

MEDITATE AND IMITATE

PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy - meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.

When I was a kid if you wanted to insult someone's intelligence, and spotlight their ignorance, you would call them "a meathead." *Little did I know, that's actually an appropriate description for us all...* Did you know that your brain weighs about three pounds, and 60% of it consists of fatty tissue? The brain is the meatiest organ in a human body. *Hey, that means we're all **meatheads!***

*But that **doesn't mean** we lack intelligence.* Actually, your meathead - *your brain* - can do amazing things!

The human brain consists of 100 billion cells, called **neurons**. If we took a sample of your gray matter, *the size of a grain of sand*, it would contain 100,000 neurons, and each neuron would have 40,000 synapses, or electrical connectors, that interact with other neurons.

There're over a billion synapses in one *grain of brain*.

Despite what some people might think about you, a lot is going on upstairs in your head... It's **estimated that over**

100,000 chemical reactions take place in your brain every second... Over 400 miles of blood vessels twist through your three pounds of fatty tissue, keeping the brain matter alive and healthy... The amount of blood that flows through your brain every sixty seconds is enough to fill up three eight-ounce soft drink cans...

Your brain is 2% your body weight, but it burns 20% of your energy and oxygen intake. Thus, 40-50% of your body heat is lost through your head. This is why a cap on a cold day really does keep your whole body warmer.

Did you know that when brain cells don't get enough nourishment they cannibalize each other? This means if you diet too much, it causes your brain to eat itself. *If you like brain cells, dieting may not be a smart thing to do.*

It's also interesting, *larger brains do not mean smarter brains.* The average male brain is 10% larger than the average female brain, **but...** *draw your own conclusion.*

And it should come as no surprise to parents that a teenage brain is *not* fully formed. The human brain doesn't reach full maturity until the age of 25 - *and if you've ever lived with a teenager that can explain a lot!*

Your brain is the most complex organ in your body. The world's most powerful computers can't compete with the human brain. Unlike the RAM on a computer hard drive, your brain's memory is virtually unlimited.

Imagine, **the average brain generates 70,000 thoughts every single day - 70,000 thoughts!** That's one thought every 1.2

seconds. *And yet sadly experts estimate that for most people 80% of those thoughts are negative.*

This is why in Philippians 4:8 Paul commands us, *“Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy - meditate (or think) on these things.”*

Your brain is an amazing creation of God! But as powerful a tool as it might be, it's up to you to employ your brain in a way that makes the most of its potential.

And I'm not talking about *trying to expand its intelligence*. Most of us *meatheads* are smart enough.

I'm talking about *directing its focus*. God created your brain to bring Him glory - to help you grow in Christ. Our brains were built for *knowing and enjoying God*.

But we make choices. Our *70,000 thoughts a day* can be allowed to wander from God, *and get us into trouble* - or they can be caroled and herded in a good and godly direction. **We choose what and how we think.**

In Philippians 4:4-7 Paul taught us to **guard** our thoughts. **If we rejoice in one thing, be satisfied with few things, worry about nothing, pray about everything, and be thankful for anything** the peace of God will **“guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”**

Develop an attitude of trust and faith, and God will give you **a piece of His peace...** And like a military sentinel the peace of

God will stand watch over your thoughts. God's peace surpasses our understanding.

God intends for His peace to rule over the decisions we make where we don't have all the info, and where we can't see the complete picture. My decisions should always be accompanied by God's peace. Let His *peace* set the *pace*. The peace of God **guards our thoughts.**

But our thoughts don't just need to be *guarded*, they also need to be *guided*. The peace of God *guards our minds*, but we need to *guide our minds* in a Christ-ward direction. We need to watch **what** and **how** we think.

Remember, **the theme of Philippians is "finding joy at half mast."** Even in times of disappointment, and grief, and trial - if Jesus reigns in our hearts, we can still know joy... *But that's if we think correctly.* If we don't take command of our thought life, and guide our mind in the right direction, wrong thoughts can undermine that joy.

Hey, 80% of 70,000 thoughts per day equals *56,000 negative thoughts* that are peppering holes in our joy.

How can we experience God, and receive His joy, if we are deliberately choosing to think negatively?

We really underestimate the power of our thoughts!

It's been said, **"You are today where your thoughts have brought you. You'll be tomorrow where your thoughts will take you."** Your *thought life* shapes the *rest of your life*. Be careful what you think, for it is literally what you'll become. I've heard it put, **"We are not what we think we are - but what we think, we are."**

This is what the Bible teaches us. Proverbs 23:7 reads, "For as (a person) thinks in his heart, so is he."

