

## **How Your Actions Shape Your Mind**

### **By David Feddes**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a brilliant thinker. He lived during the 1700s, but his influence lives on. Let's look at a few of his beliefs. Rousseau said that people are born good but are corrupted by family and social institutions around them. He said that children just need the proper setting for their inner goodness to flower and flourish. He proposed that government could best provide this setting. Children do best in government care. Children will flourish when they don't have parents as the primary caregivers, but when government experts are doing most of the training and educating. Rousseau believed that the real will of the people is found in the government. He also believed that sex without marriage is healthy and right. These are some of the beliefs that Rousseau held and taught, and that many people embrace today.

Now that we've seen some of his beliefs, let's look at Rousseau's behaviors. Rousseau sponged off others for most of his life. He did very little actual labor to earn a living. "He saw his family in terms of cash," says a noted historian. When his father died, Rousseau's only interest in a long-lost brother was to certify him dead so he himself could inherit all of his family's wealth.

Before he inherited his father's estate, Rousseau lived off the generosity of others. One older woman rescued him from poverty at least four times. But when Rousseau became rich and the woman was in need, he refused to help her. For two years she was sick and malnourished, but Rousseau did not even write back in response to her pleas for help. Then she died.

Rousseau slept with a variety of women without getting married. One mistress was his companion for 33 years. Rousseau said he "never felt the least glimmering of love for her... the sensual needs I satisfied with her were purely sexual and were nothing to do with her as an individual."

Rousseau fathered five children. When the first child was born, Rousseau handed the baby to the midwife and told her to leave the little bundle on the steps of an orphanage. The other four babies were also left at the orphanage. This was an orphanage where two-thirds of the babies died in the first year, and only five percent survived to adulthood. Abandoning babies there meant almost certain death for them, but Rousseau did it anyway, and he showed no interest in what became of them.

When his conduct was challenged, he came up with various excuses. At first he blamed the people around him for suggesting the orphanage. Then he said children were "an inconvenience" that he couldn't afford. Rousseau said it would have been impossible for him to pursue his noble destiny and to do his profound thinking if he had noisy children around to disrupt him or if he had to work at an ordinary job to support them. But, he added, he was such a wonderful man that there's no doubt he would have been a splendid father: "I know full well no father is more tender than I would have been." In the end, Rousseau carried his excuse-making so far that he claimed he had abandoned his five babies not for his own convenience but for their good. He would surely have been a better father than any other man, he said, but he agreed with the Greek philosopher Plato that children are better off being raised by government than by parents.

Consider how Rousseau's behaviors affected his beliefs. He was a lazy person who sponged off others and didn't help them in return, so it was handy for him to say that individual desires are good and wider social ties are bad. Rousseau used his mistress for pleasure without love, and he abandoned his kids as newborns, so it was handy for a man who forsook the duties of husband and father to believe that sex without marriage is fine and that government care is better for children than parental care. His behavior helped produce his beliefs.

Rousseau's influential ideas originated, at least in part, as excuses for his own bad behavior. And his ideas have become appealing to many other people who behave in much the same way Rousseau did. People who use others for their own benefit without helping in return find it convenient to believe, "I am naturally good. Others corrupt me; I don't owe them anything." People who want the pleasures of sex but not the responsibilities of marriage find it convenient to believe, "Sex without marriage is fine." People who refuse to spend time and energy caring for their own kids find it convenient to believe that government should train and educate children.

### **Behavior Shapes Belief**

Behavior shapes belief. The Bible makes this very clear: "The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble" (Proverbs 4:18-19). When you're walking in the way of righteousness, it keeps getting brighter, and you see more clearly and know more accurately. But when your behavior is wicked, you become blinder and enter deeper darkness; you see less and "do not know." Wickedness in behavior can lead to error in belief.

"Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely" (Proverbs 28:4-5) A person's understanding depends on what kind of person he is and what he is doing. Actions affect mind. As the case of Rousseau shows, our practices influence our thinking.

