Scrupulosity: When Doubts Devour

by MICHAEL R. EMLET

Having scruples is a good thing. It means you have a well-functioning conscience that is pricked when you face a moral or ethical dilemma. It guides you to do what is right. But if you struggle with scrupulosity, it is not a good thing. The word describes someone whose conscience is overwhelmed by such pricks or “stabs.” The person experiences an ongoing and intense concern for his or her own moral purity in both thought and deed.

To help you understand the struggle more specifically, I’ll begin with a few personal snapshots. Brandon gave up playing the piano because when he plays well, he is overwhelmed by the fear that he is stirring up ungodly pride. Alicia, who grew up in a strong Christian household and professed faith at a young age, is plagued daily by the persistent thought that perhaps she is not saved after all. She seems immune to the encouragements of family and friends who point out the fruit of the Spirit in her life. “Yes, but you can’t know my heart,” she insists. Serena ruminates for hours about the answers she gave to others’ questions throughout the day. She wonders, “Was I truthful? Was I completely accurate?” Karl resists holding his young daughter on his lap or hugging her because it triggers the thought, “What if I’m a pedophile and I’m being sexually gratified by this?” He is horrified by the thought. Despite having no objective, physical evidence of sexual arousal, his anxiety about it has grown, to the point that he now avoids...
close physical contact with his daughter. Graham has become a virtual recluse because every time he ventures out of the house, he feels compelled to share the gospel with every person he meets—bank tellers, restaurant servers, supermarket cashiers—anyone and everyone. The persistent thought “Share the good news!” is ruining his life and his marriage. He feels obligated by passages like Romans 10:14 and Matthew 28:19. He asks, “How do I know for sure I’m not the one God wants to bring the good news to that person?”

Have you worked with anyone who struggles in these ways? Many Christians are paralyzed by obsessive doubts and worries about their spiritual and moral lives. These doubts and worries rob them of peace, purpose, and joy. They feel isolated and alone, finding that many people, even brothers and sisters in Christ, misunderstand their struggle. This further reinforces their sense of separation from God. Historically, this problem has been known by the name scrupulosity, but more recently in the psychological literature it is labeled religious obsessive-compulsive disorder.

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In my role as a biblical counselor, I often find it challenging to address scrupulosity. Relatively few resources exist to guide those who want to provide wise pastoral care. In light of these realities, this article will provide a hope-filled, biblical perspective and practical help for this struggle.

Defining and Describing Scrupulosity
Here is how I define the experience of scrupulosity:

Intrusive (spontaneous, unbidden, unwanted) and obsessive

1 Romans 10:14: “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

2 The term is actually derived from the Latin scrupulum, a sharp stone, implying a stabbing pain on the conscience. From “The History of OCD” found at https://www.ocduk.org/ocd/history-of-ocd/
(persistent, recurring) thoughts and doubts about moral-spiritual issues, which produce distressing levels of anxiety and the quest to rid oneself of that anxiety, usually by one or more of the following: performing compulsive behaviors, engaging in mental rituals, or by avoiding triggering situations.

Some have called it “the doubting disease.” Others have viewed scrupulosity as “fearing sin where there is none.” Often you see excessive concerns and fears over committing a sin, distinguishing right from wrong, how to make decisions, and having assurance of salvation. The anxiety that results from these concerns may lead to excessive confession of sin and/or apologizing, repeatedly seeking reassurance from loved ones, prolonged and excessive rumination, ritualistic praying, or avoidance of certain situations that may provoke the intrusive thoughts (including reading Scripture or attending church). This is not merely a tender conscience. The over-scrupulous person’s “moral thermostat” is clearly malfunctioning.

The experience of scrupulosity is not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to Christianity. It has also been described in other religious settings, including Muslim and Orthodox Jewish communities. Psychiatrists and psychologists view the experience as a subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) given the similar pattern of struggle, its severity, and its responsiveness to the kind of interventions used to treat obsessions and

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compulsions of other types. Yet, long before modern psychiatric descriptive categories in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) existed, God’s people grappled, sometimes severely, with issues of conscience, doubt, and assurance. John Bunyan (1628-1688) the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress* was one well-known struggler, along with Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787) a Catholic bishop, and Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) a Catholic priest who founded the Jesuit order. The Puritans also dealt extensively with issues of assurance. Whether it’s called scrupulosity, the doubting disease, severe lack of assurance, or religious OCD, the problem is real and can be debilitating. In severe cases, the anxiety is such that the person may withdraw from much of daily life, as Graham did in the story I related earlier.

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6 Abramowitz and Jacoby, *Scrupulosity*, (141) note that obsessive thoughts associated with scrupulosity tend to fall into four areas: (1) distressing intrusive thoughts (e.g., related to sex, violence, or immoral acts) that are interpreted within a religious framework—the example of Karl would fit here; (2) distressing thoughts specific to a faith context that would be considered blasphemous (e.g., “Jesus is Satan”); (3) thoughts concerning questions of faith or biblical interpretation that develop into obsessions (e.g., trying to resolve the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation); (4) doubts about whether one has sinned or been obedient enough to Scripture—the examples of Brandon, Alicia, Serena, and Graham would fit here.

Common obsessional themes in other presentations of OCD include contamination (“Will I get HIV by touching that doorknob?”), aggressive or horrific impulses (“Pick up the kitchen knife and stab your daughter”), pathologic doubt (“Did I lock the door before I went to bed?”), symmetry/exactness (“I can’t listen to radio stations ending with an even number”), and sexual thoughts/imagery (“I keep visualizing my wife having sex with my brother”). While there is overlap with other patterns of obsessions and compulsions thematically, overly-scrupulous people experience their intrusive thoughts within the context of their faith commitments. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the prevalence of OCD in general is about 1.5% worldwide and those with religious obsessions make up at least 5% of that number in the United States, although the percentage of those with religious obsessions is higher in less secular societies, for example in Saudi Arabia (see Abramowitz and Jacoby, 141-142).


