

**A CHRISTIAN  
THOUGHT LIFE:  
8 WEEK STUDY OF  
PHILIPPIANS 4:8**

**BY TOM SCHMIDT**

## PREFACE

How should a Christian think? What exactly is a Christian thought life? How is it any different from those who are not Christians? How does the gospel impact our very thoughts?

These questions and others compelled me to write the following 8 week study on Philippians 4:8: *“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.”*

I hope you will find the following study helpful as you seek to honor God in your thoughts. Some of you may not be Christians or may be very new to the faith. For this reason, I wrote an extended introduction to lay the foundation of what Christians believe and how the gospel—the work of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection—impacts our daily life and thoughts. I also wrote questions throughout to help everyone consider the material and the ideas presented.

This study can easily be adapted for a discipleship relationship (what it was originally used in), in a small group setting, or in one’s personal devotion. Each week looks at one of the 8 words that Paul calls us to “think” on in Phil 4:8. We explore what the word means, how we tend to deal with this category in our thoughts and life, and how the gospel is hopeful for us as we seek to live out a godly thought life.

May God richly bless you as you seek to be transformed through the renewal of your minds in Christ (Rom 12:2)!

For God’s Glory,

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**Philippians 4:8** *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.* (ESV)

## INTRODUCTION

The human mind is extraordinary. With it we form thoughts, opinions, morals, plans, dreams, and speech. With it we direct actions, decisions, behaviors, and choices. All of us wish we were smarter. All of us wish we had a better control over our mind.

Sadly, there is something wrong with our minds and the way we use them. For some, this manifests itself in mental illness (dementia, depression, or various other medical disorders). For others, it is a frustration with the type of thoughts which are entertained (self-pity, bitterness, selfishness, jealousy). Even for us who possess a “healthy mind,” ***we know that there is something wrong with our thought life***: we find ourselves running away with illogical anxieties; we get stuck in a mental obsession of past embarrassing moments or hurtful situations—endlessly replaying them in our head; we struggle not to think horrible thoughts about others (lust, covetous, self-righteous judging, etc.); we delude ourselves over the extreme greatness of our talents or weaknesses. ***In reality, our minds are beautiful, but broken. No matter how much education we receive, or how much effort we exert, we find ourselves continually indulging in thoughts which are false, shameful, vain, or outright perverse.***

Recognizing that things are not the way they ought to be, some advocate positive thinking as the solution. The argument goes, ‘You just need to believe in yourself more;’ or ‘Think happy thoughts and you’ll be happy.’ This type of action *may* help momentarily, but really it just leads to disillusionment. It does not matter how high you think of yourself if you end up continually using your mind to do what is evil. It will not help to think ‘happy thoughts’ and pretend everything is ok when eventually the ugliness of your situation forces you to deal with reality that your life is a mess. ***What we really need is not positive thinking, but godly thinking.***

But how do we go about changing the way we handle our thoughts? And, what does a godly thought life look like? Perhaps the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippian church provides us with a good answer. Here, we are given a lasting and practical approach<sup>1</sup> to the thought-life of a Christian: **“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**

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<sup>1</sup> The Bible is God’s Word and the place where God reveals Himself to humanity. It is not a self-help book designed to make our lives easier, but a revelation of the Living God who created us for His glory. Yet in God’s great mercy, He has given a wise way to live and think, along with revealing our most important need: redemption from our sins through Jesus Christ.

**praise, *think about these things***” (Phil 4:8 ESV, emphasis mine). Found within the context of dealing with anxiety in the heart and mind (Phil 4:6-7), this verse provides the Christian with **a highly practical exhortation on forming a Christ-honoring thought-life. It is this topic we will explore in the following 8-week study, with the hope of encouraging a transformation of our minds for the glory of God.** But before we begin, first it is important to lay a biblical framework of why the Apostle’s exhortation was necessary, both in the first century and today.

## **Made in God’s Image**

Humans are unlike any creature on the planet. Far more than just being the most advanced animals, we are distinct in our very humanness. This is because we were created in God’s image. Genesis 1:26-27 reads: “God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”<sup>2</sup> Only human beings are made in the image of God.

Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer understood this as referring to the “mannishness of man.”<sup>3</sup> The image of God is manifested in our unique ability to create, express ourselves in complex language, possess morality, give and receive love, and gather corporately to offer up adoration to God—all things the rest of the animal kingdom lacks.<sup>4</sup> This uniqueness is also testified in the way that our minds are vastly superior to other animals—we process intricate arguments, we create diverse and beautiful works of art, we analytically deconstruct situations. Our minds are glorious and they reflect the glory of the greatest mind in the universe: that of God Himself.

## **Minds which are Corrupt**

While our minds were created good and glorious, something has gone terribly wrong. God made us to love him with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind,<sup>5</sup> but we, like our first parents Adam and Eve,<sup>6</sup> have turned away from God. Our rebellion is terrible and all-encompassing; we have waged war against God by insisting that we are the ultimate judges of morality and truth (Gen 3; Rom 1:18-3:20). We have rejected God and His revelation of Himself. We have rested on our own thoughts, puffing up our minds up against our Creator. We have sinned against God with our bodies, hearts and minds.

This sin has caused us to be estranged from God<sup>7</sup> and separated us from His gracious and holy presence. Colossians 1:18 describes us as being “alienated and hostile in mind” against God. Instead of living to enjoy and please God in a relationship with Him, we live out of the evil desires of our

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis min. This reference and all the following are taken from the ESV translation.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 22:37

<sup>6</sup> Gen 3

<sup>7</sup> Ezek 14:5

own minds (Eph 2:3)—actions which lead to our death, the destruction of society, and our just condemnation before God. An honest appraisal of our own minds—seeing the way that we reject God’s standards, redefine God’s terms, and choose to live in rebellion against Him in order to experience the temporary pleasures of sin—confirms the conclusion that our minds are pitted against God and ruled by sin. We say with Paul, “I do not do what I want, but what I hate, this is what I do” (Rom 7:19). Our mind, along with the rest of our person (body, heart, and will), is in need of redemption.

### **Minds Reconciled, Redeemed, and Renewed**

The hopeful message of Christianity is the gospel: God, out of sheer grace and mercy, has redeemed, reconciled, and renewed us in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, came to earth as a human being. As the God-Man (fully human and fully God), Jesus lived a perfect life of love and devotion to God in the power of the Holy Spirit, showing us what true humanity looks like. When Jesus dwelt on earth, his mind was not dominated by evil desires and sinful rebellion, but was full of holiness, love, and truth. Jesus was godly, and even though he was fully tempted, he never sinned (Heb 4:15). He never harbored a deceitful thought, arrogant scheme, perverse lust, or prideful speculation. His mind was truly glorious, perfectly reflecting the splendor and glory of God.

More than being our example, Jesus reconciles and restores our relationship with God. This salvation occurred as Jesus laid down his life on the cross (John 10:15), dying in our place. He saved us (1 Tim 1:15)—both from our slavery to sin and from the guilty condemnation that we incurred by rebelling against God who is the ultimate Judge (Rom 3:21-26). This happened as Jesus took the penalty for our sin—the wrath of God—even though he himself was sinless (Is. 53) and even though we did not deserve to receive such a gracious and merciful sacrifice (Rom 5:8). Herein is infinite mercy and love: Jesus Christ died so that we might live! After his death, Jesus rose again, conquering sin and death by his physical resurrection. Now, all who turn from their rebellion and place their faith in Jesus receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life (John 3:16). These individuals are given a new heart (Ezek. 36:26) and become part of God’s new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). This is the gospel and this is good news! Such good news is our confidence before God. We embrace this news at our conversion and continue to grow in our understanding of it throughout all of our lives.

### **Already/Not Yet**

While the hope of the gospel transforms us and makes us spiritually alive in Christ, we live in a time where we do not yet experience the fullness of being a new creation. We wrestle with the remnants of the old self (Rom 7), even while we experience fruits of a new life. Our place is one of the in-between: we are stuck between two ages (the current age where sin and death reign, and the new age where sin is completely removed and we are made fully new). So in this time of the already/not yet, we labor to know Christ and live out our true new identity.

Our calling then as Christians is to put away sinful thoughts of the old self. We ‘kill’ evil thoughts and desires (Col 3:5-11), and, as new creatures in Christ, seek to live out and embrace our new state: chosen, holy, and beloved in Christ (Col 3:12-17). While this is never perfect, it is our continual

striving and joy. The prize of knowing Christ motivates us and fills our hearts with delight (Phil 1:21) as we seek to more fully live out our new creational identity in the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Living Sacrifice and Repentance**

As new creatures, we love God not in order that He will accept us, but as those who have already been fully accepted in Christ. Paul makes this clear in Romans 12:1-2:

***“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”***

It is in light of God’s mercies, which we have already received, that we act differently. **We love because we are forgiven, not in order to be forgiven.** We offer up our lives (our actions and our thoughts) to God as a “living sacrifice,” because Jesus sacrificed himself for us. This is our “spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1-2). Unlike the Old Testament saints, we have no need to go the temple to offer up sacrifices for worship. We ourselves, like Jesus before us, are part of God’s temple (2 Cor 6:16). We are the place where God’s Spirit and glory reside, and now we seek to bring pleasing worship to God through our thoughts, bodies, and actions.

As new creatures, our thinking is different from the world around us. We turn away from the foolish and sinful ways of the world and seek to have our minds transformed and renewed. We strive to align our thoughts with God’s thoughts (found in God’s Word, the Bible) because we love God and know that God deserves to be worshipped. We live by God’s standards, rather than the philosophies and mantras of this passing age. As we do this, our minds are better able to discern God’s will for us and we discover “what is good, acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). Yet this is never perfect, and because this is so, we pursue a life of repentance.

**Repentance** is acknowledging and turning away from sins. It is to profess, ‘I am guilty and sorry for my thoughts and actions—both actions that I have done and those that I have left undone—and now I choose to do what is right.’ The Reformer Martin Luther rightly declared that ‘All of a Christian’s life is one of repentance.’ We repent not only at our conversion, but throughout our life, remembering that the gospel is our only hope. Thus, we come back to the gospel over and over again, allowing this to be our hope for change and sanctification.

### **Thinking Godly Thoughts as We Repent of Sinful Thoughts**

As we repent, we seek to think of that which is pleasing to God. Herein is the lasting relevance of Phil 4:8: ***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 (Phil 4:8).*** This verse teaches us how we ought to think, as we seek to be like our Savior, and as we offer up our minds in worship to God.

This verse is highly practical. *Paul is encouraging us to fill our thoughts with content from these eight different categories and to reject that which is contrary.* In doing this, we **reflect** God's glory in our minds—who is perfectly all of these things—and we **filter** out sinful thoughts and motives—which are the opposite of these categories. So in a way, this verse acts both as a **reflector**—reflecting God's wonderful person and character—and as a **filter**—we use these categories to reject thoughts that are not from the Lord.

The following study will explore Phil 4:8 in greater depth. Each week will look at one of the eight categories with the hope of growing in the transformation of our minds. While we ourselves cannot transform our minds, God transforms us as we seek to love, obey, and think in patterns that are pleasing to Him in the power of the Holy Spirit.

*As we go through this material, I would encourage you to commit Phil 4:8 to memory.* Also, take the time to consider the questions presented in each study. This will help you with further reflection on the material and will foster discussion with others.

