

Series: Finding Joy

Title: Joy through Biblical Thinking

Text: Philippians 4:8-9

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Verse 8

In Philippians 4:8, Paul transitioned from the subject of prayer to talk about the importance of proper thinking. He knew that unhealthy thought processes were playing a part in the contention between Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2). Thus, he said, “Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy—dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

The word rendered “finally” indicated that Paul was bringing his letter to a conclusion. He wanted to get to the main purpose of his writing — thanking the Philippians for their financial commitment to his missionary ministry (Philippians 4:10-20). Before he did, however, he felt it was important to discuss the proper mode of Christian thinking. He knew that both prayer (Philippians 4:6-7) and biblical meditation (Philippians 4:8-9) were essential to holy Christian living. Negligence in the two areas had a lot to do with the doctrinal (Philippians 3:1-11) and relational (Philippians 4:2) problems at Philippi.

Scripture is clear that one’s pattern of thinking is integral to a proper Christian lifestyle. Jesus said, “A good person produces good out of the good stored up in his heart. An evil person produces evil out of the evil stored up in his heart, for his mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart” (Luke 6:45). The word translated “heart” (*kardía*) was used in Scripture to refer to the inner-man, the soul, or the mind. It pointed to the seat of human desire, the place from which attitudes and actions emanate. According to Jesus, keeping a tight watch over one’s inner-being is necessary for holy and healthy Christian living.

Paul used the word *kardía* in the preceding verse (Philippians 4:7) to speak of the way Christian prayer has a way of providing peace in one’s heart. In our current verse, he indicated that the human *kardía* could also experience peace via proper mental schemas. Paul knew well that one’s thought life was of utmost importance. He was undoubtedly familiar with the words of King Solomon — “...as he thinketh in his heart, so is he...” (Proverbs 23:7, KJV). In writing to the Corinthians, he himself had encouraged believers to maintain a proper frame of mind, saying, “We demolish arguments and every proud thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

In our current text, Paul described the type of thinking that should typify God’s people by listing eight qualities. First, he told the Philippians to think on “whatever is true.” The word translated “true” was a compound word that literally meant “without hiddenness.”¹ Consequently, it referred to that which was the opposite of lying or falsehood. It depicted something that agreed with the facts of reality, something that was real and conformed to true nature of things. The label “true” is reserved for those

¹ *Zodhiates, ἀληθής.*

things that are in alignment with God's nature and His set order of creation and revealed truth.

When it comes to "true" thinking, believers have the ability to think according to "whatever is true" because they have truth in Scripture. Jesus said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). In addition, believers have the ability to think on "whatever is true" because of the indwelling presence of God's Spirit in their souls. The Apostle John said, "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you don't need anyone to teach you. Instead, his anointing teaches you about all things and is true and is not a lie; just as it has taught you, remain in him" (1 John 2:27).

Second, Paul called the Philippians to cultivate thought lives that were centered on what was "honorable." In doing so, he used a Greek word that referred to something that called for veneration or respect from others. The word could also be translated "noble."² It was used to describe an important qualification of deacons (1 Timothy 3:8), deacons' wives (1 Timothy 3:11), and men of the church (Titus 2:2). The term portrayed that which was "dignified" or "reverend."³ As used by Paul, the word revealed that the Christian should have thoughts that would generate respect from others, if the content of such thoughts was revealed to others.

Third, Paul told believers in Philippi to have thoughts that were "just." The word spoke of things that were morally and ethically sound. It was used of that which was righteous, upright, and right before God.⁴ In applying the term to the believer's thought life, Paul called the Philippians to have thoughts that were in alignment with God's holy standard of what is right.

The apostle used the same language ("just") earlier in his letter to describe the righteous standing a believer enjoys in Christ (Philippians 3:8-9). When one trusts in Christ's work on the cross, he or she is washed from sin and declared righteous before the Heavenly Father. However, a complete righteousness won't be experienced until the end of all things, so believers must learn to practically live righteous lives. Paul talked about these things earlier in his letter when he prayed for the Philippians to be "...filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:11).