8 See for example, Thomas Hooker, *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, reprint, 2000).

In order to provide gospel-centered help for these strugglers, it is important to understand it from a biblical-theological point of view. To set the stage for this, let’s look at a diagram that depicts the pattern of scrupulosity (see Figure 1). Note that it is cyclical. It begins, often, but not always, with a situational trigger (e.g., hearing a sermon, reading a Scripture passage, hugging your daughter).10 The trigger is associated with an intrusive thought (e.g., “I hate God.” or “Jesus was only a man.” or “I want to touch my daughter in sinful ways.”). As we generally do with any thought, the person evaluates the significance of the thought (“Is this something I should pay attention to now? What should I do with this thought?”). For the overly-scrupulous person,11 this evaluation is influenced by distorted views of God, self, and the Christian life which overly sensitize the conscience and ratchet up the significance of the thought. The struggling person appraises the thought as important or dangerous (“How could I have such a thought?! What kind of person must I be to think that? Maybe I’m not a Christian. What if I am a pedophile?”). Not surprisingly, this results in the conscience-stricken person experiencing anxiety. Attempting to suppress the thought by trying to ignore it only makes the thought more insistent and the anxiety more prominent.12

In order to gain relief, the scrupulous person engages in certain (often repetitive) behaviors to neutralize the anxiety (e.g., confessing the thought as sin, seeking reassurance from others, or avoiding the triggering situation). This temporarily reduces the anxiety and gives sufferers a sense of control over their thoughts. But this strategy backfires. The more a person attempts to quiet the thoughts with compulsive behaviors, the harder it is to resist doing so the next time. This results in even more insistent and persistent

10 For strugglers with severe scrupulosity, the intrusive thought(s) may be present continually, though it may be further exacerbated by situational factors.

11 For the purposes of this article, I am using the terms scrupulous, over-scrupulous, and overly-scrupulous interchangeably.

12 “This is well described in research settings and in everyday life. For example, if I told you, “Whatever you do, don’t think of Dumbo the Flying Elephant” I suspect that images of Dumbo would flood your mind. And if that thought is associated with danger (“If you think of Dumbo the Elephant, you will receive an electric shock from your chair”) it would be even harder to suppress it.
intrusive thoughts, and the felt need to respond with more compulsive behaviors (again strengthening the cycle).

A common experience will illustrate. When you get a mosquito bite, it itches. If you scratch it, you get some relief, but shortly thereafter the itch comes back, usually more intensely. So, you scratch again, harder this time—aah, relief! But the itch comes back yet again with a vengeance and you scratch again. And so, the itch and scratch cycle is strengthened. The only way out of the cycle is to tolerate the itch for a period of time without scratching. And that’s uncomfortable. Similarly, the only way out of the cycle of scrupulosity is to tolerate the anxiety without resorting to compulsive behaviors. I’ll talk more specifically about how to break the obsessive-compulsive cycle later in this article, but simply note for now the way the cycle of struggle plays out.
A Biblical Orientation to the Causes of Scrupulosity

Whenever we encounter struggles in ourselves and others, we want Scripture to guide our understanding. Therefore, beginning with a biblical view of human beings (biblical anthropology) is key.

Scripture teaches that we are *image-bearing worshipers* of the living God, created to serve him and to steward our lives for his glory (Gen 1:26–28). Nothing is more important than the direction of our hearts’ desires, beliefs, and loves (Prov 4:23; Micah 6:8; Matt 22:34–40). Our thoughts, emotions, and actions find their ultimate reference point in him. God also created us as *physically embodied* beings (Gen 2:7). We worship him using our bodies (Rom 12:1), bodies that can either be strong or weak. We are also *relationally and situationally embedded*, meaning that the people around us and the circumstances of life impact us for good or for ill (Prov 15:1). The fall brought disruption at *all* levels of our personhood—heart, body, interpersonal relationships, and life situations. For this reason, we always want to be aware of the potential contributions at each of these levels as we assess the nature and reasons behind a person’s struggle with scrupulosity. Let’s explore each level, beginning with the heart.

1. **Distorted views of God, self, Scripture, and the Christian life.**

The cycle of scrupulosity is powerful and is fueled by various theological distortions. Although each of these will not be present in the same way with all struggling individuals, you tend to see common themes in the person’s thoughts, fears, and beliefs in each of these areas.

**Distorted views of God.** Overly-scrupulous people tend to emphasize certain aspects of God’s character. For example, they accentuate his justice and holiness, but not his mercy and graciousness. Their functional view of God is that he is distant, harsh, punitive, capricious, merciless, and impatient. (Who wouldn’t live in fear of a God like that?) One counselee I know sees God as the equivalent of an earthly father who is harsh and critical, constantly showing his displeasure, but does not disown you or kick you out of the family. This leads to an appeasement mentality. What can I do to minimize God’s wrath? Fundamentally—and I can’t stress this enough—the scrupulous person mistrusts the goodness and mercy of God. Scrupulosity, like other forms of obsessive thinking and compulsive
behavior, is ultimately an issue of trust and yielding to God final and full responsibility for my life and the lives of others.

*Distorted views of self:* This type of distortion shows itself in at least four ways. First, counselees generally manifest a need for absolute certainty. “I *must* know if what I just did (or thought about) is a sin.” Here’s the dilemma: to truly resolve their doubts they must have exhaustive knowledge, which is impossible for finite creatures. But for overly-scrupulous people, doubt is akin to death. Living with uncertainty feels impossible. As one counselee told me, “I want firm, concrete answers, not ambiguity.” This leads to compulsive research to gain greater knowledge and compulsive seeking of reassurance from others. But it’s rarely enough—there is always another ethical “loop-hole” to discover. This is why scrupulosity is like the “Whack a Mole” game

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or a new brush fire that springs up just when you thought the forest fire was under control. Because of this quest for absolute certainty, there is a constant search for the highest authority whose knowledge will eliminate all ambiguity. But ultimately the sufferer becomes the highest authority: “What if I’m right and you’re wrong?” becomes the end game because “How can others know my mind?” Ultimately, this is a self-referential epistemology.

A second way a person’s distorted view of self can be problematic is in perfectionism and over-responsibility. Many researchers believe that a sense of inflated responsibility is foundational in the development of obsessions and compulsions.13 This should not surprise us as Christians. If the buck

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13 See for example, Ian Osborn, *Can Christianity Cure Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder? A Psychiatrist Explores the Role of Faith in Treatment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), and David A. Clark, *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for OCD* (New York: Guilford 2004). Specifically, Clark mentions the Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group, which proposed six “belief domains” common to OCD: inflated responsibility, over importance of thoughts, overestimation of threat, importance of controlling thoughts, intolerance of uncertainty, and perfectionism (p.112). Many of these domains are salient for our understanding of scrupulosity, although they lack full explanatory power because they don’t highlight the reality that we live in relation to the triune God. Our thoughts, attitudes, perspectives, and self-concepts must be understood in relation to him.
stops with you, if you are responsible for maintaining your standing with God, then it is no wonder you live on hyper-alert. It is no wonder you seek to identify and rid yourself of any potential sin that could threaten your security. We were never designed as human beings to carry the full weight of our well-being. We are creatures, not the Creator. We are dependent, not independent.

