

## How to Think Good Thoughts • *Philippians 4:8-10*

A popular proverb of today says, “You are what you eat.” But that’s not the way it is according to Jesus in Matthew 15:10-20. Jesus says, “You are what you think!” Eat junk and it makes for a junky body. Think junk and it makes for a junky life.

Computer people have an interesting expression: “Garbage in; garbage out.” Jesus says that’s exactly the way it is with our thoughts and with our lives. If we think garbage, we live the way we think.

What we think and the way we think is the major determiner of much of life. We all know people who insist on thinking negative thoughts and thereby live negative lives. Some continually dwell on past hurts and live in bitterness and defeat. Others fill their heads with good thoughts and that, in turn, produces a good life. You are what you think!

“But I don’t have any control over what I think!” “I just think when I think.” “My thinking is like a feather in the wind that goes wherever it’s blown. Even during the sermon my mind has already wandered into thoughts about the building, about the people around me, about what I’m going to have for lunch, about my plans for next week. Nobody can control thoughts!”

Wrong! According to God, we do have a great deal of control over what we think. We can choose what we think about just as we make any other choice of life. That’s precisely what *Philippians 4:8-9* is all about. Here God gives us eight questions to ask about what we think and to serve as a filter to let good thinking in and keep bad thinking out. Paul writes:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

The first question we should ask ourselves before we think is, “Is it true?” This may seem strange, but it’s not here talking about true in comparison to false. It’s talking about reality in comparison to fantasy or make-believe. Some people don’t think about reality. They live in a thought world of make-believe and fantasy.

Do you remember the story about *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*? He was a man who lived in a total fantasy world that had nothing to do with the way things really were.

When I was a boy I loved to live in a world of make-believe. My bike was a horse. The roads were rivers. The median was an island. The trees were mountains. The fields were the plains. I was Wild Bill Hickock or Buffalo Bill. That may be okay for a kid, but it’s bad thinking for a grown-up Christian.

Some Christians live in a fantasy world from watching soap operas all day. Some Christians perceive themselves to be right and interpret everyone else to be wrong. Still other Christians think that everyone else is against them or for them or out to get them. The next time you think (I hope it’s soon!), ask yourself, “Is it true? Am I thinking fantasy and make-believe or is my thinking the way things really are?”

The second question to ask is: “Is it noble? The Greek word here is *semnos*. It was used by the Greeks to refer to the respect they gave to their gods or to their temples. So God is here telling us that we are to think thoughts that are worthy of respect.

Another aspect of the word refers to things that are dignified and serious. It is the opposite of being silly and flippant.

One summer during college I studied in Europe. The day before I arrived in Paris an American college student knelt down under the Arch of Triumph at the French Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and fried an egg over the Eternal Flame. Obviously that was not noble. It was flippant; it was without respect.

This does not mean that Christians can’t have fun! But it does mean that the basic orientation of our minds is toward that which is serious, dignified and worthy of respect. We ought to filter out the thoughts that are not worthy of a life that belongs to God and a body that is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Imagine the inside of your mind as a large temple belonging to God and dedicated to Jesus Christ. Now, imagine your thoughts as pictures hanging along the corridors and in the rooms. Are those thoughts/pictures worthy of the temple? Are

***You are what you think!***

they noble? As thoughts come up for thinking, make a conscious decision as to whether or not they should be hung on the walls of your mind. “Are these thoughts noble?”

The third question we must ask is: “Is it right?” This word literally means conforming to the laws of God and man. It refers to thoughts that view things from God’s righteous perspective. In some ways this is the easiest and in some ways this is the hardest of all the questions. How does God see what I am thinking about? Am I thinking God’s thought after him?

When a fellow Christian does something I don’t like, do I get angry and hateful or do I see that person as a fellow sinner for whom Christ died? Do I think of Easter as a time for new clothes and Easter bunnies or as a celebration of Christ’s resurrection? Do I think of Sunday as a day off of work or as the Lord’s Day given specially to honor him?

Let’s try our imaginations again. This time think of your mind as a courtroom with God sitting at the bench. One by one we bring our thoughts past him for review. Include those that conform to his law and way of thinking and exclude those that are not right.

Another question to ask is this: “Is it pure?” This has to do with morality and means “morally undefiled”. Perhaps impure sexual thoughts are the most difficult to filter out in our sexually suggestive society. Some people get into real trouble on this one. They look everyone over as a potential sex partner. They see sexual symbolism in everything and repeatedly dwell on it. Their minds have dwelled so long on the impure that they are deeply grooved and hard to change.

Please don’t think that all sexual thoughts are bad! Sex was God’s idea in the first place and right sexual thinking is thinking in tune with God.

Do you ever drive around and look at other people’s homes? Maybe you’re the type who visits all the open houses. There are two ways to look and think. You can admire a beautiful home, or you can covet that home to the point that you think about it all the time, begin to despise your own home and maybe even begin to plot ways of getting that neighbor’s house or one like it.

The same goes for sexual thinking. You can admire beauty, but watch out when it becomes lust that continually lingers on your mind, causes you to despise your mate or leads you to plot ways to act immorally.