**Before moving on, consider the following questions:**

- 1. Have you admitted that you are a sinner and have rebelled against God with your mind, actions and life? And have you turned from your sins and trusted in Christ's death on the cross as the penalty for rebellion?*
- 2. In this introductory lesson, are there aspects above that are new or unclear to you?*
- 3. What are some sinful thought-patterns of this world that you find your own thoughts conforming to (worldly notions of morality, sex, money, relationships, etc.)? What do you struggle with the most in seeking to be transformed in your mind?*
- 4. Why is conformity to the world so alluring? How have you seen its destructive effects in your own life and heart and mind?*
- 5. If we choose not to use God's categories as a reflector and filter in our mind, what will we use?*
- 6. As we undertake this study on our thought life, are you confident that the gospel is your starting place and foundation? Are you attempting to change your thinking to earn salvation or because of what Christ has already accomplished in and for you?*

## WEEK 1: “WHATEVER IS TRUE”

**“Whatever is true....think on these things” Phil 4:8**

We live in an age of skepticism. This is especially so when it comes to truth claims regarding life’s biggest questions. Argue for a view about God or the purpose of our existence and your words will likely receive criticism and suspicion: ‘That is just your opinion!’ ‘What if you lived in a different culture or time, would you still believe that?’ ‘Are you only arguing this in order to further your agenda?’ While we should always seek to be discerning and avoid naivety, many in our culture push pass the bounds of critical thinking into a bald, cynical agnosticism. Questions like, ‘Who is God?’ ‘What is truly right and wrong?’ ‘Why do we even exist?’ are ultimately considered unanswerable.

Another common approach is to consider all truth-claims relative. Thoughts to this effect are many: ‘Your beliefs about God work for you, and my beliefs about God work for me;’ or ‘All religions lead to the same place.’ Ours is an age much like that of the book of Judges: ‘Everyone did what was right in their own eyes’ (Judg 17:6). ***In this mindset, the only wrong approach to life’s biggest questions is to claim that your way is the only one that is right.***<sup>8</sup>

The Bible paints a very different picture. Some things are true in reality and other things are false. The ultimate judge of truth is God who “never lies” (Tit 1:2). God’s words are always true and always “trustworthy” (Ps 93:5). All knowledge is not purely relative; in fact, for some questions we have access to objective true knowledge—***knowledge that accords with the way things really are and transcends time, culture, or circumstance.*** This knowledge comes from God.<sup>9</sup> Christians marvel at the fact that even though God is transcendent and infinite, He is also truly knowable and has given us objectively true knowledge about ourselves, Himself, and the world around us.<sup>10</sup>

Our access to truth is found in the Bible, which is God’s “God-breathed” revelation of Himself.<sup>11</sup> The truth we glean here endures beyond the rise and fall of cultures, civilizations, and human philosophies (Is 40:8), and it gives us a foundation of wisdom to rest upon. This is the knowledge that accords with the way things really are. Thus, as we seek to follow the Apostle Paul’s first admonition “whatever is true...think on these things,” we have confidence that we are able to know true truths about God, ourselves, and others from an accurate, authoritative, and reliable source.

### **Forces that Subvert Truth**

There are numerous forces at work which prevent us from thinking true thoughts about God, ourselves, and others. Our sinful flesh, which loves the fleeting pleasure of sin, warps our objectivity and leads us to embrace distortions of the truth. The world and non-Christian culture present us with false notions of reality

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<sup>8</sup> As D.A. Carson says in his book the “The Intolerance of Tolerance”: the only heresy left is to claim there is heresy at all!

<sup>9</sup> John confirms this idea specifically in claiming that Jesus makes God known (John 1:18), and Jesus claims to be the truth (John 1:18).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, as created finite beings our knowledge of God will never be comprehensive. This is impossible. But we can still know true things about who God actually is. Psalm 139:17 celebrates this fact: “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!” We can have access to truth and know truth things about the Living God who made us!

<sup>11</sup> 2 Tim 3:16. This leads us to embrace the reality that the Bible is without error and is trustworthy in all that it proclaims (inerrant and infallible).



based on a life outside of God and His Word. Our circumstances pressure us to alter truth for convenience's sake. Demons and the devil twist the truth and present us with lies that appeal to our senses. Together, these forces lead us into sin, deception, and error.

Most of the time, deep down, we are aware that we are suppressing the truth (Rom 1:18). We exchange the truth for a lie because we choose something or someone else instead of God (Rom 1:25). Often, we let another person's opinion, recognition, or acceptance of us trump God—even though we know what we will gain does not last in the end. We are all like sheep gone astray (Is 53:6) and have bought into the deceptions of the Devil, who is the father of lies (John 8:44). Thankfully, Jesus is the true and the good shepherd who brings us back to God and truth (John 10:14).

### **Thinking True Thoughts about God**

In the Garden of Eden, the devil spoke the first lies to our first parents Adam and Eve. He did this by twisting God's words 'Did God really say...' and by questioning God's goodness and fairness (Gen 3:1-6). Our first parents choose rebellion and believed the lie, and this has led to the fall and ruin of the human race (Gen 3:7-24). Since that tragic day, we ourselves have repeated their folly and chosen lies over the truth.

The ways we are tempted to believe lies about God is various and differs for every person. Some people choose a false image of God presented in different religions. ***For Christians, often the temptation is to believe false notions about God's character.*** God doesn't care about me; God doesn't mind if I sin; God isn't able to provide this need; God keeps good things from me; etc. These lies assault our hearts and, when believed, cool our love for God, leading us into disbelief and sin.

It is vital that we allow God's Word to be the standard of how we think about God. As we read His Word and grow in obedience, our ability to distinguish good from evil [truth from lie] also grows (Heb 5:14). Another helpful approach is to consider the attributes of God (Immanence, Transcendence, Omniscience, Omnipresence, Omnipotence, Holiness, etc.). By meditating on God's attributes, we lead our heart and mind into joy and delight in God, which in turn kills some of the power behind the lies we hear.<sup>12</sup> Finally, we need God's Spirit to fill us and empower to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, good, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

### **Thinking True Thoughts about Ourselves**

Along with thinking true thoughts about God, we also need to think true thoughts about ourselves. Often, the devil/flesh tempt us think too highly of ourselves (believe we are better/smarter/funnier/more capable/stronger than we actually are) or too low of ourselves (believe we are too inferior/stupid/dull/incapable/weak than we actually are). This tendency toward self-absorption and self-delusion hinders us from loving and obeying God and from loving others.<sup>13</sup> While there is a fleeting pleasure to be had when one embraces pride or self-pity, we must put these rebellious thoughts to death (Col 3:5).

It is vital that we repent of believing lies about ourselves. Our true worth is not found in our own intelligence, beauty, strength, accomplishments, careers, or relationships, but in God who made us for His glory (Is 43:7)

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<sup>12</sup> An excellent outline and description of God's attributes can be found in A.W. Pink's book "The Attributes of God" found for free here: [http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/attributes\\_online.html](http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/attributes_online.html)

<sup>13</sup> This state of mind (self-centered vain-glory), destroys our ability to consider others as 'more important' than ourselves (Phil 2:1-4).

and redeemed us in Christ (2 Cor 5:16-21). Jesus died on the cross for our rebellious self-centered thoughts, and his blood cleanses us from all the filth those thoughts leave behind. Remembering how Christ has redeemed our minds and how our worth is found in God, leads us to think true thoughts about ourselves. The result of this is a joyful humility—my worth is not found in myself but God—and sure confidence—God is my strength and my life. Embracing this appropriately humbles the proud and raises the downtrodden.

### **Thinking True Thoughts about Others**

A third area to consider is how we believe lies about others. One way we believe lies about others is the result of pride. Often, we hear of a person's sinful actions and subtly start to consider ourselves better or more righteous. If taken too far, we begin to forget that they are sinners like us, made in God's image and in need of God's grace. Also, in our puffed-up state, we often assume that we know what others believe or think about ourselves or God (thinking that we can see into their heart), and from this state we make self-righteous judgments about them. Believing these lies lead to smugness which prevents us from actually knowing and loving others. All of these lies must be repented of if we are to obey Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:39).

### **Repentance of Lies**

If we hope to follow Paul's exhortation to "think about things that are true," first **we must repent of believing lies**. Believing a lie may provide a comfort or security in the moment, but it only leads to our harm and distance from God and others. **We repent of lies by calling them out for what they truly are—deceptive, false, perverse statements not in accordance with reality—and by turning away from them to the truth.** Our repentance will never be perfect, but our hope ultimately is in Jesus who paid the penalty for our rebellion and gives us his righteousness. He never believed a lie, but died in the place for liars like you and me. With this in consideration, we strive to think true thoughts about God, ourselves and others and present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God (Rom 12:1). We've been brought into the truth, and thus we reflect God's truth in our minds. This is how we ought to think, as we seek to bring glory to God.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. Why is it hopeful that God has revealed true truth (that which accords to the way things really are) about Himself and the world?
2. Do you find it easy to trust God and His Word? Why or why not?
3. Why is it false to claim all religions lead to God?
4. What prevents us from thinking true thoughts about God? What lies about God do you find most alluring?
5. How do you approach reading the Bible and how do you let God's Word shape your heart and mind?
6. How are you most tempted to believe that which is not true about yourself? About others?
7. How is God leading you to repent this week of believing that which is false?

## WEEK 2: “WHATEVER IS HONORABLE”

### *“Whatever is honorable....think on these things” Phil 4:8*

To be a Roman citizen in the first century was prestigious and honorable. A Roman citizen could vote, receive legal benefits, and be protected from enemies of the state. The Apostle Paul himself was a Roman citizen and used this to his advantage when he was mistreated in Philippi (Acts 16:37-38). Recognizing the honor of being a citizen, he employed the imagery of citizenship to urge the Philippian believers to live out and embrace their new identity in Christ (Phil 1:27-28; 3:19-20). Paul knew that a Christian in Philippi was not only a citizen of Rome, he or she was also a citizen of heaven—a reality that was true, even though it was invisible. This second citizenship in Christ deserved ultimate allegiance and submission, and, in the mind of a Christian, **had to be understood as more defining, weighty, important, and glorious** than Roman citizenship could ever be. Thus, the Philippian believers—much like us today—possessed a dual citizenship and needed to learn how to live out this new reality in a culture which rejected the authority of Christ.

The first example of ‘citizenship language’ in Paul’s letter to the Philippians is found in 1:27, where Paul exhorts believers “to live as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> In the Apostle’s mind, a new identity in Christ *ought* to be expressed in action and Christ is *worthy* of this. This was the natural and reasonable thing to do.<sup>15</sup> In the Philippian context, this meant that believers needed to pursue unity with each other, unflinching gospel proclamation in the face of opposition, and humble sacrificial love (Phil 1:27-2:18). A community which looked like this honored Christ and reflected an allegiance to him as supreme above every cultural value.

Paul’s second use of ‘citizenship language’ is found in 3:20. Here, Paul reminds believers that while the opponents of the cross “set their minds on earthly things” (Phil 3:19b-20), a Christian’s “citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). A citizen of heaven must no longer consider only earthly realities and value systems, but should live and think differently from those outside the faith. Instead of echoing the glories of the Roman Empire (or the world) and imitating the ideals and lifestyle of the culture at large, believers imitate Christ and the apostles (3:17, 4:9). This meant “straining toward the goal of knowing Christ,” boasting in the righteousness of God given to Christians through faith (3:1-14), and maintaining the apostolic tradition (4:9). To live and think this way was to live ‘worthy’ of one’s citizenship in Christ and brings honor to the gospel.

