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THE CHRISTIAN'S THOUGHT LIFE

Philippians 4:8

By

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October 15, 1995

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Philippians Lesson 25

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Mark Twain wrote, "What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head, and is known to none but himself. All day long, the mill of his brain is grinding, and his thoughts, not those other things, are his history." (*Reader's Digest* [1/93], p. 155).

I would modify Twain by saying that our thought life forms the basis for and is largely revealed in our actions and words. But Twain's comments correctly affirm that our thought life composes a major part of who we really are. Jonathan Edwards put it this way: "The ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them" (source unknown). Thus it is crucial for each of us to bring our thought life into submission to Jesus Christ by learning to think biblically about every aspect of life.

One of the most helpful things I have learned about the Christian life is that all sin begins in our thoughts, which the Bible often calls "the heart." Jesus said, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:20-23). No one commits these outward sins without first having committed them in his mind. If we want to grow in godliness, we must win the battle over sin on the thought level.

In Philippians 4:8 Paul exhorts us to develop a Christian thought life. His words should not be divorced from the context. Practicing verse 8 is essential if we want to develop and maintain healthy relationships (4:2-3, 5). A Christian thought life is also integral to a life of joy (4:4) and peace (4:6-7) in every situation. Since our thoughts form the basis for our behavior, a godly thought life is also essential for the obedience to which Paul exhorts us in verse 9. Clearly, Paul's thought life was at the heart of the contentment

he had learned in every situation (4:10-12). So Paul is telling us the way to be whole people in our relationships with God, with one another, and within ourselves. But before we look specifically at what Paul is teaching and how to obey it, we need to think about:

I. WHAT PAUL IS NOT TEACHING: THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING.

I need to focus on this for a moment because the Christian world has been infiltrated with the false teaching of “positive thinking,” popularized by Norman Vincent Peale and, with only slight variations, by Peale’s protege, Robert Schuller. If you are at all familiar with the teachings of these men, you know that they are not Christian in any orthodox sense of the term, even though they both have been welcomed into evangelical circles. Through their influence, the idea has crept into the American church that it is wrong ever to be negative or critical. This has resulted in the loss of discernment.

A young woman once stopped attending the church I pastored in California because she said I was too negative. When I pressed her for specifics, she showed me my sermon outline from the previous week. Sure enough, I had to admit, my points were stated negatively rather than positively. But I pointed out to her that I had taken the points verbatim from the biblical text. But that didn’t matter to her! And, of course, it didn’t occur to her that she was being critical of my preaching, or that Paul and Jesus were often both critical and negative. She believed that we must always be positive.

The positive thinking heresy has further spread through the so-called “Positive Confession” heresy, also called the “Health and Wealth” or “Name it and Claim it” teaching, that whatever you confess positively by faith, God *must* do it. This heresy attributes power to faith itself, and says that even if you are sick, you must not give a negative confession by admitting it, but must claim your healing by affirming, “I am well!”

Also a number of purportedly Christian sales companies or successful salesmen have utilized a form of this error through a sales motivational teaching called “positive mental attitude.” You’re never supposed to entertain negative thoughts. You’re supposed to

use “positive self-talk,” have faith in yourself, and visualize yourself as successful and wealthy so that it will become a reality.

All of these errors are based on the heresy of Science of Mind, taught by Ernest Holmes, the founder of the Church of Religious Science, that your mind can create reality, that through thinking positively, you can do anything or achieve any success you want. The variations mentioned above, though claiming to be Christian and appealing to Philippians 4:8 as support, are satanic in that they appeal to the flesh, promote self, and do not confront people with the need to be subject to the lordship of Christ. (Dave Hunt deals with many of these errors in his two books, *The Seduction of Christianity* and *Beyond Seduction* [both by Harvest House].) But, clearly, Paul is not teaching the power of positive thinking in Philippians 4:8.

II. WHAT PAUL IS TEACHING: THE CHRISTIAN’S THOUGHT LIFE SHOULD BE FOCUSED ON THE GREAT TRUTHS OF SCRIPTURE.

Even though Scripture is not specifically mentioned, it is assumed, because it is the only source for knowing what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good repute. Let’s look at the list:

1. Think on whatever is *true*.

The word means, “true as to fact ... it denotes the actuality of a thing” (G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* [Charles Scribner’s Sons], p. 20). The “true” is that which corresponds to reality. God Himself is the only final test for truth. Since He is unchanging, the moral standards revealed in His Word, which stem from His holy nature, are also unchanging. They apply to every culture in every age. John 3:33 attests, “God is true” (see also, John 8:26; Rom. 3:4). As Paul writes to Titus, who was in Crete (the Cretans were notorious liars), “God ... cannot lie,” and He made known His truth by “His word” (Titus 1:1-3). Jesus also claimed for Himself that He is true (John 7:18; also 5:31-32). Opposed to God and Christ, Satan is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). He is a deceiver, and he uses sin to deceive those ensnared by it (2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 4:22; Heb. 3:13).