Third, highly scrupulous individuals over-value their thoughts. Nearly all people have bizarre intrusive thoughts. It’s what we do with them that counts. (I’ll say more about this later.) Those who don’t struggle with OCD or scrupulosity may have a random thought during a Sunday service, “The gospel is a fairy tale.” or “Have sex with the worship leader.” The vast majority of us will think, “That was bizarre,” and continue to worship. But the scrupulous person thinks, “The fact that I have this thought means something critical. It must mean that I’m the kind of person who could believe or do such a thing. What if I did this horrible thing right now? Oh no, maybe I’m not really a Christian.” And the anxiety swells. The problem is our thoughts do not always reliably indicate what we actually believe and how we want to live—even more so for an overly-scrupulous person. You can also see how this works with doubt. To ignore a doubt is viewed as ignoring the Holy Spirit, thereby defiling a person’s conscience.

The final distorted view of self involves the intolerance of anxiety. The scrupulous person says, “I must get rid of this anxiety at all costs.” The anxiety is experienced as a marker of danger and who wants to remain in a dangerous situation? This fuels the quest for reassurance or the avoidance of triggering situations. Ironically, as counselees’ anxiety decreases with counseling (a good thing!), they may wonder, as one of my counselees did, “Well, if I’m not anxious about my eternal state, maybe my heart is hard toward God.” This can feel like a no-win situation. Anxiety is intolerable but lack of anxiety (at least early on in the counseling process) can itself breed doubt.

Notice that for each of these characteristics you could ask a counselee this question: “What does this self-concept say about your view of God?” I’ve found this to be a good homework assignment, not only for scrupulosity but also for OCD in general.
**Distorted views of Scripture.** This has several aspects. Scrupulous strugglers often want the Bible to say *more* than it does. They want it to prescribe, in detail, every jot and tittle of behavior for every situation. Why? Not so much to know how to serve God out of love and gratitude, but out of slavish fear. So, if I know exactly how much I should give back to God to be faithful in terms of my finances, it minimizes the risk (and anxiety) of being wrong. The problem is that this view of Scripture makes the Bible an impersonal moral algorithm rather than a story of redemption.

Conversely, those with scrupulosity often act as though the Bible says *less* than it does. There is a tendency to “atomize” the Bible, to zero in on one particular verse or point of doctrine. Rather than placing a question within the entire scope of the biblical witness, they stay within narrow confines. Often, they overemphasize the imperatives of Scripture over the indicatives. The grace/law distinction is a classic example. I’ve had counselees mired in James 2:17, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” They scrutinize their lives, wondering if their works are sufficient to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith. But James 2:17 is not all that Scripture says about the relationship between God’s grace and our works. Another verse that has been a stumbling block to scrupulous people is Romans 14:23, “But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats [or does anything else], because the eating is not from faith. *For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.*” An exclusive focus on this idea can lead to decision paralysis. “If I take the Lord’s Supper, despite my doubts, I’ll be condemned.” Again, this verse has to be understood in its context and in the broader testimony of Scripture.

But scrupulosity is not a failure in moral reasoning, as if all that is needed is more extensive biblical interpretation. The problems are rarely solved by doing intensive Bible study on the kinds of questions people often bring to the table.¹⁴ Rather, what is needed is a growing trust in God’s character and redemptive work as the basis for living with wisdom.

**Distorted views of the Christian life.** Those who struggle with scrupulosity

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¹⁴ That is not to say that balanced biblical study cannot be helpful. You’ll see later how important a robust biblical perspective is. Rather, the problem of scrupulosity is generally not resolved merely with the correction of faulty theology or the reassurances of a biblically literate counselor. And again, I’m not talking about the person simply wrestling with doubts and questions about the Christian life or particular passages of Scripture.
tend to elevate law over grace. They are rightly picking up on the demands of the law. Their antennae are up for the demands of discipleship, but they struggle to experience the grace and mercy of God, which is an unshakeable foundation for living the Christian life. Seeing law as ultimate makes the Christian life transactional. Law becomes more important than receiving—and giving—love. One of my counselees said it well: “I want to find the answers so that I can follow the rule. I just want to know what I need to do.” Ultimately this leads to works righteousness: I gain favor with God by what I do. That’s my ultimate security.

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Ironically, seeking to keep the law in minute detail leads to the breaking of bigger laws! Does that sound familiar? The Pharisees should come to mind. They ended up missing “weightier matters” as they focused on minute applications of the law (Matt 23:23–24). This law-based emphasis is associated with black and white (either/or) thinking. Likewise, overly-scrupulous people cannot tolerate the uncertainty of gray areas. They take a small thing and make it everything.

A second distortion involves confusion between temptation and actual sin, particularly in those scrupulous counselees who are persistently assessing their thoughts, motives, and actions for the presence of sin. Where does a thought cross the line from temptation to actual sin? Consider, for example, Ephesians 5:3, “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people.” The fact is, we may not be able to discern the exact moment when the line is crossed—and that’s part of the problem. The overly-scrupulous person says, “Show me—exactly—where sin begins.” Life becomes about avoiding the line rather than a thankful and dependent posture toward the Lord of mercy, trusting that he will indeed keep his servants from willful sin (Ps 19:13).
Many of the intrusive thoughts experienced by overly-scrupulous people don’t even fall into the category of temptation. For example, what if a scrupulous person has the sudden urge to yell an obscenity during a commuter train ride? The person is mortified by the thought but it’s not a temptation because there is no real desire to do it. But the emotional pull of that moment is as great as if he or she had actually done it. In the OCD literature, this is known as “thought-action fusion”—if the thought entered my mind, it is as if I’ve done it. Ironically, this focus on potential sin (e.g., I wonder if I’m displeasing God if I don’t give all my birthday money to the poor?) keeps strugglers from seeing evidences of obvious sin that arise due to their ruminations and self-focus. The “what ifs” obscure the “what is.” I once counseled a scrupulous young man for a long period of time. He had confessed many things to me, but when he admitted that he had looked at pornography and masturbated, I said, “You finally have something to confess and actually experience the mercy and forgiveness of God for!”

