



P.O. Box 66540
Albuquerque, NM 87193
505.890.6806
E-mail: irm@liferesource.org
Website: www.liferesource.org

Presentation Transcript
Paranoia
By Bill Jacobs
June 19, 2008

The title of this presentation is *Paranoia*. It's one in a series on *Mental Health and the Bible*.

Paranoia. Why would we talk about that? It's so hard to be a Christian when we're paranoid. And it's our hope that talking about this topic will help us all understand what we experience in everyday life. It helps us to make sense of what's going on around us. It helps us get more connected with reality, because paranoia is *not* reality. Hopefully, we can become stronger Christians, and as a result, participate more in our congregations, and make them more spiritually healthy, and also help the children because they all need a healthy congregation as well.

What is paranoia? Paranoia is an unfounded, or an exaggerated, distrust of others, sometimes reaching delusional proportions. So, to distrust other people isn't paranoid if they've given us reason to do so. But when the distrust is unfounded, or exaggerated, then it becomes a problem for everyday life. Paranoid individuals constantly suspect the motives of those around them and believe that certain individuals, or people in general, are out to get them. So they're always anxious – creates a lot of anxiety.

A number of years ago we went to visit a minister and his family who lived in a nearby church. We'd never had a chance to spend much time with them until that visit. Now, I don't want to overstate my case, because he really was a good minister and the fruits of his family over time have born out very nice children, who are all happily married and have nice kids themselves. But in that first visit I remember sitting at the dinner table listening to him talk, and it struck me that he seemed to think that everybody was against him, especially people in authority positions. A few years later, he was put in charge of the security for a large church convention. Many of the people in his congregation volunteered to help him. He had this large security force. This was quite a large convention. And I noticed that they all had kind of a bulge in their coat pocket and they were wearing these aviator sunglasses. They all looked like – or I guess, maybe, they *thought* they looked like – the FBI. They were probably pocket Bibles, you know, but it gave off the look. They were all running around acting really important. And there were all kinds of measures taken that were never taken before. The doors to the convention

center were locked from the inside so that you couldn't get in. And there was somebody posted at every door all through the whole festival. When they took the money – from the offering that they collected – to the bank, it was like this big armada of cars. Whereas, it would have been better, probably, just to take the money in a sack and walk in unobtrusively. So, there was this whole big thing built up and all these people just kind of fell into it when it didn't need to happen. And I think that was all founded on his belief that it was more dangerous than it really was.

I know that another minister at that festival discovered that he had a gun – a handgun – under the seat of his car, believe it or not. So, when he had a chance, he stole it from him and turned it into lost and found just to give him a bad time. So, a lot of times, people do tend to take advantage of the paranoid when they realize that they are. There are a lot of jokes about that. You know, the guy that called the paranoia hotline and was told, "Hold while your call is traced."

In the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*.... How many people saw that movie – *A Beautiful Mind*? Everybody? That's the first time ever in Albuquerque that everybody's actually seen the movie. Here, I've been telling everyone else that you guys are cinematically challenged, and everybody has seen the movie! But, in the movie, this schizophrenic man thought that he was working for the CIA to unravel Soviet plots against the United States. And the way they present it, you believe it, too, because you see it from his perspective at first. Then, we later find out that that's all delusion and hallucination on his part.

In preparation for this sermon I found a Website about conspiracy theory. Interestingly enough, the title of the magazine was *Paranoia*. That's what they called the Website in the magazine. Here's a quote from it:

Over an astounding millennial time period, the cryptocracy's agenda became undeniable, beginning with the Ruby Ridge FBI fiasco, to the Waco travesty, to the Oklahoma City bombing and the twin towers air raid.

So these people have connected the dots between all of these events. They think that they're all connected – that it's part of a conspiracy. And they said:

Paranoia was there connecting the dots, reading between the lines, and letting nothing notable slip under the wire.