In light of this, we can better understand Paul’s second category of content to consider: “whatever is **honorable.**” **An honorable thing is that which is worthy of respect and admiration.** While the things of the faith are certainly honorable, there are also many ideas, objects, people, and actions in our world that also deserve this title. This is because we are all made in God’s image and the world bears the marks of God’s **common grace** and blessings. **Common grace** means that even though we have all estranged ourselves from God through sin and rebellion, there is still some good, truth, honor, and benefits of God’s kindness which remain in our world—even on those who are not Christians. To miss this fact is to overlook the way God causes his rain to fall on the wicked and the righteous (Matt 5:45). Both parties (Christians and non-Christians) receive gifts, talents, and skills, and every good thing we have is ultimately a gift from God (Jam

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<sup>14</sup> The NLT does a great job translating his verse: “Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ. (Phi 1:27)” Unfortunately, most translations fail to bring out the ‘citizen’ aspect of the verb Paul uses here (*politeomai*). “to conduct oneself with proper reference to one’s obligations in relationship to others, as part of some community”(Louw-Nida 41.34-Bibleworks).

<sup>15</sup> Another verse that expresses this same reality (you are a new creation, so live it out) is found in 1 Cor 5:7.

1:17). So we as Christians are to think after honorable things. But what does this mean and how do we discover whether or not something is honorable?

### **What is Honorable?**

Elsewhere, Paul uses this same word for honorable (*sema*) to describe the high caliber character needed for those who might serve as deacons and deaconesses in the church<sup>16</sup> (1 Tim 3:8,11). These individuals had to be “sincere in speech, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain” (1 Tim 3:8); they also could not be “malicious talkers,” but had to be “temperate and trustworthy in everything” (1 Tim 3:11). If a person possessed these traits, they were honorable and might serve in a leadership role within the church. Considering these traits, we see that an honorable deacon/ness was a person who used their speech and life in such a way that was *respectable* and *admirable*.

As we hope to think about honorable things we should ask two things. First, ***‘Does this deserve respect and admiration?’*** Second, ***‘Does this honor God and the inherent dignity we possess as God’s image-bearers?’*** By using these criteria, we can fill our minds with honorable things, and reject delighting in that which brings shame and reproach.

### **Does this Deserve Respect and Admiration?**

The first part of our criteria requires us to ask whether or not something is worthy of respect and admiration. Deceit, infidelity, laziness, insincerity, abusive language or behavior, cowardice, manipulation, and pride all bring shame and reproach on the person participating in them. These sinful categories, and others like them, do not deserve our respect or admiration, for they are not honorable. ***Sin is never an honorable path, no matter how many people tread upon it.*** For us, dishonor appears when we begin to justify those who engage in these behaviors, or when we find ourselves wishing and scheming of ways to participate in these traits (even if we only hope to do so in our thoughts). ***Potential dishonorable actions are not honorable thoughts.*** Thus, we have to recognize when we have begun to delight in that which is not honorable. After this, it is vital to label these wretched thoughts for what they really are: dishonor and rebellion against God. Doing this helps kill the power behind alluring dishonorable thoughts.

Instead of delighting in these things we can choose their opposite and pray that God helps us delight in that which is respectable and admirable by the power of the Holy Spirit. So when we encounter a deceitful thought, we can counter it with the truth and pray that God helps us choose what is true. When we are tempted to be lazy, we can counter this with the possibility of sacrificial love and pray that God strengthens us to serve Him and others. When we are tempted with pride, we can counter this thought with an acknowledgement of our weaknesses and pray that God uses us, as a weak instrument of this world, to bring glory to His Name. This thought-pattern deserves respect and admiration and promotes a cycle of thinking about that which is worthy of respect and admiration.

### **Does this Honor God and Our Dignity as Image-Bearers of God?**

The second part of our criteria is to discover whether a potential item to think about honors God and our dignity as image-bearers of God. ***A task, idea, or pursuit honors God when it gives God and His character ultimate respect, admiration, and submission.*** Honesty, sacrifice, compassion, integrity, love,

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<sup>16</sup> Some understand 3:11 to refer not to female deacons, but the wives of male deacons. Either way, we are still able to use both of these verses to understand what Paul thought was ‘honorable.’

protection, and courage are traits which reflect the glory of God's character and are worthy of our respect and admiration. Because God is the true source of all that is honorable, we honor Him by delighting in these traits (and others like them). However, when we do this, we ought to recognize that the ultimate source of all things honorable is God Himself.

Another way to approach this is to recognize and consider actions which specifically seek to honor God. These tasks are honorable in and of themselves. What is interesting is that even the process itself of thinking through new ways to honor God can itself be a pattern of honorable thoughts. To do this, we might consider ways to grow in holiness, since God calls us to be holy (1 Pet 1:15). Or we might think through fresh ways of praising and thanking God for His goodness. We might attempt to memorize Scripture—since God's Word is itself honorable. The possibilities are endless!

Along with asking whether or not something honors God, we should also consider whether a thing honors the image of God inside of man. Since we are all image-bearers of God, thoughts which defile, enslave, abuse, and corrupt this image are dishonorable. Harboring bitter or prideful thoughts, indulging in suspicious gossip, assuming the worst in others, exploring sexually immoral images or fantasies, thinking through ways of deceiving or manipulating others, parading self-righteous arrogant sentiments, worshipping false gods, and dishonoring parents are all examples of dishonorable thoughts which overlook the dignity and worth of those around us. These thoughts treat other people as less than human, and fail to honor Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

Honorable thoughts lead us into honoring the image of God in man: observing a humble thankful posture (honoring others' knowledge), rejecting speculative gossip (honoring others' integrity), choosing to abstain from sexually immoral thoughts (honoring our spouse or future spouse), thinking through ways to outdo one another in love (honoring others around us), and obeying parents or authorities God has placed over us (honoring authority). These types of thoughts honor the dignity of others and obey Christ's command to love neighbor—a very honorable thought process indeed.

### **The Danger of Taking Honor too Far**

Love. Compassion. Kindness. Integrity. Tolerance. These traits are easily recognized as honorable by most in our culture. Yet, very often they are taken to the extreme and made the ultimate standard of what is respectable and worthy of admiration. When this happens, the honorable is exchanged for the dishonorable. This is "making a good thing into an ultimate thing"<sup>17</sup> and is idolatry. Idolatry does not give God the respect and admiration He deserves, and thus is to be rejected.

### **Choosing to Think Honorable Thoughts**

This week we ought to interrogate our thoughts, "Are you an honorable thought?" If a thought is not, then we reject it. If it is, then we choose to be thankful for it and praise God who is the ultimate source of all goodness. We are citizens of heaven and God has called us to think honorable thoughts for His glory.

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<sup>17</sup> Tim Keller often uses this phrase to describe when a thing becomes an idol.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. Have you ever considered the fact that as a Christian your true citizenship lies in Christ (rather than country, hobby, job, or organization)? What benefits do we possess as citizens in Christ that those outside Christ do not?
2. What makes a thing honorable? What dishonorable thoughts have filled your mind with lately?
3. How does thinking honorable thoughts relate to thinking true thoughts?
4. What does it mean to make a 'good thing and ultimate thing'? Why is this ultimately a dishonorable action?
5. How is the gospel hopeful as consider our inability to think about that which is honorable?

## WEEK 3: “WHATEVER IS JUST”

### ***“Whatever is just....think on these things” Phil 4:8***

The imagery of ‘*whatever is just*’ draws our minds to the sphere of the courtroom. Here, actions and motives are examined and assessed in light of agreed-upon rules and standards. Here, the guilty are punished and the innocent exonerated, assuming everything goes the way it should.

Our hearts long for justice. The rape of a helpless woman, the swindling of an elderly person’s life-savings, an election won through fraud, the poor being taken advantage of, and overly harsh, vindictive punishments are all examples of things which make us cry out: ‘Injustice!’ Even though we live in a time where moral lines are blurred and what is right or wrong is often considered a matter of mere opinion, deep down we are unable to shake the notion of justice. We crave it.

God Himself loves justice (Is. 61:8). He is a righteous judge (Psalm 7:11) who always acts in just ways (Deut. 32:4). As the ultimate arbiter of everything that is right and wrong, one day we will all stand before Him and give an account of our lives (Dan 12:2; Rev 20:11-15). Not bound to any law higher than Himself,<sup>18</sup> God has shown us what is truly righteous and given us a moral law, written on our hearts and found in every civilization,<sup>19</sup> which we are obligated to fulfill (Rom 1:19-23; 2:1-11). This moral law is a reflection of God’s righteous character and is more fully expressed by His God-breathed Word, the Bible (1 Tim 1:9; 2 Tim 3:16).

The Bible speaks of two types of people in our world: the righteous and the unrighteous. The righteous are those who love God and seek to obey His laws, and the unrighteous are those who do what is evil in His sight (Ps 1). God shows favor toward the righteous, but the wicked are doomed to perish (Ps 34:21-22). While it is clear that there are two types of people in the world—those seek to love and follow the Triune God of the Bible and those who don’t—the Bible also places all of humanity in the category of the unrighteous. This is because God is infinitely righteous; even one violation of God’s law means that a person is guilty before God and is rightly considered a law-breaker (Jas 2:10). Since this true, there is really no one on earth who is truly righteous (Rom 3:10), and on the great and terrible Day of Judgment, all of us will be without excuse before God’s perfect and righteous judgment.

Yet God, in His great kindness and salvific love, has graciously chosen to save us. In this redemption, God made a way for us to become righteous again and be delivered from a guilty verdict and the wrath of God. This wonderful salvation was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. He wrote of “the righteous one” who would “make many to be accounted righteous, and...bear their iniquities” (Isa 53:11). This ‘righteous one’ was Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a sinless, righteous life (Heb. 4:15) and suffered an agonizing death on the cross, bearing the wrath of God (Rom 3:25).<sup>20</sup> Although he never sinned, he took the punishment for our sins. The Apostle Paul refers to this in his second letter to the Corinthians: “God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Martin Luther called this the Great Exchange: God took our unrighteousness, sin, and guilty verdict and gave us his righteousness and right standing with God. In this wonderful act, God remains just and the justifier of the person who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:21-26).

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<sup>18</sup> If God were bound to a law above Himself, than this law would actually be what is ultimate in our universe, rather than God.

<sup>19</sup> C.S. Lewis articulates this well in his excellent book “Mere Christianity.”

<sup>20</sup> Theologians refer to Jesus taking the holy anger of God toward sin (wrath) as propitiation.

This incredible salvation is open to all who acknowledge their rebellion against God, turn away from their lawlessness, and trust in Jesus for their salvation. Ultimately, this salvation is a gift from God received through faith (Eph 2:8-9; Rom 3:23). All who are Christians now possess God's perfect righteousness (Phil 3:9). This has *already* taken place at the cross, but we await the final Day of Judgment which has *not-yet* happened. In this time of the in-between, the Apostle Paul urges us to think about what is just. ***A just thought is that which aligns with God's revealed character, judgments, or desires. Our task is to learn how to recognize thoughts which are not just, repent of delighting in them, and embrace thoughts which are just.*** By doing this, we more fully live out the realities of our new identity as those who are righteous in Christ and reflect the glory of God in our thoughts.