To conclude this section, these inaccurate views of God, self, Scripture, and the Christian life lead to fear-based and duty-oriented living rather than the grace-based living we are called to as children of God (Gal 4:4–7). Here, repentance is less about God (a true sorrow over sin) but about seeking relief from anxiety and performing a duty in order to feel better. The pathway out of scrupulosity must involve a growing trust in God that counters these skewed beliefs and patterns of thinking, although it is much more than replacing faulty views with correct views.

We will now shift to look at other factors that influence the overly-scrupulous person.

2. Brain-based dysfunction. As I mentioned earlier, the patterns of obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviors found in scrupulosity fit the diagnostic description for OCD. As the framers of the DSM note, their descriptions do not say anything about the particular causes for a given person’s struggle nor the kinds of treatment needed in response to the struggle.\(^\text{15}\) And yet, there is clear evidence of the body’s role in obsessive-compulsive struggles—a fact that should not surprise us because, as Christians, we

hold to a robust body-soul anthropology. There is evidence that obsessive-compulsive patterns run in families and that certain people seem predisposed to them, and perhaps are less able to dismiss intrusive thoughts.

We also know that a person can develop symptoms of OCD after certain physical events such as a viral brain infection, stroke, traumatic brain injury, carbon monoxide poisoning, or, in more rare cases, strep throat. That is, there are some cases of OCD that have clear biological causal elements. Even if that does not seem to be the case in a particular individual, there is a strong brain-based correlation for these symptoms. If you scan the brain of someone who is actively obsessing, you will see certain areas of the brain lighting up, particularly a cluster of cells deep in the brain called the basal ganglia. These patterns can change with both counseling and/or with medication.

Certainly, identifying a physical correlation doesn’t mandate a medical treatment, but it does remind us that the more someone’s thought patterns become entrenched, the more deeply “enfleshed” they may be in the brain. Change is not as simple as telling someone, “Just don’t think that.” The “itch and scratch” pattern described earlier actually manifests in the human brain. Neural circuits are enhanced by performing compulsive behaviors and reduced by refraining from performing them. Again, it should not be surprising to us as believers that well-worn ruts of thinking and action show neurological correlation.

3. Relational influences. A person’s relationships can play an important role with regard to scrupulosity. Sometimes you will come across a legalistic church or family of origin where performance and perfectionism are highly valued. I had one counselee who was exposed to theological distortions like these at his church: “You’re far worse than you can imagine, your motives are always off, and you need to ask God to reveal the places of your wickedness and double-mindedness.” There is some element of biblical truth in this, but as a paradigm for Christian living it is unbalanced, missing the grace
and mercy of Jesus Christ. It’s hard for this influence not to taint a person’s view of himself or of God. You can see how this might contribute to the problem of seeing sin where there is no sin, a fundamental characteristic of scrupulosity. It would be even harder if the person’s brain chemistry predisposed him or her to obsessiveness.

The overly-scrupulous person is often dealing with the worst possible scenario: being cut off from God. If God is your enemy, to whom can you appeal?

4. Societal-cultural and situational influences. Scrupulosity (and OCD more generally) was not a major problem in any society prior to the Renaissance in Western Europe. Before the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the Catholic Church did not urge individual Christians to weigh their own sins. In contrast, the new ruling said that each person had to regularly confess sins, and that thoughts themselves could be mortal sins. This dramatically changed the lives of those prone to obsessions. The more responsibility you feel you have for your eternal destiny (and for life in general), the more potential for paralyzing fear.

More recent influences that might impact someone who is prone to scrupulosity include revivalist preaching and theology, a western culture of individualism and self-determination, an introspective and therapeutic culture, and the vestiges of the Enlightenment where true knowledge is based on reason and experimentally verifiable facts.

From this lengthy biblical orientation, you can see that there are both internal and external factors that influence the struggle with scrupulosity. Despite this complexity, there is hope for change.

16 Osborn, Can Christianity Cure Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?, 119. The chapter “Renaissance Anxieties” gives helpful historical perspectives.

17 Here I’m thinking of the “anxious bench” associated with some revivalist preaching (a seat near the pulpit reserved for those especially concerned about their spiritual condition) as well as a “perfection” theology of sanctification, which holds to the possibility of achieving a sinless state in this life.
Help for the Scrupulous Person

Before launching into helping approaches, it is important to remember that the Bible can be both a help and a hindrance for the scrupulous person. As biblical counselors, we rightly want to bring biblical perspective and truth to the struggler, but we must be careful. The remedy can become the enemy. Scripture can trigger fear, or it can tame fear. Delight can quickly pivot to danger.

Appealing to Scripture and to God’s love and care is easier when the person struggles with other subtypes of OCD. For example, a person who fears contamination from germs might be able to reduce her compulsive cleaning rituals by coming to trust that even if she becomes ill and dies from an infection, God is still her keeper (Ps 121) and she can’t lose him. Yet, the overly-scrupulous person is often dealing with the worst possible scenario: being cut off from God. If God is your enemy, to whom can you appeal? The very passage of Scripture that brings comfort to one person may send your scrupulous friend into paroxysms of anxiety and obsessive rumination. “Is God my keeper? How can I trust him with my life when I don’t even know if I’m his child?”

Remember, sometimes reading Scripture relieves fears; sometimes reading Scripture provokes fears. This is true not only between different individuals but within the same individual over time. What helped last week may be a hindrance this week. It’s important to keep assessing how the person is doing if you introduce a particular passage to discuss. For some extremely scrupulous people, reading the Bible regularly or going to church or taking the Lord’s Supper will be longer-term goals.

Having mentioned this important preliminary, here are several aspects of the helping process. I will discuss eight. Though there is a general order to what I am proposing, don’t take this as a rigid step-by-step algorithm.