In the book of Proverbs, wisdom isn't just about abstract ideas or theories; it is practical knowledge. Wisdom is knowing through doing, and doing based on knowing. When you do things, it shapes the way you think. The relationship between belief and behavior is not one-way traffic where you first think something and then take action based on what you think. Rather, it's two-way traffic, where what you do affects how you think, even as how you think affects what you do. Knowing shapes doing, but doing also shapes knowing.

As humans we are not just thinking machines that process data. Our beliefs depend on more than just logic and evidence. It's helpful to ask the question, What shapes your mind? Three things are of special importance. First, your *social setting*: Whom do you fit (or fight) with? Second, your *actions*: What is your pattern of behavior? Third, your *heart*: What moves your inner self? This article focuses on how your actions shape your mind. Other articles examine how your social setting shapes your mind and how your heart shapes your mind.

Here are a few examples of how behavior shapes belief.

A business tycoon is always busy, always on the job, and he gets rich. He believes in the free enterprise system and thinks that it's good for everybody. If any people don't flourish in the system, it's their own fault, not a result of any problem in the system. This wealthy workaholic can't imagine why anyone would not agree. Is his belief based purely on logic and research, or is it influenced by his behavior, by the fact that he has spent years pursuing money and that work, work, work is his way of life?

Or go back a few centuries. An American slave driver believes that black people are less than human and that Scripture supports slavery. But is his belief in black inferiority based on real evidence that people of African descent are less human than other people? Is his belief that the Bible endorses slavery really based on careful study of the Bible? Or are his beliefs shaped more by his behavior, by owning black slaves and making money from their hard labor?

Today, many live-in couples believe that living together makes a good marriage more likely. They think it's wise to experiment. In their opinion, if they live together without marriage and things go well, they can get married later and are more likely to have a solid, lasting marriage than if they live apart and don't get sexually involved until after the wedding ceremony. This

idea is demonstrably false! Even apart from the Bible, sociology plainly shows that the divorce rate is much higher among those who live together first. So why, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, do many couples believe that living together before marriage makes a good marriage more likely? They believe it because of their behavior. They live together and have sex without a marriage commitment, so their behavior leads to the belief that this will help them succeed in marriage. The belief is not based on deep thought or solid evidence.

Another example of behavior shaping belief is a man who is a control freak. He likes to run everything and have everybody do what he says. His wife is to be his servant, obedient to his every command, and his children always are to do whatever he wants and never even think a different thought. This man believes that the Bible teaches total patriarchy, that the man of the house does all the thinking for the household. Is his behavior really based on strong, biblical belief? Or is his belief that the Bible teaches extreme patriarchy shaped by his behavior, his preferred pattern of acting to control and intimidate everyone who is close to him?

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are children who believe their parents are unfair and stupid, even though in reality the parents are fair and wise. Why do some kids believe bad things about good parents? Because the kids are rebels. They are doing wrong, harmful things, and they know their parents don't approve. The kids need a belief that fits comfortably with their behavior, so they believe their parents must be unfair and stupid.

Or consider party animals who think the Bible is outdated. Some kids who grew up in churchgoing families leave home for college. They start partying like crazy, and somewhere along the line the Bible just doesn't seem true or relevant anymore. Their dismissal of the Bible is not based on new insights or on evidence provided by a particular professor. Instead, their behavior leads to a change in belief.

A young woman was talking to a pastor about her loss of faith after she had gone to college. She had grown up in a churchgoing family, she thought she believed Christian teaching, but after she had been in college for a while, she decided that the Bible was shaky at best and probably not true. The pastor asked her, "When did you start to feel that way? Was there a particular time when you began to think that the Bible isn't true?" And she said, "Yeah. It was around last November." The pastor said, "Think back to last November. Is there anything else that happened last November that is of interest?" The girl thought for a moment. Then she started to cry and said, "That's about the time I started sleeping with my boyfriend." The girl knew that the Bible says sex is for marriage, she knew her behavior was going against the Bible, so all of a sudden the Bible was outdated and hard to believe. Her behavior changed before her belief changed to match it.