## Recognizing Unjust Thoughts

How do we know when we are dwelling on unjust thoughts? What does an unjust thought look like? Unjust thoughts take many forms: we hope for the downfall of a person whom we are jealous of; we think of ways of harsh retribution for those whom we believe have wronged us; we play with tempting thoughts (lust, coveting, lying, stealing) and wonder how we might escape being caught or found out; etc. These thoughts are not just because they conflict with God's standards of what is right. They are a violation of God's just laws and this makes us unjust lawbreakers. By recognizing and identifying a thought to be unjust (as it truly is in the light of God), we are better able to unmask temptation's seductive lies and grow in godliness.

One particular unjust thought pattern many of us are prone to is that of ***vengeful*** thoughts. In our entitlement-soaked culture, these thoughts appeal to our logic and supposed sense of justice: "That person was wrong to do that action against me, what an outrage! I shall make things right and punish him/her for this." While this line of thinking appears righteous, if we're honest with ourselves, most of the time ***we not really as grieved by the wrong committed against us as much as we are upset that we have been personally slighted or overlooked.*** This slighting leads us into a cycle of vengeful thoughts about the one who has not honored our inflated sense of self and distorted notions of justice. ***These thoughts are not just because when we think them, we have taken the place of God, who will punish sin on the Day of Judgment.*** We don't have God's authority to make these decisions, nor are we impartial in our sentiments. Even more than this, we forget that God is actually the truly offended party (Ps 51:4). The Apostle Paul reminds the Romans to reject this type of thinking: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:19-21). This is a helpful approach for our own thought life; we must reject vengeful thoughts and trust God, who is the truly offended party; He will make all things right in the end.<sup>21</sup>

Another unjust thought pattern comes through ***self-righteous judgments***. This type of thought assumes that we have the ability to read other people's minds and view into their hearts.<sup>22</sup> In this, we condemn others (that person is fat/lazy/stupid/weak/arrogant/etc.), or we condemn ourselves, from a viewpoint that assumes omniscience. These thoughts are unjust because we overlook the righteousness given to us through

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<sup>21</sup> Of course this does not mean we should not seek justice in this world or use the resources around us for our protection. God has given the government for this and we can make full use of this (Rom 13:1-4).

<sup>22</sup> This does not mean that we should overlook the actions of those who are living sinful lives yet claim to be Christians, for a good tree will bear good fruit, and you will know them by their works (Matt 7:17-19); at the same time, we have to avoid making hypocritical self-righteous judgments (Matt 7:1-4).



Christ, and because we assume that we possess knowledge which only God has. Paired with this, we often condemn others for not following extra-biblical standards which we believe are universally binding. This is simply repeating the legalistic mistakes of the Galatian heresy (Gal 3:1-6)—adding something that is needed in addition to Christ to be considered righteous. These thoughts are not just, and must be put away.

### Repentance of Unjust Thoughts and Consideration of What is Just

Our only hope of deliverance from unjust thoughts is the gospel. Jesus Christ went to the cross and took all of our unjust thoughts and ways on himself. ***Every single unjust thought and action we indulged in has been placed on Jesus as he died on the cross.*** We can't become just through our obedience or just write off the notion of justice altogether because of how far we have fallen short of God's standards. Instead, we repent of loving unjust ways and we believe the gospel. Jesus has delivered us from our slavery and foolish addiction to unjust thoughts; He's given us a new heart that loves to consider what is just. Our task as Christians is to confess our unjust thoughts to God, admitting they are truly unjust (an offense to God's justice), turn away from these thought patterns and actions (repentance), and rest in Jesus who died and rose again.<sup>23</sup> Unjust thought patterns belong to who we were before we were in Christ, and now we must be put them to death (Col 3:5-11) and embrace our new identity in Christ.

As we repent of unjust thoughts, we consider what is just. What does this look like? One way we can do this is by considering God and His just actions. God's ways are always just and righteous—all of them! God has never committed an action which is evil—never in all of eternity! We consider how God demonstrated justice toward His people in the Old Testament—He saved them over and over again and also disciplined them. We remember how God punished the sins of humanity on Jesus, sins which were committed before and after the cross (Rom 3:25)—in this we see not only justice, but also mercy! We think about the Day of Judgment, when God will punish every sinner outside of Christ and every wrong will be made right (Rev 20:11-15). God's justice is truly awe-inspiring and is a wonderful way to contemplate what is just.

Another way to think about just things is to delight in the *rightness* of just situations and events around us. To be sure, our world is broken and corrupt and nothing is completely free from the stain of injustice. Yet there is still much that is right and should be celebrated on this side of heaven: the hungry being fed; the guilty being fairly punished; the weak being protected; wrongs being made right. Right actions and events of this world point us to God who delights in justice. As we delight and partake in just actions of this world, we give glory to our just God.

In addition to this, we might also pray that justice is done in our lives and the world around us. By praying for justice—and by taking up actions—, we end up filling our thoughts with things that are just. We can pray for those who have not received justice in our neighborhood and for those who are being unjustly persecuted in other parts of the world.<sup>24</sup> Or we might pray that God uses us to bring about a greater justice in our particular context of friends. While we will not see this world become a just place until Jesus returns and the earth is made new, thinking just thoughts today is part of living out our new creational identity in Christ.

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<sup>23</sup> If the temptation to indulge in unjust thoughts feels overwhelming, cry out to God in your prayers. Ask Him to help you remember that God is our “very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). As you turn from unjust thoughts and rest in Jesus, pray that the Holy Spirit empowers you and gives you the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) and the self-control to resist unjust thoughts.

<sup>24</sup> Rev 6:9-10 gives the imagery of martyred saints crying out for God to bring justice on the earth, and this is a good prayer for us too.

Let's interrogate your thoughts this week and ask, "Is this thought just? Does this thought give allegiance to God's justice shown at the cross?" As we consider what is just we reflect the glory of God in our thoughts.

**Questions to Consider**

1. What does it mean for a thought to be just? How do we know whether or not a thing is just?
2. What happens to the notion of just thoughts in a worldview that disregards the God of the Bible?
3. What type of unjust thoughts are you most prone to dwell or delight on? How does this process affect you, your relationship with others, and with God?
4. Why is the gospel our only hope in our desire to be just and think just thoughts?
5. How does thinking just thoughts relate to thinking thoughts that which are *true*, and *honorable*?
6. What are some ways we might consider what is just this week?

## WEEK 4: “WHATEVER IS PURE”

### ***“Whatever is pure...think on these things” Phil 4:8***

Purity is alive and well today. Of course this depends on how you define it. Some people will spend thousands of dollars to acquire a ‘purebred’ dog. Others strive for jewelry made of the *purest* gold and finest metals. Most of us use a filter for our drinking water, which makes our water as *pure* as we can possibly make it. But when a dog is a mutt, the gold is fools’, or there is dirt in our water, purity is lacking.

***Today, many people define purity solely as something which is agreed upon and acceptable to the majority in our culture.*** So having sex before marriage is considered pure, especially if the couple is ‘in love,’ because this has become an acceptable practice in our culture. Harboring hateful thoughts toward someone because of the color of their skin on the other hand is considered racist, impure, and repugnant by nearly everybody. Not embracing another person’s religious beliefs as just another form of truth is also considered closed-minded, intolerant, and impure to our society’s values. These examples point toward an unspoken moral standard in our world by which we judge things to be pure or impure.

The Apostle Paul himself had to deal with the topic of purity. In particular, he dealt with some in his day who preached the gospel in an *impure* manner (Phil 1:17).<sup>25</sup> Apparently, these individuals preached Christ “from envy and rivalry,” not out of love, and hoped to afflict Paul in his imprisonment (Phil 1:15-17). Instead of preaching “from good will” and “out of love” (Phil 1:15-16), these preachers harbored evil intentions and harm toward Paul in their proclamations. Impurity showed its dirty face in the pulpits and the streets.

The topic of purity is our fourth category in Paul’s list of things to consider (Phil 4:8). This particular term “pure,”<sup>26</sup> finds its origin and background in temple and religious worship.<sup>27</sup> OT believers knew that they had to offer “pure” sacrifices as they brought their offerings to God in the temple.<sup>28</sup> Because this was true, the word “pure” is closely related to the notion of being “holy.”<sup>29</sup> This matches the Jewish worldview: God is completely pure and holy and since this is true, He deserves pure offerings and worshippers who submit to His standards of purity. Evidence of this is seen in the language of ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ animals and worship restrictions throughout the OT.<sup>30</sup> Israel had to learn how to “distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (Lev 10:10) if they were to obey the command to “be holy” like the “LORD their God” who “is holy” (Lev 19:2).

Commentator Gordon Fee helpfully explains Paul’s term for “pure” found here in Phil 4:8. He argues that it refers to that which “is not besmirched or tainted in some way by evil.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, a ***pure thing is free from imperfections or deviations from what it ought to be.*** According to Paul, these are the things we as Christians ought to fill our minds with and consider. But how do we identify what is pure, especially in a day—like in the days of the Judges—where everyone does “what is right their own eyes” (Judg 21:25)? What is a pure thing? How do we deal with our own lust for what is not pure?

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<sup>25</sup> Paul uses the same word here for purity (*hagnos*) here in Phil 4:8 as he does in Phil 1:17.

<sup>26</sup> *hagna*

<sup>27</sup> Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, 418.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> B.D.A.G., Bibleworks 8, entry 8.

<sup>30</sup> Gen 7:2; Lev 10-11; 22:17-31; Num 19;

<sup>31</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 418.

## Identifying the Defiled and Tainted

As the holy Creator and Ruler of the universe, God himself is pure. In fact, He is the source of all that is pure and holy in the world, and He allows us to know in a true way what is pure and what is not. This knowledge of what is pure comes through the Bible, which itself is a pure revelation: God's words are "pure words, like silver refined in furnace on the ground, purified seven times" (Ps 12:6). Thus, the Scriptures themselves are pure, and without error or flaw.<sup>32</sup> The wisdom God gives us in the Bible—God's commands and standards for our lives—is also "pure" (Jas 3:17).<sup>33</sup> So it is from here that we are able to identify what is truly pure and what is not pure—pure in an objective and real sense—regardless of the latest fads or trends in our culture tell us.

These pure words teach us that when we live for God, we are living in a pure way. We see this in Psalm 19:9: "the fear of the LORD is pure (same word used for pure in Phil 4:8), enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether."<sup>34</sup> A pure life is found in loving and serving God. Those who reject God and His ways are "crooked, but the conduct of the pure is upright" (Prov 21:8). This notion rules out the possibility that there are many "pure" ways to live. ***There is only one right and pure way to live, and this way of living is in reverential submission to the Triune God of the Bible***; all others paths are rebellion and fraught with impurity. Thus, ***an action or thought truly becomes impure when it has deviated from God's standards for living and thinking.***

Today we can discover what is impure by comparing our thoughts to the words of Scripture. Since the Bible gives us true knowledge about God, any thought which advocates a false picture of God or of what God requires of us is impure. Thus, thoughts which lead us to sexually desire a person other than our spouse are impure, since they have deviated from God's standards of sexual morality.<sup>35</sup> Thoughts which exalt selfish interests are impure, since God alone is to be worshipped. Thoughts which denigrate others are impure, since God calls us to love our neighbors. Thoughts which lead us to "trust in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security,"<sup>36</sup> are impure, since they lead us into idolatry. Thoughts which believe lies about self or others are impure, since they deviate from God's standard which is telling the truth. The Scriptures lead us into purity and the Holy Spirit helps us to apply them to our thoughts and life.