1. **Begin with suffering.** Invariably, overly-scrupulous people are suffering. They feel that the very foundations of their faith have been stripped from them. Every step feels like walking on shifting ground. Anxiety, of course, is prominent but so are shame, guilt, confusion, depression, and a sense of isolation. They often feel misunderstood when they are honest about the content of their thoughts. Imagine saying to your pastor, “I
keep thinking that I’m a pedophile.” People who know you well will try to reassure you—“Of course you’re not a pedophile!”—but that reassurance is often short-lived in the face of further intrusive thoughts. Confiding to someone, “I wonder if I’ve committed the unpardonable sin” will often lead the concerned friend to gather evidence that the struggler has indeed trusted Christ, which may be helpful, but only temporarily. When a person’s own mind feels like an enemy, the suffering is ever-present.

And though the struggle with doubt may appear fully volitional and self-inflicted, it should be viewed as a weakness, not a chosen and intentional posture. Scripture does not treat anxiety as high-handed sin but primarily as weakness and faintheartedness, and we should approach counselees accordingly (1 Thess 5:14).

2. Educate counselees regarding scrupulosity. I will highlight two main aspects here.

First, should you call this struggle “OCD” or not? For severe strugglers, I have found that situating their experience in the language of obsessions and compulsions actually helps them take a step back from their endless cycle of doubt, fear, and self-recrimination. There is something more than meets the eye when it comes to the fears and doubts of overly-scrupulous people. Their “stuckness” is evident. They feel powerless against the onslaught of their intrusive thoughts. I generally find it helpful to say something like this,

“You think this is entirely a moral-spiritual issue, whether it’s settling your state of salvation or discerning whether you did something right or wrong. But this is a more complex problem, with many factors at play. It goes historically by the name scrupulosity.

“Your pattern of intrusive and persistent distressing thoughts, the anxiety you feel, and the subsequent compulsive behaviors you do in response to the anxiety, fit a pattern of experience consistent with what has been described as a subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). This doesn’t mean, however, that a medical approach using psychoactive medication is mandated.
Even the dominant secular approaches to scrupulosity would recommend counseling that challenges faulty views and beliefs that you have.

“Biblical counseling has a broader and deeper agenda though. It addresses distorted views that you have about God, yourself, and the Christian life, as well as the nature of your intrusive thoughts. In fact, how you relate to God in the midst of this struggle is critical to experiencing freedom, and that’s what we’ll be working on together.”

After a discussion like this, I will usually refer to the struggle descriptively as scrupulosity, rather than focusing on diagnostic terminology.

Though we use this less technical name, we still engage the questions that result from being physically embodied. I have sometimes been asked by counselees, “Is OCD/scrupulosity a spiritual issue or a body/brain issue?” I’ve answered, “Yes!” And then I have elaborated, saying,

“It’s both. It’s spiritual in the sense that as God’s image-bearer you are always living in relation to him. Your heart is always active as a responsible and responsible creature. Growing in trust of him is key for growth. But given the severity of your struggle, the neural patterns in your brain are now part of the problem. Your thoughts have become increasingly ‘sticky.’ You have well-worn neural ‘ruts’ to overcome. And it will take some time to lay down new faith-filled patterns to replace them.”

Some who work with persons struggling with OCD advocate “relabeling” the intrusive thoughts by saying, “It’s not me; it’s my OCD.” While I understand the goal of depersonalizing the intrusive thoughts (see below), I find it more helpful and more in line with a biblical view of people to say, “This sounds like your scrupulosity speaking rather than your loving God.” Or, “That smells like scrupulous thinking rather than the freedom that comes with a biblical mindset.”

A second early step is to educate overly-scrupulous people so they come to understand the nature of their intrusive thoughts. Those struggling with scrupulosity get stuck and ruminate on thoughts they find disturbing. They attribute a high level of significance to them, whereas, as I mentioned earlier, these same thoughts would be dismissed by the vast majority of people. So how should we understand the nature of these intrusive thoughts?

Though the struggle with doubt may appear fully volitional and self-inflicted, it should be viewed as a weakness, not a chosen and intentional posture.

Should we pay attention or not? After all, aren’t our thoughts reflections of our hearts’ desires and our stance regarding God, according to Scripture (Heb 4:12)? Yes—and no.

The exact origin of our thoughts is sometimes tricky to discern. Generally speaking, our hearts are intimately tied to our thought life. That is, the content of my thinking generally does reflect the orientation of my heart. But the intrusive thoughts experienced in OCD in general (and scrupulosity in particular), may be more of a spontaneous brain-based phenomenon (as a result of the general brokenness we experience after the fall) rather than a chosen cognition, a true meditation of the heart. When, for example, a new mother is cradling her infant and she has the intrusive thought, “Pick up that knife and stab him!” it is a phenomenon dissonant with her true heart’s desire. (She loves her child and wouldn’t hurt him.) She is horrified and may wonder what the thought means. It is also conceivable this is a “fiery dart” from Satan, but the bottom line is this: for someone

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20 Presumably, prior to the fall, there would have been no disturbing, intrusive thoughts of any kind at odds with Adam and Eve’s love for God. Because the fall affects us holistically, body and spirit, it is understandable why spontaneous, unbidden thoughts might arise in the context of our fallen neurochemistry and sin nature.
struggling with scrupulosity an intrusive, horrifying thought like this is not a true reflection of the heart’s desire. This is very different from a person becoming aware of anxious thoughts regarding whether he or she can pay next month’s rent, which is a case of the heart’s desire being revealed (e.g., fear of going into debt) by specific thoughts. Instead, what happens with OCD/scrupulosity is that secondary thought patterns (perfectionism, need for certainty, etc.) begin to take over. Contrary to the intrusive thoughts, these thought patterns do reflect the person’s active heart and are where the action is when it comes to change.

Another way of saying this is: it’s not the content of the unbidden thought that is critical but what you do with the thought that counts. Christians are more sensitive to thought content that is contrary to God’s revealed will (and that’s generally a good thing). But most Christians who experience the intrusive thought, “What if I’m a pedophile” are able to dismiss the thought as inconsequential because they see it as an aberration from their true heart’s desire. That is, they don’t view it self-referentially. Or, at most, they will say to themselves “Even if that’s true, God will help me.” But for those with tendencies toward scrupulosity, their secondary thought patterns begin to dominate and they will likely think, “Why did I have that thought? What does it mean? What does it say about me that I could have such a thought? Maybe I really am that twisted.” Since the doubt created by the thought cannot be completely erased, the overly-scrupulous person becomes anxious and desperately seeks relief, whereas the person with the properly-calibrated conscience can put the thought aside and move on.

