



# **CAN *THOUGHTS* BE EVIL OR SINFUL?**

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR INTRUSIVE  
THOUGHTS AND OBSESSIONS?**

**BIBLICAL & CLINICAL CONSIDERATIONS  
FOR CHRISTIANS**

**BY JUSTIN K. HUGHES, MA, LPC**

 *Justin K Hughes*

# CONTENTS

02

*The Major Points First  
Living With Uncertainty*

03

*OCD Intrusions Vs. Normative  
Functional Uncertainty*

04

*What Is Sin?*

05

*Pause To See The Big Picture*

06

*Christian Doctrine: Yes, Our Internal Thoughts Matter, But Not How  
You Might Think They Do*

*Sermon on the Mount- Heart Matters*

*Temptation and Being Tempted- The Heart of the Matter*

*All Apart from Faith is Sin- Faith Matters*

*Bad News / Good News- What's the Matter?*

*What Scripture Doesn't Say*

08

*How Do I Know If I've Sinned?*

09

*17 Ways God Speaks*

10

*What Is Functional AND Faithful- At The Same Time?  
Practicality Must Stand On Principle*

11

*You Have More Than One Option- Faith AND Treatment*

12

*Faithful Uncertainty*

Christian doctrine teaches us **sin** is ultimately anything that is contrary to God and his character- loving, just, holy, long-suffering. **Sin** exists in the realm of both actions and thoughts. There is such a thing as “evil thoughts” (Matthew 15:19). For those who suffer with OCD, anxiety, and scrupulosity, this can feel overwhelming.

**What exactly does it mean that thoughts can be evil, or sinful?** Like most things experienced under great fear, it *feels* worse than it may actually be. Getting clear on what this actually means- and what you can do about it- can serve to experience *more* joy, peace, and contentment.

## The Major Points, First

As the shorthand goes, TL;DR (“too long; didn’t read”), here’s the summary:

- **Sin does not have one singular definition.**
- **Nowhere am I aware that the mere presence of a thought or feeling is *necessarily* sinful (in Scripture).**
  - However, having a thought *may* actually reflect the heart of the person, or it may not.
  - This uncertainty is *very difficult* to handle for those with a disorder, like in OCD, GAD, Panic/Agoraphobia, etc.
- **Sins that do pertain to our thoughts appear to be part of a “bigger picture” issue.**
- Sin does begin from an inward state, but **God’s Spirit is the *revealer* of all sin, so we must learn to trust God** to uncover what we need to know, leave the doubts to Him, and make commitments to work on not getting tripped up by other *known* problems causing impairment, such as compulsive thoughts and behaviors and false safety-seeking.

## Living With Uncertainty

Evan\* had the kindest eyes that were as sad as a Weeping Willow tree on a rainy day. Even his posture slumped like the iconic tree. He became relieved to be diagnosed with OCD and to be told a hopeful way forward. His positivity vanished when I suggested he start with [Imaginal Exposure](#), particularly around the fear of whether he [blasphemed the Holy Spirit](#) and whether he lusted after other women. He would get caught up in doubt spirals, and upon “resolving” one, sometimes he would get a trigger within seconds and start again- hours of painful research and reassurance-seeking. When he got relief from that concern, he worried he wasn’t loving his wife or thinking the best about her. **Surely he was living in sin or he wouldn't feel so concerned or doubtful, right?**







His two main subtypes of OCD were ***Scrupulosity*** and ***Relationship (ROCD)***.

Uncertainty proves to be one of the hardest trials for a person with OCD (e.g., a thorn in the flesh, ala 2 Corinthians 12:6-7). Brushing off distressing thoughts *is not the luxury* of someone with OCD.

