

August 8, 2021

A Letter from Paul – Philippians
XII. Think About These Things, Practice These Things
Philippians 4:8-9

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner was driving from New York to Pennsylvania for a speaking engagement, when he had what can only be described as a mystical experience. It was a beautiful summer day, but his thoughts were racing all over the place, keeping him from taking in any of the beauty. “*And then, suddenly,*” he writes, “*I started noticing the trees*”:

They were in full summer foliage. They were greener than I could remember ever having seen trees before. The sun was in them. The air was stirring them. As I drove by, they waved their leafy branches at me like plumes. They beckoned. They reached out. It was the wind, of course, that made them wave. It was the air whipped up by my car streaking by at sixty-five miles per hour. But no matter. They waved in the only way trees have of waving and caught my attention so completely that all other thoughts vanished from my head. I didn't think about them. I just saw them . . .

The trees are always so glad to see it. That was the best way I could find to say it. They waved their branches like flags in a parade, hailing me as I passed by as though I were some mighty spirit. They looked as if they had lined up for miles along the New York Thruway to greet me, and after a while I started waving back at them from time to time as if they too were mighty spirits and it was I who was greeting them.¹

Thinking about that experience of the waving trees and trying to come to terms with what that moment had felt like and what it had seemed to convey, he came to this conclusion about that experience:

I believe I was not just being eccentric. I believe that for a little while I saw those trees as so real that I was myself made real by them. We were concentric. It was the whole of me that waved at the whole of them . . . The holiness that we shared – what it was that we were hailing and honoring in each other – was that it was God who had formed and given life to us both. Trees and humans together, we had both proceeded from the hand of Holiness. Maybe

the least eccentric thing I ever did in my life was for an hour or so on that long drive not just to glimpse that truth but to act on it. The trees waved their holy branches at my holiness. I waved my holy hand at theirs.

We live in a broken world, a world shattered by wars, famine, political upheaval . . . [But] For all its horrors, the world is not ultimately a horror show because, as Jesus tells us, the world has the Kingdom buried in it like a treasure buried in a field, like leaven working in dough, like a seed germinating in the earth, like whatever it was in the heart of the Prodigal Son that finally brought him home. The question is: how is it possible for us not just to glimpse that buried kingdom but to unbury and become it? How is it possible in a broken world to become whole?²

“How is it possible for us not just to glimpse that buried kingdom but to unbury and become it? How is it possible in a broken world to become whole?” I think that is precisely the question Paul wants to answer for us this morning, when he instructs us to *“think about these things,”* and when he exhorts us to *“practice these things.”*

“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.” Because to think about these things is, as Buechner experienced, is ultimately to be drawn into thinking about God, who is the source of all that is good and holy and beautiful and true. Paul is taking one last crack at the Philippians, and also at us, to teach us about what it means to be a Christian, to live a Christian life. And his first instruction is simply this: in a world so filled with the ugliness of human sin, the caustic noise of anger and hatred, and the devastation of human cruelty and suffering and indifference, think on these things, says Paul – in order that we should never lose sight of the profound Good News of the Gospel, that *“though the wrong is oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”³*

Leslie Weatherhead, the brilliant English preacher of the last century, gets at this with a picture drawn from a summer holiday revisiting the places of his childhood:

. . . I wandered along on the tops of the hills I have loved since boyhood in the Scottish border country near Tweedsmuir . . . It was a gray day, with rain falling frequently and the skies for the most part the color of lead. As I got higher on the bleak, peaty heights, the countryside seemed hostile and menacing. The precipices looked dark and formidable. The valleys seemed like vast caldrons of mist and fog swirling around to envelop any intruder, losing him and careless whether he fell over a precipice or not. But then suddenly there would come a gleam of sunshine, and it would shine on a distant hillside with indescribable loveliness, bringing out the rich, green moss where some little stream took its birth and lighting up the heather in purple glory. Then the light would fade again, the clouds swirl around me, and all be dark and gray. Which

*is the abiding reality – the darkness or the light? It would seem on that day as though it were the darkness, but of course, of course, the abiding reality is the light.*⁴

Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable – think about these things, says Paul, that we should not lose sight of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Nor lose sight of the great truth that even now, amid this present darkness, the eternal light of God’s love, of God’s great plan of redemption, is still shining – and the darkness shall never put it out.⁵