It’s important for counselees to accept that the intrusive thought is not necessarily a true picture of reality. After all, they are also not 100% certain they are a pedophile or a reprobate or whatever fear that has gripped them.

3. Help them to doubt their doubts and to do so quickly. Counsel the scrupulous person to directly engage in the battle with his or her doubts at the first moments an unwanted thought enters the mind. Or as one of my counselees and his father would say: recognize the thought as “scrupo-poop” and flush it! Rather than assessing the thought as something critical to attend to, the person must learn to devalue it immediately. I want people
to increasingly say, “My thoughts and emotions are not a reliable indicator of reality. I am believing a lie.” Counter to the advice of Jiminy Cricket, do not let your conscience be your guide in this case. Help people identify red flags that indicate the thought is false and “scrupe poop.” For example, it’s probably scrupulosity if:

- it’s accompanied by the use of words like “I wonder if,” “What if,” “Maybe I,” “I think I might have,” all of which point to a lack of definiteness; or
- the anxiety and lack of freedom are oppressive in the moment.21

These red flags indicate that scrupulosity is at work and the perceived danger is not real.

Here, it’s important for strugglers to rely on the wisdom of others. I’m not suggesting they frantically seek repeated reassurances from others or engage in insatiable exercises in data-gathering that exhaust the people around them. Rather, what’s helpful is a commitment to trust the perspective of one or two key people whom they respect when they say, “This is your scrupulosity speaking; this is not a valid concern.” Relying on the wisdom of others to discern the difference between real and potential sin helps to retrain and recalibrate the conscience. Scrupulous individuals must ultimately take the risk of forsaking the perceived validity of their thinking and perspective. This will not come easily.

4. Help them to live with ambiguity and uncertainty. As I hinted above, don’t be too quick to reassure your counselee. Reassurance too often plays into the itch and scratch cycle of scrupulosity. It may seem to help in the short term but it generally doesn’t work over the long haul. Rather, it’s important to help overly-scrupulous people live by faith, which means entrusting themselves to God rather than living by the “sight” of their own certainty. I was amazed to see this quote from a secular researcher: “An

21 Someone might ask, “But how do you know what I’m experiencing is not the conviction of the Spirit?” I would help them see the contrast between scrupulosity and true conviction by the Spirit: scrupulosity involves repetitive cycles with ambiguous issues and the associated guilt and distress never really resolves. You turn inward, and the experience with God is mechanical/transactional. True conviction of the Spirit involves clear cut violations of God’s law that are agreed upon by others. Relief from guilt occurs as the person experiences the joy and freedom of repentance, turns outward, and the experience with God is personal/relational.
important take home message is that the patient has in a sense created his or her own religion where faith is not enough—rather he or she requires a guarantee about things that cannot be guaranteed.”22 Exactly right! The scrupulous person is trying to achieve a full and final certainty that actually leaves no room for faith.

There must always be an appeal to the One who knows all things. First Corinthians 4:1–5 is instructive in this. Paul writes:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

Notice that even with a clear conscience Paul submits his own perspective to God. It’s as though he’s saying, “I could be wrong. It’s possible I’m not seeing things clearly. I don’t think so, but at the end of day, I am entrusting myself to the Lord who sees all and knows all.” He’s exhibiting a dependent and trust-filled certainty rather than an independent and self-verifiable certainty, which is not faith.

Consider asking counselees to list the areas of their life where they do, indeed, live with functional (i.e., trust-filled) faith rather than absolute certainty. In fact, they will find this happens in all aspects of their life except for the places of their scrupulosity! Help them to come up with statements like this:

- I trust that when I go to bed I will wake up in the morning.
- I trust that when I get into the car I will arrive at my destination.
- I trust that when I eat dinner I’m not going to get food-poisoning.

And so on. There are no guarantees that the worst-case scenarios (dying in bed, having a fatal accident, becoming sick from E. coli) won’t happen, of course. Nevertheless, we all are living implicitly within the reality that God indeed is our keeper. Living without 100% certainty casts the sufferer (and all of us) upon God’s mercy and care.

Living in moment-by-moment trustful dependence is the *sine qua non* of the Christian life, but the Bible is not a manual that tells you exactly how to live each minute of your day. In fact, Proverbs 26:4–5 gives two differing approaches to handling the person who is a fool. Which is correct? It depends! It takes wisdom to discern what is better in a given moment. But as we grow in the fear of the Lord and in dependence on him, we grow in wisdom (Ps 1; Ps 111:10; Prov 9:10). We learn how to contextualize God’s Word for the varied (dynamic, not static) situations of life.

One of the primary goals is to help overly-scrupulous people take their eyes off themselves and instead focus on the goodness of the Lord.

In fact, if the struggler is honest, he or she leans in the direction of wisdom even in situations governed by scrupulous tendencies. One question I’ve often asked counselsees in the midst of scrupulous rumination is this: “On pain of death, is this really a sin or not?” That is, “You keep wondering whether you’re sinning in the area of pride when you’re hitting well in the batting cage. Let’s say your life depends on getting the answer to this question right: Are you sinning or not?” The counsellee will invariably answer “no.” Everyone chooses “correctly,” because deep-down, he or she knows what is really true, despite what is felt.²³

5. *Help them to “look upward,” to press against their distorted views of God.* One of the primary goals is to help overly-scrupulous people take their eyes off themselves and instead focus on the goodness of the Lord.

²³ I recently learned that my approach here is similar to Jonathan Abramowitz’s “Life-Savings Wager” exercise to push counselsees to distinguish what they logically know from what they feel in the midst of their anxiety. *Getting Over OCD: A 10-Step Workbook for Taking Back Your Life, 2nd ed.* (New York: Guilford Press, 2018), 154.
Scrupulosity curves inward and is oriented toward self rather than toward God. Take time to discuss passages of Scripture, focusing on the objective actions and character of God rather than a subjective sense of what this means for them personally. That’s counterintuitive, isn’t it? Normally when we read Scripture it is a good thing to ask, “So what does this mean for me?” But for the scrupulous person that question can lead to a cognitive death spiral. Instead, choose Scriptures that provide a counterweight to the common distorted views of God I outlined earlier. Here are several examples of passages that may be helpful to your counselees.

