

Philippians 4:1-9

The Power of Spiritual Thinking

...*think on these things* – v. 8

As a man thinketh in his heart so is he the wise man writes in Prov. 23:7. You've heard the saying "you are what you eat?" The same thing could be said for the Christian's thinking. You are what you think. It's no wonder, then, that the Christian's thought life is an issue that is often addressed by the Apostle Paul.

It is in connection with our thinking that Paul writes to the Corinthians in 2Cor. 10:4,5 that *the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.* And in those familiar verses in Rom. 12:1,2 he writes *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

We have noted in the course of these studies in Philippians that Paul places a strong emphasis on the mind. *Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus (2:5); in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves (2:3); And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (4:7).*

Paul certainly knew the positive spiritual effects of right thinking. He also knew that so much of the Christian's warfare is fought in the mind and that many of the dangers a Christian faces in this world come through wrong or distorted thinking. The devil is devoted to luring a Christian into wrong thinking because he knows that wrong thinking stunts spiritual growth and wrong thinking robs a Christian of assurance and wrong thinking leads to bondage and pride and an ineffective witness for Christ.

You could say, then, that in v. 8 where Paul now gives his final *finally brethren* he is in effect placing a stamp or a seal on all that he has already said. If the Philippians would devote themselves to constructive spiritual thinking then they would establish and maintain unity in the church. Euodias and Syntyche would get along and the minds and hearts of the saints in Philippi would not be troubled by the animosity of the world toward the gospel of Christ.

And what was true in Paul's day is no less true in our day. The Christian needs to be engaged in constructive and spiritual thinking. The trouble we face in our day and in our culture is that we find it so strongly tempting to be taken up with other things. There are some Christians that devote all their mental energy toward planning on what it takes to get ahead in the world. If I can reach a certain benchmark, a certain income level then I'll be able to pay off my debts and provide a more comfortable life for my family. We'll have

nicer things and we'll be able to afford to do more things that we really can't afford to do now. I'll be able to afford that car that I can only dream about now and oh, of course I'll be able to give more to the church and to other good Christian causes.

Now I'm not about to say that there's anything wrong with getting ahead or making plans for the future, but what I would suggest is that when those things dominate your mind then you're not thinking right and you're not thinking the way Paul tells the Christian to think in v. 8.

I can remember many years ago when I was a new Christian and young in the faith I was recruited to attend one of these pyramid marketing schemes where you become a distributor of certain products. And the idea was that as you succeeded not only in selling products but in getting others to sell the products which they would buy from you then you would exponentially increase your income beyond your wildest dreams. And the way they tried to motivate the people in the marketing scheme to work hard to recruit other sales reps was to get you thinking on all the things you would be able to buy and all the things you would be able to do. Basically they would dangle the things of the world before you and try to increase your appetite for all the things the world has to offer.

Such thinking is not at all what Paul has in mind when he says in v. 8 *whatsoever things are true, and whatsoever things are honest, and whatsoever things are just, and whatsoever things are pure, and whatsoever things are lovely, and whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things.*

But then there are other Christians who, while they may not devote their mental energies toward thinking about the world's goods and the things they afford if they only had more money, they instead devote much thinking to all that is wrong in the world. Our politicians are corrupt and big corporations are nothing but greedy profit mongers. And wasn't the jury's verdict of George Zimmerman a travesty of justice, or doesn't the news media abuse the practice of reporting the news by instead giving out propaganda for fueling racial tension. And 9/11 was really a government conspiracy, and we didn't really land on the moon.

And here again, we want to do our best to stay informed and we want to be aware of the issues of the day that we might take the right kind of civic action when the time calls for it. But when these things dominate our thinking to the point that we can hardly think about anything else then we go astray in our thinking and reap the rotten fruit of anger and bitterness and constant agitation and anxiety. This is not the kind of thinking that Paul calls for in our text.

I suppose I could devote this entire study to listing ways that Christians are not suppose to think. That's not the issue that the text addresses, however. The fact that there is so much wrong thinking among Christians establishes the need for our text today to be rightly understood and applied. And so what I want to consider today is what the text positively states. I like the way one preacher of old summarized the teaching of this verse when he

entitled his sermon: The Transforming Power of Thought. I'd like to modify that theme a little bit this morning by turning it into a question.