Since as fallen creatures we are prone to Satan’s lies and deception, the only way we can know the truth and walk in it is to

steep ourselves in God's Word. We should know the Word so well that we automatically run everything we encounter through the grid of God's Word. We live in a day that is geared toward emotions and strongly influenced by the supposed "virtue" of tolerance. Our culture assumes that love means being tolerant and accepting of everyone and everything, even if God's Word plainly declares that something is an abomination. If you go with the flow, you will be carried far from God's absolute standard of moral truth as revealed in His Word.

We also must resist the pragmatism of our culture, which determines the true by whatever works. If something works, which means, it brings you happiness (at least at the moment) or it accomplishes what you want, then it must be true. But God's Word doesn't always line up with what works. In fact, it's clear that sin often brings pleasure for a season; if it didn't we wouldn't be so enticed by it. Many of the "positive mental attitude" methods are effective in making you a successful sales person. But the question is, Are they biblical? We must test everything by God's Word, not by feelings or pragmatism.

2. Think on whatever is *honorable* (NIV = "noble").

The word means "that which inspires reverence or awe; dignified, worthy of respect." It is a character quality required in deacons and deaconesses (1 Tim. 3:8, 11). Elders should keep their children under control "with all dignity" (1 Tim. 3:4). All Christians should "lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Tim. 2:2).

This means that Christians are to take life seriously. We are not to be silly goof-offs, who treat life as a perpetual joke. We live in light of eternity, keeping in mind the uncertainty of this short life and the reality of heaven and hell. This doesn't mean that we can't appreciate clean humor. But our overall tenor should communicate to a lost world that they must stand before a holy God someday soon. Think on these reverent themes.

3. Think on whatever is *right*.

This word is used of God Himself who is righteous (Rom. 3:26; 1 John 2:29; 3:7) and of Jesus Christ (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:1). Thus we are to be righteous people, as John

writes, "Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil" (1 John 3:7-8). To think on what is right means to think on the holy nature of God, especially as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, and to model our behavior after Him.

4. Think on whatever is *pure*.

The word refers to ceremonial purity, but also to the moral purity that is pictured by the ceremonial. It especially means keeping our bodies undefiled by abstaining from sexual sins (see 2 Cor. 11:2; 1 Tim. 5:22; Titus 2:5; James 3:17; 1 Pet. 3:2; 1 John 3:3). In Ephesians 5:3-5 Paul warns, "But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." As Christians, we must say no to our sexually impure culture and focus on moral purity.

5. Think on whatever is *lovely*.

This word occurs only here in the New Testament. It means what is pleasing, agreeable, and attractive. At times we all find ourselves attracted to that which is evil. But this word must be taken with the context, meaning that which is both pure and attractive. Jesus Christ is inherently attractive, and so we should think often on our lovely Savior, who gave Himself for us on the cross.

6. Think on whatever is *of good repute*.

This comes from a compound word meaning to speak well of something (our word "euphemism" comes from this Greek word). It refers to something that "deservedly enjoys a good reputation" (F. F. Bruce, *New International Biblical Commentary, Philippians* [Hendrickson], p. 146). As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, love believes the best about another person, it refuses to believe an evil report about a brother or sister until there is certain evidence to establish it.

After this list of six items, Paul changes the sentence structure, beginning the next two phrases with the word "if"; I take these

final two qualities to sum up all the others plus anything Paul has omitted.

**To sum up, think on anything of virtue.*

The word "excellence" (NASB, NIV) means moral virtue. Although it is common in Greek literature, this is the only time Paul uses the word. Peter uses it as a quality of God and thus as the first quality that we are to add to our faith (2 Pet. 1:3, 5). This means that as a new Christian, one of the first things you must do is to stop any behavior that is not in line with God's moral virtues as revealed in Scripture, such as the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and Paul's list of the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21). To continue doing such things will hinder your growth in godliness. We must focus our minds on moral virtue.

**To sum up, think on anything worthy of praise.*

The word "praise" is used both of what is praiseworthy in God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; Phil. 1:11) and in people (Rom. 2:29; 13:3; 1 Cor. 4:5). Of course, every attribute and deed of God is praiseworthy, and so we should daily think about how great God is and on the marvelous works He has done, both in creation and in history. Toward other people, even toward those in the world, we should be gracious by focusing on their strong points and good qualities. Even though we all are depraved by nature, because of God's common grace even unbelieving people can be kind, caring, and loving. Ultimately those qualities, even in unbelievers, do not bring glory to the person, but to God. So we should be appreciative and affirming toward people rather than negative and critical.

**Think on these things.*

Paul means to reflect on these qualities that stem from God and should be characteristic of us as children of God. "Give them weight in your decisions" (Beare, cited by Bruce, p. 145). Allow them "to shape your conduct" (Ralph P. Martin, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Philippians [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 171). In other words, think on these things with a view to doing them.