Outlook does produce outcome! "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny." *Fat chance* you'll live a joyful life if you don't pay attention to what goes on in the *fatty tissue* between your ears. We need to **guide our thoughts**.

1 Peter 1:13 tells us, "Gird up the loins of your mind."

The phrase, "gird up" means "to get a grip." When it comes to our thought life, we need to roll up our shirtsleeves, and **get a grip** on what we *entertain in our brain*. For Peter and for Paul this was the issue that called for *determined effort* and *relentless persistence*.

A serious follower of Jesus works at it - we discipline our minds to think pure, and holy, and godly thoughts.

If you're a Christian, God has done a miracle in your spirit - in the eternal part of your person. You've been *forgiven of your sin*, and *given a brand new nature*.

God has put a love in your heart for Him, and for the people around you. You are *a new creation in Christ*. But that doesn't mean you'll immediately think like one.

Our mind needs to be renewed. As Paul says in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."

Satan doesn't want you to become a Christian - but if he can't stop you, he certainly doesn't want you living like one -

and to stop you from living like one, he puts all his effort into keeping you from thinking like one.

This is why Paul encourages us in 2 Corinthians 10:5, “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ...” When we were kids we collected lightning bugs, or fireflies. Dad took a ball jar, and punch holes in the lid, so the bugs could breathe.

At dusk we'd run around the yard, catching fireflies, and filling up our jar with with as many as possible.

This is what Paul is telling us to do with our minds. Our thoughts are like fireflies - they float away - they drift off. And they have to be gathered up into one place - **obedience to Christ**. We need to collect every stray thought, and focus it in a God-ward direction.

1 Peter 1:13 reads “Gird up the loins of your mind,” but I like the translation, “Keep your mind on a leash.”

Think about it, you'd never let your toddler wander off through the mall unattended - or let your dog run wild in the grocery store - *then why would do you let your mind roam aimlessly, without giving it direction?*

I've heard it said, “Empty lots and empty minds are alike, they both collect trash.” Vacant lots are notorious eyesores - and so are minds devoid of spiritual input.

Not *setting* your mind on the right things, is *letting* your mind get pulled down by the negative and nasty.

This is why Paul *steers our minds and guides our thoughts*, “*Whatever things are true - noble - just - pure - lovely - of good*

report - if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy - meditate on these things.”

Paul is teaching us a couple of lessons here...

On the one hand, he's encouraging the Philippians to find wholesome material for their minds. Thoughts need to be stimulated. A *new you* should think *new thoughts*.

We need to feed our minds good and godly brain fuel.

This refers to the television you watch, and books you read, and music you listen to, and video games you play.

Paul is concerned about your input. Your brain is like a computer - in that it's only as good as the data it receives. **If garbage goes in, then garbage comes out.**

If you're listening to a steady diet of obscenity-laced music, don't be surprised when your language grows more coarse... If you soak-in movies and television filled with lust and sensuality, how can you think your life will become purer and more devoted to your spouse?... If you're obsessed with playing violent video games, then eventually you'll treat other people more callously...

But if you **input** thoughts that are **true**, and **noble**, and **just**, and **pure**, and **lovely**, and **good**, and **virtuous**, and **praiseworthy**; then joy will be the **output** of your life.

Here's where your mind should be focused...

“Whatever things are true...” This means more than just *truthful facts*. It's a reference to bigger, biblical truths.

What if I reported to you that a tornado touched down and ripped apart a trailer park, I'd be truthful to the facts. *But what*

value is there in meditating on the devastation of a tornado? That's more depressing than it is elevating.

But if in thinking about that tornado I focused on the overarching truths of God - His sovereignty over all things - the eternal value of temporary trials - our fallen world, the reality of sin, and the need for a Savior - even the Savior's love for us - if we thought about these things, it would build up my faith and help restore my joy. We need to think on whatever things are true and truth!

We should also think on *“whatever things are noble...”*

Rather than think like the rest of the world thinks... only about *self-preservation* and *self-gratification*. We should force ourselves to think higher, nobler thoughts.

You've heard someone say, *“Get your mind out of the gutter.”* That's what Paul is saying - get above the orbit of your own concerns, and think objective, biblical thoughts about the world, and life, and eternity, and God's truths.

It's been said, *“Great minds talk about ideas. Average minds talk about things. Small minds talk about people.”* Be a large-minded person and think noble thoughts.

