

“The Skillful Management of Attention”

July 18, 2021

Hi I’m Jake! If you have a Bible, turn to **Phil 4:8-9**.

Last week - Pastor Allen used the analogy that joy is the boat, peace is the anchor. And when we grasp these, we are given this spiritual buoyancy in our lives. That no matter what life throws out at you, whether you’re in a season of suffering, or your life or your relationships are not where you want them to be, or you’re a Paul stuck in prison no sign when you’re going to get out, that in Christ you can have this sort of peace and joy deep within your soul. So how do we do that?

Philippians 4:8-9

8 Finally, brothers

In other words - “alright let’s land the plane, to conclude...”

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.

This verse implies that you and I actually have some level of agency - that while we really don’t have control of our circumstances, as much as we’d like that, we do have within us the ability to control and cultivate the type of people we want to become.

Here Paul gives two commands to tap into the joy made available to you:

Philippians 4:8

Think about these things

Think - the Greek word λογίζομαι - it can also be translated as - to reckon, count, fix, or to meditate. So not just giving a passing thought, but to meditate, meaning fixing your mind and mull over the things of God.

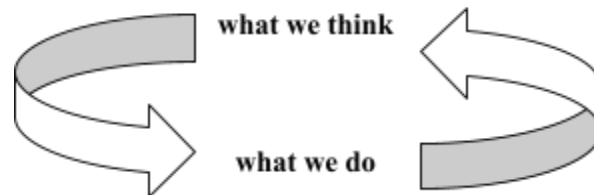
And he says in v.9, all the things you've seen me do:

Philippians 4:9

Practice these things

Practice - In the Greek it's πράσσω - exercise, to be busy with, carry, to undertake, to accomplish, perform, to commit

So Paul's making this connection here, that how we think and what we do work together and shape us. To help illustrate this I thought I'd give you a diagram that encapsulates this and makes Pastor Jon Ludovina proud (because he loves him some diagrams).



So there's this interplay between the two. What we put into our minds, the things we entertain in our thought life and imagination determines and impacts how we act and how we live day-to-day. And in the same regard, what we do impacts how we think. To sum it up: **what we think and what we do shapes who we become.**

So if you want to grow into Christ-likeness, following Jesus, being a person marked by joy and peace, it's by filling up our minds, according to the passage, with good and true things and acting upon what we know to be good and true.

One author after doing a significant amount of research on the topic concluded this:

Winifred Gallagher, *Rapt* - quoted in *Deep Work* by Cal Newport

...the skillful management of attention is [essential to] the good life and the key to improving virtually every aspect of your experience....who you are, what you think, feel and do, what you love - is the sum of what you focus on.

Now that sounds all well and good, but if I'm honest, there's this part of me that thinks as I read this passage, "Well yea Paul, that's easy for you to say - you don't have much going on." And there's this defensive part within me that's thinking, "I bet if you had my life, and my demands, and the Internet - you might be telling a different story."

And the truth is, while this is the way people are changed and formed - there's this underlying reality that in our culture we are not set up to think these thoughts and live this out. Speaking broadly here, but I don't know if you could say overall as a society we're doing well in our mental and emotional health. Theologian NT Wright puts it like this:

NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*

To think about all the wonderful and lovely things listed here, runs directly opposite to the habits of mind instilled by the modern media... Is that a true representation of God's good and beautiful world?

How are you going to celebrate the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the place in the world which humans have made ugly? How are you going to take steps to fill your mind instead with all the things that God has given us to be legitimately pleased with, and to enjoy and celebrate?"

It's interesting to note NT Wright cites "modern media" here as the primary example of what is problematic in our world. Often, what we pay attention to and act out, is shaped in large part by what our society puts out.

And while for the sake of time we can't give an exhaustive list of all the ways our culture sets us up negatively, I wanna give you just two this morning:

1 - attention economy (delivery of the message)

Specifically in the way information, entertainment, and media is delivered to us. It's actually designed in such a way to make us distracted and anxious. For the longest time, most of us tend to think of social media a lot like TV - it's a harmless product used to pass the time, just don't over do it, right?