## OCD Intrusions Vs. Normative

We know from research and the examples of those who suffer that **OCD intrusions are:**

- ***More frequent***
- ***More Distressing***
- ***Harder to let go***



So for the fortunate **97-98% of the population** *that doesn't have OCD and get stuck* very long with having an intrusive thought, like blasphemy against God, a sexually deviant thought, or a feeling you might get sick and die (and just to be clear, a LOT of people without OCD having these as passing thoughts), let's be patient with the experience of those who *feel* they are more real because of the above bullet points. Evan was one of the many in history where a "simple doubt" felt very real.



## Functional Uncertainty

***Functional uncertainty*** is essential for all of us to live in freedom. **We must learn to tolerate levels of not knowing- and move on- and we do every day in ways we take for granted.** An obvious example might be "playing with fire" by intentionally flirting with a married coworker- hoping something might come of it. But what about finding a coworker attractive?



*Biblically, there is no prohibition to finding someone attractive. In fact, acting godly in these moments is precisely where faith must be exercised.* Just precisely when and where does it cross into lust? Sin? When you laugh a little too much at someone's joke? When you feel some sort of positive chemical like oxytocin in your body when someone is kind and validating towards you? If you feel aroused?



**There's some nuance here**, and it requires honesty, wisdom, and ultimately, the Spirit of God to work in our hearts in a meaningful way. We can't turn that into a formula. That's big:

## **We cannot turn faithfulness towards God into a formula.**



What OCD (or an anxiety disorder) does is prey on the very mechanisms by which the average person is functionally able to move forward. Doubt and uncertainty are hallmark features of OCD. Moving on? Not so easy. *What if?! I need to be sure! I can't move forward or handle this without knowing! Just one more time....*

Sound familiar? Read on.

## **What is Sin?**

**There are a variety of ways sin is described in the Bible.** Theologically, it **can be [complex to define](#)**, while **it is also simple** (we don't have to have the "perfect" definition to acknowledge sin in our lives). Hundreds of different sins are labeled in the Bible. Where the sufferer of OCD and Anxiety Disorders gets caught up is in the *uncertainty/doubt they feel*. Here are a few examples of different sin "categories":

- **Breaking the law of God** (1 John 3:4)
- **Rebellion against God** (Deuteronomy 9:7) begins as an internal state, especially through pride (Isaiah 14:12-15).
- **Original sin** involves simply being born into our sinful world just as it is (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12)..
- Many more designations are made, with different theological frameworks attempting to describe some of the variations (e.g., Catholicism separates **mortal and venial sins**, based on 1 John 5:17, or Evangelical theology separating into **inherited, imputed, and personal sin**- a [framework of 3 categories](#)).

# Pause To See The Big Picture

Those not familiar with Scripture or who have been **abused** by it often already stand in fear of God as an **abusive tyrant**. This is not the God I know! Nor is it the God of Christianity. He does take sin seriously, but often in ways very different from how our *very human* brains do. Let's see God for God as much as we can.

It can be overwhelming reading the hundreds of sins labeled in the Scriptures and those who already have been abused by Scripture feel even more hopeless! To be fair, this “overwhelmed” feeling is not an uncommon dynamic in other domains of life, either. For example, if you moved to a new country and were studying all of their laws, you would also feel overwhelmed. We must slow down to mindfully, calmly look at this topic. Can't do that right now? Then get some support to be able to do it. Pause reading the article and come back to it later, or discuss it with your team of support.

*Christ wishes to bring you hope and freedom* (Matthew 11:28-30). Did you know that **'Fear Not!' is actually the most common directive in all of the Scriptures? By a long shot.** The point of the Gospel is that for those who place their faith in Jesus, there is grace and forgiveness for ***all sin. Period. Anyone. Anywhere.*** That's radical. So let's stand by the truth without getting distracted.

Check out my full 3-part article for more, [Is Anxiety Sin?](#)



# Christian Doctrine: Yes, Our Internal Thoughts Matter, But Not How You Might Think They Do

Let's take a little more specific look Scripturally at how our thinking might be sinful, but we'll soon follow that up with guidance and hope for what that *actually* means and a way to approach that if you suffer severely with intrusive thoughts.



