

Dwell on these Things

Text: Philippians 4:8-9

By Pastor Trent Boedicker

Our thoughts shape our attitude and actions. Imagine a little girl who comes down the stairs in the middle of the night, crying. “Mommy! I had a bad dream. It was so scary, and it felt so real. There were monsters and I tried to hide. Then I woke up and thought I heard noises coming from my closet, and I’m too scared to go back to sleep.” Her mom holds her little girl, and kisses her on the forehead, comforting her. “It’s okay, you are safe. It was just a dream. There is no such thing as monsters. I’ll show you. How about I check your closet before tucking you back in bed?” That little girl was afraid because her mind is consumed by that scary dream, and so her mom redirects her thoughts to what is real. I am here, you don’t have to be afraid, God watches over us.

Or picture a little boy running through the house like the Tasmanian devil. He is loud and obnoxious, knocking over everything in his path. One moment he is jumping up and down on his bed, and the next moment he is climbing up the walls. His mother stops him in his tracks and says, “What has gotten into you today?” “I don’t know,” he answers. “Well, you’d better figure it out,” she says, “because you know better than to act this way.” She glances over at the TV, and notices the characters in the cartoon doing the exact same things. “So that’s where you’re getting these ideas. I don’t think we’re going to be watching that show anymore. It’s obviously a bad influence.” She sees the problem, his mind is being filled with the wrong influence, so she helps redirect his thoughts to what he knows is right.

These are just a couple of examples of how the things we think about influence our lives. Everyday we are bombarded with information from all different directions. It might be the headlines we see in the news, or the entertainment that we watch on tv, or the conversations that we have with other people, or the comments that are posted on social media, or a hundred other things funneling through our mind without end. And somehow, we have to sort through all of this and filter out the good from the bad.

We may not even be aware of how these ideas are affecting us. A person who spends a lot of time dwelling on the news might find himself depressed and frustrated as he reads about all of the problems in this world. An individual who is consumed with Facebook may find themselves fired up over the latest controversy people are arguing about. “I can’t believe so and so said this! Just wait until they read my response.” Someone who fills their mind with entertainment, binge watching all of the popular new shows, might start to find themselves talking and acting more like the characters on tv than the person that we’re called to be.

And so, it’s very important that we fix our thoughts on the right things. It’s not that we can bury our heads in the sand and ignore what is going on in the world around us. But we can choose where to place our focus... what will capture our attention... what will dominate our thinking. If our thoughts influence the way we live, believers must dwell on the things of God.

I like the way one commentator puts it. He says,

The human mind will always set itself on something, and Paul wanted to be quite sure that the Philippians would set their minds on the right things. This is something of the utmost importance, because it is a law of life that, if we think of something often enough... our thoughts will quite literally [carve] a groove [in our mind] out of which we cannot be jolted. Therefore we should set our thoughts upon the fine things—and here Paul makes a list of them.ⁱ

In our passage, in Philippians 4:8, the apostle lists the kinds of qualities that should define the Christian mind. It's not a rigid checklist of do's and don'ts but more of a filter through which we are to process the ideas that flow through our thoughts each day. He says, "...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."

When we dwell on something, that's where our focus is placed. It's what we spend time thinking about throughout the day. If you're outside mowing the lawn, your mind goes somewhere. Where does it go? If you're standing at the sink washing dishes, your thoughts drift to something. What is it? Those thoughts can either be helpful, directing us to the Lord, or they can be unhelpful, filling us with worry or despair.

The apostle urges us to apply this filter to our thoughts. We're not going to look at all eight qualities that he describes here, but we'll touch on a few of them this morning.

First of all, the passage tells us to dwell on what is true.

Philippians 4:8 says, "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right... think about such things.*" (Philippians 4:8 NIV84)

The apostle was writing to the congregation in Philippi, and he was concerned for them, and for all believers, because he knew how easy it is for us to be led astray. There are so many false ideas and conflicting opinions, out there, so we need to be careful. When you hear something ask, "is this a trustworthy source, or will it lead me astray?"