It's interesting that they would use the word *paranoia*, because the actual definition of it is unfounded or exaggerated – distrust or suspicion. But more and more people are coming to call any kind of suspicion paranoia. So I think that's where that's going. So, when we listen to people talk, we should distinguish whether they think it is just normal distrust or irrational distrust. The kind of paranoia we're talking about today is the suspicion that is irrational or delusional.

So let's talk about symptoms of this. *The Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* – which is the US manual for these things – lists the following symptoms for *paranoid personality disorder*.

Preoccupied with unsupported doubts about friends or associates. You know, none of us functions at our highest level at all times. Sometimes we get tired or stressed. At those times we don't always give out the most positive energy. When most people encounter this low ebb in others, they usually assume that it has something to do with the state of the other person. You know, "he's off his game," or "he's tired," or "she's had a bad day." But paranoid people often assume it has to do with them. "He doesn't like me." Unsupported doubts about friends or associates.

A second thing they've found is *unfounded suspicions* – believes others are plotting things against him or her. I talked to a young woman a long time ago whose husband, about a year after they got married, started pulling the blinds shut during the middle of the day. He'd peek out and she'd ask him what was wrong. He would say that he was afraid the FBI was shadowing him. He had no rational reason to think that.

Another diagnosis point is that a paranoid person *perceives attacks on his or her reputation that are not clear to others and is quick to counterattack.* You know, there's the story of the young single guy who lost an eye in an accident. After he recovered, he went to get a prosthetic eye. The doctor showed him a state-of-the-art glass eye that looked very real, was perfectly matched in color to his other eye, and would actually move in the socket with the other eye. He asked how much that was. He said, "Well, it's five thousand dollars." He said, "Oh, do you have anything else?" He said, "Well, I've got this new polymer eye. It looks almost as good." He said, "It's move, too, and it's matched perfectly. The only difference is that it just doesn't have the same realistic look to it that a glass eye would have." He said, "Well, how much is that?" He said, "Twenty-five hundred." He said, "Oh...is there anything else you have?" He said, "Well, I have a wooden eye." He said, "It's painted with pretty glossy paint, and it looks pretty good – it's better than wearing a patch – but it doesn't look anything like either of the other two." He said, "How much is that?" He said, "A hundred dollars." He said, "Well, that's all I can afford, so that's what I'll take." He wasn't really pleased with it, but he did the best he could with what he could afford. So not too long after that, he went to a dance. And, of course, he was feeling uncomfortable because he still didn't feel really good about himself with that situation. He was really reticent to ask anybody to dance, but he saw this girl sitting across the room who wasn't being asked by anybody to dance. So he went over to her and said, "You wouldn't want to dance with me, would you?" Her eyes lit up, and she said, "Wouldn't I? Wouldn't I?" And he said, "Big nose! Big nose!" Perceives attacks on his or her reputation and is quick to counterattack. Right? Defensive.

The fourth thing is that they are often *unforgiving and bear grudges.* I told a man once that I thought his son was seriously troubled and that he might be suicidal or homicidal. He interpreted my efforts to help as an attack on him and his son. He tried to discredit me with others and has avoided me ever since. I was reminded of the proverb that says, "Reprove not a scorner lest he hate you." Unforgiving and bearing grudges. Many times paranoia causes people to become scornful, defensive and hostile, too.

Maintains unfounded suspicions regarding the fidelity of a spouse or significant other. The mother of one of my little clients was telling me recently that her – well, it's not recently anymore, but... – but her new boyfriend always want to check her cell phone

when she gets home every day to look at the call logs so he can tell who she has been calling and talking to. It's interesting that he used to be a SWAT team member. You think about the people that guard the President and other important people. You know, it might actually be a bit helpful to be in that line of work, because you are always looking. Security people, or that kind of person, a lot of times, may gravitate toward that kind of work, because it kind of fits the way they feel. Of course, now don't think that I think that everybody that works in security is paranoid, because I know that is not true.

