

KEEPING YOUR JOY - The Heartfelt Theology of an Isolated Prisoner - Part twenty

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MORE INSTRUCTION ON HOW TO GUARD YOUR LIFE WITH THE PEACE OF GOD

Philippians 4:8-9 - "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. [9] What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

Paul talks about the peace of God **twice** in these verses, not **once**. We saw last week how the peace of God will **guard our hearts and minds**. That was in **verse 7**. In today's text, in **verse 9**, Paul tells us the **God of peace** will be with us.

And there's a reason Paul keeps coming back to this important subject. We Christians are truly a people **caught in the middle**, as it were. We are described, to use Paul's very words in **3:20**, as "**citizens of heaven**." For us, to "**live is Christ**" and to "**die is gain**" (2:21). But most of us aren't **dead** yet, and the place where we **live** isn't conducive to heavenly citizenship.

This living polarization is obviously on Paul's mind in today's text. How are we to **manifest** Christ in this present world? Everything about daily life here and now assails us with an endless parade of changing **feelings, motives** and **ambitions**, very few of which, at least on the surface of things, are even remotely conducive to shaping Christ in our souls. Circumstances, good and bad, are constantly paraded to **hijack our interests away from Christ**.

Make no mistake about it. This world **wants** your praise and admiration. It wants your thoughts. And if it can't capture **all** of them, it certainly wants **more** of them than is appropriate. Every step of life **asks questions, challenges faith, entices worship, offers opportunities, calls for decisions, and holds forth treasures**.

So Paul calls us to live **carefully** and, perhaps above all, **selectively**. There is no time for giving your precious mind's attention to **everything**. We must **think** - "think on these things." And we must **choose** - "think on these things" (as opposed to those **other** things).

This is the **aggressive** conclusion to last week's text. The theme of those verses is continued. How shall we live in this world until Jesus returns (3:21)? What does **heavenly citizenship** look like here on

earth (**3:20**)? Well, there must be ***unity in Christ*** if people are to believe our message (**4:1-2**). We are called to rejoice in the Lord (**4:4**).

This joy in Christ is the ***moderating*** power of our life's ambitions, affections, and reactions (**4:5**). We are to be constantly expressing our ***thankfulness in prayer*** in all situations, not because the situations are ***pleasant*** or ***easy***, but because no ***trial*** separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus and we have the hope of His return in power. And no ***treasure*** can become idolatrous when compared with the greatness of Christ Jesus in our heart (**4:6-7**).

So we ***rejoice***. We ***pray***. And now, in today's text, we ***think***. The idea I want to come to at the close of this teaching is set out in the title - "**More Instruction on How to Guard Your Life With the Peace of God.**" I say "***more***" instruction because Paul ***began*** his thoughts on this subject with his famous words in **4:7** - "**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**"

Rejoice in all things. Pray thankfully at all times as you remember the coming of Jesus. And the peace of God begins its ***guarding*** work in our hearts and minds, protecting them from both the discouragement of hard trial and the idolatry of ease and abundance. Precious words, these, to be sure.

But is this ***all*** Paul says about the peace of God? Is there anything more? This will be our closing point. But there are several other thoughts shaping the counsel of our famous text today, the first of which is the most ***basic***, and yet most important of all:

- 1) **WHILE WE LIVE FOR JESUS IN THIS PRESENT WORLD WE MUST CONSTANTLY BEND OUR MINDS TO THINK ABOUT WHAT WE ARE DOING**

Philippians 4:8 - "***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.***"

We're not used to having our thoughts commanded. I chose that term "***bend***" our minds for two reasons. ***First***, I wanted a term that implied an ***unusual effort*** - like bending a piece of steel. By that I mean even though we are growing in inward holiness there will still be many times, perhaps

even prolonged seasons, where the direction our thoughts naturally take will not even be even be close to the right direction. Our minds can't be trusted to **automatically** tend where they should. "***Think on these things...***" means making the effort to focus concentration **away** from some things **toward** others.

