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Philippians #20

Sermon Summary #20

Think, Meditate, Ponder, and Practice! Philippians 4:8-9

Among the many reasons I could mention why I love God's Word, let me give you just one example. When I read a passage such as Philippians 4:8-9, I find myself experiencing a double effect. On the one hand, I feel encouraged and energized, almost as if I'm being lifted above and beyond the harsh realities of life in this fallen world of ours. It's as if the exalted language of v. 8 and the virtues to which it calls me serve as something of a *powerful updraft* that elevates me from my place on earth and draws me closer to God.

But then, almost at the same time, this text rather rudely takes hold of me and plants my feet firmly back on the ground and then reaches down and slaps me across the face and shouts, "Wake up, Sam, and change how you think and live right now!"

It's as if there is at one and the same time both a *glorious beauty* and a *gentle brutality* in Paul's words. The glorious beauty is obvious. Words like honorable and pure and just and lovely and excellence are soothing and reassuring to my heart. But there is a gentle brutality at play here as well. What I mean is that Paul uses these terms not so much to give me the warm fuzzies but to *challenge* me in terms of what I value most and what I do with my time and how I make choices about what I'll watch and hear and read and where I'll go. And it's brutal! But it is a gentle brutality because in it all God is expressing his love to me and to you.

So, I don't know if you feel the same double whammy that I do when I read this passage, but I want to try to account for it as we unpack Paul's terms.

But before we jump into v. 8 I need to draw your attention to two crucial points.

First, I need to say something about how v. 8 relates to v. 7. You will recall from last week that Paul assured us that if we are diligent to pray about everything we will experience the presence of God's peace guarding our hearts and minds.

However, I didn't say anything last week about *precisely how* God guards our hearts and minds. Let me explain what I mean. What happens if we pray fervently and frequently and about everything, as Paul instructs us, but then fill our minds and hearts with filth and garbage and lies and offensive images? *Will God guard our hearts and minds with his peace regardless of what we do, irrespective of what we allow to enter into our heads?* I don't think so. In other words, can I expect my heart and mind to be guarded, safe from harm and the onslaught of Satan, resting in the peace of God himself, all the while I'm filling it with filth? Absolutely not.

My sense is that in v. 8 Paul is telling us how or by what means and when God guards our minds. And it is only as we take steps to fill our minds with what is honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable. In other words, we must "think about these things," we must ponder and reflect and meditate upon such things; we must open our hearts and minds to whatever reflects these moral virtues if we expect to experience the peace of God which Paul promised to us in v. 7.

Second, please observe that there are *two imperatives, two commands, not just one*. People often read vv. 8-9 and focus their attention only on the command in v. 8 *to think*. They fail to observe that Paul also commands us in v. 9 *to practice*. This is not a call for merely intellectual reflection, but for sober consideration of what is good *so we can live it out daily*. That is why I titled the message today, **Think, Meditate, Ponder, and Practice!**

So we see that this is not the counsel of someone seeking to withdraw into a cocoon of isolation or of someone trying to escape the hardships and heartaches of life. This is rock-solid counsel for those who need

the strength and presence of God to help them triumph over all such challenges. What Paul says here isn't designed for the ivory-tower intellectual egghead, but for every Christian man and woman who lives down in the trenches of daily life.

What I'm asking all of us to do is *to place our lives under the probing searchlight of this passage*. I'm asking all of us, myself included, to think today about the overall quality of our lives, whether in our relationships, our hobbies, how we spend our money and time and energy, what we wear, what we do at work, how we speak, what we watch and listen to, where we go with friends or when alone. What is the moral and aesthetic tone of our existence?

Think! Meditate! Ponder! (v. 8)

Make no mistake: *There is no enduring change in life, there is no meaningful Christ-exalting, sin-killing sanctification apart from a transformation in how you think. Your mind matters.* In fact, it matters eternally. So Paul tells us all to think about true things, not lies; ponder and reflect on what is noble and dignified, not what is base and vulgar; meditate on what is just and righteous not what is wrong and distorted; focus on what is pure, not sleazy; fix your thoughts on what is admirable and praiseworthy, not offensive and ugly.

The repetition of the word "whatever" all through v. 8 is designed to impress on our hearts the comprehensive scope of these virtues in terms of how they are to impact our lives. Don't think of these as simply general principles but rather bear in mind moment by moment that a life of truth and purity and excellence is made up of daily, indeed hourly acts characterized by these virtues.