But it is for even more than that for which Paul wants us to think on these things. There is a hard challenge for us also in Paul’s imperative that we are to “think” about these things – to think about these things in a world where we are so readily distracted, not by sin and evil, so much as by our own daily trivial pursuits. Let’s do a quick calculation. How much time did we spend on social media this past week, and how much on prayer? How much time did we spend watching television, and how much reading the Bible? How much time did we spend basically just wasting time, and how much on thinking about God, His will and His ways in our lives? What do our calculation reveal? Hence Paul’s strong command – think about these things. Spend time on God and the things of God – priority time. Because not only does that keep us from despair, but also because that which most occupies our minds so readily also becomes that which shapes our hearts and drives our actions.

Peter Marty, pastor and editor of the Christian Century magazine tells of a college student who took a vinyl recording of one of Beethoven’s sonatas and drilled a hole a half-inch off-center. He then put it on a turntable – and the beautiful music of Beethoven instead sounded like, and I quote, “*a clowder of wheezing cats*”. But that, says Marty, is precisely how most of us are living – off-center from God, our true center. And that is why our lives end up so filled with noise instead of with peace. Instead of living life centered upon God and the things of God – thinking about these things, as Paul puts it – we fill up our days, our thoughts, our hearts with lesser things. Giving to those lesser things the priority, the time, the energy, the place that rightly belong to our true center in the things of Christ.⁶

And to illustrate this, he draws on the familiar story from Luke 10 about Mary and Martha. Jesus is visiting their house – and Martha is awlirl at the work of hospitality, while Mary just sits there at the feet of Jesus, listening to His teaching. Martha gets fed up with this pretty quickly and demands that Jesus tell her sister Mary to come help her. And remember what Jesus says? “*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion.*”⁷ Jesus doesn’t tell Martha her work of hospitality is wrong, He just sets things in their proper order – Jesus first, everything else second. To order things any differently is to live life off-center. It is to go through life with all the grace of a clowder of wheezing cats. We cannot rightly serve Christ, be Christians, without Christ at the center of our attention. Therefore, says Paul, “*Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable – think about these things.*” For to think about these things is ultimately to think about the Christ who is behind them all.

But not just think about these things, Paul continues, practice these things. Put these things of Christ and from Christ into practice in your daily living. Try them out, attempt them, actually

seek to do the things Jesus says to do – let practice make perfect. For it is not just our minds that Jesus seeks to bring into right alignment with His Word, but also our daily actions. A disciple of Jesus is not merely someone who has learned to see things through the eyes of Christ, but someone who is seeking to live daily by the example of Christ and by His teachings. *“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ,”* Paul told us back in chapter one.⁸ And he is basically saying the same thing to us again this morning: *“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things . . .”*

So, not just to think about what is true, but to practice living in accordance with that truth. Not just to think about that which is honorable, pure, lovely, and so forth, but to practice daily living in a way that is honorable, pure, and lovely. For example, probably the most important passage in Paul’s letter to the Philippians is that passage about Jesus we read in chapter two, where Paul began: *“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others.”*⁹ And then comes the really important part: *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant . . .”*¹⁰ So, not just think about the example we have in Jesus, but seek to practice that example in our own lives, by looking not only to our interests but also to the interests of others. Think this, says Paul – but also practice this.

I was thinking of that particular passage this week, not just in light of this sermon, but also because I had a phone call early in the week from someone who is truly thinking and practicing this idea of humble service. I received a phone call from Lisa Thomas-McMillan, who runs the Drexell and Honeybee’s donation-only restaurant in Brewton, Alabama – a restaurant where everyone eats whether they can pay twenty dollars or twenty cents or nothing at all. I told you about Lisa and her wonderful work of everyday compassion in a sermon a few years ago.¹¹

Anyway, what Lisa wanted was permission to include that sermon in her latest book. And I was deeply honored by that request and, of course, said yes – but also told her that I wanted to go back through that sermon again because I had borrowed a lot of the stuff about her and her restaurant from an article on the Bitter Southerner website¹², and I wanted to be sure I had everything properly footnoted. But as I was looking over that sermon, Lisa’s story spoke to me again just as powerfully as it had the first time. Lisa is a deeply Christian person who is not only thinking these things of Christ, but seeking to put into practice these things of Christ – someone who is genuinely as concerned, if not more concerned, about the interests of others as she is about her own.¹³