God's Word is the light that exposes the dark and impure thoughts of our minds and hearts. Yet as we consider this topic, it is important to remember that merely being presented with an impure thought is not sin in and of itself. Jesus himself was presented with sinful temptations, yet he never sinned, even though he was truly tempted (Heb 4:15; Matt 4:1-11). ***It is when we embrace, indulge, and delight in impure thoughts that we sin, and thus render ourselves impure.*** Since this is the case, we need to repent and believe the gospel.

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<sup>32</sup> A word to describe the Bible's condition as accurate and free from error is "inerrant" or the doctrine of "inerrancy."

<sup>33</sup> It is also "peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere" (Jas 3:17).

<sup>34</sup> NIV translation.

<sup>35</sup> One frequent category the Bible addresses regarding purity is sexual ethics (1 Pet 3:2; Tit 2:5; 1 Tim 3:2). Pure sex is that which is found between a man and woman in marriage; all other sex is tainted and imperfect. While non-Christians "who do not know God" defile their bodies with sexual promiscuity, Christians are called to "abstain from sexual immorality" and control their bodies in "holiness and honor" (1 Thess 4:1-8). Like the Christians of the first century, we are called to reject the sexual morality of our day, and pursue a godly purity with our bodies and our thoughts. This purity is particularly challenging in our sex-saturated culture, but it is the way of true purity.

<sup>36</sup> New City Catechism 17's definition of idolatry

## Repenting of Impure Thoughts

No one, except for Jesus, can truly claim to have a pure heart free from sin (Prov 20:9). We have all chosen the path of impurity and that which defiles. By choosing what is false and impure, we ourselves have become false and impure (2 Kings 17:15)<sup>37</sup> and separated from God's holy presence. Our pursuit of impurity is rebellion, since we have rejected God's standards for purity, in the place of our own.

As we fight for purity, we have to remember that all of us will fail. In our fight, we ask God to help us recognize impure thoughts which tempt us. When these arise, we turn away from them and reject them as impure. We put these thoughts to death and refuse to be seduced by their empty promises of pleasure and freedom. As we fight, there may be times we fail. Certainly, this happens to us all. But we have a sure hope for purity in repentance and belief in the gospel.

Repentance of impure thoughts begins by acknowledging that we have rebelled against God by accepting a false standard for what is pure, and chosen to delight in it. After confessing our sin, we turn away from impure thoughts and look to Jesus who died on the cross for our impurity. Jesus never chose what is impure over what is pure, yet he took our impurity on Himself as he died on the cross—he became sin who knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21). As we rest in Christ we are assured that everyone who hopes in Jesus “purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). Christians are *already* pure in Christ, but they have *not yet* experienced the fullness of this reality. This is particularly encouraging for us as the stains from the sins of our past haunt us. We must remember that Jesus took on our filth, and gave us his pure standing with God. Jesus' cross and resurrection define us more than any sinful event from our past.

## Considering What Is Pure

Along with filtering out thoughts which are not pure and resting in the gospel, we strive to consider things that are pure as we reflect God's glory in our thoughts. This is the right response for us who are truly new creatures in Christ. ***The earthly approach to life—soiled with impure motives and moralities—has no grip on us, but through the Holy Spirit, the power of Jesus' resurrection dwells in us.***<sup>38</sup> One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is “faithfulness” (Gal 5:22), and it is through the Spirit's power that might be faithful in our pursuit of purity. We rest in the grace of God which was brought us into a right standing with God, and we strive for purity in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A wonderful way to consider what is pure is meditating on Jesus' purity. Jesus never lusted after the young women who gathered around him. Jesus never believed what is false about God or others. Jesus never thought about himself in an arrogant manner—even as God in the flesh he took the form of a servant (Phil 2:5-11). Jesus never chose comfort, jealousy, or any idol in the place of God. He was absolutely pure and this is awe-inspiring.

We can also consider what is pure in the various situations we are in. When tempted with impure lustful desires, we can pray for our own purity, the purity the person we tempted to desire, and for our spouse (or future spouse). When tempted with impure jealous thoughts, we can give thanks to God for where He has

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<sup>37</sup> While the most fallen and impure human retains his or her worth since they are made in the image of God, the point of this verse is to argue that we become like what we worship (see G.K. Beale's book “We Become What We Worship”).

<sup>38</sup> Phil 3:10 emphasizes this reality that the believer, has the power of Jesus resurrection within through the Holy Spirit.

placed us and pray for the person we are tempted to be jealous of, asking God to bless that person's pursuits. When we are tempted with any other type of impure thoughts, we can follow the same pattern: turn away and pray. Doing this, in the power of the Holy Spirit, can also help us to consider what is pure.

The Apostle Paul's admonition to Timothy "keep yourself pure" (1 Tim 5:22) is a good word to us all. In our battle for purity our only hope is Jesus Christ. God has truly made us pure and new in Christ, and pure thoughts are what we ought to consider as we present ourselves as living sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1).

### **Questions to Consider**

1. What does it mean to be pure? What is a pure thought?
2. Which impure thoughts tempt you the most? Why is important to remember the distinction between being presented with an impure thought and indulging in an impure thought?
3. Why is the Bible's definition of purity more important than the world's definition? How are they different?
4. What is our solution to impure thoughts? How can we use this category of purity both as a filter—to reject impure thoughts—and as a reflector—to reflect God's glory?
5. How does the gospel address our inability to think pure thoughts?
6. How one should deal with the task of thinking about things that are impure when that is the topic of conversation? Some examples: How would one discuss pornography without falling into lust? How does one consume media that has tempting images, messages, themes mixed in with redeeming ones? Can you even prescribe criteria by which you make these decisions when some people are more prone to impurity than others?
7. How do thinking pure thoughts relate to *true*, and *honorable*, and *just* thoughts?

## WEEK 5: “WHATEVER IS LOVELY”

### ***“Whatever is lovely....think on these things” Phil 4:8***

Contrary to the uninitiated, Christianity is not a joyless drudgery. Psalm 84:1-2 makes this abundantly clear: “*How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.*” Here, the Psalmist rejoices and delights, and is even thrilled with knowing and experiencing God. The heart of Christianity is a relationship with the Living God which results in redemption, delight, and intense pleasure—even in the context of suffering and pain. While the religion of Buddhism and philosophy of Stoicism view emotions as evils to be repressed or rejected, Christianity views them as natural and neutral—they might be sinful or they might be righteous depending on the situation and depending on how they are used.

Christians are encouraged to use their emotions rightly and to find delight and joy in God (1 Thess 5:16; Phil 4:4). The Christian ‘tastes’ and sees ‘that God is good’ (Ps 34:8), and knows that there is unending pleasure found in knowing God (Ps 16:11). The writers of the Westminster Catechism rightly summarize humanity’s purpose for existence: *Q. What is the chief end of man? A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*<sup>39</sup> Thus, for the Christian, life is found in God who is to be enjoyed and worshipped.<sup>40</sup>

Considering this reality leads us to Paul’s fifth category: whatever is ‘lovely.’ ***A lovely thing is that which causes pleasure or brings delight.***<sup>41</sup> A thing becomes “lovely” as a person recognizes people, things, situations, or ideas which elicit joy in the heart. As we will see, this category is wide and diverse—many things are lovely all around us.

### **Considering What Is Lovely**

Where are ‘lovely’ things found? Is loveliness simply in the eye of the beholder? In one sense, our answer is yes. One person will love classical music while another will consider it boring. One person will delight in chicken noodle soup while another find it repulsive. Lovely things in a very real sense are a subjective matter, contingent upon the tastes, upbringing, and the environment of the person who experiences them. But in another sense, true loveliness is rooted in objectivity. Why do we all long for what is lovely and long for more of it? Perhaps it is because true loveliness, and our longing for what is lovely, comes from the fact that we were made to worship God, who is the true source of all that is lovely. ***Ultimately, all that is good and delightful in our world is in some way a reflection of God’s glory and majesty. Thus, our hearts long for lovely things because our hearts were made to delight in God and His glory.*** Since this is true, we ought to first consider God as the source of all that is delightful and then search for it in the world around us.

God is delightful in both His person and His actions. First, God is delightful in who He is. Considering His attributes makes this plain to us. God, unlike everyone and everything, has no need of anyone or anything to exist.<sup>42</sup> He alone has immortality (1 Tim 6:16) and is without beginning or end. Along with this, He is holy, all-powerful, and good. Unlike us, He has no need of things outside of Himself to be happy and satisfied; God is fully and completely satisfied in Himself as a Trinity of persons (here we see perfect love, community, and

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<sup>39</sup> Westminster Catechism Question 1. Scriptures which speak of us glorifying God (Ps 86; Is 60:21; Rom 11:26; 1 Cor 6:20; 10:31; Rev 4:11. Scriptures which speak of our enjoyment in God (Ps 16:5-11; Ps 144:15; Is 12:2; Luke 2:10; Phil 4:4; Rev 21:3-4).

<sup>40</sup> For a helpful explanation of joy and the Christian life, consider reading John Piper’s “Desiring God.”

<sup>41</sup> B.D.A.G. entry for *προσφιλής* (*prosfilae*)

<sup>42</sup> Theologians refer to this as ‘aseity.’

joy). These facts, God's attributes, lead us to delight in God Himself. Second, God's actions are delightful. When we think about how God created the universe and everything in it, we see a beautiful work. When we see how God rules everything He made in perfect righteousness, we see a lovely work. When we observe how God cares for creation and redeems a people for His glory, we delight and experience pleasure in our hearts. So when we seek to consider what is lovely we should begin first by considering God and God's works.

After we consider the loveliness of God, we ought to consider the lovely things in the world around us. The Bible teaches us that "every good thing is a gift from God" (Jas 1:17). Since God's common grace is present in our world, both Christians and non-Christians experience and produce things that are lovely. Remembering that a lovely thing is 'that which brings pleasure or delight,' we can easily find lovely things all around us: a beautiful song, an extraordinary sunset, a phone call from an old friend, a well-cooked meal, etc. A lovely thing has its basis both in the objective reality of God as the source of all that is lovely and the subjective reality of how we are affected by the particular thing. Considering lovely things is a grace to us, as it reminds us that we have much to be thankful for and delight in.

### **Recognizing and Repenting of Profane Thoughts**

The opposite of lovely is that which is disgusting or profane. ***A thing becomes profane as it abandons or distorts its proper design or boundaries.*** Unlovely thoughts take numerous forms. Sexually delighting in the naked body of your spouse is lovely; sexually delighting in the naked body of anyone else is profane. This is because sexual delight was intended for marriage and sexual delight outside of this design and boundary is an offense to God. Delighting in the joys of our God-given labor is lovely; delighting in the joys of our God-given labor when we should be giving time and attention to our spouse, children, or friends is profane. Here, a good thing (work) is turned into an ultimate thing and becomes a profane idol.<sup>43</sup> Delighting in the success and blessing of another is lovely (this is one way to show love for your neighbor); delighting in his or her success while covetously wishing it was our own is profane (this is covetousness). Here, delight is perverted into coveting. In these examples we see that it is very easy for us to meditate and fill our thoughts with the unlovely.