In addition, think on *“whatever things are just...”* Or literally, whatever things are *right in God's eyes*. The world we live in has been warped by sin. Values, identities, gender roles, sexuality have all been twisted.

And our world tries to normalize the twisted-ness.

Today's media pushes a godless agenda. Terry Fisher, a producer of the TV program, *LA Law*, was quoted as saying, *“For television, married or celibate characters aren't as much*

fun.” Hollywood promotes promiscuity, and glamorize the types of sex that God prohibits.

To think on what’s **“just”** is to applaud portrayals of life as God intended. Men taking responsibility for others. Women nurturing their own. Men and women treating love as a commitment - and intimacy as a by-product of that commitment. *Think on what untwists the twisted.*

And think on **“whatever things are pure...”** The opposite of **pure** is **murky, cloudy, contaminated**. If it’s **pure** it’s clean and clear. You can see through something that’s pure. There’s no selfish agenda or ulterior motive.

We need to focus on things that aren’t tainted with greed, or lust, or envy. **“But Pastor Sandy that limits my options. That rules out my favorite TV programs.”** Well, it just might. Hey, it’s easy to settle for the status quo.

What if you **turned on the faucet in the kitchen and out streamed slimy, filthy, dirty water - would you drink it?**

Of course not, just because the county pumped dirty water into your house doesn’t mean that’s what you should drink? And just because the only options on your TV are impure doesn’t mean you’re free to view the garbage. Paul is saying we need to value *our spiritual health* as much as *our physical health* - **be selective!**

To obey *verse 8* - to meditate on positive, godly things, probably involves the *inverse*, **“Whatever things are lies, whatever things that take your mind into the gutter, whatever things are twisted and not as God intended, whatever things are trashy or murky, whatever things are ugly and offensive,**

whatever things only depress, if there is anything that causes shame or that brings about embarrassment - do *not* think on these things.” Thinking pure thoughts will involve *not thinking* corrupt thoughts.

If you examined the church lawn you’d find a few splotchy areas - places in the turf that have more weeds than grass. *You could take the time to pull the weeds...*

But here’s the deal, where the grass is lush and thick there’re no weeds. The weeds only grow where there’s no grass. So the best way to beautify our lawn is to sow more grass seed. The good seed chokes out the weeds.

And this is how you clean up your thought life...

Fill your down time - the recreational spaces in your schedule - with good and godly influences. Sow good seed. *Get your nose out of the TV - and play a board game with your family - or entertain a Christian friend.*

Certainly, make a commitment to read God’s Word.

If you took home one of the Bibles we give out on Sundays, and read just three pages a day, six days a week, you’d read the whole Bible in less than a year.

Thinking true, and pure, and lovely thoughts are the best way to drive out evil, selfish, and lustful thoughts.

Thus, Paul says, *“whatever things are lovely...”* God has created a world that’s full of beauty. He desires that we enjoy His wonders and appreciate its loveliness.

Yet we rush through life and never stop to smell the roses - or enjoy the sunset. Some of us are so interested in our favorite sitcom we’d never lay out under the stars and enjoy God’s

handiwork. A baby's first steps, a child's inquisitiveness, an athlete's skill are all lovely things that should be enjoyed and appreciated by God's people.

A newborn baby entered my world this past week. Her *satisfied mom* and *excited dad* were lovely to behold.

In our own family we've got five year olds starting kindergarten, and love birds about to get married. God has filled up our lives with truly lovely things and when I take the time to think about them it brings me *great joy*.

Paul also tells us to think on "*whatever things are of good report.*" This is in contrast to the bad reports that seem to surround us. Today's media has a *bad news bias* - 90% of what is presented as news is negative.

There's an old newspaper saying, "If it bleeds, it leads." But this constant onslaught of negativity doesn't accurately portray what's happening in our world...

Did you know that in 2017 the US life expectancy rose to 78.8 years old - it's a record high. In the year 1900 the average American was only expected to live 47 years.

Watch today's evening news and you'll hear of flesh-eating bacteria, exotic viruses, Ebola, antibiotic-resistant super bugs, etc. You wonder if the human race is on the verge of extinction. *The news today has a negative slant.*

For example, every summer's shark attack reports. You hear of the 15 people worldwide who die from shark bites, not the millions who enjoyed a day at the beach.

Some of you have stopped going in the ocean for fear of getting eaten by a shark. Yet, statistically, you're more likely to get struck by lightning than attacked by a shark.

