

Habits of Thinking and Acting

Philippians 4:8-9

Today's passage is Philippians 4:8-9. In these verses Paul first challenges us to **think** properly, and then he challenges us to **act** properly. The progression is important: what we do is informed by what we think.

8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

This passage urges us to conform our patterns of thinking and acting to the will of God. This will involve confronting the habits of the flesh (that part of us that craves sin instead of the will of God). The flesh is like the ruts worn into a country dirt road over the years. When you drive on that road, it's easiest and most natural to let your wheels settle into those ruts and take you wherever the road goes. Over the years [unless our minds are intentionally renewed day-by-day] we develop well-worn paths in our minds that are at odds with the will of God. It eventually becomes very easy and natural to let our thoughts travel down those paths. The ruts in your mind may take you down the path of anger, bitterness, anxiety, jealousy, judgmentalism, despair, sensuality, or a hundred other sub-Christian patterns of thought.

Trying to renew your mind, change your habits of thinking, etc. will likely be one of the most difficult thing you will ever do in your life. The flesh has been likened to a wolverine (the animal, not the Marvel Comics character; see *The Enemy Within* by Kris



Lundgaard, 73-75). A wolverine weighs about 35 pounds but can take down a moose or an antelope; its teeth and claws are lethal. When you seek to submit your mind and heart to God, like a wolverine, the flesh will “bare its teeth and flash its claws”; the flesh will resist your attempts in a fierce, tenacious way:

- The flesh will try to convince you that you should give up before you begin because you'll never love God more than you love sin.
 - The flesh will tell you to wait until tomorrow (or next week or next year) to seek God (you've got more urgent things to do today).
 - The flesh will point out that you're already more spiritual than most of your friends, so don't get too fanatical about abiding in Christ.
- The flesh will not give up without a fight.

My goal in saying all of this is to impress upon us all (myself included) that there is a 0% chance of changing our habits of thinking and acting in our own strength, independent of God's power. We need to become desperate for God to do this deep work in our minds. The good news, as we saw in Philippians 2 is that we can “work out our salvation with fear and trembling because “God is already at work in us” giving us the **desire** and the **power** to do the things that please Him. Therefore, we put no confidence in ourselves but have GREAT confidence in God to renew our minds.

Dwell on the things that are “excellent” and “worthy of praise.” (Philippians 4:8)

8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

Here in verse 8 we have a command to “dwell on” or “think about” the right things, and therefore the implicit command to not think about the wrong things. Before we discuss this verse in some detail, I want to give the broader biblical context of our thought-life. Unless we understand this broader context, we won’t really understand what is at stake in this command Paul gives us. It will likely seem good but fairly trivial/inconsequential. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

A Biblical Perspective on our Thought Life. Consider these three perspectives from Scripture (from both the Old and New Testaments):

First, ***God knows every thought of my heart.*** Passages such as Psalm 139 David makes this point:

1 O Lord, You have searched me and known me.
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You understand my thought from afar.
3 You scrutinize my path and my lying down,
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.
4 Even before there is a word on my tongue,
Behold, O Lord, You know it all.

This is a statement about God’s ***personal*** omniscience; God has exhaustive knowledge about every thought I think, every word I speak, and every action I take. It’s not merely that “God knows everything” (that He has a database that contains every bit of data in the universe). David is saying that “God has exhaustive knowledge ***about me***”: “O Lord, You have searched me and known me. . . You understand my thought from afar. . . before these is a word on my tongue, you know it. . .”

It’s the difference between, “God knows everybody’s thoughts,” and “God is listening in on ***my*** thoughts.” He notices when I think kind, gracious, compassionate thoughts, and He notices when I think arrogant, judgmental, hateful thoughts.

Hebrews 4 tells us that “all things are open and laid bare before the eyes” of God. When it comes to God none of us has a single secret. Whether this is good news or bad news depends on the character of God. If He’s harsh and vindictive, this is really bad news; if He is “slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (as Scripture tells us), we should have great hope.

