



“JOY SCROLLING”

**Sermon Delivered by Dr Reverend Moore
Philippians 4:1-9, October 11, 2026
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

The principal at East Meck High School had brought some disturbing data to the School Leadership Team meeting in the Spring of 2016. My children were juniors that year and I was serving as the chair of the leadership team. The data showed that mental health issues were increasing among the incoming 9th graders over the previous five years. Discussions ranged from ways to offer support to the incoming freshman class to investigating the middle school feeders to East Meck to wondering if other area high schools were seeing similar trends. **Then, someone asked, “When did Instagram start?”**

The question changed our conversation. Instagram and Snapchat launched in 2010 and 2011; about the same time our data began showing an increase in mental health concerns in the freshman classes. We were clueless as to how to address this, or even if social media had anything to do with the drop in mental health among teenagers. But that conversation has hung in my mind for the past ten years. A decade later, there is plenty of data and there have been many conversations, school policies, and the first wave of government laws.

Jonathan Haidt, in his bestselling book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, describes what the combination of smartphones, tablets, and social media is doing to our children. I recommend it to anyone with children or grandchildren. Haidt notes that since 2010 depression and anxiety among college freshmen has tripled [p. 71], the amount of time teens and young adults spend with friends has decreased by 50% [p. 121], correspondingly, teenagers who agree with the statement—A lot of times I feel lonely—has increased by 50% [p. 169], all of which has led to a significant drop in the percentage of teenagers that feel satisfied with themselves [p. 155].

All of this is impacting our children more than the general public because older generations have experience of a pre-digital life that usually still grounds them in the “real” world. **Even among adults, though, we have created the phrase “doomscrolling” to describe the habit of regularly scrolling on our devices through online media or social media to regularly read negative, distressing, or alarming news.**

And with climate change, the rise of AI and data centers, inflation, and the upcoming mid-term elections there is plenty of distressing news to fill our screens. It doesn’t matter what your political or social persuasion is—the algorithms driving your digital content will provide whatever alarming news is bound to raise your blood pressure, because the angrier you become the longer you stay on your device and the more money they make.

The Apostle Paul ends his letter to the Philippians in an interesting fashion. The Church at Philippi might have been Paul's favorite. Certainly, he spoke more fondly of them compared to his letters to other churches. His final advice, his final word, to them was about their minds—about what they were thinking. The final chapter begins by addressing a disagreement between two prominent leaders in the church—two women, by the way. Immediately after that, he tells them to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” As if focusing on rejoicing in God, rather than on their disagreement, would bring them together. No matter what they faced, and the Christians then faced hardship greater than we do today—**Paul would be dead in a few years after writing these words because the Roman Empire would execute him. Nevertheless, he writes, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”**

“Finally, brothers and sisters,” he adds to conclude his letter, “whatever is true, whatever honorable, whatever is just, pure, pleasing, commendable, and excellent, if there is anything worthy of praise, **think about these things.**”

Think about these things, he says. He's just addressed two leaders in the church that had been disagreeable and cautioned everyone against worrying about things and his response to these is first rejoice in the Lord, second, offer prayers of thanksgiving, and finally to think about noble things.

Is this good, faithful guidance? Or a naïve, Pollyanna approach to the difficulties in life?

Anne Lamott, in her book *Hallelujah Anyway*, summed up the five remembrances of Buddhism this way: “I am sure to become old; I cannot avoid aging. I am sure to become ill; I cannot avoid illness. I am sure to die; I cannot avoid death. I must be separated and parted from all this is dear and beloved to me. I am the owner of my actions; I cannot escape the consequences of my actions” [Lamott, *Hallelujah*, 70]. These are hard realities of life, and one gift Buddhism has given all persons of faith are these clear, succinct truths.

How does Paul's list of things to think about change any of those realities? **You can think about whatever is honorable and you are still going to get old.** Think of pleasing things and still face the consequences of your own actions. Think of excellence and you're still going to die. Thinking about noble things doesn't change our circumstances. However, how we think about things does change how we handle our circumstances.