## Sermon on the Mount- Heart Matters

Jesus made clear in his famous "Sermon on the Mount" that our internal state matters (our "heart"). In Matthew 5:21-22, he goes deeper than cursory and superficial consideration. It might be easy to think, "I don't have a problem with sin, I haven't murdered! I didn't have sex with my coworker's wife; I haven't sinned." He clarifies this later by saying that the problem is *what proceeds from the heart* (Matthew 15:11). *Harboring anger or lust is not to be viewed as inconsequential*, despite being internal. **In other words, just because I haven't acted out something doesn't mean I haven't sinned.**

## Temptation and *Being* Tempted- The Heart of the Matter

James 1:14 teaches us that we are drawn into temptation from a starting point: being "lured and enticed by [our] own desire." The Greek word translated as "*desire*" speaks to longing, craving, or lust. Clearly, this reflects something *prior to* behavior. If we tune into it, it's not just an immediate reaction like the following:

**A (Tempted) = C (Giving In- Internally or Externally)**

*Rather, there's something in-between:*

**A (Tempted) → B (Our "Heart") → C (Giving In)**





Jesus was provided “temptation” but didn’t give in to it- either as an internal or external response (Matthew 4:1-11). The technical existence of temptation is not problematic for the believer; it’s our response to it. You can see a video clip that features violence. You can drive past the strip club. But we are tempted when our own “sinful desires” give that temptation any footing. We can’t avoid all possibility of temptation, not should we. Jesus tells us we are to be in the world (John 17:14-15).

## All Apart From Faith Is Sin- Faith Matters

Possibly one of the toughest passages to read if you suffer with anxiety and especially perfectionism is Romans 14:23b:



*“For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”*

Living in Minnesota, we would say, “uffda.” Oh boy. But again, context is king. The whole passage is about learning to be faithful to God while being understanding towards differences in conscience- even giving ourselves a break when our conscience is more sensitive than other believers- work with where you/others are at. **That’s right- conscience can be acceptably different for different people! That’s good to know for my anxious and perfectionistic self!**



## Bad News / Good News- What's the Matter?

The prophet Jeremiah was given a glimpse into the human heart, and it’s bad news/good news:

*The heart is deceitful above all things,*

*and desperately sick;*

*who can understand it?*

*“I the Lord search the heart*

*and test the mind,*

*to give every man according to his ways,*

*according to the fruit of his deeds.” (Jeremiah 17:9-10)*



The bad news is I have a deceitful heart. Sick. It needs healing. I need to be saved from it. The good news is that God graciously heals and saves.

# What Scripture Doesn't Say- Thoughts Don't Matter Like We May Always Think They Do

*There are no Scriptures I am aware of nor consistent, major teachings of the church that say the occurrence of a thought, feeling, or any internal impulse is necessarily sinful.* This is where **uncertainty** comes to play. There is a required level of certainty we all must face. Not sure about that? Check out my full 4-part series, [\*Can Christians Be Free From Uncertainty?\*](#)

I believe and will argue that any thought can exist in your mind. And we can practice facing that thought by exposure, as I've noted in my [\*Biblical Rationale For Exposure Therapy\*](#), because if you can't "think" about something reprehensible, you can't even confess known sin. God is not asking us to suppress thoughts or not be aware or not let our brains not process information. It's what we do with it that makes all the difference. And interestingly enough, this is also the **heart of OCD treatment**: you are not defined by your intrusive obsessions- but you get to choose how to respond over time to them. Isn't this learning the discipline of faithfulness?

