

Philippians

Part 20 – Ponder and Practice

Philippians 4:8-9

The promises of Philippians 4:7 and 9, with the connection between “the peace of God” and “the God of peace,” show that Paul’s directions in 4:8-9 are linked to his previous call to rejoice in the Lord, gentleness, and prayer. In addition, the final two directions for our anxious hearts and bound to each other by a parallel structure: “ponder these things” and “practice these things” (D. Johnson, 270).

Main Idea: As Christians ponder and practice that which accords with the gospel they will know the comfort of the God of peace.

Vs. 8 – Verse 7 ended with the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds. But what God does in us and for us often requires our active participation. We have some responsibility for what goes on in our hearts and minds and Paul now turns to that. The Bible holds together divine sovereignty and human agency.

When Paul strings terms together as he does here, the inevitable question is whether each term bears a distinct meaning or whether Paul is adding one to another for effect. The commentaries distinguish between the terms as best they can, but there is plainly a fair measure of overlap. The difficulty of making precise distinctions is increased by the fact that five of the words in Paul’s list are not words he commonly uses and two of the eight qualities are mentioned only here in the NT. The terms taken together represent “those qualities which are good in themselves and beneficial to others.” [O’Brien, 503]

The sense of the present imperative that concludes v. 8 is, “Let your mind continually dwell on these things.”

Vs. 9 – Paul summarizes the ethical exhortations of the previous paragraph by saying that they are to live according to the teaching they have received from him and the example he set for them. In other words, the ethics of the previous verses are distinctively *Christian*. The thinking they are to do at the end of v. 8 is to lead to living. The virtues of v. 8 are not only to be pondered and reflected on, but *practiced*, and practiced in the context of the gospel and of faith in Christ.

In v. 7 the “peace of God” was the benefit to be gained from a life lived by prayer and thanksgiving. Here the presence of “the God of peace” is the blessing. We are reminded that the blessings of the gospel are all *personal*. They are not *things* that God dispenses, as it were; they are all the blessing of his own presence in the lives of his children. In any case, even in this list of duties, we have been reminded of the need to *trust the Lord*, as in v. 6. As everywhere else in Paul and in the Bible, the Christian life is the effulgence, the overflow of faith in Christ and love for him.

1. Ponder

Vs. 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.”

- What our minds dwell upon shapes our actions and therefore impacts directly the course of our lives. Jesus taught that the secret thoughts which occupy our hearts are the fountain from which our actions flow (Mark 7:14-23). In Proverbs we are told: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (4:23). So Paul tells us first to think long on the perfections of God so that we may put into practice what we have heard in the gospel and seen in the lives of those who are growing in Christlikeness.

Finally, whatever is...

a) True

- Christians must set their minds on whatever accords with the truth. God himself is the truth (Deut 32:4; Isa 65:16). Jesus refers to himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). He is the full embodiment of “grace and truth” (Jn 1:17). God’s words are always only true (Ps 18:30; 19:7-14; 33:4).

b) Honorable

- This is reference to something that “evokes special respect.” (Harmon, 419). It is a requirement of deacons and their wives (“dignified” 1 Tim 3:8, 11). To think on honorable things requires a simultaneous rejection of that which is dishonorable.

c) Just

- In New Testament Greek “just” is taken from the word group which includes *righteous* and *righteousness*. God is the ultimate standard for what is just. Man’s standards of justice must never be used as a measure for God’s justice. In our own day justice has come to mean embracing that which God calls sin. God’s standard of justice is found in his Word and is grounded in his unchanging character.

d) Pure

- For something to be pure means that it is unmixed or unadulterated with foreign substances. In this context it has a clearly ethical significance. Christians are to carefully avoid filling their minds with the immoral, corrupt, and debased.

e) Lovely

- This word is used nowhere else in the New Testament. It typically referred to that which “pertains to causing pleasure or delight” (Harmon, 421). Things that are lovely are those things which bring delight to the heart.

f) Commendable

- This is the only place in the New Testament where this word appears. It carries with it the meaning of something that is worthy of recommendation or carefully chosen.

g) Excellent

- The virtue of excellence was a major feature of the thinking of the Greek philosophers. But like the rest of this list Paul means for us to understand “whatever is excellent” in light of the character of God. Christians are called to declare the *excellencies* of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

h) Worthy of Praise

- Paul uses the term praise to refer both to what is owed to God and to people who deserve public commendation.

2. Practice

Vs. 9a – “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things...”

- Paul’s list of virtues is made up of words largely embraced by Greco-Roman culture. So Paul is careful to ground his virtue list in the gospel. Christians are to understand those virtues as expressions of Christlikeness. That which the Philippians “have learned and received and heard and seen in” Paul was the gospel and its implications. So Paul gathers up those virtues so well recognized in the ancient world and captures them for Christ.

3. Peace

Vs. 9b – “...and the God of peace will be with you.”

- Paul inverts the wording of verse 7. To be guarded by the peace of God is to know the presence of the God of peace. The peace of God will guard our hearts because the God of peace is with us by the Holy Spirit.