Paul didn't write those words to the Philippians with the idea that thinking about noble things would change our circumstances. **He wrote them to change our lives in the midst of difficulties.** He wrote those words while sitting in a prison cell, possibly the one that would ultimately lead to his death, and still he wrote.

Between climate change and AI, our war with Iran and those in Gaza and Ukraine, and now with our political division more exposed with the upcoming mid-term elections, there are plenty

of reasons for us to worry. It's easy to doomscroll because our global media makes it possible for us to be aware of all the terrible and worrisome things that happen in the world.

The data in Jonathan Haidt's book shows us what focusing on negative things all the time has been doing to children of the past decade. And to a lesser extent the loneliness, the anxiety, the anger are happening to adults as well. Are we making the difficulties of our times worse by the way we use social media and online media, today?

Anne Lamott once wrote, "**The best way to change the world is to change your mind**" [*Grace (Eventually)*, 252]. **Could it be as simple as that?**

"Whatever is true, whatever honorable, whatever is just, pure, pleasing, commendable, and excellent, if there is anything worthy of praise, *think* about these things." Paul is not saying that we should only think happy thoughts, to wish away the problems we face or the troubles in the world. **Happy is not on the list.**

To think about whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just is to face the realities of life and to focus on whatever is the right thing to do, the decent thing to do, the noble thing to do. And **while we do not have control over the circumstances in life, we do have control over our minds. We choose what we think.**

And for far too often in the past decade we have been putting garbage in our minds. When we think the worst of people, they generally live up to our opinions. When we focus on stories that make us angry, we add to the stress in our lives. When we compare ourselves to the filtered pictures of our peers on social media, we rob ourselves of enjoying life and ourselves as we are. **We can choose another path.**

We choose what we think. If you can't untangle yourself from your phone or tablet to read good books or positive periodicals or get outdoors in nature, then at least seek out positive stories online. They do exist. **The Good News Network has been reporting good news stories since 1997.** Optimist Daily is another. A quick google search will help you find several options. What if you woke up in the morning and spent a few minutes "joy scrolling" instead of doomscrolling? Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul says. **Rejoicing is joy scrolling.** The words rejoice and joy both come the same Old French word and from the same Latin word.

What if you reminded yourself that every day ordinary people do the right thing. They keep their promise, respond to anger with kindness, open a door for a stranger, help someone in need. These things happen so frequently that we do not notice them. Yet, we rely on people being trustworthy, and honorable, and decent every day. Otherwise, we wouldn't eat the food we bought at the grocery store or sit down for a meal in a restaurant. We wouldn't make a deal with anyone we do not personally know. We wouldn't send our children to school to be nurtured by teachers we met one time, or work with strangers at our jobs. **Start noticing all the people around you doing the right thing.** Rejoice in them. Again, I say rejoice.

Twice in this passage Paul references the peace of God. The first he writes after he tells the Philippians to rejoice always and to offer their requests to God in thanksgiving prayers. If we do that, he says, “the peace of God, which passing all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Then, after he tells us to think about noble things, he adds, “and the God of peace will be with you.” When we take back control of what we are putting in our minds and choosing to rejoice and choosing to think on noble things the peace of God and God of peace will be in us and with us.

At the end of our service, we will be dedicating a Serviceberry Bush and a Persimmon Tree in honor of the Catawba People because our Environmental Justice team has been thinking about what is true and honorable and just. It’s not a huge thing, but it’s one step in a journey of a thousand miles. When we think about noble things, we find ways to do honorable things.

In writing about this Bible passage Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Through the great crises of our times and through the little crises of each of our [days], I believe that this is a deep part of what God says to us. Yes, take your times seriously. Yes, know that you will be judged by the terrible sins of your times. Yes, you do well to faint with fear and foreboding at what is coming on the world. And yet rejoice. Rejoice. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety. Pray” [Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 50]. He wrote those words 60 years ago; he could have written them yesterday.

You control what you think. Rejoice. Pray. Think about noble things. AMEN.