There used to be publication, you would see in the checkout lane at grocery stores, called "The Weekly World News." The headlines on the front page were always crazy and outlandish like: "Bat Boy Discovered in Cave." There would be a picture that was obviously photoshopped of a little boy with fur on his face and wings under his arms. It always made me laugh, and I couldn't help but wonder if there was anyone who took those headlines seriously.

Most people realize that isn't the most reliable source of information, but there are times in our lives when it may not be so obvious whether the things we read or the things we hear are true. When a friend says, "Hey have heard..." how do you know that what they're telling you is reliable? When an article says, "Hey, did you know..." how can you tell whether or not the information is accurate?

One of the buzzwords in our culture today is "fake news." There is a lot of information out there that is distorted or misleading or slanted or biased or even at times an outright lie. In the

age of the internet, stories spread at the speed of light, popping up on our newsfeed, and we have to sort through this information. Some articles twist the facts to fit their agenda. Other stories look real but turn out to be completely bogus. We might find ourselves getting caught up in the hype and click share before checking it out for ourselves. It's amazing how we can allow ourselves to get worked up about something that's not even real.

But as Christians, we are called to be discerning. Don't believe everything you hear just because you saw it on tv or read it on the internet. Check it out for yourself and see if it's reliable. I don't want to waste time worrying about things that aren't even true. Someone has said, "...only 8 percent of the things people worry about are legitimate matters of concern! The other 92 percent are either imaginary, never happened, or involved matters over which the people had no control anyway."ⁱⁱ

We need to focus on the things that are true, and not allow ourselves to be tripped up by everything else. Truth is a characteristic of God, who never lies, and it ought to be characteristic of his people. We are to speak the truth, and allow our thoughts to be informed by the truth. Ephesians 4:25 (ESV) "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."

The ultimate source of truth is God's Word, so let your mind be saturated with it, meditate on it's verses, so that you will not easily be led astray. Psalm 119:160 (NASB95) assures us, "The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting."

God's people are to dwell on what is pure.

Philippians 4:8 tells us "...whatever is pure...whatever is admirable... think about such things..."

As the Philippians read these words, they might have thought about what their lives were like before they became a Christian. Many of them had come from a pagan background, which meant worshipping idols, and going along with what everyone else was doing. But when the Lord entered their life, they began to change. Their values changed. Their desires changed. They learned what it means to live a holy life, pleasing to God. The way they talked, the way they acted, the way they treated others was different as God began forming his character in them.

But it's not always easy to follow Christ in a pagan world, and they would have faced the temptation to look back. Maybe it was as they walked past the pagan temple and heard their old friends feasting inside. A thought popped into their minds. Why not live for ourselves? Why not follow along with the rest of the world? Then they remembered who they were in Christ, and The apostle reminded them of who they were in Christ, and who God called them to be.

We face the same challenge in our lives. God is changing our values, forming his character in us, but it's not always easy to follow Christ in this world. Our hearts are pulled in the wrong direction, and we are tempted to pursue our own selfish desires instead of living to please God. And so we need to be reminded of who we are in Christ, and who he has called us to be. Dwell on the things that are pure.

1 John 3:3 (NIV84) *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.* – Those who have this hope in Christ realize that there is more to life than the here in now, we are focused on eternity. And so we seek to live for God’s glory, purifying ourselves as he is pure.

Titus 2:11–12 (NIV84) *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.”* - God’s grace is a wonderful teacher. It humbles us, as we think about all that Christ went through to secure our salvation, what he accomplished on the cross to provide cleansing for sin. The more we focus on his grace, the more our heart desires to live for his glory.

