disciplines richer, more effective, less boring, and more meaningful. As you practice holy noticing, you'll discover that intercession, praise, confession, and meditation on Scripture overlap and naturally flow in and out of the discipline. It will even enhance the discipline of Christian community as you learn to be more fully present with others. And over time it will help your mind wander less during your devotional practices. It has especially helped me slow down to more deeply reflect upon Scripture.

Finally, holy noticing is not a cop-out or a way to escape or deny reality or sinful attitudes. It may actually make you *more* sensitive to sin and injustice that you may have ignored previously. It will give you a clearer picture of reality—what you are actually thinking and feeling. It will increase your appreciation for God's creation and give you greater wisdom in your relationships so that you can be more Christlike in them.

### **Why Holy Noticing Matters**

In the chapters on the BREATHe model, I share many practical benefits related to this practice. However, a mindful

lifestyle should matter to Christians who want to grow and live the abundant life Jesus promises us. I have learned that when we cultivate the art of holy noticing, these broad benefits will result.

*1. We avoid spiritual forgetfulness.*

In the book of Psalms, the psalmist records what often happens to us in our walk with God: our mental chatter and the stories we tell ourselves often lead us to forget God, what He has done, and what He is doing, at least temporarily. Psalm 78:11 reminds us about this pattern: “They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them.”

When we ruminate over and regret the *past*, we forget His mercy (e.g. we worry about how we will pay this month’s bills when God has consistently provided for us in the past).

When we misread or misconstrue something in the *present* (e.g., we read something negative into a glance from our boss), we forget His grace.

When we speculate and become anxious about the *future*, we forget His sovereignty (e.g., we fret over a difficult conversation we must have with our boss next week, yet every time that has happened, God has given us strength).

And when we try to think our way out of unhappy thoughts, our unhappiness can actually intensify. Initial fleeting emotions of sadness, anger, regret, fear, or worry can turn into full-fledged depression or anxiety if we incessantly ruminate on them.

Holy noticing, however, can help us counter our tendency to spiritually forget God. It helps interrupt our thought stream, which often gets hooked on unhealthy regrets and ruminations about the past, misrepresentations about the present,

and worries about the future. It helps us spiritually remember by calming the brain's fear centers while simultaneously engaging our thinking centers so that we can think more clearly and biblically. It helps us *come to our senses* like the younger son in the prodigal son story came to his (Luke 15:11–32). And the Psalms often illustrate that thoughtful reflective practices serve as an antidote to spiritual forgetting (see Pss. 78, 103, 106, 137).

In another biblical example, Luke records two disciples on the road to Emmaus, walking with Jesus, although they didn't recognize Him. They walked with Him all day as they recounted

**Although Jesus is with us all day, our ruminations about the past and anxiety about the future often obscure our conscious awareness of Him.**

their gloomy narrative of the recent events surrounding His death. Yet toward the end of their conversation “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:30–31). This story illustrates that although Jesus is with us all day, our ruminations about the past and anxiety about the future often obscure our conscious awareness of Him.

Our ruminations about the past and anxiety about the future often obscure our conscious awareness of Him.

We forget that He is with us.

The narrative we add to our thoughts and emotions clouds reality. Holy noticing helps us become more aware of Jesus' moment-by-moment presence with us through His Spirit. It keeps us from looking only at the surface of things (see 2 Cor. 10:7).

## *2. We enhance our mental and emotional health.*

And why is this important for a believer? Because we are a unified body, soul, and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23). When things go awry in our souls, our whole being is affected.

Neuroscientists have discovered specific brain processes involved in this practice. Although I briefly list these processes here, I will explain them in more detail in future chapters. Holy noticing helps us

- keep negative emotions from running unchecked;<sup>5</sup>
- avoid wrong assumptions and incorrect thought patterns;<sup>6</sup>
- have a greater awareness of our internal body sensations,<sup>7</sup> which can cue unhealthy, unconscious thinking patterns;
- “think about our thinking,” which makes us consciously aware of unhealthy and sinful thinking<sup>8</sup> (we might call this mental reflection that the apostle Paul wrote about in Philippians 4:8); and
- identify less with difficult emotions.<sup>9</sup> We don't let them define our true self.