## How Do I Know If I've Sinned?

Many clients can grasp the rationale that the occurrence of a thought is not necessarily a problem. For example, they understand how if someone says a word, like *potato, sex, apple, kill, beautiful, hatred*, that we now have a "thought" about what is spoken. Typically, clients feel and/or believe that if the thought is generated internally it's somehow more real. Even experienced this, saying, "I know, Justin, that I'm technically *thinking* a thought when we say it out loud, but isn't it different when these thoughts are constantly generating inside of myself? Isn't that a *heart* issue? A faith issue?"





The Holy Spirit is considered our “Helper.” One of the ways He helps is through conviction of sin (John 16:8). Notice, very carefully, here: **it is God who convicts**. In fact, in even stronger wording, Jesus in John 6:44 says that we **can’t even come to the Father without him drawing us!**

To even identify sin, from a Biblical, Christian perspective, we must actually rely (trust, faith) on the object of our faith to even do this. Sin is an often odd concept to those who aren’t of faith- and it should be!

***You must trust in God to reveal sin.*** And if you trust in God, you will also trust the many ways he says he speaks (see my whole article on the topic: [“The Holy Spirit is Different Than Your Emotions or Thoughts- Part 2 of 2: How Does God Speak?”](#)).

## 17 Ways God Speaks

17 ways?!! That’s a lot! Yes, and it’s only a quick list of what I- as one person- have been able to compile. I am confident there are more.

- **Prayer** ([Romans 8:26-27](#))
- **Peace** specifically after prayer, which comes from God, not ourselves ([Philippians 4:6-7](#))
- Through **His Word** ([1 Timothy 3:16](#))
- Through the **person of Jesus** ([Hebrews 1:1-2](#))
- **Nature** ([Romans 1:20](#))
- **Other Believers** ([James 3:17](#))
- **Music** ([2 Chronicles 20:21](#))
- **Circumstances** (2 Corinthians 12:6-7)
- **His Spirit** (John 14:17; 1 Corinthians 3:16)
- **Not through fear**- for followers of Him (1 John 4:18), see the article “Fear Not”
- A **mature conscience** (1 Timothy 1:5; 1 Peter 3:16)
- **Trials, suffering, and events** (James 1:2-5; Hebrews 5:12-11; 1 Peter 1:6-7)



- **God's kindness**– a motivator for admitting our wrongs (Romans 2:4)
- Through **testing and spiritual growth** (Romans 12:1-2)
- **Audibly, directly, on very special occasions** (see Exodus 3 as one example). Many people just assume- incorrectly- that the Bible is just full of stories of God just talking to everyone. Not true. Special circumstances led to God making Himself known audibly and/or in some overtly tangible way. He may do that still today, but requiring it is setting up an unrealistic expectation- or worse, telling God what to do.
- By **conviction of the Holy Spirit** (John 16:8).
- **Through discipline**, not punishment for believers (Hebrews 12:4-13).
- By being made in the image of God, **our own awareness** (Psalm 19:1-4; Matthew 5:45; Romans 1:20).



As Jeremiah faithfully penned, **it is the Lord who searches the heart.**

## What Is Functional AND Faithful- At the Same Time?

Many people and even clinicians attempt to address compulsions by appealing to an argument of practicality- sounding something like this:

*"If this is causing so much distress, then it's important enough to change it."*



Egh...[palpable discomfort] \*Justin shifts in his seat.\*

## Practicality Must Stand On Principle

If a practical rationale helps you not compulse, awesome! Compulsions are pathological. Period. The problem for many Christians, like Evan, is **an argument of practicality won't be sufficient**. And frankly, I respect that. I am fine being practical, inasmuch as that practicality stands on principle. Those deeply committed to their faith and who think deeply about it will often see a faulty presupposition and error in theological rationale, arguing **God hasn't called us to not suffer, He has called us to follow Him**.