In fact, that is how the whole idea of the restaurant got started for her – in thinking about the concerns of others in a moment so ordinary that we have all experienced it before. Only she used that moment to put it into practice something most of the time we only think about. So, this is that part of that old sermon, as fine an example of what it means to treat the concerns of others as equal to your own as I can think of:

Lisa Thomas-McMillan never thought running such a restaurant would ever be something she would do. It had all started after she had

moved back to Brewton, where she had grown up. She was in line at the grocery store, and the elderly woman in front of her had about \$12 worth of groceries already bagged, but couldn't pay for them. Lisa says, "*She was standing there, digging in her purse, trying to scrape together enough.*"

Lisa didn't think; she acted. "I told her, 'I'm going to pay for that,'" she says. The lady put up a few feeble yet heartfelt protests, but noting the growing line behind them, accepted Lisa's help. After paying for the lady's and her own groceries, Lisa felt moved to do more. "I was like, 'Wow. She can't afford \$12 of food, and if you don't have that, you really are doing without.'"

Lisa ran to the parking lot after her and asked the woman if she had this issue a lot. She said she did, and so did some of her friends. Again, Lisa leapt before she looked. She asked if the woman would share these friends' names. She gave Lisa a list of 27 senior citizens. Lisa contacted them and then began cooking breakfasts for them in her house every morning.

"I don't know what made me do it, but I was going to help these folks," she says. She'd pack up the food, go to Burger King and get 27 coffees, and deliver it all to 27 homes before she went to her job as an insurance agent.

"*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of other.*" And the story goes on from there, but it ends with a quote from Lisa: "*'The more you do, the more you're able to do, and the richer you become. Not with things or money. With love,' she says. 'I don't think nothing can top that.'*"¹⁴

The more you do, the more you're able to do – which sounds a whole lot like what Paul means when he tells us to practice these things. In fact, I love that he uses that word "practice" – because of its dual meaning. Practice in the sense of "just get out there and do it". But practice also in the sense of, as Lisa said, "*The more you do, the more you're able to do.*" The more we practice these things, the better we will get at doing these things. The more we practice the Christ-centered, Christ-like life, the more that Christ-centered, Christ-like life will become natural to us, second nature even.

And then I love how Paul ends this passage. Think about these things, practice these things, and if you do so, then "*the God of peace will be with you.*" Last week he told us that the peace of God would be with us.¹⁵ This week's promise is even better: that as we think about these things, as we seek to practice these things, not merely the peace of God, but the God of peace Himself will be with us. To help us, to bless us, to confirm in us all that is true, all that is honorable, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, all that which is commendable.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 112.

² Buechner, pp. 112-114.

³ Line from Maltbie D. Babcock's great hymn, "This Is My Father's World," Hymn # 370 in our Glory to God Hymnal (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

⁴ Leslie D. Weatherhead, "Which Voice Shall I Trust?" in That Immortal Sea (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 44.

⁵ John 1:4-5.

⁶ Peter W. Marty, "At the center," Christian Century, Vol. 138, No. 15 (July 28, 2021), p. 3.

⁷ Luke 10:41-42.

⁸ Philippians 1:27.

⁹ Philippians 2:3-4.

¹⁰ Philippians 2:5-7 (5-11).

¹¹ Here is a link to that sermon, "The Growth of a Mustard Seed": [The-Growth-of-a-Mustard-Seed-Mark-4.pdf \(easleypresbyterian.org\)](#) .

¹² Jennifer Kornegay, "The Difference Between Happiness and Joy," Bitter Southerner website: [The Difference Between Happiness & Joy — THE BITTER SOUTHERNER](#) .

¹³ Hear Lisa tell her story in this wonderful video: [A Donations-Only Restaurant Changed This Small Town | All Y'all - YouTube](#) .

¹⁴ Again, all of these quotes come from Jennifer Kornegay's wonderful article, "The Difference Between Happiness and Joy," see link above.

¹⁵ Philippians 4:7.