How Can the Christian's Life be Transformed by His Thinking?

In the moments that remain I want to answer that question in 3 ways.

I. The Christian's Life is Transformed by being Engaged in Thinking

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

I've been describing ways in which a Christian shouldn't think. He shouldn't be dominated by worldly thinking and he shouldn't be dominated by fearful thinking. There's something closely akin to wrong thinking that is actually something just as bad, if not worse, and that is a Christian who isn't engaged in thinking at all.

There are plenty of religions in the world that suppress thinking. Such religions prefer their adherents to be blind followers of whatever is dictated to them. I would include Roman Catholicism in that category. I can remember reading Lorraine Boettner's book on Roman Catholicism in which he pointed out that the Bible itself was on the Catholic index of forbidden books during the days of the counter Reformation. Boettner has been criticized for being over the top in his criticisms of Roman Catholicism so I did a little searching to see if his account of the Bible being on the index of forbidden books was valid. The best I could do was find one site that claimed that Bible reading was allowed in the laity provided you had a license issued to you by the proper church authorities.

I can remember when I worked in the printing industry having a discussion with a Roman Catholic who piously told me he would never read the Bible. It was against the policy of his church. I told him rather sarcastically that pious ignorance is a feature of the Roman Catholic church. You are suppose to read your Bible but you're suppose to do more than read it. You're to *think on these things*.

Philippians 4:8 is a text that some preachers draw from in order to expound the practice of meditation. A number of Puritans have written on the practice of meditation. In his book *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* Dr. Beeke devotes a chapter to the Puritan practice of meditation. Some of the headings in that chapter include **The Definition, Nature, and Kinds of Meditation; The Duty and Necessity of Meditation; The Manner of Meditation; The Subjects for Meditation** (this heading ties into our text) **The Benefits to Meditation; The Obstacles to Meditation.**

It's not my purpose today to elaborate on these headings. Let me just share with you what the Scripture itself says on the subject. The Lord's word to Joshua in Joshua 1:8 is a word we should all take to heart: Jos 1:8 *This book of the law shall not depart out of thy*

mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.

Psalm 1 contains a familiar statement pertaining to meditation. Speaking of the Blessed Man v. 2 says *But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.* The word *meditate* occurs many times in the Psalms. Let me just leave you with one more reference, this one from the New Testament: 1Ti 4:15 *Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all.*

Simply put meditation is a form of thinking. When Paul says *think on these things* there's a sense in which he's calling for meditation. The word *think* in our text, however, is different from the common word for *think*. It's the word that in other places is translated by the word *reckon*. How many times have you heard me cite Rom. 6:11 as the essence of gospel obedience. *Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The word speaks to us of more than just mental exercise. It includes that but it also includes appropriation by faith. You are to think and you are to apply God's word. You want to know what it says, what it means, and how it applies to you. This is to be the Christian's practice. His mind is to be actively engaged in his religion. He's not to be thoughtless. He's not to be a blind adherent to whatever is dictated to him by other men.

I love the text in Acts 17 that speaks of the Christians at Berea. Ac 17:11 *These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.* I have referenced this text on occasion to stress the point that there is no such thing as spoon-fed Christianity, not even when the Apostle Paul himself was holding the spoon. Those who heard Paul at Berea tested what he said by the scriptures and for that practice they are labeled as *noble*.

I hope that as Christians you are actively engaged in thinking. Not every Christian appreciates this privilege. I remember from my college days a student who was frustrated because he had heard two views by two different professors on a particular verse from the Bible. *How am I suppose to know what it means if my teachers don't agree* he asked. I remember saying to him – *it's enough to drive you to the Bible.* One of my professors, the one who stands out as having the greatest impact on me, constantly charged his students to go to the word. Don't tell me what Dr. so and so says it means, you get into it. You think about it. You study it carefully and prayerfully and compare it with the rest of the Bible until you know what it means.

As Christians we are suppose to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We are suppose to advance in our sanctification. We are to avoid being conformed to the world and are instead to be *transformed by the renewing of our minds* (Rom. 12:2). In order to accomplish these things we must be actively engaged with our minds. We are to *think on these things*.

But would you consider with me next that the Christian becomes transformed by his thinking not by being engaged in undirected or misdirected thinking.

