

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 21: Spiritual Stability—Part 2: Gratitude, Godly Thinking, Obedience Philippians 4:6b-9

“But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

As the title reveals, this lesson is a continuation of the last, revealing three further characteristics of a spiritually stable Christian. The four from the previous lesson were: Harmony, Joy, Contentment and Faith. It’s important that we bring these characteristics to the forefront of our minds as we continue to handle the text. Since we begin with the contrasting word “but”, it’s necessary that we know what was just written.

Paul says, **“But in everything”**, which contrasts the command for believers to **“not be anxious about anything”**. Our faith in God, when brought to maturity through the Word of God, and fleshed out through right thinking, and holy living, will cast out anxiety in this life. Our anxieties come when we fail to look to God, and look to ourselves (or something else in the created order) instead. Our anxieties come when we take the truths that we know about God, pack them into a small box, and stick them on the top shelf of our closet. When we worry, we essentially tell God that we don’t trust who He is, or what He’s capable of. We essentially admit that we don’t believe that God is with us, or for us. This is why the sin of anxiety is so wrong, because it speaks so little about God.

But at this point in the letter, Paul is still not done his thought about ceasing to be anxious. It’s not enough to do nothing. There is a putting on, as much as there is a taking off in Paul’s thought. As we will examine in this lesson, it is only by doing all things in a prayerful and thankful attitude that we will truly cease to be anxious about things. We will not speak so much to the theology of prayer in this lesson, as much as we will highlight the high priority that prayer must have in the life of the believer. When Paul says **“but in everything by prayer”**, that ought to speak to us about the frequency and dependency of the believers’ prayer. Paul doesn’t recommend that believers recite a short, memorized chant to God at a set time every morning, or evening, or before a meal, if they want to overcome the anxieties of life. Paul tells them to take everything to the Lord in prayer. It was Peter who said, **“casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.”** (1 Pet. 5:7) It is this type of thankful and consistent prayer to God, that affirms that He is the sovereign lover of our souls, that removes all anxiety. Jesus said in John 14:27, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”**

This is the peace of God that is given to all believers. It is not given to the world, it is only imparted to those Holy Spirit-indwelt, regenerated believers in Christ. It is this peace of God that gives believers a heart of gratitude, this next characteristic of spiritual stability. By living our life thankfully communing with God through prayer in everything, believers will experience **“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [which] will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus.”** (v.7) This peace of God is the guard, verse 7 says, against anxiety, doubt, and worry. MacArthur notes, *“Paul’s use of the phrase hearts and minds was not intended to imply a distinction between the two; he was merely making*

a comprehensive reference to the believer's inner person. Once again, Paul reminds his readers that true peace is not available through any human source, but only in Christ Jesus."¹⁰³

This peace with God, this spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving through every trials of our lives, and in every prayer request, is the result of our faith in God. And our faith in God is the gift of God, which is shaped by the Word of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. The believer will not be shocked, or doubt God's goodness or protection or wisdom when suffering comes. The Holy Spirit will bring afresh to our minds 1 Peter 5:10, "**And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.**" That verse isn't telling us to complain because God has abandoned us to our suffering. That verse tells us that God, who has called us, is gracious, and aware of our suffering. There is a point, there is an intended end to what we live through, and God will restore us. More than that, He will one day remove all suffering completely. So we should be thankful. "*Thankful during the most difficult time of my life?!*" Yes, then. Imagine that it's 3:00 am, you wake up to a room filled with smoke. It seems as though the main level of your home is on fire. Time is of the essence, so you dial 9-1-1 for help. Seconds after your call, a fireman is in your room. You ask him, "*How did you get here so quickly?*" He says, "*We were driving back to the station and noticed your house on fire. Now listen to me. The only way I can get us both out of here is to use this window. You're going to have to trust me. I have this under control. You're going to be safe in a minute.*" Now imagine at that time, you start complaining over his help. Imagine that you insult his skills, and tell him over and over again that you're both going to die. Sounds ridiculous right? Any of us would be eternally grateful to have a fireman present to save us, when our life was on the line. We would listen to his every command to ensure the preservation of our life.