III. HOW TO OBEY WHAT PAUL IS TEACHING: WE MUST CONTROL WHAT COMES INTO OUR MINDS.

Proverbs 4:23 says, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." Patrick Buchanan has observed, "The food that enters the mind must be watched as closely as the food that enters the body" (*Reader's Digest* [11/89], p. 203). Frank Outlaw wrote, "Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become actions; watch your actions, they become habits; watch your habits, they become character; watch your character, for it becomes your destiny" (*Reader's Digest* [date not known]). To obey what Paul is saying, we must exercise control over our thought life. This involves at least five things:

1. *We need the mind of Christ through conversion.*

Before a person knows Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, he has a depraved mind (Rom. 1:28). He lives in the lusts of his flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind (Eph. 2:3). God must supernaturally raise us from our state of being dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1) and impart to us a new nature that is able to obey Him (Eph. 4:22-24). Paul says that "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Rom. 8:7-9). As he goes on to explain, the Holy Spirit gives us the power to put to death the deeds of the flesh and to live in obedience to God.

2. *We must clean out and block out sources for sinful thoughts.*

We cannot have a pure thought life without first ridding ourselves of things which defile us. It would be like trying to clean yourself while you're lying in a mud hole. The first step is to get out of the mud and get to a source of soap and water. If we allow things into our lives which promote sensuality, greed, sexual impurity, crude language, violence, hatred, love of self, or anything else not pleasing to God, we cannot grow in holiness.

I agree with Pastor Kent Hughes, who in his book, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* ([Crossway Books], p. 75) writes, "I am aware of the wise warnings against using words like 'all,' 'every,' and 'always' in what I say. Absolutizing one's pronouncements is dangerous. But

I'm going to do it anyway. Here it is: *It is impossible for any Christian who spends the bulk of his evenings, month after month, week upon week, day in and day out watching the major TV networks or contemporary videos to have a Christian mind.* This is *always* true of *all* Christians in *every* situation!" (emphasis his). Amen!

It needs to be said: You *will not be a godly person* if you do not control the TV, videos, movies, music, magazines, books, and even the radio programs you take in. If something is polluting you or tempting you, get rid of it and make plans to avoid it!

3. *Take in God's Word from every source.*

Read it daily. If you're not a reader, listen to it on tape. You have no excuses for not saturating your mind with Scripture. As Kent Hughes also says, "You cannot be profoundly influenced by that which you do not know" (p. 77). I cannot encourage you enough to memorize verses that relate to problems you struggle with. Unless the Word is in your heart, God cannot use it when you are tempted (see Jesus' example in fending off temptation, Matt. 4:1-11). You do not need to read the newspaper every day, but you desperately need to read your Bible every day! It's like a daily shower--it cleanses off the dirt of the world (Eph. 5:26).

4. *Expose your mind to the teaching and examples of the great Christians down through history.*

Listen to and read sermons from godly men. The sermons and commentaries of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, J. C. Ryle, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and other giants of the faith are available in print. Read the biographies of these and other godly men and women. With a few exceptions, avoid most of the modern Christian best sellers, and spend your time reading the works that have stood the test of time. These men walked with God, and they will feed your soul.

5. *Listen to wholesome music, especially the great hymns of the faith.*

I enjoy many of the praise choruses, especially those that are taken directly from Scripture. But also, some of the great hymns have a history of sustaining God's people down through the years, and they are doctrinally meaty. The Wesley's used hymns to teach theology to many who were illiterate. Get recordings of the great

hymns and play them until you know them by heart. They will fill your mind with wholesome truth.

Conclusion

A number of years ago, the news media picked up the story of a woman known as "Garbage Mary." She lived in a smelly Chicago tenement amid mounds of garbage. She spent her time rummaging through trash cans. She would bum cigarettes off her neighbors. Police took her to a psychiatric hospital after she was stopped for questioning and found to be in a confused state of mind. When they went into her filthy apartment, they were astounded to find stock certificates and bank books indicating she was worth at least a million dollars. She was the daughter of a wealthy Illinois lawyer.

It's a pathetic story, but it pictures the lives of many professing Christians, who could be immersing their thought life in that which is true, dignified, right, pure, lovely, of good repute; that which is virtuous and worthy of praise. But instead, they surround themselves with moral filth, wallowing daily in raunchy TV programs, polluting their minds with the sordid stories of this condemned world, rather than focusing their thought life on the things of God and Christ.

An old Indian Christian was explaining to a missionary that the battle inside of him was like a black dog fighting a white dog. "Which dog wins?" asked the missionary. "The one I feed the most," replied the Indian. Paul says, "Feed your mind on the pure truth of God's Word."

Discussion Questions

1. Why are Peale's "Positive Thinking" and Schuller's "Possibility Thinking" fundamentally opposed to Scripture?
2. Some Christians argue that we need to be aware of what's going on in our culture through movies, TV, etc. Your response?
3. How should a Christian police officer apply Phil. 4:8 when he is daily confronted by moral filth in his job?
4. Someone may argue, "The Bible itself has stories of immorality, etc. What's the difference between reading it there and watching it on TV, movies, or video?" Your answer?

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