

Sermon 25: Standing Firm through Thinking and Practicing

OUTLINE

'Think about these things'

'Practice these things'

INTRODUCTION

How do we stand firm in a world that is against us in so many ways? Paul has been telling how, 4:1-9. We must stand firm in the Lord by being united in the Lord; by rejoicing in the Lord always; we are to be gentle to everyone; we are to be anxious for nothing because the Lord is at hand; and we are to pray in all things; give thanksgiving in all things; and we will know God's peace which will help us stand. We come now to the last exhortations of this list in v8-9. '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. ⁹What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.' Paul has two final instructions, 'think about these things;' and 'practice these things.' We will be looking then at our minds and our practice.

Think about these things

V8, '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.' Paul has dealt with various areas of our lives that contribute to our spiritual stability. He has addressed the need for the church and good relationships with other believers because we need each other to stand firm. He has addressed the matter of our joy, because the joy of the Lord is our strength. He has spoken about the importance of our engagement with the outside world returning good for evil and letting the gentleness that saved us be known to all. He has addressed again matters of the heart in addressing our anxiety. Paul turns now to the matter of our thinking, of our minds. Here Paul reminds us that Christianity is a religion that deeply involves the mind, and our spiritual wellbeing depends upon the state of our minds. Paul sees the Christian life not as an unthinking life but a thinking life. The word for 'think' here means to weigh/consider. This means that we are to live with our critical faculties engaged; that we are constantly testing all things; that we are discerning not gullible.

Compare this with some of the other ways people live their lives. There is pragmatism, if it works it is good. The concern is not with whether it agrees with God's will but does it work. Then there is emotionalism, if it feels right do it. How many judgment calls are being made around sentiment like feeling sorry for someone? The latest version of unthinking groupthink is to use the oppressor and oppressed lens. If you can rhetorically paint someone as oppressed, that's it, the unthinking crowds will condemn the oppressor and fight for the cause of the oppressed. The Christian is to be different and deliberately so, Rom. 12:2, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.' The Christian realizes that the world is in the grip of the

father of lies, and that there are many deceptions that have captivated the hearts and minds of unbelievers. We have light from God; we have the mind of Christ; we have the truth of His word and are to live the thinking life that does not just go with the flow of what is influencing the unbelieving masses.

Paul using 6 'whatever's and 2 'if's covers a wide range of things that we ought to put our minds to. Paul is not merely concerned with keeping the bad thoughts and errors and false teachings out of our heads but that our minds be filled with the true, good and beautiful. Several commentators have noted that this list sounds similar to the virtue lists that we might find in some of the philosophies at the time and some have even found this problematic. We need not be worried Paul is not copying and pasting a virtue list from philosophy, though inevitably there will be overlap. Unbelievers are made in the image of God, they have the moral law written upon their hearts. They know that it is wrong to lie, cheat, steal and murder; they know the value of loyalty, self-control, integrity and hard work. Personally I think nearly anyone could sit down and write out a pretty decent set of ethical principles to live by, trust me as a preacher telling other people to do the right thing is really easy. There is no genius in that, the inconsistencies will come in in the area of motive, the goal we are driving towards, how what we do is informed by the distinct truth of God found only in His word, and how the believer also has the inner working of the Holy Spirit influencing everything they do to conform to the image of Christ. Paul is going to give us a list of things to consider and I do believe that he is including these things even among the unsaved. Paul does not have a gnostic view of the universe or an Anabaptist view of the universe. Not everything of this world is bad, it is God's creation, so music, art, food and drink, entertainment, humor, stories, God made all of these possible as part of His common grace and they can be enjoyed to the glory of God. Some Christians feel that you cannot enjoy anything that does not have the adjective Christian attached to it, Christian movies, Christian music, Christian take outs, Christian plumbers. Now as believers because we are discerning things in accordance with God's word we will be able to sift through what is good and what is bad; give glory to God for that which is good and spit out that which is not. 1 Tim. 4:4, 'For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.' But as we go through this list we are not left with the scraps of what we can find of these things in a fallen world but have the superlative example of them in God and His word.