- Psalm 103 extols the many benefits of God (particularly in verses 1–14). These are not tied to our performance.
- Psalm 136 recounts the creation of the world and the exodus, pausing repeatedly throughout the psalm to affirm, “God’s steadfast love endures forever.”
- Luke 15:11–31 tells the parable of the prodigal son. Its centerpiece is the graciousness and generosity of the father to both sons.
- Ephesians 1:3–14 emphasizes how we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ.24
- Philippians 2:6–11 focuses on the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ.
- Colossians 1:15–20 shows the preeminence of Jesus.
- Hebrews 10:11–14 highlights the finality of Christ’s sacrifice for sins, including the fact that he has “perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”25

Usually, after we read the Scripture, I will ask, “Are there things that encourage you in this passage? Are there ideas that trouble you?” The latter

24 This may not initially comfort someone who lacks assurance because they doubt whether they are part of the elect. They will say, “Sure, this is true for those who are in Christ but I don’t know if that’s true of me.” I will still point them to the gracious and merciful and proactive redemptive plan of God in Christ Jesus. Scripture does not push its hearers to a self-absorbed internal hunt for assurance. Rather, Scripture proclaims Christ and urges people everywhere to turn to him.

25 There are many passages in Hebrews that can be helpful because of the Christ-centered nature of the book. But there are also many places that trip up scrupulous counselees (e.g., Hebrews 6:4–8; and 10:26–31) so be wise about what passages you use.
question is important because, as I mentioned earlier, a scrupulous person often finds places of concern in what should ordinarily be an encouraging passage. If so, I want to know what they are.

I also try to encourage counselees that, ultimately, it’s not the strength of their faith but the direction of their faith that is important. I’ve used the thief on the cross in Luke 23:42–43 as an example of this. All the thief said to Jesus was, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” No detailed confession of sin. No acts of piety. No agonized introspection. A simple turning toward the King. And what was Jesus’ response? “Too late?” Or “Let me think about it.” No! “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” As one of my counselees said, “The grounding for my assurance occurred 2000 years ago.”

As strugglers ground themselves in the finished work of Christ, they will be more comfortable with being unfinished works themselves. Scrupulous people find remaining imperfections in their life to be threatening. But remember, Jesus “has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb 10:14). This puts the weight of our lives, both now and for eternity, on the trustworthiness of God. There is always a safety net. This allows the scrupulous person to take the risk of being wrong—“I need to lean on God’s grace. If I’m wrong, I’m wrong, but where else can I go?”

This response of faith reminds us that unless these truths are actually enacted in the scrupulous person’s relationship with God, they are no match for the anxiety and fear, especially if it is tied to salvation issues. Counselees have to engage these truths at more than a mere cognitive level. The approach must be more than a thought replacement exercise wherein one replaces the thought of an angry, condemning God with a gracious God. I want the counselee’s view of God to change, but one of my over-arching goals is to help the struggler actually engage with God in the moment. There is a need to fight fire with fire at the emotional level. So how do you stir up trust in the living God that counters fear in the moment? Honest, desperate prayer. So often, in the midst of building anxiety, the scrupulous person will resort to a ritualized response or avoid God altogether. Have counselees take the time to walk through with God exactly what they’re experiencing right now, similar to what many of the psalms do.
Here’s how Karl, who’s plagued by the fear that he is a pedophile, might do it:

“Oh my merciful Father, what a bizarre and distressing thought. You know I love my daughter and the thought of harming her sickens me. But I’m really anxious right now, thinking, ‘Well, maybe I really do want to do that.’ I know I am completely dependent on you for all of life, Jesus. Your redemptive work is sufficient even for the worst of thoughts and actions. Help me to take the risk of resting in your grace and not scramble for my own solution—avoiding my daughter—which really is hurtful to her. Help me to draw near to you and to her, right now.”

This level of direct and specific engagement with God bears fruit. Rather than harboring fear of a merciless and wrathful God, the counselee presses toward God in prayer, trusting in his gracious and loving character.

Another way of talking about engagement is simply this: turn to Jesus today. Don’t worry so much about the past or the future. For example, trying to nail down past status (did I become a Christian when I walked the aisle on December 14, 1999?) or future destination (am I truly one of the elect who will go to heaven?) actually keeps you from living in the present. Even for Christians who do have relative assurance of their salvation, the call is always, “Will I turn to Jesus today?”

Here’s how John Bunyan put it, after a long, renewed struggle with doubt while imprisoned:

It was my duty to stand at his [God’s] word, whether he would ever look upon me or no, or save me at the last . . . I am for going on, and venturing my eternal state with Christ, whether I have comfort here or no; if God not come in, thought I, I will leap off the ladder even blindfold into eternity, sink or swim, come heaven, come hell, Lord Jesus, if thou wilt catch me, do; if not, I will venture for thy name.\(^{26}\)

\(^{26}\) Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 125.
In other words, in the midst of his doubt, he still turned toward Christ. This echoes Peter’s words in John 6:68, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Finally, I’ve also found it helpful for counselees to look for creation-based markers of God’s love.27 So much of the scrupulosity battle occurs at the level of the mind; counselees need something to pull them out of the cognitive confines of the struggle. One such marker is the tangible beauty of the natural world. It can draw overly-scrupulous people away from anxious and obsessive ruminations by refocusing their attention and praise on the good God who made and sustains his world (Ps 148). Literally “stopping to smell the roses” interrupts the scrupulous cycle. Grasping a smooth stone reminds counselees that God is their rock and refuge (Ps 18:2). Multisensory reminders of God’s care for his creation (and for the counselee!) build a vocabulary for grace and life rather than sin and death. They help counselees “taste and see” that God is indeed good (Ps 34:8). God speaks through both nature and his Word (Ps 19) and sometimes a scrupulous counselee is able to hear the former when the latter is too threatening.

6. Help them to “look outward.” If looking upward toward God is critical for strugglers, so is looking outward—loving others around them. Just as it is important to engage with God in the moments of high anxiety, the scrupulous person should ask, “What can I do right now to bless a person near me?” This, too, cuts against the inward spiral of scrupulosity. Focusing on how to serve someone else right now not only interrupts obsessive rumination or compulsive activity, but it also shifts priority from

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introspection and self-focus to others-focus. Loving others emphasizes the weightier matters of the law.