Is it any different with how we respond to God in any trial? God wasn't passing by when He saw our house on fire. God is not a first responder. God is not learning of a fire breaking out in our life. God tells us through His Word that He is in every trial. (As a side note: God being in every trial does not mean that somehow God is responsible for the sin in your life, or anyone else's. See James 1:13 for more.) But God is present in every trial. And that should make us thankful. When our house is burning down, and we call out to the God who already knows, and He tells us to trust Him because He's got this...we can be grateful.

1 Corinthians 10:13, "**No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.**" God is there, He hasn't gone anywhere, that's what it means that God is faithful. We leave Him all the time, that's why we're faithless many times. Through every hiccup and major obstacle of life, He is there. And 1 Cor. 10:13 teaches us that He'll not overdose us with any temptation. He knows exactly what we can handle. God also wants us to trust Him, so He tells us that He's given us the way of escape. That way is only found in Christ, through a trust in Him as we recall all that know of Him through faith in His Word.

Who can forget Romans 8:28? "**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who called according to His purpose.**" Why should the Christian be grateful in every situation, and praying with thanksgiving in every situation? Because God is working EVERYTHING in your life out for your good! "*Nope! Not everything! I wasn't ready to lose my child!*" Sometimes, we don't always see how anything good comes from that situation. It's hard to find 'good' in the death of a child. But this is a time where a rooted theology will undergird our faith.

¹⁰³ MacArthur, John *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody 2001, p.284

Though we feel pain at that moment, there is still at that moment such a flood of God's goodness and control that we trust Him. We can still live to make much of God even through the mourning of our child, trusting Him that He will sustain us, knowing that 1 Cor. 10:13 is true at that moment too. That example is an extreme one, but many of us have read, or maybe even witnessed the testimony of people who have lived to glorify God in a time like that.

It is this attitude of gratitude that dispels all anxiety. This is the attitude that ushers in the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. This peace cannot be mustered up in our own hearts. This peace cannot be found here on earth. All the self-help books at Chapters combined cannot give us this peace. All the wisdom of men combined, Dr. Phil, Dr. Oz, and Dr. Winfrey combined cannot give us this peace. The best that this world can tell us, is to hold on tight when our life gets rough. The best that this world can tell us is that things will work out right. But that is an empty promise. We have God to trust in. We have Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 10:13, and 1 Peter 5:10, among many others to remember. These truths bring peace, they come from God, and cause us to release all anxiety and be grateful to be in the strong arms of the One bringing us to safety.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

Godly Thinking: **“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”** (4:8)

Ephesians 4:28 sprung up in my mind just now, so I'll let it introduce my thought: **“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands.”** Perhaps you're wondering what that has to do with Philippians 4:8? Remember Paul's argument in this past verse verses. *“Don't be anxious, that is wrong thinking. Be thankful and remember that God is good, that'll give you God's peace. Rather, think this way...(insert verse 8 here).”* IOW, wrong thinking must be replaced with right thinking. Paul doesn't stop at telling the thief to quit stealing. The thief ceases to be a thief when he repents of his sin and instead begins to do honest work with his hands. The greater motivation leads to right living.

Consider the example of a married man at work. There's a beautiful woman there, and she is quite flirtatious with him. In the moment he considers the excitement of the attention of a beautiful woman. He doesn't intend on an adulterous relationship, but he dances near the flames for the fleeting promise of pleasure. What motivates a man to engage this way? I argue based on God's Word that that man's thoughts are taken off of all things right and godly and valuable. But now, imagine that same man whose thoughts are God-centered all of the time. His mind is never strayed from how thankful he is to God for the wife that he has. He admires her. She is the woman who has given him her youth. She is the mother of his children. She is the one who is his best friend. While wrinkles form on her face, her beauty has never shone brighter to him. He is the luckiest man in the world to be able to grow old with her. When he values her like that, she becomes invaluable to him, and all the enticement of other women fade away.

How we respond and conduct ourselves in life is a direct reflection of what we reflect upon most in life. What we think and focus on will manifest itself in our life. This is why we are commanded by Paul to cease processing things internally (which leads to anxiety) and rather to commit ourselves to right thinking. But where does right thinking come from? How do we know what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely commendable, excellent, or worthy of praise? Do we not take what we know from the scriptures and apply them?