Second, I chose the term **bending** our thoughts to emphasize that the Lordship of Jesus in my thoughts will frequently make them look **bent** by the world's standards. The price of following Christ is you can't **fit in** with the major trends of this fallen age. That term "**trending**" should sound more like a **threat** than a **compliment**. It should sound obtuse and irrelevant to citizens of another kingdom.

I believe the pressure of our culture to fall in line and conform is escalating. In the next decade this will be particularly obvious over issues of "**tolerance**" to things God rejects and one day will judge. Please understand how important this is to you. In the sovereign plan of God it is going to become impossible to be an **inconspicuous** Christian. There will simply be no way to **blend in** with the crowd in the days to come if following Christ is to have any actual meaning at all.

That means I must prepare myself to **stand apart** from most of the world's priorities. How ready are we for this? In terms of what is most acceptable and most admired and most pursued, I will be in a **different line**. Most people are on the "**broad path that leads to destruction.**"

Any other road looks ridiculous to them. They constantly **lean to their own understanding**. They are shaped by what Paul calls the "**course of this age**" and the opinion of their peers, especially the media. And they don't like to feel **judged** or **condemned**, especially by the personal convictions of righteousness held by Christians.

Again, the thrust of our text must not be missed. The emphasis isn't that we must be **thoughtful**. Paul wouldn't deny we **all** think a great deal. Many think of complicated, intricate things - intellectually demanding things. Most of us know you can't live on in this world **without** thinking. And most of us work hard at thinking clearly about **certain** practical concerns.

None of that is the issue of this text. The issue of this text is a different burden all together. We are being called to make ourselves think on a few **important** things because we are more prone to think on many **other** things. The call is to **dwell much** on things we frequently pass over

lightly, and the call is to think ***less*** about things our environment focuses on ***greatly***.

So we're called to ***train*** our minds rather than having our minds ***shaped*** for us by the environment of this fallen world - "***Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind....***" (Romans 12:2a). That's it exactly. But it's not easy. Newmarket is full of people who train their ***dogs*** more than they train their ***minds***. There are people right here who work out four and five times a week to train their ***bodies*** who rarely put the same devotion into the training of godly ***thinking*** and godly ***valuing***, and godly ***goal-setting***.

This is Paul's concern. We do not lightly or easily emerge from the ***mind-press*** of this fallen age. The ways of God don't waft into our minds like a breeze wafts through a window on a lovely spring day. Life with its menu of choices comes all lined up, like a huge buffet. Ideologies, world-views, truth claims (many of which contradict the others), theories to pursue, treasures to cherish, dreams to dream - all are lined up and no one can choose them all. "***Pick the right ones!***" screams Paul. "Know where to settle and fix your attention."

2) CITIZENS OF HEAVEN WITH RENEWED MINDS

Philippians 4:8 - "***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.***"

Certainly we are saved by ***Christ***, and not by ***contemplation***. But being that we are already, through Christ, ***citizens of heaven*** (3:20), our minds must be trained to run along new patterns for direction. In other words, life in Christ isn't just tacked on to the ***outside*** of life by a list of rules. It is ***organic***, not ***decorative***. It is a living power that leaves no part of the life untouched.

This is the reason for the ***nature*** of this list in ***verse 8***. It's really a list that ***isn't*** a list. Paul doesn't lay down some legalistic thought subject list. Rather, he tells us ***how*** to think, without telling us specifically ***what*** to think about. This is because he is teaching these Christians ***how to navigate*** with their minds. Life is big and wide, with much to engage us in this world. There is so much to do. This verse is Paul's compass teaching us how to ***point our minds*** toward Christ through all of life's changing circumstances.

Again, Paul is not telling us how to **make** ourselves Christians by thinking great, moral, and lofty thoughts. Rather, he's telling us how to train our minds toward their true citizenship in Christ. In his letter to the Colossians he put it this way: "**If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.** [2] **Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.** [3] **For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God**"(3:1-3).