Fourth, Paul encouraged the Philippians to cultivate thinking that was "pure." The word depicted something that was free from sin. It spoke of that which was morally and ceremonially acceptable, that which was without any spiritual defect.⁵ Christians should have consciences that are clean from the carnal contaminants of fallen society. Impure thinking was surely a part of the problem at Philippi. A large amount of contention was present in the church (Philippians 2:1-4; 4:1-3). Paul knew that impure thinking had led to impure living. The church needed both its individual and collective minds cleansed by God's truth.

² Friberg, Friberg, Miller, [CD-Rom].

³ Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

⁴ Friberg, Friberg, Miller, [CD-Rom].

⁵ Friberg, Friberg, Miller, [CD-Rom].

Unfortunately, too many modern believers have impure thought lives because of their interaction with worldly music, books, social media, TV programming, and internet material. No wonder so many struggle with spiritual strongholds and life-dominating sin. Many have programmed their minds according to the impure thought patterns of this world.

Fifth, Paul encouraged the Philippians to think on that which was “lovely.” The language referred to something that was “pleasing” or “acceptable.”⁶ It depicted one’s thoughts as being morally aesthetic before the Lord. Paul’s words served as a reminder that the Lord understood the Philippians “thoughts from far away” (Psalm 139:2). Consequently, it would have been prudent for the church to employ God’s means of grace to maintain thought patterns that were pleasing to the Lord.

Sixth, Paul told the Philippians to meditate on “whatever is commendable.” The language spoke of something characterized by good omen.⁷ One has defined the word with the synonym “auspicious.”⁸ That which is auspicious is “that which shows or suggests that further success is likely.” One modern dictionary has used the word of an aspiring author whose first work debuted to positive reviews.⁹

The word translated “commendable” in Philippians 4:8 was used figuratively and spiritually to speak of things that guaranteed spiritual success. It was used of someone or something of which people spoke well. Paul’s use of the term unveiled an important spiritual truth. Sin often starts in the thought processes. Lust often leads to adultery, mental anger often leads to outbursts of wrath, and covetousness often produces a materialistic lifestyle. Sinful living springs from sinful thinking. To avoid moral and spiritual failure, the Philippians need to learn to think in a “commendable” fashion. When their thoughts were right, their lifestyles would follow.

Seventh, Paul encouraged “moral excellence” in thinking. The Greek of the text referred to something of superior quality. Paul’s charge was for the church to maintain thinking of a morally superior nature. Peter issued a similar charge to believers, saying, “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with *goodness*, *goodness* with knowledge” (2 Peter 1:5).

Believers should employ spiritual resources from Christ to make sure their minds rest upon things that are of good moral quality. The reason for so much apathy and carnality in the modern church is obvious. Many allow their mental schemas to orbit around inferior ideas and values. The old axiom is true — “Garbage in; garbage out.”

Last, Paul told the Philippians to have “praiseworthy” thoughts. The apostle’s language was used of something that elicited praise in the ancient world.¹⁰ Applied to the Christian’s thought life, the term indicated that the Christian’s thoughts should evoke praise from God. Christians have been born-again to live praiseworthy lives

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

⁷ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

⁸ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

⁹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auspicious>

¹⁰ Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

before God (Ephesians 1:12 and Philippians 1:11). The mind is the starting place for a praiseworthy life.

After listing out eight qualifiers for Christian thinking, Paul gave a command. He told the Philippians, “dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8). He used an imperative mood verb in the original language; thus, he issued a command that called for a continual action from his hearers. His verbiage hinted at the need for personal responsibility in cultivating a Christian thought life. The Greek verb was one from which we get our English word “logic.” It meant “to think according to logical rules.”¹¹ Used subjectively within Paul’s discussion, it carried the idea of pondering ideas, thinking on certain concepts, or keeping certain realities in one’s mind.¹²

Paul’s words in Philippians 4:8 empathize the importance of sound thinking in Christian living. To experience the abundant life of Christ and to glorify Christ on Earth, believers must learn how to manage their thinking in a godly fashion. One has rightly said, “The battle against sin starts in the mind — the thoughts or what one dwells upon.”¹³ In regard to physical health, it is often said, “You are what you eat.” One could say something similar in regard to spiritual health — “You are what you think.”