Of course we start with the scriptures! Jesus said in John 17:17, “**Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.**” When we want to think falsely, and broken, we search our fallen, depraved minds that focus on the flesh and are hostile to God. We search our foolish hearts that are hardened to spiritual truths and blinded. (1 Cor. 1:18-31) But when we want to think and operate in truth, we search with diligence God’s Word, and with eyes that are opened we will see His truth. (1 Cor. 2:10-16)

The mark of a Christian is right thinking, both in theology (what we believe and know) and theopraxy (how we live out what we believe and know). We need to think clearly and concisely in the classroom, and on the street. There must be understanding when the Word of God is read or heard, in order for that to happen. This is why we are having Sunday School right now! This is why we meet on Wednesday night! This is why we have a speaker at Putt-Putt, and Fireworks night, and the Valentine’s fellowship. This is why we’re having a second service today! The leadership of the church recognises the importance of sound and frequent biblical teaching to ensure the right thinking (spiritual growth and maturity) of the saints. Every believer ought to grow, as Peter says, and be “**prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.**” (1 Pet. 3:15) How can a believer do this apart from a right understanding of the Word of God?

I’ve met many people in my years as a believer who go to a church and claim to follow Christ, and what began as excitement when we discovered ourselves as fellow believers, quickly turned into disappointment to me as I learned that they were unable to talk about God’s Word. Further conversations revealed that they believed all sorts of nonsense in the name of Jesus. And I can’t count how many times I’ve heard statements like, “I can’t give you chapter and verse, but I know it’s in there.” (Maybe because it’s not there) I’ve even heard some of those people talk about “chapter and verse” as if it were a bad thing, an over-the-top thing, a destructive thing in the church.

The Holy Spirit is not in the business of saving people so that they can meet Sunday after Sunday for the sole purpose of “*Singing...we just sing...and if the Spirit leads us sometimes we’ll just sing for 3 or 4 hours in a row. None of us are going to argue if the Spirit leads us into a long worship service like that. Sometimes the Spirit leads someone into a convulsion...There are flags at the back of our church, different colors have different meanings, someone will run up and grab a particular flag and start running around the room with it while we sing. We leave to pumped up for God!!!*” (This was the testimony I heard from someone I know who attends a church in Essex) I know another prominent member of that church. He’s been a “Christian” longer than I have, yet he’d probably fail to identify which testaments the books belonged too. God has given us all different intellects to be sure, and we should not feel shame or pride because of our own. God certainly does not expect that after 20 years all would be seminary caliber Christians. But God does expect that after any length of time, you’re not drooling all over your bib, and talking in coo’s, making unintelligible sounds theologically.

A COMPARISON WITH PHILIPPIANS 4:6-8

We’re anxious because we’re not trusting in, and depending upon God. We’re anxious because we’re thinking about all the wrong things, and not thinking about all the right things. Allow me to share a comparison between Matthew 6:25-34, and our text here in Philippians. Lloyd-Jones speaks to the heart of the matter, concerning the lack of thinking that led to the anxiety that our Lord speaks of, he said,

“Faith, according to our Lord’s teaching in this paragraph (Matthew 6:25-34), is primarily thinking; and the whole trouble with a man of little faith is that he does not think. He allows circumstances to bludgeon him. That is the real difficulty in life. Life comes to us with a club in its hand and strikes us upon the

head, and we become incapable of thought, helpless and defeated. The way to avoid that, according to our Lord, is to think. We must spend more time in studying our Lord's lessons in observation and deduction. The Bible is full of logic, and we must never think of faith as something purely mystical. We do not just sit down in an armchair and expect marvelous things to happen to us. That is not Christian faith. Christian faith is essentially thinking. Look at the birds, think about them, and draw your deductions. Look at the grass, look at the lilies of the field, consider them.