As Christians, we repent of delighting in profane and evil thoughts. This occurs as we recognize that a temptation to delight in the profane is evil in a real and objective way—***it is truly profane because it rejects God's design and boundaries.*** When we remember this fact, we must label the thought for what it is—an offense against God—and turn away from it. If we have been delighting in a profane thought, then we must turn away from this behavior and admit to God in prayer that we have sinned against Him (confession). As we do this, we turn away from the thought in the power of the Holy Spirit, and rest in Jesus who delivered us to delight in God and all that is good. Then we consider Jesus: he never succumbed to evil thoughts and yet was punished as though he did. This is grace and this is truly lovely! Jesus suffered in our place and we have been given his perfect righteousness as we repent of sins and believe in him. This lovely grace motivates us to choose what is lovely over what is profane.

### **The Ironic 'Lovely' Nature of the Cross**

The cross of Christ is a disgusting and beautiful symbol. It is mark of disgust because it was an instrument of brutal and horrific execution. In the first century, the cross was reserved for the worst of criminals.<sup>44</sup> A

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<sup>43</sup> Tim Keller draws our attention to the notion of an idol being a 'good thing turned into an ultimate thing.'

<sup>44</sup> John Stott "Cross of Christ" is an excellent resource for those who wish to grow in their understanding of the cross.



criminal sentenced to death on a cross was first stripped naked, and then scourged,<sup>45</sup> then forced to carry a heavy plank of wood to his/her place of execution, before finally being nailed through the wrists and feet to the plank of wood and lifted in the air. As the criminal hung on a cross in excruciating pain, he or she was mocked by those who would pass by. Ultimately, it was the suffocation which killed the person, since the position on the cross left the victim struggling to breathe. For those in the first century, the cross was the equivalent of what we think of the electric chair: an instrument of death.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, for some reason the cross is considered a lovely symbol for Christians. Why? This is because it was on the cross that Jesus took the penalty for our sins and was forsaken in our place (Rom 3:21-26; Mark 15:34). Jesus substituted himself for us, took our punishment on himself, and reconciles us with God. Jesus' death became our death and His resurrection becomes ours too (Col 2:12). The cross ironically becomes a symbol of God's love, grace, and mercy. It is no longer viewed with disgust as an object of death; now it is our boast and delight, since it is at the cross that a Christian receives confidence that his or her sins have been forgiven and he or she has been reconciled with God. For Christians, the 'word of the cross...is the power of God' for salvation (1 Cor 1:18) and a thing of delight and honor, even as we bear our own cross and suffer (Luke 9:23).

### **Growing our Taste for Spiritual Beauty**

As Christians we recognize that God has given us new desires and attitudes which are different from those outside of Christ. We find worship, prayer, and fellowship with God to be lovely, while those on the outside the Christian faith view these as boring, strange, or impossible. We find joy in trusting God, while outsiders find joy in temporary or fleeting things to be supreme. We are thrilled to find greater victory over sin in our walk with the Lord, while others consider our 'battle with sin' to be religious or close-minded. God has given us a taste for Himself and for godliness, and the more we grow in maturity the more this taste grows. Much like a connoisseur of fine wines grows in his or her ability to distinguish and appreciate high quality wines, so we grow in our maturity and desires for godliness the more practice. This happens as we are "trained by constant practice" of distinguishing what is good and evil (Heb 5:11-14). God has mercifully given us the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit, and brothers and sisters to help us in this training (2 Tim 3:16; Heb 10:24-25).

Finally, we ought to grow in our delight of the *spiritual beauties* that God has placed in our lives. Spiritual beauty is a beauty that reflects God's character and holiness. These things are lovely in a true and objective sense—since they reflect God's glory and holiness—and ought to be experienced with delight in our hearts. Examples of these things are many: a kind and gentle spirit in the heart of a believer; modesty and fidelity in the arena of relationships and marriage; the church (she is the bride of Christ, adorned with God's righteousness); repentance of sins and reconciliation in relationships with God and others; generosity and sacrificial giving; bold and courageous evangelism in the face of cold skeptics; etc. Certainly, God is kind in allowing us to be exposed to so much spiritual beauty every day; we would do well to consider and delight in these graces. When we do this, we glorify God—showing that He is supreme above all earthly delights—and we enjoy His lovely goodness.

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<sup>45</sup> Scourging is to be "severely beaten with a multi-lashed whip containing imbedded pieces of bone and metal" (ESV footnote Mark 15:15)

<sup>46</sup> D.A. Carson often makes this equivalent when speaks about the cross and its modern day equal.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. How does embracing the statement “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever” change how we think of Christianity? What do we do when we do NOT feel joy in our hearts?
2. What does it mean for a thing to be “lovely”? Would you add or change anything to the author’s definition?
3. How do we consider what is lovely (delightful) as we think about God and His Works?
4. How do we consider what is lovely in the world around us?
5. What does it mean for a thing to not be lovely—for it to be profane? Why are we drawn to that which is profane?
6. How does the gospel address our addiction to the profane?
7. Why is the cross of Christ an ironic lovely symbol?
8. What does it mean for us to boast in the cross (Gal 6:14) today? What does it look like for you individually?
9. What are some examples of spiritual beauty around you? How might considering these things lead us to more clearly reflect God’s glory in our thoughts?
10. How is God calling you to grow in considering what is lovely in your thoughts?
11. How does the category of considering whatever is “lovely” relate the previous four categories in Phil 4:8 (truth, honor, justice, purity)?

## WEEK 6: “WHATEVER IS COMMENDABLE”

**“Whatever is commendable....think on these things” Phil 4:8**

For many young people, one of the biggest highlights of going to college is living in student housing. Here, new friends are made and community is formed: pizzas are shared, movies are watched, and conversations about life’s deepest and most trivial topics go late into the night. I personally had the pleasure of living in the dorms a total of four years when I was in college. Considering that time period, it is interesting to observe how easily one person’s actions impacted the lives of the many (a reality exasperated by the extremely close living quarters): if a person played music loudly at 3 A.M., everyone who lived on the floor was affected by it and woken up; if trash was left in the hallway, everyone had to step over it; if someone burned popcorn, the fire alarm would go off and all would have to go outside and sit in the cold. In this living situation, it was easy for a person to earn a shameful or favorable reputation among our community.

It was during this season of dorm-life that something happened which propelled my name from a position of relative obscurity to one of *extremely* brief campus fame. The event occurred one evening when I happened to be the first person on the scene of a fire. In God’s providence, I had experience and training with fire extinguishers, so I was able to act quickly and put the fire out before too much damage occurred and before anyone was hurt. For me, this was just the natural response, but others saw my actions as brave, selfless, and admirable. The school newspaper promptly interviewed me and the next week everyone on campus knew my name and the story. Though I don’t think I deserved the attention, my actions were considered *commendable*. This adjective is the next category for us to consider in Paul’s list.

What does “commendable” mean? ***A commendable thing is that which is approved or admired by other people. The term is concerned primarily with how a person, thing, idea, or action is perceived or valued in the minds and hearts of others.***<sup>47</sup> The status of ‘commendable’ is received as others recognize the extraordinary nature of a person or situation. Using this definition we can begin to think about what is commendable in our thoughts and the world around us.

### The Slippery Nature of Approval

Receiving approval from others can be a very slippery affair. If we try hard to be liked, we are viewed as shallow or fake. If we completely disregard what others think we are considered rude or arrogant. If simply adopt the values of our culture around us, we end up with attitudes and actions which are contrary to the approval of God as found in the Scriptures. If we brazenly proclaim God’s Word without concern for how it might be received, we can come across like a loud clanging symbol (1 Cor 13:1)—offensive and irrelevant. In this sense, it is difficult to discern what is commendable.

At the same, there are actions, ideas, and persons which are considered commendable by nearly all. Those who display great sacrifice, courage, or integrity generally win widespread good report in the culture at large: the first-responders of 9-11 who gave their lives to save those trapped in the World Trade Center; the leader who while stomaching great dissent and difficulty brings an organization to new heights; the worker who shows up every day and never steals or deceives. Kindness is also considered commendable: holding the door

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<sup>47</sup> Occurring only once in the NT, the term (*euphema*) is found in extra-biblical Greek from the time of the NT to express this same notion. Josephus (**Against Apion 2:253**) uses the term to refer to the acclaimed reputation some temples have. Other translations express this same idea: “good report” (KJV, NASB), “admirable” (NIV).

open at a store for the mother of young children; assisting the elderly in manual labor; visiting the sick or bringing meals to their family. Certainly these and others like them are considered commendable today.

Yet, as Christians we recognize that many things around us are not commendable in an ultimate sense. Secular media may celebrate lavish living, sexual promiscuity, and vain-promotion, but we reject these as products of those who walk in the darkness (Eph 2:1-4). We know that what truly matters in the end is that which is approved by God. ***On the Last Day, it won't matter if the culture approves of an action, ideology, or lifestyle, what will matter most is what God thinks of it.*** God will judge us all and His judgments will be just and true. Yet because of common grace there is much in the world that is commendable and to be considered by the Christian.

The Christian should strive for a commendable reputation and avoid unnecessary offense. While he or she does not need to receive acclaim, a Christian's life should be above reproach and witness to the outside world of the Holy Spirit's empowering work. We see Paul highlighting the importance of anyone who aspires to the position of elder to have good reputation among those who outside the faith: "he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil" (1 Tim 3:7). Those who are not well thought of "fall into a disgrace" and a trap set by the devil. The gospel will always be an offense to those who are perishing (Gal 5:11), but our lives should not be an offense, so that more will be saved (1 Cor 10:31-34).

### **Repenting of the Contemptible**

Why would anyone choose to think about that which is not commendable? Why would we ever fill our minds with the contemptible? There are many reasons for this and the fact is we all do it. All of us dwell on what is wretched to God and the world around us in order to experience the fleeting pleasures of sin. Controversies and unnecessary conflict are not commendable, yet how often do we let our thoughts wonder into evil suspicions? Doing this usually leads us into self-righteous thoughts about our own superiority over others. Another way we choose the contemptible is by indulging in cowardly irrational fears. In this, we begin to assume the worst in others and ourselves—cowardice is never commendable. Again, another example of choosing the contemptible is indulging in selfish thought patterns. These thought patterns are often so despicable that if anyone ever heard them we would be utterly ashamed and embarrassed. Contemptible thoughts allure us with their false promises of freedom and pleasure, but only lead us to ruin, sin, and hatred toward God and neighbor.

We as Christians must repent of contemptible thoughts. ***Jesus Christ died on the cross for our love affair with what is contemptible so that we might be freed to delight in his love forever.*** God has given us Jesus' righteousness and Christ has taken the filth of our sin upon himself (2 Cor 5:21). Remembering this leads us away from despicable thoughts, to the freedom of honoring God with commendable thoughts. We then choose commendable thoughts to honor God and love our neighbor, knowing that our hope is in Jesus and not our performance. Christ's approval has been given to us, and since we've been accepted we act out of our love and gratitude to our gracious God. This repentance is ongoing and lifelong, as we continue to grow in our ability to recognize contemptible and commendable thoughts.

## The Fear of the LORD<sup>48</sup>

The category of human approval leads to an important theological topic: the fear of the LORD. You and I all fear something or someone's opinion and this fear leads us to do certain things. Some fear man and become people-pleasers. Some fear debt and become stingy. Some fear loneliness and make poor decisions in relationships. Some fear failure and cannot handle defeat. Some fear intimacy and refuse to open up their hearts to anyone. We all are afraid and this can lead to a distorted approach to considering what is commendable in our thoughts. What we need is a better fear. A holy fear. The fear of the LORD. This fear will help us in our pursuit of commendable thoughts.