The word pure means something that is holy, free from sin, uncontaminated. Like a bottle of water... The label says, “Purified Water.” That tells me the contents are clean, uncontaminated, fit to drink. There is nothing floating around in there that shouldn’t be. It’s not going to leave a strange aftertaste if I take a drink. It is pure water. But what if someone opened the cap, when I wasn’t looking and poured a little dirt in there from the back yard? What if they poured the water out into an old stinky shoe, and then poured it back into the bottle? NO WAY!!! It’s been polluted and will probably make you sick. What about our lives? Christ has cleansed us by his grace, and so the last thing we want to do is contaminate our minds with sinful thoughts that will trip us up and cause us to stumble.

There is a saying: Garbage in, Garbage out. It means that when we fill our minds with negative influences, maybe it’s the music we listen to or the shows we watch on tv, then it will affect our behavior in a negative way.

I remember as a kid, growing up, there were several shows on tv after school that my siblings and I weren’t allowed to watch. Sometimes we complained. “But mom, it’s not fair. All of our friends get to watch that show. It’s not that bad. And she would tell us, “I’m not responsible for what your friends watch, but I am responsible for you.” So we didn’t watch it. Looking back, I’m so glad to have had a mother who cared enough about us to guard our minds from the garbage on tv. And that inspires us to have the same attitude today, because unfortunately entertainment has only gotten worse since then. We need to dwell on the things that are pure.

1 Peter 1:15–16 (NASB95) *“...but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; ¹⁶ because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”*

God’s people are to dwell on what is lovely.

Philippians 4:8 says, “...whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if there is anything excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.”

This is the only place in the entire NT where this word is used. It describes something that is beautiful, or inspiring, or pleasing to the eyes. It reminds us of all the beauty that is in this world, and that God is the one who created these things for us to enjoy.

How often do we pause to consider the lovely things in our lives? Maybe its sitting out on the deck in the evening and watching the sun set in the sky. As we take in the sight, we can give God praise for creating it. Or maybe it's pausing to listen to the laughter of our children, who are having fun in the backyard playing. As we enjoy the sound we pray, thank you Lord for these moments as a family. It is lovely. Or maybe it is taking a moment while preparing a meal. The recipe book is open on the countertop, and the ingredients are laid out and ready to be tossed into the casserole dish. And it strikes you how all of these wonderful flavors come together to make something amazing. You say, "Thank you Lord for creating food in such a way that brings joy to our taste buds." God pours out blessings like these in our lives, each and every day. And when we stop to consider his goodness, it fills us with praise.

Sadly, instead of appreciating what is lovely, we often find ourselves dwelling on the things that are unpleasant and disagreeable in our lives. We miss the sunset, because we're too busy complaining about how tired we are after a long day. We miss the laughter of our children, because we're too busy thinking about their messy rooms and all of their chores that were left undone. We miss the joy of the wonderful meal, because we are dreading the dishes on the table that need to be cleaned. The blessings are there, but they go unnoticed because our perspective isn't right.

Yes, it is true, the world can be a dark and ugly place and we realize this is the result of sin. But there is still beauty to be found, because when God created the earth all that he made was very good.

Of course, the greatest beauty of all is found in the Lord. *Psalm 84:1–2 (ESV)* "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! ² My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God." **Psalm 27:4 (NIV84)** says, "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." Is this the longing of our soul? Do we seek the beauty of the Lord?

What's on Your Mind?

What's on your mind this morning? Where are your thoughts? We could dwell on all of our problems, and how life isn't the way we want it to be right now because of the virus. This probably isn't how any of us would have wanted to spend Mother's Day. We could focus on what has gone wrong. Or we can dwell on the things of the Lord.

Make the decision each day to filter your thoughts through the qualities listed in this verse. When your mind begins drifting in the wrong direction, take that thought captive and say "no, I'm not going to let that consume my attention today. I'm going to ask the Lord to refocus my heart on him. Seek the Lord, and set your mind on things above.

ⁱ Barclay, W. (2003). *The Letters to Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, pp. 92–95). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

ⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, pp. 95–96). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.