Second, ***God expects me to love Him with every thought of my mind/heart.*** The *shema* in Deuteronomy 6 expresses what God expects of His people in every generation. Moses gave this command to the children of Israel before they entered the Land:

4 “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! 5 “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

We shouldn't see a hard a fast distinction between our heart, our soul, and our might; they're meant to be taken together to mean “our whole being” - everything we are and everything we have. God expects us to love Him - intentionally love Him - with every fiber of our being. We really can't overstate how comprehensively God wants us to love Him. Of course our love for Him only mirrors **His love for us!** God loves us with all His heart, soul, and might; He proved that on the cross when He gave His one and only Son!

Interestingly, when Mark records Jesus' restatement of this command (in Mark 12:30), He includes the mention of loving God with our “minds”:

30 and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

Clearly, God expects us to love Him with the thoughts of our minds/hearts.

Third, ***I, therefore, should make it my ambition to love Him with my every thought.*** Since David believed that God knew his every thought and that God expected him to love Him with his every thought, he had this aspiration for his thought life (Psalm 19:14):

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

David was able to say, “God, I am accountable to You not only for the words that I say, but also for the meditations of my heart (the very thoughts that I mull over throughout the day).

To be honest, until relatively recently, I don't think I took very seriously the idea of submitting the very “meditations of my heart” to God. I felt like I had my hands full dealing with the words of my mouth and the actions of my body; but the meditations of my heart just seemed too untamed and too far out of my control. But I began noticing the Scriptures we're discussing this morning and became convinced that God wants me to “own” my thought life and gladly answer to Him about them.

Eventually we all need to grow up and become accountable for the meditations of our hearts. We should acknowledge that our thinking has been shaped by all sorts of influences: the homes in which we were raised, the things that have happened to us (both good and bad), our God-given temperaments, etc. But eventually we need to say, “I am responsible for the deep patterns of thought in my heart. By God's grace, even the meditations of my heart should be pleasing to Him.”

I've also found it incredibly empowering and encouraging to realize that God can be trusted to ***expose and refine*** the meditations of my heart. David sure thought so. At the end of Psalm 139 he prayed this:

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

This is a model prayer for every follower of Christ. God, expose the hurtful, anxious thoughts of my heart. . . and lead me down life-giving paths. That's exactly what Paul is urging in Philippians 4:8. Listen again:

8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

The core command is given at the end of the verse: “**dwell** on these things.” This verb has a variety of different connotations, but at its core it means to consider, ponder, dwell upon specific things (and types of things).

Paul first lists six adjectives to describe the types of things that should dominate our thinking. Significantly, scholars tell us that Paul has taken a list of virtues that were popular in moral philosophy of his day (such as Stoicism); most of the virtues in this list are found elsewhere in the NT and in the Greek translation of the OT (the LXX), but they weren't exclusively Christian virtues (such as humility and radical forgiveness). Paul was saying that Christians should excel in **the virtues that were already valued** in their society. Of course they were to excel in these common virtues without letting their culture define their morality and without adopting the unbiblical presuppositions of those who teach these virtues. These virtues were not only godly; they were also a bridge to people without Christ. Living in a society that viewed Christ's followers with suspicion and/or hatred, these virtues would have gotten their attention and possibly opened doors for the gospel.

Something similar is true in our day. There are many virtues that are highly valued outside of the body of Christ. They are good in an absolute sense; but they are also a bridge to the larger culture. Think about honesty, for example. Let's say that you are doing work for someone (as a carpenter, a plumber, an accountant, an engineer, etc.) and you make a mistake that nobody notices (you break something, you mis-calculate something, etc.). If you come back and say, “I messed up, and I'm going to make it right w/o any additional cost,” you will build a bridge to that person.

The virtues Paul lists are widely accepted in our day and in our culture. If these virtues aren't embedded in our thoughts (and therefore our words and actions), we shouldn't be too surprised if others don't take our witness very seriously. Paul challenges us to **dwell on these virtues** (6 adjectives):

[I'll illustrate each one briefly with some specific examples.]

- o whatever is **true**: it aligns with reality; it is not false. Last week Logan talked about dealing with anxiety. He pointed out that we sometimes become anxious because

we can't control our circumstances and we can't fix every problem. If we dwell on what is true (what aligns with reality), we will consider all the ways God has been faithful in the past; we will entrust our circumstances to Him through prayer.