This is the important point. Certain "**things**" are anchored "**with Christ**," in heaven, "**at the right hand of God**" - the Creator of all objective truth. Our post-modern world treats truth the way a chef prepares food in a restaurant. Truth is determined by the taste of the customer. Meaning is determined by the audience, not the speaker. Paul's whole list calls for the opposite approach. We are to shape our minds around God's truth - not shape God's truth around our fallen, relativistic minds.

Paul's language is starkly objective. Think of what **is** true, what **is** honorable, what **is** just, what **is** pure, what **is** lovely, what **is** commendable. These things are **objectively measurable**. Some things are **impure**, even if the whole world laughs at them on television. Make sure you **see** these things as **impure**. Some things aren't **honorable**, even if billions of dollars are made with them in the media. Some things aren't **worthy of praise**, even if superstars build empires around them.

The church will **never** offer one lick of light to this world unless she **thinks** the right way about all these things.

3) **PAUL'S FINAL INSTRUCTION ON LIVING LIFE PROTECTED BY THE PEACE OF GOD**

Philippians 4:9 - "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

In my introduction I said I wanted to close with some thoughts on this point. Paul comes back to the subject of the believer's life and God's protecting peace. In **verse 7** he wrote of the "**peace of God.**" In **verse 9** he writes of the "**God of peace.**" But peace is at the heart of the issue.

Here is the question. What is the living relation between God's truth and God's peace? Or, how

does peace come into our lives from what God has revealed in His Word? That, it seems to me, is a very important question.

Long ago I had lunch with a man (he doesn't attend our church) who told me of his difficult family situation. He talked of the burden he carries at home and at work. He told me of his struggle to hold on to God. He told me of his personal reading - how his life had been so helped by one particular author he had discovered. "***I just sense the peace of God as I read,***" he said. "***It's as though God just soothes my mind and heart with His peace.***"

I tried, in as loving a way as I could, to pry the meaning out of those words. How did this author "***soothe***" his mind with God's peace? How had God "***helped***" him with the peace He gave? Did my luncheon partner mean God showed him how to respond with patience and grace to his wife's apparently unreasonable demands? Did he mean God used this author to teach him there were more important things than the material success he feared losing at his business? Did he mean God used this author to help him dig into a local church for prayer support and encouragement or perhaps correction?

Sadly, I don't think he meant ***any*** of those things. I think he meant God just helped him ***escape*** from his pain for a while, but led him nowhere into what he should ***do*** about his situation next. And I fear there are many evangelical Christians who have bought into this more Eastern, contemplative vision of what the peace of God actually ***is*** and what it ***does***.

This is Paul's concern in **verse 9**. He steers us away from the kind of peace that chants "***Serenity now. Serenity now.***" God's peace comes, even in difficult, heart-breaking, pressure-filled times, from ***doing*** what he places at our feet to do - "***What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you***"(4:9).

I ***don't*** mean that we can do ***everything***, or perhaps even ***very much***, to solve all our troubles. But there are always ***some*** things we can do. And there are definitely ***many*** things we can ***avoid*** doing wrong if we put our minds and our wills at His disposal.

For example, I can, almost unwittingly, look for ***pity*** from others. And Paul would say, "Don't let your mind go that way." I can become so obsessed with ***blaming*** others (and there's almost

always something to blame others for!) that I avoid thinking about what *I* can do better in my situation. I can shut myself off from Christians, telling myself they don't care or don't understand. And Paul would say "Don't think that way. Don't put your thoughts in that direction!"

Don't beat yourself up for what you **can't** do, but **don't** allow your desperation to justify bad, ungodly responses. And, perhaps most important of all, don't follow the lead of others who **approve** of your un-Christ-like response, or, who, in their actions, have already done exactly what you're doing, and then use them to justify your own unwillingness to do what God might be calling you to do in your situation.

It may **seem** that there is comfort in doing this. But it's a **false** peace. And a non-productive one. **Think** the Word. And then **do** the most godly thing revealed, whatever the cost. That's when you truly stack the deck in your own favor. The **God of peace** will be with you.