

Essays in Philippians- Think on These Things

Part 15

Phil. 4:8

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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 you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:8-9).

As a trained Jewish rabbi, Paul's writing style would sometimes reflect the prophets. In the above-cited passage, Paul writes like a psalmist. His carefully crafted phrasing attempts to elevate the minds of his readers. When our minds are properly focused, we can then practice the life exemplified by Paul. In so doing, the God of peace will sustain us.

At a glance, we can understand why this passage is beloved. It promises peace to practitioners. At the same time, however, the verse is vague. Paul instructs to think about whatever is true, honorable, just, etc. But, what is "whatever?" He does not say. Instead, Paul leaves that for us to wisely discern. Discerning good and evil according to the Gospel is the responsibility of saints. This is what he stated at the beginning of the letter: "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11).

Perhaps in trying to make practical application of this text, we have been limiting in defining "whatever." For example, we may apply the passage to Bible reading. Or, from another perspective, we may use the passage to warn against ungodly entertainment. Of course, we need to read the Bible and abstain from ungodly entertainment. However, the application is far more expansive.

Throughout Paul's letters, he writes about a general manner of life. Sinners who have been renewed in heart and mind are to live a transformed life. As they learn about their new life, they can begin to grow in the image of God. They reflect His glory in the world. They become living signposts. They point the rest of the world toward a bright future of eternal life that can be gained by faith in Jesus. This passage is not merely about one or two actions. This passage is about a lifestyle.

The Gospel Transforms "Whatever"

As new creations in Jesus Christ, we must learn how to use our lives in a self-giving fashion. We are to live for the betterment of others and to the glory of God. But, how do we do

this? Well, there is no formula for this. We are to discover our God-given abilities and refine them (Eph. 4:7). Then, we are to use our gifts in ways that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praise-worthy. Notice how Paul explains this in Romans:

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...” (Rom. 12:3-6).

As Christians, “whatever” we do with our lives is to be an expression of our Creator’s transforming, self-giving love. Paul taught the Colossians, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23-24).

Now, the point of citing passages from Ephesians, Romans, and Colossians is not done for the sake of proof-texting or redundancy. The point is to demonstrate a recurring theme in Paul’s letters. Paul frequently wrote about using our lives in their totality to the glory of God. This is how Paul understood the consequence of the Gospel working in people’s lives. In Philippians, he uses himself as an example of what he is teaching.

Paul was an apostle and a tentmaker. He practices these works simultaneously. He did not compartmentalize his life. He did not have a secular life and a spiritual life. The two were blended together. For example, he used his earnings from tent-making to sustain his work in evangelism. Also, he went into business with Priscilla and Aquila in tent-making and worked with them evangelistically (Acts 18). Combined, Paul’s life was an expression of the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Without question, Paul’s tents were of unparalleled quality and his business dealings fair and honorable. Both his secular work and evangelistic efforts were expressions of the glory of God and contributed to his reputation (1 Thess. 2). Therefore, Paul used himself as an example for the Philippians in how they were to live. The Gospel transforms “whatever.”

Conclusion

Should Christians think about God’s word? Of course. Should Christians abstain from ungodly entertainment? Yes. However, being a Christian is about much more than reading and abstaining. Being a Christian is about living to the glory of God and serving others. The beauty of the Gospel is that it can impact “whatever” we do in life. The Gospel can change how we do little, trivial things in life. Likewise, the Gospel can change how we do the big, consequential things in life. Christ is to be exemplified in “whatever” we do in life.

What ability has God given you to use to His glory? What gift has God given you to share with other people? How can your gift be used to promote truth, honor, justice, purity, love,

commendation, excellence, and praise? Answers to these important questions require thought. Our thinking will form how we live.

Paul's thinking had been reshaped by the Gospel. By the Gospel, he was able to discern between good and evil. He was able to make wise use of his life to the glory of God and the service of others. By the Gospel, we can share in the same glorious, self-giving life. If we share in this life, we will be sustained by the peace of God in hope of eternal life.