Reads negative meanings into innocuous remarks. You know, the man who says to his wife, "You look nice today, honey," and she says, "What do you mean, today?"

Reluctant to confide in others due to a fear that information may be used against him or her. We all know of stories where people have taken things that others have told them in confidence and used it against them at work and at church and wherever. But we're talking about when others give them no reason to believe that.

So those are some of the symptoms that we see in people. Let's talk about the different *kinds* of paranoia that are observed.

One is called *persecutory paranoia*. This is the most prevalent type. In this case, the person makes him or herself believe that all those around them are their enemies, or bent on harming them, or taking their life. A lot of times people who have, also, an aggressive temperament – that are paranoid in this way – often turn dangerous and hurt other people.

Delusions of grandeur is another one. In this, the other person believes himself to be a great individual. It comes right along with this "they're out to get me" thing.

Religious paranoia. Sometimes people that suffer this have a delusion that they are the one true messenger of God sent to propagate God's word in the world.

Reformatory paranoia. In this, the person considers himself a great reformer in some area and looks upon all those around him accordingly. He always thinks of himself as a great curator or savior of other people.

Erotic paranoia is another one. The patient often tends to believe that some members of the opposite sex, belonging to an illustrious family, want to marry them. You know, the people stalking the queens, or the stars? Those people, a lot of times, have erotic paranoia.

There is, interestingly enough, a *litigious paranoia*. This is the kind of paranoia that causes people to always want to be suing others, because they think that these people are doing them wrong.

Hypochondriacal paranoia. In this kind of paranoia, the person believes that he's suffering from all kinds of diseases, and also, that other people are to blame for his suffering. We've seen people that just always think they have something going. I had a young woman from a church that I used to work in, and whom I knew as a girl, call me

one evening. She told me that a few years prior, while she was in Mexico on vacation, she ate a hamburger that wasn't cooked properly, and some parasites from the meat got into her throat and then into her body, and infected her. (There's actually a whole thing about *parasitic paranoia*, too, in the literature – about how some people feel that their body is invaded by parasites.) She called them worms. She also exhibited signs of schizophrenia. So I said, "Why don't you go to a doctor and get that checked out? Find those worms. Get treated." She said, "Okay." But then the next night she called back and told me that they would want to do a scan on her body to find the worms. And she said, "The demons told me that they would migrate the worms to my body while they were scanning my head. And then when they scanned my body, they would migrate the worms up to my head." So one of the characteristics about schizophrenia is that the delusions are unshakable. You cannot convince them the delusions are false in most cases. So there's always a reason why these things have to be the way they are. If you could have heard her talking – as I did on the phone – she said this with the utmost conviction. She really *believed* that this was true. We do believe in the demon world and demon possession, but are demons really going to migrate worms back and forth? No, that's all...interesting that her pastor fell for it.

Let's talk a little bit now about diagnoses that include paranoia. There is no diagnosis in the DSM for [just called] paranoia. It's always a feature of other mental problems. Some people who are depressed have a lot of paranoid thoughts.

I had a client once who was twenty five-years-old. He became depressed when his girlfriend broke off with him when he was eighteen. He began to think that he was meant to be a loser and a non-achiever the rest of his life, and that the universe was conspiring to keep him down. That's how he put it. He said, "Every time I try to get up, I get knocked down." And when I would ask him, "Who is doing it?" he would say, "Well, nobody. It's just the way it is." He would try to start college, for example, and quit, knowing that something was going to happen to mess up his plan when he was the one that quit and caused it.

At other times, people who have dementia – and there's a lot of different things that can cause that – Alzheimers, strokes, different things – a lot of time they become paranoid, too. So it's a feature there.

There is a diagnosis called *paranoid personality disorder*. Here paranoia is not so much the result of some physical or genetic problem, but more from life experience, or environment. The father and the son that I mentioned earlier...both of them had a really rough time as children – I think because of their appearance and their lack of social skills, probably. They probably had a really hard time in school, I would think.