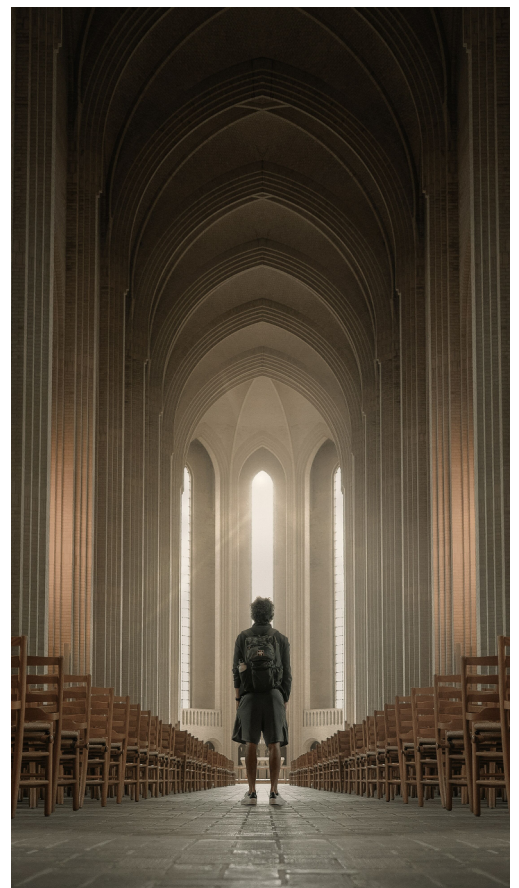
*Unfortunately, many Christians who are suffering only stop here and miss the bigger picture because they see it as only one option: be faithful to Jesus or do therapy.*

## You Have More Than One Option- Faith AND Treatment

I am here to tell you don't have to choose between only two options. You can reduce suffering *and* be faithful to Christ.

**Here are 4 common approaches that I find help people move forward when they are stuck on the question of whether their thoughts are sinful:**

- I. For more mild and moderate cases of OCD or those happy to just jump in, **basic education** on how OCD works is often enough to get started with treatment. A little rationale goes a long way.
- II. Most clients, in my experience, just need to **see how the therapy works**. They need to try practicing ERP and "get a taste."
- III. Some clients actually need a **more developed rationale** (which is usually an overall smaller part of treatment, but it is often essential- especially with obsessions and mental compulsions dealing with taboo and "inappropriate thoughts").
- IV. Those who are so deeply mired in doubt and uncertainty often need something that can first help them **stabilize their functioning**. They may be so overwhelmed and impaired that other needs have to be addressed first. This is where any number of intensive strategies and/or stabilization may be needed- a temporary break from environmental triggers, intensive treatment, medication, etc. ERP, when rigorously applied, helps clients typically become less impaired and regain a significant amount of functioning, but sometimes a person is not immediately ready for ERP.



Getting encouraged by **treatment success** is one of the best things that can happen! It increases buy-in and willingness to continue. Evan needed a little of the first 3 in order to be successful. Once he did, he 'put his hand to the plow' and hasn't looked back.

## Faithful Uncertainty

The last consideration I want to leave you with- the sufferer, family member, or clinician- is that when you are ready to do the most recommended therapy for OCD- ERP (Exposure and Response Prevention)- typically we need to start like with a good Texas Brisket: **"low and slow."** In other words, hierarchically (a lower-mid level of distress). In therapy, with the supportive factors that exist, I start most with a 3-5 "SUDS" (out of 10 on the distress scale), but this is maybe higher than someone can do on their own. Start with a challenge you can complete, not ones you keep failing at; an OCD specialist can help.

10 SUDS (Distress)	Write a full script and verbally share while preventing all compulsions (mental checking, review, etc:). E.g., "Maybe I said 'I reject the Holy Spirit.' I won't be able to be 100% certain and maybe _____ [your imagined worst case] will happen."
8	Take your #6 and say it 50 x in a row, as fast as you can (to make it difficult to assess how you're feeling about the Holy Spirit at the moment).
6	Verbally stating the thought that occurs in your mind to a trusted person: "What if I blasphemed the Holy Spirit?"
4	Verbally saying, "The Holy Spirit"
2	Writing the initials, "H.S.", on a piece of paper.