The trouble with most people, however, is that they will not think. Instead of doing this, they sit down and ask, What is going to happen to me? What can I do? That is the absence of thought; it is surrender, it is defeat. Our Lord, here, is urging us to think, and to think in a Christian manner. That is the very essence of faith. Faith, if you like, can be defined like this: It is a man insisting upon thinking when everything seems determined to bludgeon and knock him down in an intellectual sense. The trouble with the person of little faith is that, instead of controlling his own thought, his thought is being controlled by something else, and, as we put it, he goes round and round in circles. That is the essence of worry.... That is not thought; that is the absence of thought, a failure to think.”¹⁰⁴ (To which I add....Kaboom shaka-laka)

We are commanded to think at all times, in an educated and calculated way. Paul commanded the Roman Christians to “**not be conformed to this world, but (to) be transformed by the renewal of (their) mind.**” (Romans 12:2) There is a way that the world thinks, as Paul said in Ephesians 2:2, “**in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.**” There was a time when every Christian walked like the world, meaning they thought like the world. But now we are commanded to think like a Christian. We are now to “**do all to the glory of God**”. (1 Cor. 10:31) We are to “**love the Lord (our) God with all (our) heart and with all (our) soul and with all (our) mind.**” (Matt. 22:37) We are fighting in a war Christians. And the battle is held in the mind. Let us consider now, in greater detail, what Paul would have us think about.

Whatever is true: We have spoken at length about “truth”. Jesus answered Pilate in John 18:37, “**You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.**” Jesus said to Thomas in John 14:6, “**I am the way, and the truth, and the life.**” Early Christians were known as those who were devoted to “The Way”. What relevance do these verses have here? Only to say that all truth is ultimately God’s truth. All truth is truth about Christ, and from Christ, and to Christ. This is what we are set our thinking upon primarily. This is the thinking that tops Paul’s list. This means that what we read, hear, speak and think about is to coincide with the Word of God. The rest of Paul’s list flows out from this first point.

Whatever is honorable: There is a principle that Pastor Scott taught me many year ago, “*What you’re cherishing in now, what you’re hoping in now, what you’re focusing on now, what will that mean to you in 10,000 years?*” Will I be proud of it? Will I still cherish it? Will I look back and say, “Time well spent!” So many times our attention and desires are placed upon things that will rust and decay. Our hearts on to set on Heavenly things, “**where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.**” (Matt. 6:20) All of our thoughts ought to be set upon worshipful things. Are we thinking and acting towards things that advance the kingdom and make much of Jesus Christ? Will the work that we are doing stay with us for the rest of eternity?

¹⁰⁴ Lloyd-Jones, Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, 2:129-30)

Whatever is just: This is a word that we could translate ‘righteous’. IOW, we need to think about the character of God, and His revealed will. Are we thinking and acting in accordance with what we know God would approve of? There are so many who are walking around “searching out God’s will” for their life, yet who fail to walk in step with what he has revealed for their life. Are we “quenching” the Spirit? (1 Thess. 5:19), or are we pleasing Him with our righteous thoughts and deeds?

Whatever is pure: While this point is not exclusive to the others up to this point, ‘pure’ (Hagnos) simply means to focus our thoughts upon those things that are moral and holy. Paul desired to present the church “as a pure virgin to Christ.” (2 Cor. 11:2) Paul instructed Timothy, “keep yourself pure.” (1 Tim. 5:22) Paul instructed the young women in his letter to Titus to, “love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind...” (Titus 2:5) The purity that believers are to have is a reflection of its origin, James 3:17, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” This wisdom from above shapes the believer into the image of Christ. 1 John 3:3, “And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure.”

Whatever is lovely: Although this is a little besides the point, one of the points that I bring up to atheists during a conversation on origins is, where does beauty come from? Why are things universally beautiful or ugly? (Sure, there are some who find spiders cute. But I’m referring to mentally balanced people.) No one thinks that the Rockies are hideous. No one has to look away at a sunset. Everyone notices a rainbow.

What we ought to think about, what we ought to set our minds on, is what is lovely. I don’t think that Paul had sunsets and rainbows in mind here, but I do think that there are many God-given things that we ought to set our minds upon. There are lovely and beautiful things that we should think about, but they are the things that God Himself declares to be beautiful, and not the things that men twist and pervert. We should focus our minds on being a sweet, and generous, and patient and gracious people.

Whatever is commendable: This is the only time that *euphemos* is used here. It’s a very simple concept really. Imagine if your every thought we broadcast for the world to see. How much of your daily thought would change? We should think only upon those things that our fellow believers would affirm and think well of. After all, our thoughts would change if everyone knew them, yet God knows our every thought.