The Bible teaches that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7). But what exactly is it? The Bible speaks of it in a number of places.<sup>49</sup> First, let's consider what it is not. To fear the LORD is not to fear that God will abuse or maliciously hurt us. Rather, ***fearing the LORD is to rightly view God's power and authority with reverence.*** It is to show God the respect and reverence that His all-powerful nature deserves. Yet this act is more than just a polite reverence, it is an attitude and perspective of God that results in transformed actions and lives. A good definition of the fear of the LORD is an ***affectionate, reverential submission.*** First, it is affectionate—worshipful, desiring of God (it hates what is evil [Prov 8:13]). Second, it is reverential—it recognizes God's power and authority (it does not envy sinners [Prov 23:17]). Third, it is displayed in submission—it involves obedient action (Deut 6:2).<sup>50</sup> This affectionate, reverential submission is what it means to fear the LORD.

A helpful analogy for considering the fear of the LORD is found in how we approach trains. When we walk up to a train track and see a train coming, we promptly move away, knowing that the train has the power to kill us. We respect the train's power and submit to the wisdom that it is best to stay out of a train's way. In a sense, this is similar to the notion of how we respond when we exercise the fear of the LORD. ***We see God's power and are more concerned with pleasing Him than any person, thing, or situation.*** Yet a proper fear of the LORD also leads to warmth in our hearts toward God. God is not only terrifying powerful, since we are in Christ, He is our King and benevolent Father.

By embracing a fear of the LORD we are directed in how we act and think toward others and how we approach what is commendable in our thoughts. We act toward others in order to impress God and not them—this kills people-pleasing. We reject evil actions considered commendable by the masses, fearing God more than what we will miss out on in this life. We consider commendable thoughts without turning good things into things which define us, knowing that our worth and identity are found in God. The fear of the LORD is a most useful tool in our fight against sin and in our striving to love God.

Let us interrogate our thoughts this week and ask if we are considering what is commendable. Let's pray that God would fill us with the Holy Spirit and help us to honor Him in our thought life.

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<sup>48</sup> I've capitalized LORD here to follow with the practice found in most English Bibles to translate the name of Yahweh. Yahweh is the Hebrew name for the God of Israel, whom we now know to be our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

<sup>49</sup> At least 47 times in the OT and NT.

<sup>50</sup> To hear one of my sermons on the 'fear of the LORD' go here: <http://www.ttschmidt.com/portfolio/the-fear-of-the-lord-proverbs-1>

### **Questions to Consider**

1. What does it mean for a thing to be considered commendable? What are some example of commendable things in your life and in the culture at large today? What are some recorded examples of commendable things in Scripture?
2. Why is acquiring human approval so complex? How do you view the importance of receiving the approval of others?
3. How is the gospel our only hope in considering what is commendable?
4. What is the fear of the LORD?
5. How is God calling you repent of indulging in that which is not commendable?
6. How does this category relate to the other five (*true, honorable, just, pure, lovely*) which came before it?

## WEEK 7: “IF THERE IS ANY EXCELLENCE”

### *“If there is any excellence....think on these things” Phil 4:8*

There is a war going on today in our culture. The war is between those who love Apple products and those who are devoted to the PC. Regardless of what side you are on, when the latest products arrive there is usually a great fanfare over the sleekness of some new design or improvements in features of the latest gadget. Our hearts hunger for excellence.

If you have ever been a part of a successful team or group—business, sports, hobby, etc.—you have likely experienced those managing you call you to excellence. Coaches urge players to strive for record-breaking feats and opponent-crushing victories. Managers hold high standards for their employees’ appearance, service, and customer interactions. Parents push their children to excel in academics and social-circles. This call to excellence, which abounds in our world and social circles, is not only found in our products or performance, but also in our moral virtues. We hold with high regard particular virtues such as tolerance, unity, and hard work, and seek instill these into the hearts and minds of our children.

Excellence is not only valued today, it was also highly esteemed in the first century when Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians. Moral philosophers argued for moral excellence and historians lauded the excellence of ancient battles won and opponents defeated.<sup>51</sup> The term<sup>52</sup> Paul uses here in Phil 4:8 for “excellence” (also translated as virtue),<sup>53</sup> was extremely commonplace for those who lived in Rome.<sup>54</sup> This is the seventh quality in Paul’s list of things to consider.

***A good definition for excellence is the possession of a superior quality or exceeding goodness.*** The term can denote “a good quality of any kind” and was often used by those in the first century “as a moral characteristic.”<sup>55</sup> Commentator Gordon Fee is helpful:

“The word “excellent” is the primary Greek word for “virtue” or “moral excellence.”... Although not found elsewhere in Paul, the present usage, along with “contentment” in v. 11, is clear evidence that he felt no need to shy away from the language of the Greek moralists. What he intends, of course, is that “virtue” be filled with Christian content, exemplified by his own life and teaching (v.9).”<sup>56</sup>

So we learn that Paul is using a category common in his day to provide the Philippian Christians with a framework for a Christian thought-life—a thought-life that reflected the glory of God and was markedly different from that of the world. Our task is to discover how we ourselves can consider things of excellence.

### **Forsaking Excellence**

While we claim to value excellence, often we forsake it in our thoughts and actions. In the place of excellence we often substitute that which is lazy, distorted, sloppy, corrupt, or twisted. Usually we do this because of selfish motives: it is easier to give a half-hearted gift than it is to give one that excels the expectations of the recipient; it is easier to perform a task at a superficial level than to exert the efforts required to offer what is

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<sup>51</sup> B.D.A.G. e notes how *Aretae* term is used both by historians and moral philosophers

<sup>52</sup> *Aretae*

<sup>53</sup> KJV

<sup>54</sup> BDAG

<sup>55</sup> Friberg Reference

<sup>56</sup> Fee, commentary on Phil, p 419.

excellent (especially in cooking or cleaning); it is easier to offer a cliché compliment than to offer a sincere thoughtful encouragement. We chose what is easy over what is excellent at the expense of those around us. Often times we are choosing selfishness, which is sin. Our selfishness distorts our expressions of love, which would have been much more powerful if they had been expressed in a spirit of excellence. Of course this does mean that have to be perfectionists (this can lead to sin derived from the fear of man), but the pursuit of excellence can help us to be more authentic in our love for others.

Another reason we forsake excellence is due to our mistaken understanding of the sacred and secular. Sometimes we label specifically religious tasks (things like prayer, singing worship songs, or tithing) as ‘sacred’ activities and those which are not (things like cooking, cleaning, working a job in a secular field) as ‘secular’. This can lead us to be lazy in our “unspiritual” non-church related activities or thoughts (or vice-versa). Such a view is unbiblical and was rightly exposed as false by Martin Luther and those of the Protestant Reformation. He and others argued that we are mistaken if we as Christians split up our tasks into what is sacred and what is secular. For a Christian, all of life and every vocation is a sacred service to and worship of God (Col 3:17). If you are changing oil, you are doing this for the glory of God. If you are breastfeeding your child, you are doing this for the glory of God. If you are selling stocks or houses, you are doing this for the glory of God. If you are preaching a sermon, you are doing for the glory of God. Everything we do, in and out of the church, is a sacred work to God who has providentially assigned us the task. This reality should thrill and motivate us to work with excellence for God, since we are doing everything out of love and worship of Him.

### **Redeemed to Enjoy God and His Excellent Works**

Christians, we have been redeemed to enjoy God and God’s excellent works. 1 Peter 2:9 makes this abundantly clear: “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the *excellencies* of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”<sup>57</sup> You and I have been brought out of the kingdom of darkness so that we might proclaim the excellencies of King Jesus, who laid down his life for us on the cross. We gave ourselves over to selfish and laziness, but he selflessly gave himself up to die in our place. ***He rescued us from the profane mundane so that we might revel in his thrilling excellence. This excellence is especially seen in His grace.*** While we deserved to be crushed for our sins, God gave us forgiveness and eternal life in the gospel. Now we get to sing, delight, and proclaim the excellencies of God’s grace for all eternity!

Even though we are compelled to marvel at God’s grace, we also should marvel at God’s excellent works. All of God’s works are excellent: “How great are your works!” (Ps 92:5). God has never made a mistake or given a half-hearted effort. Every one of his works is marvelous and awe-inspiring: trees, plants, stars, animals, the laws of nature, etc. Creation proclaims God’s glorious excellence (Ps 19) and we get to join in with our voices. On top of this, we ourselves are works of God’s excellence: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well” (Ps 139:14). Since we are works of excellence, self-degrading and self-pitying thoughts ought to be rejected for the evil lies that they truly are. In Christ we see the reality that we are of value, not because we think high thoughts about ourselves, but because we are creatures made by our glorious God for His glorious purposes.

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<sup>57</sup> Emphasis added



## The Gospel as Distinct from Mere Moral Excellence

The gospel is a scandal to those who embrace a moral excellence outside of Christ. Most of us have someone in our social circles who is a ‘moralist.’ This person always obeys the rules. He or she never oversteps the mark or speaks out of place. Instead, there is always obedience, something of which the moralist is usually very proud. Often, you will find this person looking down on those who do not live up to his or her standards of excellence. Many of these individuals believe that God will accept them because of their superior moral performance and virtue. For the moralist, the gospel of grace is an unbelievable scandal. How can God allow the filthy, the lazy, or the undisciplined into heaven? Yet this is exactly what the gospel declares: though you are evil and deserve death and hell, God has placed your evil and the punishment for your evil on Jesus, and God has given you Jesus’ perfect righteousness (2 Cor 5:21)! We deserved only separation from God for our rebellion, but God has restored us to Himself and allows us into heaven solely by His grace! The moralist cannot accept this.

The gospel is radically different from mere moralism. ***Moralism is fatal because it is resting on self instead of Christ for one’s standing with God.*** This will never work, for God’s only solution to our sin is Jesus’ death on the cross (Rom 3:21-26), and resting on our efforts will lead to our just condemnation on the Day of Judgment. Our only hope is the gospel.

## Considering Excellence in Light of the Gospel

How do we practically consider excellence in our thoughts and how do we do this in the light of the gospel? For each of us this will be different, but there are some principles that might help. First, we enjoy the excellencies of our world but do not let them become idols in our hearts. If Tim Keller is when he argues that ‘idolatry is when we make a good thing an ultimate thing,’<sup>58</sup> then we have to be careful not to make excellent things (like possession, actions, or persons) that which define or ultimately motivate us. When we let the excellent things of our world become idols, we are not rightly considering them in our hearts. The proper response is to give thanks to God for them. Second, we remember that the gospel of grace destroys any right we have to self-righteously look down on that which is not excellent. Every day you and I find that which is not excellent, and the temptation we face is to snobbishly and condescendingly critique those around us. Yet this is contrary to the grace we’ve received. As recipients of God’s grace, we ought to be a gracious and merciful people in the power of the Holy Spirit. Third, we must remember that it is the Bible which ultimately defines that which is morally excellent rather than culture. Presently, our culture believes that sexual freedom expressed through sex outside of the marriage is morally excellent. It also believes that for a person to claim Jesus alone is the way to God is morally repugnant. These views of moral excellence conflict with God’s Word, so we must reject the world’s standards of excellence and cling firmly to God’s Word. Fourth, we should let the excellencies of this world lead us to consider the excellencies of God’s grace and mighty works of creation. New Mac products, majestic houses, and beautiful music performances should lead us to remember God as the Author of all that is beautiful and wonderful.