Impure thoughts are the easiest to do something

about and the easiest to let run wild. If your mind starts to allow in ideas of illicit sex, if you begin to roll over in your mind the body of another person, if you begin to think through what it would be like to—*change your mind!* Force yourself to do something else. Purposely choose to think about something else.

It’s up to us! What do you think? Is it pure?

The fifth question we need to ask is: “Is it lovely?” This means is it winsome, agreeable, pleasant or amiable. I like the way William Barclay puts it. He says, “It is that which calls forth love”.

Here’s a test that’s easy to conduct. Pick somebody you really like and somebody you don’t like. Who comes to your mind right away? Okay, now think some thoughts about both of those people. Do your thoughts call forth love for those persons? You see, thoughts of criticism and vengeance and bitterness are not lovely. Thoughts of kindness and goodness and consideration are lovely thoughts and the kind God encourages us to think.

Let’s again imagine the rooms of our mind. Step with me for a moment into the guest rooms where all the people you think about stay—parents’ room; children’s rooms; employer’s room; pastor’s room; neighbor’s room; anybody’s room. Pretend that there is a table in that room with a flower vase on it and you are going to decorate the room. You may choose between something unlovely such as briars and poison ivy and Canadian Thistle or you may choose the loveliness of roses and carnations and orchids.

God calls us to decorate all the guestrooms of our minds with the lovely thoughts of kindness, goodness, patience, love and forgiveness. Ask yourself before you think, “Is it lovely?”

And then we must ask the question: “Is it admirable?” This means to speak well of someone. It comes from the word the Greeks used to describe the period of holy silence just before a religious sacrifice. William Barclay says that it means “the things that are fit for God to hear.” But let’s make it as simple as we can. It’s to think good thoughts about people.

I am convinced that this is one of the most important steps toward general happiness in life! With just about everybody we know there are things to criticize and things to commend. Aim at always thinking the best of people. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Think good and admirable things about them and try to say good and admirable things about them.

The results are wonderful. Instead of having to gossip and criticize and put people down to lift ourselves up, we start to plant and grow good and admirable thoughts. We feel better about ourselves and we reap the benefits of kindness and sense the joy of loving others.

Don't be one of those nasty, sharp, critical folks. Think the best of others. Think to yourself whenever you think anything, "Is this admirable?"

Number 7: "Is it excellent?" The Greek word used here was extremely common in ancient secular literature, but it is used only four times in the New Testament. The Greeks used this particular word to describe all virtues, but the meaning here in the New Testament seems more precise. It means the things that are really important, that are permanent and eternal."

This is a good thought check. We often spend lots of time thinking about things that really don't matter over the long haul. We need to frequently ask ourselves, "What difference will this issue make in eternity. Or for that matter, what difference will it make next week?"

You are on vacation and are due to arrive in Chicago by 6 p.m. You didn't guarantee the motel reservation so you could lose it if you are late. Just outside of Madison you hear the thump-thump-thump of a flat tire.

You have a choice of what to think about the situation. You can think about having to change the tire. You can worry about how to afford a replacement. You can mull over losing the motel reservation. You can think about getting mad. You can hate your family for talking you into this vacation in the first place (we all look for someone to blame, even if it's the family dog!). Or, you can think what a marvelous opportunity this is to show the children how to handle disappointments in life in the joy of the Lord!

Which type of thinking is excellent? Ten years from now, what difference will it make whether you got a flat tire or which motel you stayed in? It doesn't make any difference at all. But ten years from now, what difference will it make how you taught your children to respond to difficulties and disappointments in life? Perhaps all the difference of eternity!

Think about what is really important, what is

permanent and lasts for eternity. As you think, ask yourself, "Is it excellent?"

The last question we need to ask ourselves is this: "Is this the kind of thought that is worthy of praise, especially from God?"

Imagine time again. Imagine your thoughts being public!

I heard a man in Chicago recently tell about his 5 year-old daughter's ambition to become a nurse. He bought her a toy "Nurse's Kit". She was delighted! At the dinner table he took the plastic stethoscope and put it to her chest and said, "I can hear your

heart!" She immediately grabbed it out of his hand and ran upstairs. She was never seen with the stethoscope again.

Years later her parents were cleaning out her bedroom closet and found a hole in the wall. Reaching inside the hole her dad found the plastic stethoscope!

Most of us have lots of thoughts that would not be much praised by our parents, our friends or fellow Christians. Fortunately, they can't hear our thoughts. But we can hear them and God can hear them, too! Let's ask ourselves, "Are my thoughts worthy of God's praise?"

It's a long list. Maybe it's too long to remember unless we're smart enough to memorize it. Paul writes: ". . . think about such things." Not feel, but think! The Greek word is *logizesthe* and it means to reflect on these things in order to shape your conduct. Paul emphasizes that in verse 9: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice."

And, the results? "The God of peace will be with you!"

***Aim at always thinking the best of people. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Think good and admirable things about them and try to say good and admirable things about them.***

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