Another thing to remember is that these virtues are not distinctively Christian. They can be found in the world around us. Theologians talk often about "*common*" *grace*, that is, the goodness and grace of God whereby he bestows on the unbelieving world good gifts and talents and skills that are designed to make life livable. That doesn't mean the people who are recipients of common grace are necessarily saved and redeemed. But we mustn't forget that a lot of people who have displayed incredible financial generosity toward the victims of the Moore tornado are non-Christians. Countless non-believers have made remarkable personal sacrifices of time and energy in order to assist those in need. Thus, wherever these virtues in v. 8 appear in the broader culture, identify them and think on them and embrace them.

Look for whatever reflects and gives expression to these virtues and bring them into conformity with Christ and the gospel. You can learn a great deal about these virtues from reading books by non-Christians. We can learn from film and theater and political life and works of art. As NT scholar Frank Thielman has said, Christians should "cast their intellectual nets widely – to allow all that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, wherever it is found, to shape their thinking" (231). Don't retreat and hide from the world. Rather, take advantage of their knowledge and insights.

There are eight virtues Paul mentions, so let's look briefly at each of them.

(1) "Whatever is true" – Whether it be in matters of theology, economics, political theory, your acts of service, or in your relationships with your neighbors.

Truth is whatever conforms to the gospel and the revelation of God's will in his Word. Truth is whatever conforms to objective reality.

Sadly, increasing numbers of people are drawn to the outlandish notion that there is no objective and universal truth. There are as many "truths" as there are individuals who believe them. Truth for them is entirely subjective, which is to say, whatever feels true or seems true to each individual subject, is true.

Paul's exhortation is that we are to think and meditate on truth with regard to God, man, the church, the world, sin, redemption, relationships, etc.

(2) "Whatever is honorable" – By this word he has in mind whatever is sublime, dignified, majestic; whatever evokes respect and reverence; lofty and majestic things as over against vulgar and crude,

frivolous and trivial. Christianity should never lead us to embrace mediocrity or slovenliness or vulgarity or crudeness, whether in our speech, our appearance, our activities, our productivity, etc.

He has in view things that lift the mind rather than dragging it through the gutter.

(3) ***“Whatever is just”*** – That is to say, whatever is in accord with divine standards of right and wrong.

Again, we live in a day when any such notion that there is an ultimate righteousness, an eternal and unchanging justice is simply ignored, or perhaps even mocked.

(4) ***“Whatever is pure”*** – The word “pure” is used often in the NT and can mean chaste (2 Cor. 11:2; Titus 2:5), innocent (2 Cor. 7:11), or morally pure and upright. Paul probably has in mind purity of thought and deed and words, as well as sexual purity.

He’s calling us to fix our thoughts on those things that are untainted by evil or moral corruption; that are lacking in defect and are morally blameless.

(5) ***“Whatever is lovely”*** – Here he focuses on whatever calls forth or evokes love and admiration and is pleasing or agreeable to the heart; whatever stirs the affections and awakens pleasure in accordance with righteousness.

These are the sorts of things that are endearing. It focuses on what is recognized by the world at large as admirable, whether a symphony by Beethoven or a charitable deed by Mother Teresa or sacrificial efforts in Moore.

(6) ***“Whatever is commendable”*** – That is to say, whatever is praiseworthy and appealing; whatever is worthy and avoids giving offence.

He has in mind those things which, on being seen or heard or encountered, lead everyone to exclaim, “Well done!” He’s talking about deeds and thoughts that by their very nature move people to admiration and praise.

(7) ***“if there is any excellence”*** – Too many Christians settle for mediocrity. They’re ok with just getting by. Good enough is the mantra. But God calls us to excel, to do all within our power and by his grace to pursue and produce the very best.

But there is a huge difference between “excellence” and professionalism and performance. Excellence is doing everything to the best of one’s ability as enabled by God, and in such a way that no one is distracted by it or is tempted to give credit to anyone but the Lord. Professionalism and performance are man-centered and are concerned with drawing attention to us. The pursuit of excellence should direct attention to God.

(8) ***“if there is anything worthy of praise”*** – By this I think he means the sort of conduct that wins the affection and admiration of others, even non-Christians.

And what is our responsibility? It is to “think” on such things, to reflect upon them, to ponder, to meditate on, to dwell on; it means to carefully take into account and reflect on these attributes and virtues so that one’s conduct will be shaped accordingly.