### **Sin Blocks Knowledge**

Evildoers avoid light. Truth doers seek light. Jesus said, "The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God" (John 3:19-20). Bad works can lead to bad belief. If you are disobeying God, you don't want to get too close to God. It's been said that either the Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible. When you're living for the Lord, you enjoy coming into God's presence and thanking him for his activity in your life and discovering what he wants to show you. But you're less eager to come to God when you've been disobeying him and you don't want to admit it. Evildoers avoid light. Truth doers seek light. Notice Jesus'

phrase *whoever does what is true*: not just believing what's true, or thinking what's true, or knowing what's true, but *doing* what's true. When you are a truth doer, you become a stronger truth believer as well.

Picture yourself driving a car in a very muddy area. Mud is splattering all over your windshield, and your windshield wipers aren't working very well. You can still see a little where the wipers have scraped away some of the mud, but there's a lot that you can't see. That's what sin does. Filthy living splatters mud on your mind. You can't see well with a muddy windshield. You might try to wipe it a little bit: you still have a conscience, and some true ideas may shine through here and there. But many important truths of God are not visible to you, because filthy living has splattered so much mud on the windshield of your mind. As Jesus puts it, "People loved the darkness rather than the light *because their works were evil*."

Sin blocks knowledge. The Bible speaks of "weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth," and it describes men who "also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith" (2 Timothy 3:6-8). Why do such women keep shopping for new ideas, always learning about this and that but never able to know the truth? It's because they're burdened with sins and led astray by various passions. Their bad behavior leads to bad beliefs. The same is true of sinful men. This letter to Timothy describes the behavior of wicked men shortly before describing them as "corrupted in mind." Their sin hinders knowledge.

If you are having a hard time believing the Bible and Jesus, you might say, "I have lots of intellectual objections. I've considered lots of evidence. Intellectually I just can't swallow it." Perhaps. Then again, what if your main barrier to belief isn't just intellectual? What if you've been "corrupted in mind" by sinful actions? What if you are "burdened with sins" that keep you from arriving at a knowledge of the truth?

Sin blocks knowledge. This is important to keep in mind if you have a hard time believing, and it's important to keep in mind if you're a Christian inviting other people to believe in Jesus. You might state some good arguments, provide various evidences, and refute intellectual objections to faith, but you may also reach the point where you need to say, "Let's just suppose that I could show you that the Bible is true and that all of your objections are phony. Would you become a follower of Jesus then? Would you devote your life to obeying Him?" Sometimes the answer you get will be "No." When they debate Christianity with you, they are playing an intellectual game, but their real problem is moral. They don't want to change the way they live. Their sin is blocking their knowledge.

To see clearly, your lens must be clean. If you're looking through a telescope and you want to see beautiful stars, you can't have a lens covered with fog or mud, or you are not going to see the stars. Your very self is like a telescope. It is an instrument for perceiving the things of God. That self, that instrument for seeing and knowing God's reality, will be unable to perceive the things of God if sin is smeared all over the lens. At that point, you don't just need better evidence or stronger logic to persuade you of God. You need cleansing. You need the Lord to make you clean so that you as a telescope can take in the light of God's truth.

### **Truth: Follow It or Forget It**

To believe truth, you must do truth. Behavior and belief go together. Your actions shape your mind. A new way of life goes with a new way of thinking. It is hard to start believing God's truth without starting to behave God's way, and it is hard to continue believing God's truth without continuing to behave God's way. In the Bible, the apostle James explains it this way:

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once *forgets* what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, *being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts*, he will be blessed in his doing (James 1:23-25).