- whatever is **honorable**: it is worthy of honor/respect. The idea is that if people could hear your thoughts they would respect you all the more. Let's say that someone has insulted you. People wouldn't respect you if they read your mind and heard you thinking angry, hateful thoughts about the other person. But their respect for you would grow if they could read your mind and you were praying for that person or examining your own heart to see if you had caused offense.
- whatever is **right**: it is just/right in the broadest sense. When we watch the news, if we think purely in political terms, we'll want our side to win and the other side to lose. But if we think in terms of what is right/just, we might find ourselves having thoughts of compassion for our political enemies or for people we tend to dismiss out of hand.
- whatever is **pure**: it is holy (set apart for specific purposes). This virtue includes (but isn't limited to) sexual purity. Purity of thought means that we refuse to objectify others in our thought life; instead we think of them as created in the image of God. This is the purpose of humanity (both male and female) - to image God in this world. Pure patterns of thought involve looking for the image of God in others.
- whatever is **lovely**: it inspires the love of others (not distasteful). When we're suffering - whether physically/medically, relationally, emotionally - we have a unique opportunity to think in ways that others would love (that they would deem lovely). This is where the Psalms of lament can give voice to patterns of thought that are legitimately lovely (e.g., Psalm 3, Psalm 44). They are honest and raw in places, but they are also full of faith and hope. We know that God finds those patterns of thought lovely because they're included in Scripture; and they will be lovely to others as we share the meditations of our hearts with them in the midst of our sufferings.
- whatever is of **good repute**: it is worthy of others' approval. Instead of an illustration, I'll give a perspective on patterns of thought that are worthy of others' approval. First and foremost, we want to think things that are worthy of God's approval; this means that we have to saturate our minds with God's Word. Read through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) to see how God thinks about anger, lust, retaliation, revenge, the poor, prayer, fasting, etc. If you can lay your head on the pillow with God's approval for your thought life that day, you will probably sleep very, very well.

Dwell on these things (2 summarizing nouns):

- if there is any excellence: it displays moral excellence
- if anything worthy of praise: it elicits the genuine praise/admiration of others. Here again Paul wants us to keep in mind how God and other people will react to our thinking (which shows up in our words and actions). Throughout Philippians Paul has stressed that believers should participate in the gospel; a core way we do this is by dwelling on things that the unbelieving world would find worthy of praise.

Paul tells us, "dwell on these things." These virtues are supposed to characterize our patterns of thought. It may be that you don't currently pay much attention to the things you dwell upon. You may need to stop and ask yourself, "What thoughts are dominating my thinking right now?" A couple years ago I was out in my wood shop in my day off; this should have been a happy time in my happy place. But I realized that I wasn't

enjoying myself at all because I was stewing over an argument - playing it over and over in my mind. I had this passage in mind, I would have concluded that I was dwelling on things that nobody would **honor** or **approve** or find **lovely**.

Again, I would urge you to pray Psalm 139:23-24 which says:

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

Begin praying this prayer daily - in faith and in Jesus' name. Then go through your day in anticipation that God will answer that prayer very clearly and powerfully.

Practice the things you have learned and received from godly people. (Philippians 4:9) Paul was able to challenge the Philippians to imitate the things they had seen in his life. This would include the virtues he mentioned in verse 8.

9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

The Philippians had "learned and received" things from Paul; they were teachable and receptive to the gospel and the path of discipleship. As well, the Philippians had "heard and seen" things in Paul. He didn't merely give them abstract ideas; he demonstrated how they should live.

What Paul is describing here should be the norm in the body of Christ. Ideally children "learn and receive" and "hear and see" a life of discipleship from their parents. If they don't, they should have plenty of examples in the larger body of Christ. Even when we get older, we need people to be mentors and examples, people who have walked a few steps ahead of us and can both narrate and demonstrate how to walk with Christ.

Let me reiterate that if you want your life to be an example, you have to dwell on what is true, honorable, right, lovely, etc. Our thoughts inform our words and our actions. My encouragement is simply to realize that somebody is watching your life; you have the opportunity to demonstrate what it looks like to walk with Jesus.

The promise to those who "practice these things" (dwell on what is excellent and follow godly examples) is that "the God of peace will be with you." In verse 7 Paul mentioned "the peace of God"; here he mentions the God of peace. I love that designation of our God: He is the God of peace in the sense that He Himself is full of peace; He gives us peace with Himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus; He gives us peace internally as turn to Him in prayer and trust; He gives us peace with each other as we exhibit the fruit of the Spirit.