Direct your attention and energy and action toward such things. ***Give these values and virtues weight in your decision-making. Take these things into account in the evaluation of how you will live and spend money and raise your kids and watch on TV.***

The present tense imperative points to on-going, continuous activity; this isn’t a one-time affair but something that is to characterize us constantly. An undisciplined mind is the enemy of Christian growth and maturity.

Observations:

(1) By what process or by what standard do we come to attach value and worth to things or actions? In other words, how do we know if something is consistent with these 8 virtues? All too often our approach is totally pragmatic. We judge something's value by its effectiveness. If it gets the job done, we immediately assume it's good and right. If it produces numbers and money and fame, we judge it acceptable.

Or again, we evaluate things by how well or successfully they promote our personal goals or advance our cause or enhance our reputation or make us money or satisfy our sensual desires or elicit praise from others.

It seems Paul is telling us to pursue these things because of their *intrinsic excellence*, an excellence not derived from utility or personal benefit. We are to embrace things that embody and reflect these values because they are right. Period.

(2) The key to holy living begins in the mind. Think. Ponder. Meditate. Reckon. Reflect.

Let's take the American addiction to TV as one example of the enemy of what Paul says in this passage. The average American spends a minimum of four hours a day watching TV. The average American child spends 900 hours a year in school and from 1,200 to 1,800 hours a year watching TV. By the age of 20, the average American has seen 800,000 TV commercials. Before a child finishes elementary school they will have seen 8,000 murders. By the time they are 18 they will have seen 200,000 acts of violence.

Here's the really scary thought. By the time the average American reaches the age of 65, he/she will have spent nearly 8 years watching TV.

Question: If you had a filter or mechanism of some sort that you could automatically apply to your TV and your computer and your cell phone and your I-pod and the books you read and the websites you visit and the video games you play and the places you go and what you see and what you hear that only permitted things that reflect and are consistent with the 8 virtues just listed, how much would be left for your intake?

(3) There are no negative statements here. If we fervently seek the positive we will invariably weed out the negative. Instead of asking of some activity or event or book or TV show or internet site, "What's wrong with it?" why not ask, "What's right with it?"

(4) This is biblical guidance for how to make decisions regarding so-called "doubtful" issues or gray issues or matters on which the Bible is entirely silent.

The Bible doesn't provide us with an explicit arrow every time we encounter a fork in the road. Some things are left unspoken. Philippians 4:8 is a great plumbline for decision-making: When I am confronted with a difficult choice, I must ask, "Is it true? Is it consistent with the moral and theological principles of God's Word? Is it an honorable thing? Is it right and just? Does it awaken an aesthetic appreciation? Is it the sort of thing I could recommend to others? Does it encourage me to pursue excellence? Do I hear good and Christ-loving people praise it?"

(5) Do these virtues resonate with your heart or do you chafe at the thought of them? Do they feel liberating or oppressive? Do you find yourself thanking God for emphasizing them or resentful that he has required of you something you would rather ignore? Do you find your heart celebrating these ideas or resisting them? Do they awaken life and joy in you or do you feel rebellious and angry at the thought of how they might govern your life? Your answer to that question will tell you a lot about the state of your soul, indeed, a lot about whether or not you are even saved.

The Practice (v. 9a)

Don't miss the connection between v. 8 and v. 9. Paul now calls on the Philippians and all of us to consider to what extent these virtues are reflected in his life, in what they've seen and heard and observed in him and his teaching, and put all of that into practice.

I could easily preach an entire message on what v. 9 tells us about *the nature and importance and absolute necessity of discipleship*. Do you wonder why we are so insistent about our community groups and our D-groups? It's because of biblical statements like this. You need the input and example and influence of godly people. You need to *be* one who is an example and influence to others.

From whom are you learning? Who is mentoring you? Are you being disciplined? Are you discipling others? Clearly, Paul believed passionately in the importance of godly, Christ-like role models who embody and live out the eight virtues he's just enumerated in v. 8. Where are those people in your life? Where are **you** in the lives of **other** people?

The first two words ("learned and received") refer to Paul's teaching; the last two ("heard and seen") point to his example or conduct.

They observed his life, watched how he interacted with others, they listened to his casual conversations, they set their eyes on his demeanor, how he faced and endured trials, how he bore up under unjust treatment and persecution.