We're all adversely effected by the avalanche of bad news we're subjected to each night. We lose proportion.

In today's world *poverty and hunger are in steep decline, democracy is on the rise, workers have more free time, vaccines and antibiotics are more readily available, most places are less violent, literacy rates are increasing* - **yet when have you heard these stories?**

Our newsfeed is full of reports of terror attacks, and sexual predators, and mothers who kill their babies...

But not *the brave first responder who helps out in a crisis... or the good Samaritan who befriends a stranger... or the generosity of a person who gives to a Boys Club so kids can have a place to go after school...*

We will remove a lot of the anxiety from our lives, and restore our joy, if we think on *things of good report*.

Paul concludes his list of meditate-able things, "*if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy...*" Add *virtuous* and *praiseworthy* to what we should think about.

For every school shooter who dominates the evening news, we could spotlight ten-thousand teachers who love our kids and are faithful to help educate them.

Hey, I'm not suggesting we bury our heads in the sand. We need to know about the evil in our world.

But our perspective gets blurred, and our attitude gets warped - when we focus on *the shame-worthy* rather than *the praiseworthy* - the *evil* rather than the *virtuous*.

If while watching Fox News or CNN your pulse races, and your blood pressure spikes - it's not a good thing.

You getting angry isn't going to make the world a better place. We need to watch what we're thinking - and guide our minds back into the joy that's ours in Jesus.

Yet, I want you to realize Philippians 4:8 is not some sappy, sugar-coated slogan for the positive-thinking crowd. Often verse 8 gets sung to a happy-go-lucky tune... it comes with hand motions, balloons, and even a smiley face. But this a hard verse. It's not easy to apply.

This is actually a counter-cultural, revolutionary verse that can only be obeyed by brave, and bold, and serious people. It defies the sarcasm and skepticism so prevalent in our society. This verse is more the result of a radical mind-set, than it is a carefree, innocuous jingle.

In verse 8 Paul also challenges us to choose not just **what** we think about, but **how** we think about *all things*.

Again Paul says, verse 8, "*Brethren, whatever things are true...*" In essence, don't take anybody's word for granted. Learn to **look behind** what's being said.

Here the Greek word "*true*" speaks of exposing something hidden. Words can *conceal* or *reveal*...

We need to ask, *is what's being said true or false?*

I hope all our college-bound students realize not every professor you'll meet cares about your welfare.

Some teachers teach because they failed at doing.

They've grown cynical and jaded - and now they delight in tearing down their student's faith. Life hasn't gone their way, and now they've got an ax to grind.

Don't be gullible. Don't give respect where it isn't warranted. Look for what's *true* behind every situation.

Look behind and look above... "Whatever things are noble..." Isaiah says, God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. That means we should look to elevate the quality of our thought life. **No stinking thinking!**

Often we think things we would never say. We'd be embarrassed if anyone heard what we thought. But realize whenever you think, you're thinking in God's presence. *Think about it, God knows your thoughts!*

Thus, think heavenly thoughts that honor God.

Also think "justly" - the idea is not just to look above, but take that perspective and use it to evaluate what you're looking at - is it twisted or is God-aligned?...

Look behind, look above, look at, and look through. Pure intentions are see-through. If there's no greed, or pride, or lust coloring my mind (*muddying my motives*) my thoughts will be pure ones. "Whatever things are pure" is a mindset through which I view life and people.

And "whatever is lovely." If you're intentions are pure or see-through; then you can look on what's lovely, and enjoy the

beauty God places all around us. It's an impure mind that takes pure things and defiles them.

And you can **look to** the *"good report."* Don't let your mind get trapped by negativity. We are not alone. God is still at work. There is still a lot of good around us.

That's why we're called to be on **the lookout** for *"any virtue and anything praiseworthy."* In a world that's often cynical and evil, God wants us to be *lookouts* for what is good, and godly, and is evidence of His grace.

Verse 8 is not just a description of **what** we should focus on in life, but **how** we should look at life as it unfolds... **look behind** what's said to what's true - **look above** and lift up your thoughts - **look at** and closely evaluate things as they should be - **look through**, and have a pure gaze - **look on** and dare to enjoy all that's lovely in life - **look to** the good reports - and **lookout** for all the evidences that God is at work around us...

And Christians are to be serious about cultivating this mindset. Paul says, *"meditate on these things."*

The Greek word translated *"meditate"* implies more than casual thoughts. It's the word from which we get our term **"logarithm"** - or a mathematical calculation.