II. The Christian's Life is Transformed by Guided Thinking

This is what Paul elaborates in our text. *Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.* One of the things that is striking in this verse is the vastness of the Christian's thinking.

The word *whatsoever* is the recurring word and because it is repeated again and again it means that Paul is placing a strong emphasis on it. *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest* etc. It becomes evident, doesn't it that there is a vastness to the things that the Christian can contemplate. I like the words of a preacher from the 19th century who described this vastness. He wrote:

Whatsoever things are honest — The word does not exactly mean what we call honest, but what is worthy of honour, revered, august, venerable, majestic. Think on whatever things you can look up to in persons, circumstances, and respect. Especially in social life, in the political world, in literature. Where there is no room for reverence there is no room for life. The name of God, the idea of worship, the solemnity of life, the immortality of the soul, the fact of death, the judgment seat — “think on these things,” awful, venerable things. Then government, law, the State, the Church, the ruling powers and influences of society; the magistrate, holding “not the sword in vain, the minister of God to thee for good” — “think on these things,” pray for them; check faction, uphold authority. Nor are the grand advances of science to be omitted from this catalogue. For these, we are to bless God. His hand is in them all. The astronomical accuracy that can calculate the moment of an eclipse a hundred years hence

— the power of expediting communication, like lightning, to the ends of the earth — the triumph over winds and waves — the mighty faculty of the poet — the genius of history, the gift of eloquence — the prevention of disease, the alleviation of pain — the “rise up and walk” of medical skill — these, too, together with the awful and majestic in nature and art, whatsoever in mountain or sea or sky, whatsoever in painting or noble structure shows greatness of purpose, nobility of soul, and tends to bow our souls in admiration — “think on these things.”

I think we could analyze Paul's statement under a few broad headings. We are, of course, to think of Christ. Some would be happy to restrict Paul's application to that and nothing more. And I won't deny for a moment that our thinking should include much of Christ. And that our thinking should lead us to Christ. He, after all is true – indeed he is the way, the truth, and the life. And he is honest or honorable. He alone is just and pure, sinlessly perfect and positively holy. He is absolutely lovely, the fairest of ten thousand, the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys. And we certainly have good reports of him in the

gospels and in the lives of those who know him and love him. So we're to think of Christ and we're to think of things that are closely associated with Christ.

Think on the truths of the gospel and salvation; Think on the promises of God and his covenant faithfulness. Think on the way your salvation satisfies God's justice and promotes purity in the lives of Christ's followers. Think on the time you gained a saving interest in Christ. Remember the time that you went from being at enmity with him to finding him altogether lovely. There is certainly a vastness to the things the Christian can think upon in relationship to Christ.

There are, of course, other spiritual things that you should also think on. Instead of dwelling on all that is wrong in the world you might think about the world to come. Thank God there is coming a new heaven and a new earth wherein will dwell righteousness. Can you even begin to fathom what that world will be like? One of the thoughts that strikes me about that time is the way we will be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God forever. No more distractions, no more defilement, no more weakness that springs from our infirmities. No more profanity or lewdness or strife or sinful hatred. No more self seeking or political corruption or abominable practices or murder or stealing but instead there will be the adding of our voices to the choir that sings *worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing*.

Do you not find such thoughts to be true and honest and just and pure and lovely? Thinking on spiritual things, of course, does not mean that we have to become so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. So we do well to think on the things we can do in this world to promote heaven on earth. We do well to promote righteousness and fight against sin. We do well to pray for those in office that do represent values that are true and honest and just and pure. And we do well to think on the relationships we are blessed with as members of the family of God.

Husbands, think upon your wives. Aren't they lovely to you? Aren't they patient with you? Aren't they honorable and don't they receive good reports from their children when their children rise to call them blessed? Think on your children – they are gifts from God. And if you have no children and you have no spouse then think on the fact that God has not left you without a family. You are among the Lord's people and they are your family and there's a sense in which you are even more intimately married to Christ.

Paul, you know, spoke on the subject of marriage as a distraction in 1Cor. 7. So we read in vv. 32,33 *But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife*. Some of you are not hindered by that distraction and have the liberty, therefore, to devote yourselves all the more to Christ.

The point I'm trying to stress in all of what I've been saying is that there is vastness to the things the Christian can contemplate. *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things*

are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise think on these things.