It's also noted that people with paranoid personality disorder also tend to be pretty self-centered, pretty self-important, pretty defensive, and also emotionally distant from other people. Do you know anybody like that? A lot of time you run into those folks.

Because people are this way, it impedes their social and personal relationships, and also career and career advancement. People that have this personality disorder are also the

ones that fall, a lot of times, into that litigious thing. You know, “everybody’s against me and I’m not going to put up with this any more.” And they go on the offensive and sue people or worse.

Delusional disorder and schizophrenia. There are different kinds of delusions that come with delusional disorder. The most common type is that persecutory thing – you know, everybody’s out to get me. When people have that aspect of delusional disorder, their delusions are pretty much all paranoid. People that have that have an irrational, yet unshakable, belief that someone is plotting against them. They just know something is happening. When a person has schizophrenia, the paranoid delusions are usually much more bizarre than if you just have delusional disorder. Sometimes they’re grandiose and often accompanied by auditory hallucinations.

You know the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*? They presented that as though they were visual hallucinations, but they weren’t. In real life, he never saw anybody. He just heard voices. So they couldn’t have pulled that over on us at the beginning of the movie and made us think that this was really happening.... So I think that was the device they used to get us really hooked into it. In real life, the delusions are almost always auditory. They hear voices.

That woman who heard the demons tell her they were migrating the worms around in her body. The worms were the delusion and the voices were an auditory hallucination. Her response to my suggestion that she be treated.... She knew, at some level, that they would reveal there were none, so she just couldn’t go there. She had to manufacture a way to keep the delusion. That’s the unshakable part of it.

So the delusions that are experienced by people that have delusional disorder are a lot more plausible than those experienced by paranoid schizophrenics – not bizarre, but still unjustified. A lot of times people walk around with delusional disorder and we just think they’re kind of quirky. But when somebody’s schizophrenic, they’re like this young woman, where she just sounds bizarre.

What causes paranoia in people? Well, we talked about a lot of different kinds of it, so there are different causes.

Drug abuse is one of the things that causes a lot of it. I encountered a forty-year-old woman who did cocaine for ten years – between age twenty and thirty. Ten years later she was still having auditory hallucinations. She told me that at one point she tore all the sheet rock off the walls in her apartment looking for them.

Besides cocaine, PCP, alcohol, marijuana and amphetamines really cause a lot of paranoid episodes. We think it’s because those things put incredible stress on the brain.

Stress also causes it. You know, the little boy that I saw who thought the monsters were going to get him in the dark? Way past just being afraid of the dark. Stressed by family problems – kind of acting out that. Then, the teenager who gradually lost touch with reality. He was abandoned by his parents when he was in elementary school and left to

live by himself in a house. He lived with a girl when he was fifteen. And he would beat her – out of his fears that she was running around on him. He couldn't drive down the road after awhile for fear that people would shoot him. So that stress was causing him to decompensate and lose touch with reality. And part of that losing touch was paranoia.

Injury is also another thing that can cause people to be paranoid, believe it or not. You recall earlier the young woman I told you about, whose husband was peeking out the blinds thinking the FBI was after him. A year before that started he was in a severe auto accident and he took a blow to the back of his head. When I met him he was in the hospital. He was comatose and he had dropped from a hundred and eighty pounds to ninety. He was in fetal position. The brain scans revealed that the back third of his brain had deteriorated. Apparently, it was like he got a bruise and it just started – I don't know the technical terms for it – but it just started to deteriorate. By the way, he's fully recovered from that. And I believe that was all about the faith that his wife had – who stayed with him for two years as he deteriorated, and believed in, and prayed every day for his recovery. She sat by him every day in the hospital. I remember I went to pray for him and then I moved away. I came back a few years later and he met me at the door of the church. He was completely back. I said, "Is there anything you can't do?" And he said, "There's a glitch in my brain when I try to add three and five."

Genetics is another thing that can cause it. We all know for a fact that schizophrenia is passed genetically from family to family – at least the possibility of it.

