

Sermon Outline

DE-STRESS: PRACTICING GOSPEL-ROOTED, CHRIST-CENTERED, GOD-EXALTING STRESS REDUCTION

THE PRACTICE OF EXCELLENT THINKING (PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9)

I. Introduction

II. The Practice: “Think About These Things” (Phil 4:8)

- A. The controlling idea in verse 8 is: “think about these things.”
- B. If we want to manage our stress in a holy way and experience the peace of God, it matters what we feed our minds.
- C. God made all human beings to be directed by our minds. If we mainly feed our minds anxiety-producing thoughts, then we will naturally nurture anxiety.
- D. Thinking positively is not only advice from secular people. It’s also our Lord Jesus’ advice to us through his apostle. If we want to manage our anxiety well, we need to think positive, wholesome, excellent thoughts.

III. The Practice: Think about “Whatever Is True”

- A. What does positive, wholesome thinking look like for a child of God? Consider the adjectives Paul uses.
- B. If we want to manage our stress and experience God’s peace, we need to think about “*whatever is true.*”
 - 1. Much of our stress emerges from our own exaggerated fears.
 - 2. To manage our anxiety, we need to dwell on thoughts that are grounded in reality.
- C. Of course, there are plenty of facts that are true—but also produce anxiety.
 - 1. For instance: It is a fact that religious militancy is on the rise. But pondering it constantly does not lead one back to God’s peace.
 - 2. Thus, the true thoughts that God calls us to think must be thoughts that help us stay rooted to the Lord Jesus.
 - 3. Remember that this section is rooted in 4:1: “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”

IV. The Practice: Think about “Whatever Is Honorable”

- A. To manage our stress, experience God’s peace, and stay rooted in Christ, we need to think about “*whatever is honorable.*”
- B. Honorable ideas conform to God’s ethical standards, God’s commandments.
- C. We are naturally fascinated by news of shameful scandals.
- D. Granted, we need knowledge of evil so that we know what behaviors to avoid, condemn, and resist (See Dt 22:13-30; Prov 5).

- E. But while it is one thing to be aware of shameful things, it is another to desire them, enjoy them, or fantasize about participating in them.
- F. If we ponder shameful things, we must think about them in a way that honors God: We recognize them as things that are hated by God, dangerous to us, and will cause more anxiety and suffering to ourselves and others.

V. The Practice: Think about “Whatever Is Just”

- A. To manage our stress, experience God’s peace, and stay rooted in Christ, we need to think about “*whatever is just.*”
- B. The word for “just” is related to the words for “righteousness” or “justification.” Thus, “whatever is just” is essentially “whatever is righteous.”
- C. To know what is righteous, we go to the Word of God, to the Law of God. Our heavenly Father’s commandments are righteousness and honor.
 - Ps 19:7-9: ⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
 reviving the soul;
 the testimony of the LORD is sure,
 making wise the simple;
⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
 rejoicing the heart;
 the commandment of the LORD is pure,
 enlightening the eyes;
⁹ the fear of the LORD is clean,
 enduring forever;
 the rules of the LORD are true,
 and righteous altogether.
- D. Thinking about whatever is honorable and just largely involves pondering God’s Word—admiring, adoring, studying, thinking, contemplating, and reflecting on God as revealed by his laws and testimonies.
 1. Instead of fantasizing about what is shameful; or fixating on all the injustice and corruption that is “out there,” we should always return to God’s Word.
 2. God’s Word is at the center of his child’s stress-management plan.
 3. To resist anxiety, we should fill our minds with God’s Word.
 - a. Read a passage of Scripture every day.
 - b. Memorize Scripture so that you can pull it up wherever you are.

VI. The Practice: Think about “Whatever Is Pure”

- A. To manage our stress, experience God’s peace, and stay rooted in Christ, we need to fill our minds with “*whatever is pure.*”
- B. “Whatever is pure” stands within whatever is true, honorable, and just. But “purity” may have to do specifically with sexuality.
- C. Sexuality is one of the great powers God has stored in the human race.
- D. Sexual desire was given by God to give us a small taste of the intensity of his own desire for us (which is not sexual, but divine).

- E. When we divorce our sexual desires from God—from his holiness, truth, love, life, and Gospel—our desires are distorted. Our sexuality becomes unhinged from God’s vision for it and quickly becomes destructive.
- F. To think about “whatever is pure” does not mean having no sexual thoughts. Rather, it means that we think about sexuality in a way that is true, honorable, and just—in a way that conforms to God’s Word.
- G. Practically speaking, that involves bringing our sexual thoughts and feelings to God in prayer, and asking God to unite our sexuality to himself.
 1. filling our minds with God in the area of our sexuality.
 2. accepting our sexuality as a gift from God, rather than a dirty thing to be rejected.
 3. asking God to bind our sexuality to his purposes.