Attention economy is what happens when brain science meets entertainment. It's the idea that your ability to think is limited, therefore advertising, marketing, media, and social media do everything they can to get you to pay attention to their app, or their feed, so that your data would get sold to the highest bidder. So headlines will purposefully be exaggerated so that you spend more time filling your mind on that stuff. Most pop songs and YouTube are getting shorter, so that you'll want to spend more time consuming more songs. Your streaming service, whenever you're done with an episode, will automatically go to the next episode so that you'll spend more time on there. All the while, your viewing habits get sold to big businesses who in turn create more content and design algorithms catered to you to spend more time on there

And here's what's happening at a neurological level when that happens: whenever you scroll through your feed or click that headline or passively wait for Netflix to play the next episode of your show - there's actually trace amounts of dopamine that your body pumps into your brain so that you'll want more of it. One tech guru said the same thing happens when you're playing a slot machine. Your mind goes numb as you just stare at the screen hoping for the next hit. The thing is, your body is not meant to run on that much dopamine, so what happens? We crave more and more entertainment to get our fix and in the process it sucks dry our ability to think

And that's just one way our culture hijacks our ability to think and act. Here's the second:

2 - competing stories (content of the message)

Specifically in the content of the information, entertainment, and media that's delivered to us. I got this from a book by James KA Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, where he says in a nutshell, that in our world we have competing stories vying for our emotions and we often don't even realize it.

For example - this idea that the good life is found in a romantic partner is not because someone sat you down in a classroom and taught it to you. You absorbed it often unconsciously through the stories you're being told in your music, or TV shows or movies or your peer group.

No one probably taught you "Be independent, be your true self, and who cares what others think." But you did watch Moana and thought, "Man, what a fun story. And who knew The Rock could sing? And honestly I could go on and on."

It's subtle, these competing stories, and more often than not they target our gut and we take it in, slowly shaping us.

Now that's just two forces that are competing for our thought life and our habits - but over time, what happens to you when you allow yourself to think and act in this way?

Over time living in an attention economy physically and emotionally wears you out and you need more and more digital media to satisfy you. You find yourself having a hard time concentrating or connecting with the people around you or with God Himself because our brains have been chemically altered by the attention economy. Spending time with Jesus becomes near impossible because you've altered your mind in such a way that you can't simply be still and be with Jesus.

Inhabiting a story or a liturgy that is counter the things of God - most often subconsciously - leads you slowly down a road where one day you've grown apathetic to the things of His Kingdom and you've bought into a story that appeals to your flesh, that's more in tune with the way the world thinks.

What about the messages and statements you've said to yourself? For decades? *You'll never fit in. You'll never be happy. You are a screw up. Everyone thinks you are a loser. Things will never get better. You'll never be enough. You'll never be forgiven for what you did. God will never love you the way He loves that person.* Have you ever stopped to realize, what if I am actually speaking Satan's

accusations to myself? What if this thought that has been with me for so long, is actually an anti-the way of Jesus and shaping me into something terrible

The point is this - the things we think and absorb - they in turn shape us. We become what we dwell on for better or worse. And who we are right now, is by and large a byproduct of things we've dwelt on.

And this is a hard truth but I think some of us desperately need to hear this: that if we believe the Scriptures say are true - and I do, fwiw - then some of us are thinking and doing the exact things you need to think and do to be a person of worry. It's the same with any other besetting sin patterns - if you're cynical, if you're angry, if you're critical and skeptical of other people - could it be because you're thinking and doing the things you need to do to become that sort of person? Could it be that the reason you find yourself frustrated by your work, or your family, or your marriage, or your LifeGroup, or your leaders is because the things you fill your mind with and act on have shaped you into that sort of person?

And here's the good news to reiterate here: what we think and what we do shapes who we become.