The Promise (v. 9b)

Do you remember how Paul concluded vv. 4-7? It was with the promise that if we pray about everything "the peace of God" will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Now, here again, Paul concludes with the promise that if we ponder and think and meditate on these things and give them weight in the daily decisions of life and then put all this into practice, "the God of peace" (cf. Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; 1 Thess. 5:23) will be with us. *The "peace of God" will be in us and the "God of peace" will be with us*. What more could we possibly hope for?

The promise of God being "with" us is the promise of more than merely his presence, but includes the experience of his favor, his blessing, his guidance, his protection, his constant power to help us do whatever needs to be done, etc.

Conclusion: A Meditation on Meditation

Contrary to what you may be thinking, Paul didn't write this and I didn't just preach this message because we are united in a conspiracy to rob you of joy and happiness and fun in life! Precisely the opposite!

Let me explain what I mean by giving you just one way in which you and I can respond to the command in v. 8. There are a lot of ways we can go about "thinking on these things," but let's briefly consider just one: thinking and meditating on Scripture.

Sin tells me that pursuing purity of thought and deed will undermine my experience of life's greatest adventures and most satisfying pleasures. But the Word of God reinforces my decision to obey by reminding me that in obedience is the fullness of joy and in honor there is the blessing of God and in righteousness there is a thrill that not even on its best day could the sweetest of sins begin to touch.

The psalmist declares that the way not to sin, i.e., the way to enjoy God above all else, is by treasuring his Word in our hearts (Ps. 119:11). Making God's Word our heart's treasure is another way of describing one aspect of *meditation*. More than merely "confessing" his Word, "treasuring" it "in our hearts" means placing ultimate value on its truth, prizing it as something precious and dear and of supreme excellence, and then *ingesting* it through memorization and meditation so that it flows freely through our spiritual veins. When this happens the Holy Spirit energizes our hearts to believe and behave in conformity with its dictates. In other words, we sin less.

Meditation begins, but by no means ends, with *thinking* on Scripture. To meditate properly our souls must *reflect* upon what our minds have ingested and our hearts must *rejoice* in what our souls have grasped. We have truly meditated when we *slowly read, prayerfully imbibe* and *humbly rely upon* what God has revealed to us in his Word. All of this, of course, in conscious dependence on the internal, energizing work of the Spirit.

Meditation on Scripture, then, is being *attentive* to God. It is one way we “keep seeking the things above where Christ is” (Col. 3:1). It is a conscious, continuous engagement of the mind with God. This *renewing of the mind* (Rom. 12:1-2) is part of the process by which the word of God penetrates the soul and spirit with the light of illumination and the power of transformation. Don Whitney uses the analogy of a cup of tea:

"You are the cup of hot water and the intake of Scripture is represented by the tea bag. Hearing God's Word is like one dip of the tea bag into the cup. Some of the tea's flavor is absorbed by the water, but not as much as would occur with a more thorough soaking of the bag. In this analogy, reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word are represented by additional plunges of the tea bag into the cup. The more frequently the tea enters the water, the more effect it has. Meditation, however, is like immersing the bag completely and letting it steep until all the rich tea flavor has been extracted and the hot water is thoroughly tintured reddish brown" (*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 44).

But do we really have reason to believe that thinking and meditating and pondering on the truth of God's Word can bring us the kind of joy and fulfillment and satisfaction our hearts so desperately want? Yes!

The Word of God brings us satisfaction and joy and delight so that we will not be enticed and tempted by the passing pleasures of sin:

"They [i.e., the laws, precepts, commandments of God's Word] are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward" (Psalm 19:10-11).

Again, we read:

"How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:1-2).

"How sweet are Thy words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps. 119:103).

Boring? Tedious? Hardly! When the seed of the Word sprouts and sinks its roots deeply into our souls, the fruit it yields is sheer gladness. The psalmist declares him “blessed” who “greatly delights” in God's commandments (Ps. 112:1). Again, “in the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches” (Ps. 119:14).

So, let us pray: “Father, our cry to you is that your Spirit would awaken us to all that is true about Jesus and the gospel and your character and how we relate to you. Our cry is that you would shape our hearts so that we will love what is honorable and abhor what is disgraceful, that we will live and act and speak righteously and turn from injustice and ungodliness, that we will pursue purity and celebrate all that is lovely and commendable; Father, our cry is that you would help us to recognize excellence and to fall in love with it and labor in your grace and power so that the totality of our lives reflect it. O Father, help us to think on these things. Help us to then practice these things. And may it all be for the glory and praise of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.”