VII. The Practice: Think about “Whatever Is Lovely”

- A. To manage our stress, experience God’s peace, and stay rooted in Christ, we need to think about “*whatever is lovely.*”
- B. As before, “whatever is lovely” is also rooted in/defined by the Word of God.
- C. Loveliness is necessary in dealing with anxiety, because it reminds us of God, his goodness, and his love for our world.
- D. If we are not careful to return to God, constant exposure to ugly things (bad news, gossip, etc.) could have a degrading effect on us over time. We can become more anxious, more suspicious, much angrier people.
- E. While we shouldn’t be aware of these things so that we are not deceived, the question is: What will you think about when you don’t have to think about those things?
 1. Where does your mind make its home? Does it make its home in the ugliness of the world or in the loveliness of God?
 2. Even if you have to think about ugly things (and all of us do), we don’t have to make our home in those things.
 3. We don’t have to make strife/conflict the place we run to when we have nothing else to think about. Instead, think about “whatever is lovely...”
 4. If you want to enter more deeply in the peace of God, feed your mind with beauty.
- F. No matter how much ugliness we see, there is far more beauty in the world than we can ever imagine. There is beauty in:
 - the laughter of a child,
 - the satisfaction of a delicious meal,
 - the comfort of a friend,
 - the embrace of a loved one,
 - the coolness of a shower,
 - the softness of our beds,
 - the diversity of all the life and colors around us,
 - the art, music, and stories God enables our fellow human beings to create
- G. Loveliness comes from God.
- H. When ugliness threatens to overwhelm us, take notice of the loveliness that surrounds you—the God-given loveliness that refuses to surrender to ugliness.
- I. The heart of all beauty is God himself.

1. God is absolute goodness and loveliness. God is steadfast love.
2. Let that fill your heart with loveliness. And then from there, bestow loveliness on others by speaking kindly to them and doing good things for them.

VIII. The Practice: Think about “Whatever Is Commendable”

- A. In the final lines of this passage, the Lord gives us the widest possible category of what we can think about:
1. To manage our stress, experience God’s peace, and stay rooted in Christ, we need to fill our minds with “*whatever is commendable*”; anything “*excellent*,” and “*anything worthy of praise*.”
 2. We need to fill our minds with all kinds of wholesome, life-giving, encouraging, and inspiring truths, ideas, and facts.
- B. By these words, I don’t understand our Lord to be saying, “Read only the Bible.” —The constant use of “whatever” all throughout the passage along with the phrases “if there is *any* excellence, if there is *anything* worthy of praise” suggest an openness to whatever good there is out there.
1. It seems as if the Lord is opening his good creations to us in these words.
 2. God wants us to enjoy his gifts.
 - 1 Tim 6:17: “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”
 - James 1:17: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”
 3. The Lord calls us to ponder excellent things as an alternative to stewing over things that make us sad, nervous, anxious, or perverse.
- C. Things that are “excellent” and “worthy of praise” would certainly include (but are not limited to):
1. Our dear ones (parents, siblings, spouses, good friends, etc.) (cf. Eccl 7:9)
 2. The simple pleasures of life like delicious food (cf. Eccl 7:7)
 3. Possessions God has given to us (cf. Eccl 5:19)
 4. The created world in general.

—If you take Col 1:17 and Heb 1:3 seriously, you’ll realize how glorious even your messy bedroom floor is.

 - Col 1:17: “And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”
 - Heb 1:3: “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,”
 5. Other things like:
 - Enlightening books
 - Beautiful art
 - Illuminating films
 - Other forms of refreshing entertainments and recreations

- D. Think about these things and open yourself to the goodness of God in every facet of creation.
- E. Of course, we keep our priorities straight.
 1. We look to Scripture to define what truth and excellence are.
 2. We remember that God grants us his peace to help us “stand firm thus in the Lord” (Phil 4:1) and to “guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (4:7).

IX. Christ the True and Excellent

- A. What better way to keep ourselves in the right frame of mind than by looking to *Jesus Christ* himself in thought and prayer?
- B. While there are many true, honorable, praiseworthy, God-given things in the world, God intends for his Son Jesus to surpass them all.
- C. All of God’s laws are true, honorable, and just. But as far as sinners are concerned, God’s laws become truly delightful to us only because...
 1. Jesus has fulfilled them for us (Rom 5:18, 19);
 2. Jesus has taken the full punishment of the Law for us (Gal 3:13)
- D. It is by believing in Jesus that this mind of Jesus is gradually formed in us. The sanctified mind of Philippians 4:8 is a gift from God.

The Lord Jesus cares deeply for his beloved ones. He has a plan to help us manage our stress so that we can stand firmly in him amidst all the pressures the world might exert upon us, through all the trials of life. This plan calls us to (1) rejoice in him, (2) lay all our requests before God, and now, (3) feed and nourish our minds with whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, excellent, and praiseworthy. All these qualities are found in the Word of God and are defined by it. They are also scattered like gems across every facet of God’s creation. But they are formed in us only when we look to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is as much the Savior of our minds as he is the Savior of our souls. So let us look to Jesus and receive this mind from him.

Questions for Reflection

1. Was there anything in particular about today’s sermon that blessed and encouraged you?
2. Was there anything with which you disagree or found difficult to accept?
3. Why is it important to think about wholesome thoughts?
4. How do we fill our minds with thoughts about what is honorable, just, and praiseworthy?
5. Homework: What good, praiseworthy things has God surrounded you with? Make a list of five of them. And truly thank the Lord for them and enjoy them.
6. How do we come to possess this holy mind that we see in Phil 4?