For those of us who follow after King Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, God loves us too much to leave us where we are. The Bible would call this repentance. A changing of your mind and actions to focus on Jesus and His call over your life. Daily. Moment by moment. In other words, whatever your struggle, be it your worry, or apathy, or whatever, **the good news is you are not locked in**....because if the Spirit that dwells within you raised Jesus from the dead, then He's also powerful enough to change your thought life and change the trajectory of who you're becoming.

And if you're a bit skeptical about that, I got some science to back me up:

For the record I am not a scientist, but there's been some incredible research in the field of neurology over the last 10-15 years that have essentially been reinforcing all of this, specifically the topic known as **neural plasticity**. Neural plasticity basically says that for the longest time scientists thought of the brain as being

locked in once you hit your 20s. So how you think and act, by the time you're 25 or so is how you're basically going to be for the rest of your life. Which I don't know about you but me at 25 was a mess. Woof. Neural plasticity says that's actually not true, rather, your brain is like a muscle and just like any other muscle of the body we can do things to it to make it stronger or weaker. And if you cultivate certain habits (for as short as 21 days or so), you can actually begin the process of slowly rewiring your brain chemistry to be more focused, less distracted, and more at peace.

And here's the real kicker, these scientists who are not Christians said these are the five practices you can put into place to rewire your brain: meditation, gratitude, serving, being in community, and journaling.

Which if you're a Christian you're like... "Whoa! They keep telling me I should do that!"

So this call for us to become a people of joy is actually possible, but it's going to require putting in some Spirit-empowered effort. So to wrap up, let me give you two practical things:

1 - Diagnose your actions, habits and thoughts

We'll be doing this in LifeGroups this week. Think about your typical weekday, from when you wake up all the way to when you go to bed that night - what's going through your head? What are you doing? And how is that shaping who you're becoming?

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2 - Cultivate your time and your thoughts to be filled on God

These are things that are either directly relating to God or things that draw your mind upward to be thankful and at rest. What causes you to delight in God's character and all of His good gifts? Saturate your mind on that.

- At bare minimum that looks like spending time in His Word daily. Meditating on his promises for us, His love for us, His delight in us.
- This could look like listening to sermons or worship songs on your way to work
- Or if you're at work and are doing some simple tasks, using that time to memorize some Scripture

- **So when you first wake up...**

- Are you looking at your phone? Catching up on your email and social media? Reading the news? Looking at your schedule for the day?

- How is that shaping your thought life?

--what might it look like to instead, think on **Lamentations 3:23 - the Lord's mercies are new every morning** - and so the night before, place your phone in another part of the house, and buy an alarm clock for you to wake up to instead? And what if right next to your bed you had an opened Bible so you can fill your mind the first thing in the morning with Scripture?

- **Or when you're driving to work or school that day...**

- Are you listening to the radio, or catching up on a podcast, or texting

- how is that shaping your thought life?

And what might it look like to instead think on **Ps 46:10 - be still and know that I am God** - and drive in silence, using that as an opportunity to pray? Or, to just train yourself to be bored and focus on the presence of God? Or listen to some worship music to get your mind in the right place?

- **At work, when you talk with your coworkers or you're**

- Are you likely to just talk about the worst headlines imaginable?

- how is that shaping your thought life?

And what might it look to instead redirect the worst news you hear - to think on **Rom 8:28 that God is working all things** - so you say a quick prayer. Thanking God that He is in control, that He's restoring all things to Himself, and that one day He will right everything that sin has made wrong. And in the meantime, asking God to bring justice to the world. Or **Eph 4:29**

- **When you're home, how do you spend your time with your family/roommates?**

- Are you likely to tune out or veg out, ignoring the people God has placed around you so that you can get some "me" time?

- how is that shaping your thought life?

And what might it look like to instead, even if it was a heavy day, to think on **Genesis 1:26 that the people God has placed around you are Image**

Bearers of God - and you use your tiredness as an opportunity to press more into the presence of Jesus - and you talk to your family or your roommates with a smile on your face, making eye contact with others and asking how their day was, being sensitive to how you might offer a word of encouragement or love.