Emotional factors. I talked about the son and the father who looked odd and are socially out of sync. That can do it.

Abuse can cause people to be paranoid. Paranoia, a lot of times, comes from being treated roughly as a child. You assume that it's always going to happen. The part of the brain that has to do with fight or flight is over-functioning all the rest of their life, so they're always ready and thinking that it's going to happen. We talk about children who have that startle response – you know, when they're startled they throw an arm up to protect themselves when nobody is there to harm them. Abused children often believe that they are not lovable or they're bad. And it is only a short step from that to believing that others are against them or don't like them. If a child grows up with a paranoid parent, sometimes the child adopts the same outlook.

I have a quiz for you. We're moving on to another cause now. Which number is the closest to the correct number of people killed in the Chernobyl nuclear accident? A) 50; B) 2,400; C) 11,000. Which would you think? The Chernobyl nuclear accident – the greatest nuclear disaster in history. 50? The correct number is actually 56. CNN estimated that, in the long run, 3.5 million people would eventually die from radiation. Do you know how many people have died from radiation in the long haul? A UN study in 2005 found that less than 2,000 had died. Now, that's a lot of people, but in the United States, 2,000 people die from adverse drug reactions every six weeks. So that kind of puts it in perspective. Now, 2,000 to 3.5 million – that's pretty big mistake, isn't it? That's a pretty big mistake. Part of the UN study said that one of the biggest, most hurtful things about the Chernobyl accident was the irrational fear that was created in the survivors'

minds by the media. So that's my next reason for the cause of paranoia – the media in the world. Remember Y2K? Well, that kind of says it all, doesn't it?

I've got a quote for you. "We simply cannot afford to gamble by ignoring it. We cannot risk inaction. Those scientists who say that we are merely entering a period of climatic instability are acting irresponsibly. The indications that our climate can soon change for the worse are too strong to be reasonably ignored." That was written to support the idea of global cooling back in the 70s.

I don't watch the news anymore. You hear about some terrible event, but they never tell you about all the other millions of people that are doing okay. So it automatically blows it out of proportion.

So, people are frightened a lot by what they see on television. And those things, of course, happen, but you don't see the whole picture. You just see the little thing. Then they have to generate news, so everything is blown out of proportion.

How can we treat paranoia? What can help? Well, when people are having severe, bizarre delusions, when they have schizophrenia, there are a number of psychotropic drugs that really can help people. And those are used mostly when people are, as we would say, not in their right mind – when they're having hallucinations and they're not four personality disorders.

If drugs are the cause, then getting them off the drugs is a good thing. Although, sometimes – like for that lady I knew – it was too late for her. But drug rehab is certainly important if somebody's having hallucinations because of the drugs they're doing.

You know the boy I told you about that was left by himself and was losing touch with reality? He's on Seroquel and he's got his mind back. That isn't a total solution, but he's going to take it because it's a lot better than where he was before. If you don't like the names haldol, thorazene, resperadol, clozaril and those kinds of psychotropics, those drugs are powerful psychotropic drugs, but the alternative – if you have schizophrenia – is a lot worse than any side effects you're going to have from any drug. Because you have no life when you're schizophrenic.

Psychotherapy. People who are paranoid can often learn to think differently. This is more for the people who have paranoia because of their personality – you know, it's a paranoid personality issue. Even then, though, the man in the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, who was schizophrenic, put himself on a mental diet. He *stopped listening* to the voices and started *acting* normal. That minister I told you about who was all into the security thing? Well, I've noticed over the years, as he gets older, that paranoid part of him just seems to get less and less and less and less. He's learning by his experience that no, it's not that way. So he's making sense of his life.