As a result, this way of life helps us more consistently act upon truth because we have the *mind of Christ* (2 Cor. 10:5). We become less defensive and less likely to react as we exercise the fruit of the Spirit (Eph. 4:22–23). We think more biblically as we put into our working memory (also called short-term memory) more truth (Phil. 4:8). We become more present in the moment for God and others. And we ruminate less often over negative thoughts.

### *3. We increase our happiness by changing our interior landscape.*

We are the product of both nature and nurture. That is,

we inherited certain genetic traits from our parents' genes (nature), and how they raised us also fashions who we are (nurture). For example, when I was a teen, I had bad acne. My dad had bad acne. My mom has a rib on her right side that sticks out a bit from the rest of her ribs. I got that same rib. My dad can figure out how to fix almost everything. I never got that gene. My wife will affirm that.

Just as we received certain physical traits from our parents, we also inherited some of their mental and emotional natures. I tend to struggle with anxiety more than most. My mom dealt with that as well. On the positive side, my dad likes to laugh. I got some of that nature from him. My kids remind me, though, that when people laugh at my jokes, they're often just being nice and giving me what they call a "courtesy laugh." I disagree. I believe my genetically based humor is so advanced that it lies beyond most people's comprehension. Most people just don't get how funny I really am. That was a joke if you missed it. Again, my advanced genetically endowed humor at work here.

So how much does genetics influence happiness (our sense of joy and well-being in life, even in difficulties)? Even though happiness research is still in its infancy, psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky's research<sup>10</sup> indicates that 50 percent of individual differences in happiness are determined by genes, 10 percent by life circumstances, and 40 percent by our intentional activities. So, 40 percent gives us significant latitude in how we can shape our happiness with God's help. Holy noticing can help make a difference with that 40 percent.

One study of forty-one biotech workers<sup>11</sup> who were given mindfulness training illustrates its influence over our happiness. After their training, the workers' brain scans showed a

dramatic increase of their left prefrontal cortex activation (the part of the brain behind the temple) to right-prefrontal cortex activation. Left prefrontal cortex activation in this study indicated greater vitality and well-being, indicators of happiness.

This research study infers that changing our interior landscape—our thoughts and emotions—can shift our levels of happiness. A mindful lifestyle enhances the brain's ability to rewire itself through experience, thoughts, and behavior. It's called neuroplasticity. That is, the brain is more like pliable putty than rigid porcelain. What we think about and do changes our brains. When mindfulness affects neuroplasticity, it's like an electrician running new wiring to bring a house up to code. In other words, even the aging adult brain can change and be "brought up to code."

It's worth noting that studies I refer to in this book illustrate only the pragmatic effects that *may* derive from mindfulness training. Science can take us only so far, however. Don't believe every mindfulness study on the internet that claims to have discovered some new, amazing benefit from it. Just because something is labeled as scientific does not mean it is true. Although I love science (I'm a geek), science does not transform us. God does through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the ultimate change agent, not a practice that a scientist says is good for you.

We certainly must learn from science because all truth is God's truth. But ultimate truth lies with God and His Word. Evidence-based science may inform us, but it doesn't ultimately transform us. It may illustrate some practical benefit gained from holy noticing, but, again, it does not change us. God does.



4. *We are able to live more as human beings rather than human doings.*

God created us with incredible minds that allow us to solve intricate problems. But sometimes our problem-solving mode does not serve us well. When we face emotional pain and stressful thoughts, we try to solve these problems. *Why do I feel this way? Where did these thoughts and feelings come from? What can I do to make them go away?*

This problem-solving mode is called the *doing mode*. And modern society (and original sin) has conditioned us to default to the *doing mode*. The *doing mode* tricks us to believe

that productivity, speed, and efficiency are ultimate goals in life. When we stay in our *doing mode*, it is like being on autopilot all the time. We act with little clear thinking.

**Our biggest interior problems lie not in our emotions or thoughts but in our response to them.**

We often try to fix these difficult thoughts and emotions by overthinking and brooding (a form of being in the *doing mode*). And when we expend mental resources on worry and fear in the *doing mode*, we leave fewer mental resources to simply “be” in the present moment.