7. Help them do the opposite of what fear is telling them to do. The typical secular psychological approach to dealing with OCD/scrupulosity involves cognitive-behavioral therapy, and more specifically, exposure and response prevention. This can simply be described as exposing yourself to triggers for your obsessional thoughts without giving in to the compulsion to seek reassurance, confess, apologize, do exhaustive internet research, etc. When strugglers more consistently and persistently resist the urge to yield to their go-to compulsion, the strength of their anxiety diminishes. If this is done repeatedly, over time the power of the obsessive-compulsive cycle is broken. This process is well established in the OCD research literature. As Christians, we resonate with this basic approach, but recognize the need to orient the person toward God. Exposure and response prevention for the Christian means facing your fears by drawing courage from your faithful and ever-present God. This involves yielding control of our lives to the sovereign and loving Lord. A distinctively biblical approach to scrupulosity will call the sufferer to “trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding” (Prov 3:5).

Exposing counselees to triggers helps them to learn how to tolerate risk, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Normally, it’s best to start with the situations and thoughts that cause the least amount of anxiety and work upward to the most anxiety provoking situations. Building on the gospel foundations of God’s grace and mercy I laid out earlier, the goal is to resist the temptation to engage in any activity, mental or behavioral, that typically reduces the person’s anxiety. This principle has been called “do the opposite.” It originated with Ignatius Loyola, mentioned earlier, who himself struggled with scrupulosity.28

In these conscience-training exercises, counselees must lean further out from their scrupulous confines than they might feel comfortable with in the moment. If they are not feeling some level of anxiety, the exercise is unlikely to be helpful because the goal is to help counselees face their

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28 Ciarrocchi, The Doubting Disease, 52.
fears as they cast themselves on God’s mercy. At the same time, counselors need to be sensitive to how much their counselees can tolerate: sometimes a struggler will have stopped all faith-based activities since they can stir up highly condemning and obsessional thoughts. Often, what is needed is a gradual re-exposure to these elements of spiritual life.

The goal here is to grow in trust of God, not merely to “wait out” anxiety. In other words, we are not simply “habituating” to anxiety; we are seeking to lean hard on Jesus in the midst of it, while forsaking other strategies (compulsive rituals or avoidance) that do lessen fear, but only for a short while. Tolerating anxiety while looking to God for help, rather than resorting to these quick fixes, is uncomfortable. But the short-term discomfort of anxiety yields a long-term gain as the obsessive-compulsive cycle is broken.

So, using two of the examples from the beginning of the article, how might these strategies be implemented? Let’s start with Brandon. He is an accomplished piano player and is avoiding the instrument he loves, worried that he is glorifying himself when he plays, rather than God. Brandon’s fears were met head on by the realities that God, himself, gifts his people (Rom 12:3–8, 1 Cor 12) and that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:31–39). Preaching this good news to himself, he was able to sit down at the piano and rest his hands on the keys for fifteen minutes. He did this several times on a given day, noticing that as he meditated on the love of Jesus for him, his anxiety diminished. Over time he began to play, at first tentatively and only for ten minutes at a time. But over several weeks, the length of time increased. Some days the anxiety was worse than others. But as he “did the opposite” of what his fears commanded he do—avoid playing—his anxieties decreased and his enjoyment in playing returned. Could he be absolutely certain there was no ungodly pride intermingled with his enjoyment? No. But even if that were the case, the love of Christ undergirded him and gave him confidence to proceed.

What about Graham? It was helpful for him to identify the hyper-responsibility he carried regarding the salvation of the lost. He admitted that a sense of fear-laden duty rather than love motivated him. He
“discharged his duty” as quickly as possible, sometimes only tossing a tract in the direction of someone before moving on. He realized that he found it exceedingly difficult to live in the tension and ambiguity between human responsibility and God’s sovereignty. I spent time emphasizing the latter to provide a counterweight to his inflated sense of responsibility (Eph 1:3–14, Eph 2:8–9, Rom 8:28–29). But how should Graham “do the opposite” of his obsessive fears? Should I forbid him from sharing the gospel, something we are commanded to do as believers? Not exactly, but how does a counselor toughen a pathologically tender conscience without dulling it to the Spirit’s true work? Graham and I agreed that initially he would not share the gospel unless he was specifically asked by someone (1 Peter 3:15). Increasingly, he was able to engage in normal business transactions without an overpowering sense of anxiety, trusting that if God wanted to use him as a herald of the good news, God would make that obvious. While this was not as clear cut as Graham would have liked, he was able to focus on loving his wife well when they went out for dinner rather than being completely distracted by how he was going to give a gospel presentation to the their server.

You will need to tailor your approach to individual counselees, working collaboratively to design exposure exercises that push them to confront their fears by not resorting to avoidance or compulsive behaviors to reduce their anxiety.

8. **Consider the role medication can play.** In some cases, medication may be a useful component in someone’s care. I’ve had counselees successfully battle scrupulosity without medication, and I’ve had counselees who were so troubled by their anxiety and the constancy of their intrusive thoughts that the use of medication brought enough stability to take some of the steps I’ve outlined in this article. The decision to use or not use medication is an issue of wisdom, to be decided prayerfully by the counselee, and in consultation with the counselee’s physician and pastor/counselor. Whether or not medication is used, the goal is always to press into the places of doubt and ambiguity, leaning on the gracious God who undergirds all things by his care.

29 For a biblical perspective on the use of psychoactive medications, see my book *Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses and Medications.*
These eight facets of ministry for helping an overly-scrupulous person provide a road map for wise pastoral care. Expect that you will use each strategy many times as you walk with your counselee.

**God’s Love Casts Out Fear**
As we have seen, scrupulosity is a difficult and complex problem. Unfortunately, due to the shame and self-condemnation that accompany it, counselees often suffer a long time before asking for help. By the time they do, the obsessive and compulsive patterns are often deeply ingrained.

But there is a path forward. As counselees acknowledge distorted views of God, self, and the Christian life, and as they begin to approach God in prayer, meditating on Scripture’s portrayal of his love and mercy, they are progressively able to doubt their doubts. As they courageously and persistently walk forward into and against their specific fears by the grace and power of Jesus Christ, they begin to taste freedom. It is my prayer that those who struggle with scrupulosity will increasingly find that God’s perfect love does indeed cast out their fear (1 John 4:18).