Be sure, in other words, that you are guided in your thinking to things that are spiritual and filter all your thinking through the person and work of Jesus Christ. How, then, is the Christian transformed by his thinking? Well he obviously has to be thinking if he's going to be transformed by his thinking. But he must be sure that he's guided in his thinking or that he's disciplined in his thinking so that he is occupied with thoughts of Christ, thoughts of the gospel of Christ, thoughts of the kingdom of Christ, and thoughts of the people of Christ.

There is one more aspect to the text that we must consider. If the Christian is going to be transformed by his thinking, you see, he must not only be guided in his thinking but he must be guarded in his thinking

III. The Christian's Life is Transformed by Guarded Thinking

Just as certainly as Paul states positively the kinds of things the Christian is to think upon, he, by implication shows the kinds of things the Christian must guard his mind against.

Simply put the Christian must guard his mind from thoughts that are not based on truth and are dishonorable and are sinful and impure. Pornography and the things that lead in that direction must not be allowed in the Christian's mind. What this means, of course, is that the Christian must watch or he must be vigilant concerning what he allows his eyes to see on the internet or on television or in magazines.

We know, of course, that in our culture today we are bombarded with things that are impure and sinful. They attack you everywhere. They attack you through billboard or through magazines on the rack in the checkout line of the grocery store. And even when you manage to find something on television that may be wholesome to watch, you have to be on your guard with the commercials. Immodesty is the rule of the day.

Now you know in your experience that when it comes to the mind, you can be the active creator of thoughts but you can also be the passive recipient of thoughts. Thoughts can arise from within that spring from your carnal nature or are planted by the devil and when wrong thoughts arise from within they must be taken in hand in dismissed and replaced with things that are wholesome.

In this sense, right thinking and wholesome thinking becomes a discipline. You know that when it comes to bodily exercise when your body works out that discipline is required. It takes effort and consistency and perseverance when it comes to bodily exercise. The same thing applies to mental exercise. I remember a professor from my college days who use to lament the mental laziness of many Christians. You need to make your minds sweat, he use to say. And what that means, simply, is that it takes a concerted effort to check wrong thinking and to engage in right and wholesome thinking.

So when you find your mind filled with foreboding thoughts or with impure thoughts or with vain thoughts you must not simply tolerate them, you must take the matter in hand and call on the Holy Spirit to empower you to bring every thought into obedience to Christ.

In his book on Spiritual Depression Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out how the Psalmist does this with regard to discouraging thoughts. In Ps. 42:5 the Psalmist asks himself *Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why are thou disquieted in me?* You see what he's doing? He's preaching to himself. So must we likewise preach to ourselves when we find our thought lives being crowded by discouraging thoughts or by sinful and impure thoughts. *Why art thou cast down, O my soul?* – or *Why art thou harboring sin, O my soul?* – or *Why art thou engaged in the pursuit of vain glory, O my soul, by catering to pride and self righteousness?* But next comes the positive message that he preaches to himself *Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.*

Foreboding thoughts and impure thoughts and sinful thoughts are of course inevitable given the Christian's sinful nature. But that doesn't mean he should tolerate them. It means, instead, that he should plead the blood of Christ over them and seek the help of God for victory over them. And it also means that he should do all in his power to protect himself from feeding his mind on things that will contribute to impure thinking.

I'm afraid that too many Christians don't take the matter to heart because they think that feeding on things that are untrue, and dishonorable, and unjust and impure will not bear any serious consequences. Remember the verse I cited in the beginning of this message from Prov. 23:6,7 *Eat thou not the bread of him that hath an evil eye, neither desire thou his dainty meats: For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he:*

We do become what we think which means that the potential for transformation is present with us but that also the potential for defilement and sin and hypocrisy is also present with us. Thank God this morning that the blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin including the sins of the mind. Let's realize then that our minds are a battlefield. The Christian must be engaged in the right kind of thinking. You will be engaged in some form of thinking the real question is really not whether or not you will think but how will you think. You must be engaged in thinking but your thinking must be guided thinking and it must therefore be guarded thinking.

May the Lord empower you heed his word so that you will be found dwelling on *whatsoever things are true, and whatsoever things are honest, and whatsoever things are just, and whatsoever things are pure, and whatsoever things are lovely and whatsoever things are of good report. If there be any virtue and if there be any praise think on these things.*