Sample Hierarchy (it will differ *drastically* from person to person):

## How To Be Functional With Examining Sin

At some level, you can't answer the question, "What is sin?" by focusing on a pinpoint with your own brain. It must first of all be revealed by God, if you believe what Scripture says. Cognitively as well, research suggests that the more "narrow-minded" you become checking for a distressing nuance can inhibit perceptual understanding (big-picture perception), and the more you "check" for sin, the less certain you might become (see [my article](#) for more).

To gain an "access point" therapeutically, we have to work at a point that is both

I. Non- compulsive

&

I. Starting somewhere. Anywhere.





If you're not ready to start and you have a rationale you can agree with, ask yourself: "What else is holding me back?"

## Quick Tips

If you have identified a problematic pattern of obsessing, compulsing, acting on (false) safety behaviors, or any other pathological response to an intrusive thought/feeling, "What if I sin(ned)?" / "Is this sin?", check out some of the tips I commonly utilize in therapy:



### 1. Have an informed idea of what you're working with first.

- Just overthinking? Have you ever talked to someone who is more authoritative on the topic? Do that.
- Have no clue whether it could be an unwanted intrusion or a real-life worry? Read just a little to educate yourself. Be careful not to get lost in the weeds. Set limits to how much you ask, and once you get an idea from a reputable source, work on moving forward with the following.
- Have OCD? Then what are the helpful ways for a person with OCD to respond to their obsessive thoughts?



### 2. Make a list of ways you get "tripped up." This is your [LOG](#); also identify what you can commit to working on changing (the compulsion or safety Behavior)- at a level you can currently agree with on paper.

### 3. Identify a small way to practice feeling distressed by uncertainty or doubt without giving into fear, compulsions, or safety behaviors.

### 4. Get practicing.

### 5. Don't miss the forest for the trees. As it pertains to your personal spiritual growth, let me encourage you not to be distracted by complex definitions and rather to tune in simply to what God might be saying to you today. Instead of focusing on what is very unclear, what are other ways that you can focus?



***As a clinician, I'm here to help you be functional- and faithful.*** As always, if you have trouble, do like Evan and reach out to someone who knows what they're talking about!



*Dedicated to Jennifer. She knows what she's  
talking about. Keep up the good work of  
graciously helping those who suffer.*



Justin K Hughes



**Justin K. Hughes, MA, LPC**

Owner, Dallas Counseling, PLLC

[www.justinhughes.com](http://www.justinhughes.com)

(469) 490-2002

[justin@dallascounseling.com](mailto:justin@dallascounseling.com)



Subscribe [HERE!](#)

❑ **Specialized Treatment:**

- OCD
- Anxiety Disorders

❑ **Extensive experience & training in Exposure Therapy.**

❑ **Short-term** therapy for most.

❑ Many **comorbid conditions** treated.

- E.G., Anxiety, Depression, Panic, Trauma, Eating, & Substance Abuse, and Much More

❑ **Coordinates care** as needed.

❑ Truly **individualized** treatment plans.

❑ **Passion** for people and their well-being.

❑ **Free Talks and trainings.**

❑ **Expert referral** network utilized.

❑ **Free Videos, Tutorials,** and other resources.



**FEATURED BY**

*the OCD stories*



**I AM SECOND**



National Conference on  
Addiction Disorders



Disclaimer: This e-book is educational content; it is not a substitute for professional or personalized advice, treatment or diagnosis. Always seek the advice of your health provider or faith leader who is qualified to work with you. Never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read. Links to external educational content are taken at your own risk. Justin K. Hughes, MA, LPC is not responsible for the claims or maintenance of external content.

\*The story above is a composite of several common experiences, which allows me to obscure detail to maintain anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy. Rest assured, the examples are very real.

© 2022 Justin K. Hughes, MA, LPC