Emotions aren’t things to be fixed. They simply reflect our feeling and physical states. They are not meant to be solved but to be felt, notwithstanding that they can point to sin in our lives or sometimes can be sin themselves, requiring confession. Holy noticing helps us switch from our problem-solving *doing mode* to the more reflective *being mode* by strengthening the areas in the brain that help us more easily shift from a *doing mode* to a *being mode*.

Our biggest interior problems lie not in our emotions or

thoughts but in our response to them. We can't push a reset button to make our difficult emotions instantly go away. We can, however, respond to them in a different way. Practicing holy noticing can help rezone our neural networks toward healthier thinking and feeling patterns.

The apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that we may not be able to stop a temptation to ruminate over unhappy memories or dwell on negative self-talk. But we can stop what happens next. We can refuse to act upon that temptation. He writes, "When you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

Our *being mode* gives us a new perspective that frees us from overthinking, mentally reacting, and allowing afflictive emotions or thoughts to snowball. In the *being mode* we actually stay closer to truth, which in turn frees us. Jesus said in John 8:32 that when we know the truth, it sets us free. Knowing the truth in Jesus and knowing the truth about the present moment does indeed set us free.

As some researchers have stated, "While in the 'being mode,' negative cognitive and emotion patterns may still occur, but they are experienced from a decentered perspective—as objects of awareness that rise and pass naturally, rather than as problems to be solved."<sup>12</sup> Holy noticing helps us step outside our experience rather than getting caught up in it. It gives us a different perspective through observing and perceiving our thoughts and emotions. We don't necessarily change them (of course sometimes we most certainly must if they are sinful), but we change how we relate to them.

I mentioned the story of Mary and Martha in the prior chapter. It bears repeating as it best illustrates the difference between a *doing mode* and a *being mode*. Martha illustrates our

culture's entrapment with performance, what we might call a human *doing*. Mary illustrates God's desire for us to be present in the moment as human *beings*. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, while Martha was in the kitchen fretting about preparing a meal for Jesus and fuming about Mary's lack of support. I'm not implying that we should become passive and lazy people caught up in our inner world with no drive to achieve. We all need some of Martha's qualities. She was goal-oriented and persistent, and she followed through on her plans. She simply failed to switch gears. A lifestyle of holy noticing helps us switch gears from a problem-solving *doing mode* to a presence *being mode* when we need to. And of course, as we submit to the Holy Spirit, He is always at work, no matter which mode we may be in. (If you want to evaluate your *doing* versus *being* mode, download the quiz at [www.holynoticing.com/bonus](http://www.holynoticing.com/bonus).)

##### *5. We develop a lifestyle of holy noticing.*

Researchers have categorized mindfulness as either a *trait* (a lifestyle, habit, or disposition stable over time)<sup>13</sup> or a *state* (temporary and may be induced by our current situation). As you grow in your ability to make holy noticing more of a trait in your life, you will more often bring an awareness of God's presence to your mind, heart, and activities, a posture Paul describes as "pray[ing] without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17 ESV).

Oswald Chambers illustrates this state versus trait idea when he writes about mountaintop experiences versus living in the valley. He says that we are made for living in the valleys of life, not in the mountaintop experiences, even though we may want to live there.<sup>14</sup> He writes, "It is in the valley that we have to live for the glory of God. We *see* His glory on the mountain, but we never *live* for His glory there."<sup>15</sup>

The mountaintops are moments in our devotional practices, or even special moments during the normal course of a day, when we sense God's deep peace and presence in a conversation with a friend, in the beauty of a flower, or in a verse that pops out at us as we read the Bible. It's a blessing to experience these glimpses of *shalom*. However, when we live out that peace in the valleys, we are experiencing the *trait* of holy noticing, an enduring quality that indicates Jesus is permanently changing our hearts.

So what does the Bible *really* say about holy noticing? And does church history provide examples of its practice? In the next chapter, we'll explore these questions and look at the biblical support for holy noticing.

Bonus material available at [www.holynoticing.com/bonus](http://www.holynoticing.com/bonus):

- The Doing vs. the Being Mode Quiz