- **Lastly, when you lay in bed, in those final still moments before you fall asleep, where does your mind drift of to?**

- is it about how stressful your day was? Maybe you're thinking about all the tasks for tomorrow: your work, your inbox, you kids.

How is that shaping your thought life?

---And what if instead you thought on **1 Thess 5:18 - to give thanks in all circumstances** - and you thanked God for your day. Recognizing where you saw His presence at work. Bringing to mind biblical promises that help you delight in Jesus - and as you drift off to sleep those were your final thoughts?

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And we'll be talking about that more in your LifeGroups this week to help each other brainstorm how we can cultivate these thoughts into our life. I'd encourage you to, ask your pastors how they do this. How do they cultivate this method of thinking and habit training into their lives? Because here in the passage Paul says "imitate me, do what I do," so who are the people in and around your life who love Jesus - and ask them what do they do. Because no one just wakes up looking like Jesus. There's probably a lot of hidden things they've done over the years and decades to get to where they are. So learn from them.

Here's a helpful practice for me to think through my thought life and fill my mind like Paul says.

Before I go to bed, I'll put my phone on Airplane Mode and I'll set my alarm a couple hours before the kids wake up. My alarm goes off in the morning, I'll make a cup of coffee, I go to the same spot in my living room, I'll set a timer on my phone and I sit there in silence. (I do 10 minutes but first starting out I was at 3 minutes). And I'll start that time of silence out with some [breath prayers](#), thinking

about God's love for me - - and then I sort of take note of where my mind goes. And when I tell my mind gets distracted I turn that into a prayer prompt.

- So if I'm thinking about my schedule for that day...I just silently pray for whatever's worrying me and when I'm done I go back to thinking about God
- If I'm thinking about a hard conversation someone I had lately, I pray about that. And then I'm back.
- Or I think about a fun time I had recently with some friends or my family, and I turn that into a moment to thank God for them, and then I'm back.
- And if I've noticed patterns of where my mind goes off to, I keep a mental note of that and talk about it in LifeGroup, and make that something to pray through over the day.

Then after that I go through a Bible reading plan, I do a Psalm, a gospel, and an OT narrative. And I usually pull one nugget from there to think about throughout the day.

I've been doing that for a couple years now and it's been so good for my soul and it's taken me a while to figure out that that works for me. It may not be for you, and that's ok. But you know your schedule, and your demands, and your wiring, and what you have available - so what can you do to cultivate that sort of space in your life ongoingly?

Conclusion

Because when we do this, look what happens:

Philippians 4:9

the God of peace will be with you.

Peace. A spiritual wholeness within you because you know the God of the Universe is with you. So that whatever happens in your life, you know in your bones God with me.

- Yes my day isn't going how I thought, but God is with me.
- Yes my season of life is not how I imagined, but you know what, God is with me
- Yes my relationships are not where I want them to be and I seem to keep struggling with the same things but I know in my core, that God is with me

and that's enough. And that's everything. And I don't need to be shaken because I have this peace that's cultivated in my thoughts and in my heart. Not just in a theological, abstract sense but in a real tangible way. When we dwell on these things, we can slowly become the sort of people who actually hear the voice of God through His Spirit throughout the day. We take anything and everything - whether it be a morning routine, or a conversation, or a circumstance in our life and we turn it into an opportunity to think about the things of Jesus.

Because of Jesus' work on the cross and the empty tomb, because of His paying for our sin and conquering death, because of giving us His Spirit we are now creations. His presence is over you now, around you, and in you. And when we think and do the things He calls us to - we experience His presence within us as a glimpse of what Heaven is like. When we walk in His Way we get a preview of the life to come and as we get more and more of His life in us now.

so as the band comes up this morning and we receive once again God's Word through song, I want us to think about the words we're singing. and what would it look like for you to think on this truth and live it out. what might change? and how might you get more of Jesus in your life?