IN SUMMARY – If there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things: Hansen writes, “The command to think requires his readers to give careful thought to a matter, consider, ponder, and let one’s mind dwell on something. Paul is calling for followers of Christ to be attentive, reflective, meditative thinkers. Developing a Christian mind and character requires a lifetime of discerning and disciplined thought about all the things that are excellent and praiseworthy.”¹⁰⁵

Philippians 4:9, “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

In this lesson we have reviewed the necessity of a heart of gratitude for the place in life that our sovereign God has brought us too. And we have just reviewed the necessity of godly thinking which will honor

¹⁰⁵ Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 299)

Christ, and produce much good fruit. The absence of godly thinking will only produce anxiety in our life. Finally, we will conclude by reviewing the necessity of obedience.

Paul uses himself as an example, which in itself is an example for us to follow. You may remember him saying the same thing in 3:17, “**Brothers, join in imitating me.**” He likewise said in 1 Cor. 4:16, “**be imitators of me.**” In 1 Cor. 11:1 he said, “**Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.**” 1 Thessalonians 1:6 records Paul again, “**And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.**” Just as we should imitate Paul, we should imitate those godly people who are in our life. And we should grow to be someone who others could imitate. Paul commands the people to practice what they see and hear from him. We get the idea of practice. Even professional athletes practice between games. You know the old saying, “Practice makes perfect.” Practice carries with it the idea of continually doing something over and over again until it becomes habitual. It’s the idea of mastering a fundamental task. When some think of ‘practice’, they think of little-league baseball. One kid is picking dandelions, another has his mitt on his head, another is drawing pictures in the dirt. So we think of practice as something that is necessary in the beginning, something juvenile. We shouldn’t think of practice that way. We saw that a lawyer has a practice, we say the same thing of a doctor. When we say that lawyers and doctors practice, we better not mean than their trying to learn the basics! We mean that they are performing all the tasks within their profession to the maximum because they mastered them through much effort and repetition. But they could only master what was before them by submitting to what was before them. The doctor doesn’t wildly try-out (or practice) foot surgery but cutting your shoulder open. The doctor has skills that he/she has learned from others beforehand.

The same is true of the Christian. True followers of Christ aren’t inventing any new doctrines, rather we’re all following the same Savior, and seeking to honour Him. There is a line, there is a path, there is a way. It is only when our understanding is biblical, and our thinking is godly (in-line with the scripture) that we will ever truly live in holy obedience to Christ.

Paul lists four things, what they have: learned, received, heard and seen in him. Those were the things they were to imitate. The top of the list is what they have learned, which puts the emphasis on the importance of sound doctrine. The Philippians were to take what they were taught seriously, and they were to let it mold them, so that they imitated Paul, who was leading them down the path towards Christlikeness. But Paul doesn’t stop there. The good teacher knows that his students need more than a good formal lesson, they need an example.

He mentioned what they have **heard**. The Philippians had also heard much good about Paul and his character. So Paul tells them to imitate not just his teaching, as they teach the next generation, but also his life. The report that they would have heard from the other believers would have been positive and reinforcing to the message they were taught.

He mentioned what they have **seen**. The Philippians also saw with their own eyes what the life of Paul was like. The message of the gospel, and the godly life as Paul has defined in this letter, will and must result in a godly life. They were to imitate the man and his theopraxy as much as theology he taught them.

Lastly, though I took them out of order, Paul mentions what they have **received**. Though it was true that the Philippians received this gospel message through the life of Paul, they ultimately received it through the revelation of the Holy Spirit. It is with this spirit of gratitude for receiving such a precious gift, that they move in the direction of passing this gift along to others. 2 Timothy 2:2, “**And what you have**

heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”

Believers need to be obedient, they need to submissively align themselves under Christ. And they start by aligning themselves under their leaders. By obediently adhering to the teaching of Paul, the believer will attain harmony, joy, contentment, faith, gratitude, and godly thinking. Through a consistent and persistent effort, the believer will achieve the spiritual stability necessary to grow into full maturity, and not only glorify God, but impact the lives of many.