If you get up in the morning and look in the mirror and your face looks awful and your hair is a mess, you need to do something about it. Otherwise there's no point looking in the mirror. What's the use of looking for a moment but not changing anything and then forgetting what you look like and going on with your day? Doing God's Word affects whether you believe God's Word. You're not blessed just by glimpsing for a moment what is right, but by doing what is right. If you're not a doer who acts, you are a hearer who forgets. If you don't act upon God's Word, you eventually find that God's Word is fading from your mind.

Thirty years ago, in my college days, I learned the German language. I learned to listen and speak and read and write in German. Today I know only a little German; I have forgotten almost everything I learned. Why is that? You might say, "Maybe you're kind of dumb. You must have a poor memory." Maybe so, but even if I'm not as smart as some people, the main reason I don't know much German today is that I seldom used German since college. Most people don't have a very strong memory of things they don't use, and I haven't been using German. On the other hand, I first learned Greek around the same time I studied German, and I still know a lot of Greek today. Why? Because I use it. I study the New Testament in the original Greek when I'm preparing sermons, and sometimes I read the Greek New Testament in my private devotions. Greek sticks with me because I use it.

That's a picture of what faith is like. If you use the truth by doing what God says, it sticks in your memory. As you think about and live the truth of the Bible in your daily life, your mind holds onto it more and more. If you go years and decades without living by God's truth, then even if you studied it once upon a time and had knowledge of a sort, your knowledge gets weaker and weaker. Even if it doesn't pass entirely out of memory, it seems less and less real to you. That's the way it is with truth. Use it or lose it. Follow it or forget it.

### **Obeying Aids Understanding**

The statesman and prophet Daniel received glimpses of the future from God. Daniel was told, "None of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand" (Daniel 12:10). God's revelation would be understandable and believable only for those who were living a wise life and not for those were living a wicked life.

If you don't believe the claims of Christianity and don't obey the teaching of Jesus, you might say, "I would believe if only I had better evidence. And if I believed, I would change my behavior. If I knew for sure that God is real and that Jesus rose from the dead, I would try to do what Jesus says. But I can't be expected to change my behavior if I can't believe."

But what if that's not realistic? What if behavior shapes belief? Don't assume that you first need to believe more strongly, and then your behavior will automatically improve. Of course it's important to believe, of course it's important to trust God's promises and to know the facts of the Bible, but sometimes behavior precedes belief. If you have only the slightest glimmering or possibility of faith, start acting as though you believe. Start acting as though God is real. Start behaving as though Jesus did die and rise from the dead, as though he did pay for your sins and overcome the power of death. Start acting as if all of that is true, as though Christ is real. Start acting as though you believe, and you just might believe more strongly!

Jesus put it this way, “If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority” (John 7:17). You need to be seeking God’s will, and you need to be doing God’s will. Only then will you know whether Jesus is just another guy speaking on his own authority, or whether Jesus really is God with us.

If, like Rousseau, you live in a godless way and embrace beliefs that fit your behavior, you will be unable to have a living, accurate belief in Jesus. If you do not want to behave according to the way of Christ, you will not be able to believe according to the truth of Christ. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). When you’re walking his way and living his life, then His truth also makes sense to you. Obeying aids understanding. Your actions shape your mind. This awareness is vital for your own beliefs in Christ to develop and grow.

Knowing how actions shape the mind is also vital if you are a Christian trying to help others believe God’s truth. Don’t think that you only need to help them intellectually with clear explanations and strong evidence. That may help some people who are truly seeking God and wanting a different life, but it won’t help someone who is just toying with ideas about God while continuing to live in sin with no desire for cleansing or change. Before you can help them to believe the truth of God, you may need to confront the way they’re living and show that sin is blocking belief. They need repentance, not just more reasons. They need cleansing, not just more evidence. So show them how their actions shape their mind, how behavior influences belief. Let them know that changing their mind depends on a willingness to change their life.

Knowing truth involves doing truth.