The kind of thinking that Paul says should go into what's *true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy* - is the type of brain drain that goes into a complex a mathematical equation.

Paul is saying **give serious concentration to not just what you think, but how you think.** Our Lord wants godly thinking to

become automatic - second nature to us. This grid in verse 8 should be our default mindset.

In an interview, NFL quarterback, Andrew Luck, was asked what he thinks about when he drops back to pass. Luck answered, "You don't want to think about it."

Luck went on to describe how a quarterback's passing mechanics have to be so deeply ingrained in his muscle memory that during the game the art of passing a football is on auto-pilot. There's too much else for him to focus on, to get distracted with passing.

He's got 21 other men on the field he has to see. There're four or five 300-plus pound assassins trying to knock him out of the game. Grown men are running around at full speed. A quarterback has about three seconds to survey the field, assess everyone's movements, and let go of the ball with the right arc and velocity to hit a man sprinting at an angle in full stride.

It's like playing a chess match in the blink of an eye.

This is why a quarterback's thoughts have to progress beyond mere thinking to design and instinct.

A quarterback practices and practices. He watches and studies film. He trains to see the reads he'll use to make his decisions. Come game time his thinking is on auto-pilot... *The same should be true of a Christian...*

In the heat of the moment - when temptation raises its ugly head - in the midst of a fiery trial - a Christian needs to automatically gravitate toward what's true, noble, just, pure,

lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy. This is where a believer runs for refuge.

When life gets tough, rather than *frustration, or irritation, or aggravation* - our default mode should be **meditation on what's true, noble, lovely, and the like.** This is another of the keys to finding joy at half-mast.

And yet Paul isn't content with just addressing our **meditation.** He also has a word about our **imitation.**

The Apostle Paul writes in verse 9, *"The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you."*

To me this is one of the most incredible statements in all the Scripture. *Think of what Paul is daring to say...*

Maybe you could say this at church on Sundays, *but at 6:00 AM on Monday while you're still groggy... when the alarm doesn't sound and you're late... when you're stuck in traffic... when your boss hands you an hour of work with only 15 minutes left in the day...* Can you say, **do as I do, and the holy God will be with you?**

Come on, who in their right mind could say such a thing? If the Holy Spirit had not made a point of putting Paul's statement in the pages of inspired Scripture, we would think he was just being proud and arrogant.

Apparently, for Paul the Christian life wasn't just an exercise in *believing* and *thinking*, but also in *doing*...

Paul was determined **to walk the talk.** He lived what he believed. He put his money where his mouth was.

Too many Christians have the motto, “Do as I say, not as I do.” *Paul though practiced what he preached.*

I’ll never forget a funeral I officiated where all the children of the deceased got up and made reference to their dad’s favorite saying... “*Do as I say, not as I do.*”

All the kids laughed when they mentioned it. His words had become a family joke. Yet sadly, even though the man we were burying had an active, saving faith, and I believe is in heaven today - I’m not sure any of his kids followed his example. He failed to pass it on.

People aren’t prone to follow words - but deeds.

Paul set an example *in the way he thought and in the way he lived* that the Philippians were prone to follow.

What about us? Will our kids, our co-workers, our friends, our neighbors, our family follow our example?

Ray Ortlund writes of the Bible his father gave him his senior year in High School. Fifty years later he reread what dad had written, “Nothing could be greater than to have a son - a son who loves the Lord and walks with him. Your mom and I have found this Book our dearest treasure. We give it to you and in doing so can give nothing greater. Be a student of the Bible and your life will be full of blessing. *We love you, Dad.*”

In reflecting back on his gift, Ray writes of his dad, “As I read these wonderful words from fifty years ago, I never thought, “*Dad doesn't really believe that. It's just religious talk.*” I knew he meant it, because I watched him live it.

He was a student of the Bible, and his life was full of blessing, and I wanted what he had.

It took me a few more years to get clarity on some things, but what dad wrote in that Bible made a deep impression. It moved me then, and it moves me now."

Understand, you don't make a deep impression on the people you love if you don't live a convincing life.

And you'll never live that kind of life, if you don't think on serious subjects and develop a godly mindset.

Friends, when you **meditate** on godly things, it produces the kind of life others will want to **imitate**.

In closing, notice in verse 7, it's **the peace of God** that *guards our thoughts*. Now in verse 9 we're told the reward for *guiding our thoughts* is **the God of peace**.

Guarded by the peace of God - guided to the God of peace - we come full circle!... And others will follow.