When I was just out of college and working as a trainee in the ministry of a large church, the pastor told me to go visit one of the members, because his brother was there and he was hearing voices. So I remember being pretty stressed out about that, because I hadn't

done a lot of things like that before, but I went over there anyway. And I learned that he'd been lying around for a week. He'd just come back from Vietnam – been released...I can't remember if he was discharged or his time was up – but he was back. And he'd been lying around in his brother's house unbathed and unshaven, listening to voices tell him that they were going to kill him. He was having nightmares. I learned that he had been in some really serious combat. Of course, I had never heard of post-traumatic stress disorder back then. So I told him to get up, take a shower, shave, get dressed and go out and look for a job, and quit listening to all that. Just get up and go *do* something. Well, I learned later that that was about as good a thing as anybody could do – you know, without any training – because that's really part of the solution – to get up and go on – make life normal. I don't know why I said that. I guess even a blind squirrel finds an acorn now and then. But I did recall that he did gradually feel better after that. That was kind of the turning point for him. I know that he left the area not long after that, so I don't know really what became of him in the long run.

Sometimes it's really hard when you're talking to somebody to know what's causing the problem, because with these mental health issues, it's usually not just one thing. It's kind of like the rest of life, isn't it? There's always a lot of contributing factors to problems. There are so many *possible* contributing factors here.

Paranoid people are hard to treat because they inherently mistrust the therapist. The greatest single predictor of success in therapy is the trust of the therapist – of the relationship between the two of them. If the person being treated can't find a way to trust the therapist – if they have to be coerced into treatment (which never works), if they're unwilling – then their recovery is usually going to be marred by efforts to sabotage the therapy by not taking their medications, by not being forthcoming with the therapist, by lack of insight into their condition – I mean, if you're deluded, you're deluded; you think it's true – or by the belief that the therapist is plotting against them with whoever – the government or the police or whatever. So it can be a tricky issue.

How hard is it to engage in the Christian life when paranoia is a part of one's life. Well, I went on a church visit recently and I encountered some people I hadn't seen in twenty years – very nice people. I always liked them. And I like them still. But they are just filled with thoughts about a global conspiracy theory. They've tried to connect the dots between a number of obviously unrelated things. It struck me that they were filled with anxiety about that. It was just taking up all their energy. So how helpful can a person be when they're caught in that web.

Let's go to Philippians 4:6.

Philp. 4:6 – *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayers and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about those things. And whatever you have learned, or received, or heard from me, or seen in me, put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*

So my friends are still hanging in there, but it's really hard for them to do this, because they're all upset about all this stuff that isn't really real. And I have to believe that it's taking their energy away from things that are much more important for them.

Let's go to Romans 12:1. Paul said:

Rom. 12:1 – *Therefore I urge you, brothers, in the view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice – holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.*

So we're supposed to throw off all that faithless, anxious, worrisome stuff and not conform to that, but be transformed in our minds.

Now a lot of people who are paranoid feel guilty when they hear things like that said, because they find it hard to do that. There is a way to deal with those things. Let's go to Ephesians 1, and verse 17. Paul said:

Eph. 1:17 – *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know Him better. And I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you – the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints – and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him up from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realm, far above all authority, rule, and power, and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be the head over everything for the church which is His body – the fullness of Him which fills everything in every way.*

Paranoia really doesn't have a place in Christian life. So I know that makes people feel guilty who are beset with paranoid thoughts. Paranoia produces an incredible amount of anxiety and Jesus doesn't want that for us. He said in another place that we should be anxious for nothing. He's given us a spirit of a sound mind.

So, if we're caught up in suspicious thinking, we can let go of that. We can put ourselves on a mental diet. We can turn suspicious thoughts over to God and live in His care. When we find ourselves thinking negatively, there's no need to beat ourselves up over it. All we have to do is just acknowledge that we don't want to think that thought, thank God that we recognize it is bad, and then go back to thinking about good things. That's all we have to do. And if we persist in that, we will win.

Now, if we find it impossible to do this, then something might be getting in the way. And in those cases, it might be good to talk to somebody who has experience in these things to get some help. Maybe God will use that person to lead us where we need to go.