The praises of particular consumer products will be forgotten, but we’ll be celebrating Jesus and His work of redemption forever on the recreated earth in our glorified and sinless bodies. Here is true excellence and here our hearts find joy.

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<sup>58</sup> Tim Keller frequently makes this analogy in his sermons

### **Questions to Consider**

1. What is excellence? What are examples of excellence in your life and the world around us? Throughout history? In scripture?
2. Why do we forsake what is excellent? How does this affect those around us?
3. Read 1 Peter 2:9. How does the fact that we have been redeemed to proclaim God's excellencies change the way we live?
4. Since we ourselves are products of God's excellence, how does that change the way we view ourselves?
5. How is the gospel different from mere moral excellence?
6. How do consider what is excellent in light of the gospel?
7. How does this category relate and build on the previous six: *true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable*?

## WEEK 8: “IF THERE IS ANYTHING WORTHY OF PRAISE”

*“If there is anything worthy of praise....think on these things” Phil 4:8*

Apple pie is baked to be eaten. Chairs are manufactured to be sat upon. Cars are produced to be driven. Human beings were created to... to do what? Why are we here? Some claim that there is no purpose to asking this type of question because there no way for us to know (agnosticism). Others claim that we were not created at all because there is no Creator—we are simply accidents of Darwinian evolution (atheism). For either of these views, any meaning we attempt to give our short lives is purely subjective and illusory: there is no real objective purpose for our existence, or if there is one we do not have access to it. Although many non-Christians around us would argue for these positions, none of us live as though we have no purpose. We all live for something or some cause. Deep down we know there is something more to life than just eating, drinking, and working a job.

The Bible teaches that God created us for a purpose and that we are not blind products of evolution (Gen 1). God made us to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.<sup>59</sup> When a person is rightly living out what he was created to do, he will give glory or praise to God (glorify) and delight in Him. Nothing else can ever satisfy our hearts<sup>60</sup> and any approach which rejects God as its ultimate goal is rebellion. You and I were made to give praise to God.

This leads us to Paul’s final category: praise. A good definition for praise<sup>61</sup> is *to express one’s admiration for or approval of a person, object, or thing.*<sup>62</sup> *Something “worthy of praise” is that which is deserves of our admiration or approval.* The Bible and extra-biblical Greek use the term four ways: 1. praise for God (Eph 1:6,12,14; Phil 1:11; Ps 22:3); 2. God’s praise/approval/acceptance toward a human (1 Cor 4:5; 1 Pet 1:7); 3. a human’s praise for another human (Rom 13:3; 2 Cor 8:18; 1 Pet 2:14); 4. human praise for things or ideas (4 Macc 1:2). Our passage (Phil 4:8) is using this term to refer to things, persons, or ideas we approve—this means our usage falls into the fourth category above with some overlap with the third.

Commentator Gordon Fee states: “Although **this word probably refers to the approval of others, the basis has been changed from “general ethical judgment” to conduct that is in keeping with God’s own righteousness.**”<sup>63</sup> So Paul calls us to consider praiseworthy things in light of the reality of God’s own righteousness—a righteousness that we receive through faith in Jesus (Phil 3:9). There may be many ‘praiseworthy’ things around us, but as a Christian we must consider what is ultimately praiseworthy in the light of God’s revelation (the Bible). The most ultimate praiseworthy person is God. What is truly praiseworthy around us recognizes this reality and submits to this truth. Yet, we would be mistaken if we did not observe and consider things worthy of praise around us. Our task is to consider that which is ultimately praiseworthy (God and His works) and that which is praiseworthy around us in a way that is godly.

### Rejection of Praiseworthy Things

Consideration of a praiseworthy thing naturally leads to pleasure and delight. We like thinking about these things because they are wonderful to our hearts. So why would we even need to be told by the Apostle Paul

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<sup>59</sup> Westminster Catechism, which cites Glorify: Ps 86, Rom 11:36, Isaiah 60:21, 1 Cor 6:20; 10:31; Rev 4:11; Joy: Ps 16:5-11; Ps 144:15; Isaiah 12:2; Luke 2:10; Phil 4:4; Rev 21:3-4

<sup>60</sup> An excellent study on this can be found in John Piper’s work “Desiring God”

<sup>61</sup> *Ephainos* (ἔπαινος)

<sup>62</sup> BDAG 2838 Bibleworks 9

<sup>63</sup> Fee, Philippians 419.

to consider that which is worthy of praise? Isn't this obvious? The answer is you and I often reject praiseworthy things because of our tendency is geared toward pride. Pride—thinking too highly of oneself—destroys our ability to consider praiseworthy things. This happens as we refuse to accept the value of a thing because it goes against our personal assessment, because we ourselves did not come up with the accomplishment, or because we feel overlooked. Examples of this abound: an employee derides the notion of celebrating another's promotion because it was not based on his or her evaluation standards; an athlete maliciously slanders someone who is more accomplished in order to feel better about his or her own performance; a friend refuses to acknowledge another's personal success because the person did not follow his or her stated advice. Pride steals away our praise and leads us to praise ourselves. This deluded self-love is the opposite of loving others or God and is sin.

Idolatry is another way we reject praiseworthy things. We find something we love and decide that nothing else ought to be praised or admired. This is folly, since God is the only legitimate person deserving of worship—who else created the galaxies, sun, earth and human race and who else rules everything by the Word of His power (Heb 1:3)? Yet we often make things around us objects of exclusive praise, and this kills our ability to praise God or rightly appreciate praiseworthy things around us: we prize our job and look down on those in 'lesser' occupations; we exalt our family and condescendingly critique families who are different; we treasure our car and give it all our time and heart's affection; we throw ourselves into the adoration of our favorite sports team and forget to prayer or read our Bible. Such a pursuit saps our praise of God and legitimate approval of others. This is sin.

### **Jesus Rescues Us to Praise the Praiseworthy**

You and I have been rescued from our sin so that we might praise the praiseworthy. God saw us in our desperate and rebellious state and loved us even as we rebelled against him (Rom 5:8). As He pitied the Israelites when they were in the bondage of Egypt and saved them from their physical slavery (Exod 2:23), so God pitied us in our slavery to sin (Rom 6:18). He sent his Son Jesus, who came in perfect humility and worship—he was never prideful and never idolatrous. Jesus was punished for our pride and faithless hearts. He died the death we should have died and rose again conquering sin and death. Now he leads us in the freedom of being sons of God—we are no longer captives of sin but are sons of God (John 1:12-13).

We've been rescued by Jesus to praise God and to rightly praise the things around us. This has all been accomplished by Jesus and we can take none of the credit. Worldliness leads us to pride and worshipping worthless things (Rom 1:21-23). Thinking that God will accept us because of our performance is delusional—God saved us because of His mercy and not because of our performance (Titus 3:5). Believing in Jesus as our only hope leads us to hearts filled with thankfulness and praise. We don't have to be filled with despair or praise worthless things; Jesus has saved us from all of this. It is so much more wonderful to rejoice in God through the power of the Holy Spirit and to consider praiseworthy things around us in godly manner. So we repent of our sin and place our trust in Jesus, praising God and that which is worthy around us.

### **Considering Praiseworthy Things Around Us**

There is so much to praise in the world around us. This is a result of God's grace: "every good and perfect gift" is from our Father in heaven (Jas 1:17). We could create endless lists of the praiseworthy things: a beautiful piece of music; a favorite meal prepared to perfection; an unexpected raise in our salary; our body being healed from sickness; etc. Sometimes even sorrow or lament is praiseworthy, especially so at the death of a loved one or the wake of a terrible tragedy (Ecc7:3). How do we rightly consider praiseworthy things,

without succumbing to idolatry (making them ‘ultimate things’), and without sulkily rejecting legitimately great things because of pride? Perhaps we need a perspective centered on the gospel. This view recognizes that Jesus has redeemed us to adore God above all and to enjoy the things of this world for His glory.

Remembering this prevents us from exalting things beyond their proper limits (making them idols) and keeps us humble as we see that God gives us good things and is the ultimate judge. As we see things through this lens we become grateful for ‘praiseworthy’ things and are led to delight in God who is ultimately praiseworthy.

Considering praiseworthy things around us forces us to engage and enter into our culture. So often Christians hide themselves from culture in an effort to remain pure, but this isolation hinders our witness to the world around us and our enjoyment of God’s common grace. We have to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt 10:16). This will require courage, frequent repentance, and the Holy Spirit’s leading.

### **The Weight of Glory and Everlasting Praise**

As Christians have access to unending and ceaseless joy in God. For all of eternity we will treasure God and grow in our love and knowledge of His goodness and glory. We were made for praise and pleasure in God! This shapes the way we feed our hearts here on earth, since we know that God is greater than any earthly pleasure. This leads us to tell us others the gospel and to orient our affections around tasting and seeing that God is good (Ps 34:8).

It seems appropriate to end our study on praise with a quote from C.S. Lewis. I believe that he is right here in his estimate that many of us are “far too easily pleased”:

*“If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”<sup>64</sup>*

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<sup>64</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*

### **Questions to Consider**

1. How does the fact that God exists and made us to worship Him impact how we view the purpose of our existence? How would life and morality be different if there was no God and no true meaning to our existence?
2. How is God worthy of praise? Why does He deserve our praise more than anything? How does seeing God as the ‘most ultimate praiseworthy person’ impact how we praise other things?
3. How does pride prevent us from praising God and other things? How does idolatry prevent us from praising God and other things?
4. How can we rightly enjoy praise-worthy things in non-Christian culture? What are some things in culture that you are struggling to enjoy rightly?
5. How have you been “far too easily pleased” in pleasures outside of God lately? How does the category of praise relate the previous 7 categories (true, honorable, pure, righteous, lovely, commendable, excellent)?

## CONCLUSION

For the past 8 weeks we have studied Paul's exhortation to consider what is true, honorable, pure, righteous, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praise-worthy in our thoughts. Our desire has been to grow in a godly thought life, both by filtering out what is contrary to God's desire for our lives and by reflecting God's glory in our thoughts. We've been reminded that since we are all sinners, our only hope is in God's grace—not our obedience or efforts. The reality of the gospel leads us forward into repentance of sinful thoughts and into rest in what Jesus has done. As we have done this and continue to do this in the future, we seek to more fully live out our new creational identity in Christ.

However, we would be mistaken if failed to mention that the Christian experience is not merely one of the mind, but also of the heart, body, and action. As we strive to be transformed in our thinking based on Phil 4:8, we should also obey the verses directly after it: "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things..." (4:9). Paul knew that transformation was holistic and included the body as well as the mind. Here in Phil 4:9, he urges the Philippian believers, and now us, to imitate the apostolic approach to godly living. This means we are to live godly lives in imitation of the apostles—these practices included prayer, fellowship, Bible study, sacrificial service, and evangelism. So as we seek to grow in a godly thought life, we must also strive for godliness in our actions.

As we grow in a godly thought life and in godly actions, we are given a promise at the end of Phil 4:9: "the God of peace will be with you." Such a promise is a precious anchor for our souls, as we choose God over the world and gospel-obedience over fleeting sinful pleasures. The God of peace is with us as seek to put to death what is earthly in us and as we fix our eyes on Jesus. The God of peace is with us as He works within us the will and desire to serve Him (Phil 2:13) and as He carries us forward to day when Jesus returns (Phil 1:6). The God of peace will never leave us nor forsake us. This is a precious truth and comfort and for our hearts.

May the LORD transform your mind, heart, and life for the glory of Jesus.