All together, Paul’s words in Philippians 4:8 should not be regarded as a checklist to be followed. Instead, they should be regarded as a diagnostic list. If one is walking with Christ, he or she will naturally have thinking that is true, honorable, just, pure, and so forth. If one has thinking that is contrary to such virtues, one should seek Christ for repentance and change. By living according to Christ’s spirit and truth, one can develop thought patterns that result in a godly life. Such was the need at Philippi.

Verse 9

At beginning of verse 9, Paul issued another imperative, saying, “Do what you have learned and received and heard from me, and seen in me...” (Philippians 4:9). The apostle’s words provide a glimpse into the nature of true, biblical disciples-making. The word “learned” spoke of the process of learning through instruction, “received” spoke of the handing down of apostolic truth, “heard” referred to the act of comprehending such truth, and “saw” conveyed the importance of life-on-life observation in the discipleship process (Proverbs 27:17; 1 Corinthians 11:1; 2 Timothy 2:2).

Paul’s terms at the beginning of verse 9 — “learned,” “received,” “heard,” and “seen” — depicted the way the Philippians had been discipled by Paul. They learned, received, understood, and observed the realities of Christ from the apostle’s teaching and life. He had personally ministered among them and taught them (Acts 16:11-24). He had even stayed in the homes of some of the church members at Philippi (Acts 16:35-40).

The believers at Philippi had learned a lot from Paul, but as he wrote a later to them, he knew they were in need of renewed obedience. Thus he said, “do what you

¹¹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

¹² Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

¹³ Saxton, David. W. *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 133.

have learned....” In the original language of the New Testament, Paul gave a command for continual action. A.T. Robertson has described the terminology as calling an individual to practice something as a habit of life.¹⁴ In order to develop strong thought lives, the Philippians needed to practice obedience in regard to the apostolic teaching they had received from Paul. The doctrinal (Philippians 3:1-11) and relational (Philippians 4:2) problems in Philippi were not going to heal themselves. The true believers in the church needed to “work out” their salvation (Philippians 2:12-13) by obeying biblical truth.

Paul’s words revealed that obedience is integral to healthy Christian living. Obedience is particularly needed in regards to one’s thinking. The Lord will not override one’s will and generate holy content within the mind. One must practice faith-filled, grace-empowered submission to the Lord’s truth. Obedience may seem like a harsh, dry, and duty-oriented concept for many modern believers who unwittingly champion an antinomian form of liberating grace. However, Paul’s words in Philippians 4:9 reveal that a certain sort of obedience is needed if one wants to tap into what Francis Schaeffer called “true Christian mysticism.”¹⁵ When believers obey God’s Word through the help of the Holy Spirit within them, the supernatural life of Christ gains sway over their thoughts, words, and deeds. A transformation takes place that gets great glory for Christ.

Paul concluded verse 9 by saying, “and the God of peace will be with you.” The concept of peace, as delineated by Paul, was similar to the Hebrew concept of “Shalom.” It involved not just the exclusion of hostility, but the inclusion of unity. For the Jew, the concept wasn’t just the absence of war, but presence of peace, pleasantness, and prosperity.

Paul implemented the word in a spiritual way to describe the resultant condition of those who fill their minds with healthy types of things — true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and praiseworthy things. When one emotionally and spiritually dwells on such realities, he or she will experience what one has called “a religious disposition characterized by inner-rest and harmony.”¹⁶ Such involves a complete “freedom from anxiety.”¹⁷

But Hebrew peace didn’t just involve a personal dimension; it involved a relational one as well. The essence of Shalom centered on right relationships, in particular with one’s God and one’s neighbor.¹⁸ The Philippians needed this type of peace. They were marked internal strife and self-seeking behaviors (Philippians 2:1-4; 4:1-3). Paul knew the church (Euodia and Syntyche in particular) could regain peace if it aligned its thinking with biblical truth.

¹⁴ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

¹⁵ Schaefer, Francis. *True Spirituality*. ??????????

¹⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

¹⁷ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

¹⁸ Barclay, [CD-Rom].