It should be noted that these virtues put forward are in counterpoint to the values that were prevalent in the first century. Like our own society today there were certain practices and attitudes which were very popular. Instead of modesty and purity in sexual relationships there were all sorts of deviant sexual behavior like pederasty, prostitution and things spoken about in Romans 1. Like any age they were prone to excess and overindulgence not self-control; many were ruled by desire and appetite instead of ruling it. They were addicted to brutal violence and bloody forms of entertainment. It was not only the Christians who were critical of these things, but we have in God and His word the best and clear alternatives to these things. These are also guides to help us identify these things. If we are what we think then we must think about things that are '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.' Let's examine each of these.

‘Whatever is true.’ As with the spiritual armor the first item on the list is truth. This is still relevant for us today. We live in the post-modern age, this is a philosophical movement that has resulted in the questioning of all truth claims; any overarching theories of everything; and given birth to relativism. In its wake we are facing the radioactive fallout. For example, gender is a social construct and is not directly rooted in God given biology. Things are what God has made them to be not what we want them to be. The believer then is to begin with God who is called in several places a God of truth. He is the God who cannot lie. For this reason His word is also called truth. This truth fits us to know what to do in any situation, 2 Tim. 3:16-17. It is God’s truth which sets us free from the lies that grip so many. And being God’s children we are called to speak this truth to others, Eph. 4:25, ‘Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.’ If we do not know the truth we will be vulnerable and tossed around by every wind of doctrine and conspiracy theory.

‘Whatever is honorable.’ Paul is the only NT author to use this word and in every instance he uses to describe mature believers; godly men and women who can be imitated, deacons, deaconesses and older men. The other times it is used the ESV uses ‘dignity’ to translate it. Paul is calling for us to find those role models for ourselves that are dignified, how different this is to the influencers who young people ordinarily follow. TikTok influencers are trespassing walking into people’s houses; recording how they destroy golf carts; bowling alleys; hitting golf balls in a hotel room; putting wagon wheels on a tesla and running it down a hill, etc. Disrespect to authority; destruction of property; running roughshod over people for the camera and many other bad practices are out there to be followed. We are to discover and meditate on what is honorable; dignified; typical of maturity not immaturity.

‘Whatever is just.’ We are told to meditate on what is just/righteous. This is not so much our righteousness in Christ in justification but rather God’s upright standards for human conduct. Not everything that is legal is righteous. Abortion is legal; homosexual marriage is legal; getting drunk over the age of eighteen or sleeping around can be legal, but this does not mean it is righteous or just. Informed by God’s own holy character and righteousness; meditating on God’s wonderful laws like the 10 Commandments we learn what is good and our hearts are drawn out to it. Something wonderful happens between our hearts and our minds; the mind is the doorway to the emotions. If you meditate on the rightness, the goodness, the wisdom of God’s laws, your heart will love what God loves, and want what He wants. By constantly bombarding your mind with ambiguous people who are constantly breaking God’s law, lies, excuses, temptations will be at hand to make sinning easier.

‘Whatever is pure.’ We are to strive for the high water mark of being holy as God is holy in our thoughts. Purity refers to sinlessness, free from defilement or contamination. Because nearly all movies and books and plays and series are contaminated in some way, we may want to argue away this ideal. But we must not. Christ is pure; heaven is pure; the word of God is pure; there are many things in God and the Bible we can think about and are necessary to think about so that we do not grow calloused towards sin. This of course also relates to sexual purity.

‘Whatever is lovely.’ Whatever is aesthetically or morally beautiful. It is here that we can talk about the importance of aesthetic beauty in our lives. God has

made us to appreciate that which is beautiful as a pointer to the source of that beauty, the Most Beautiful One. We can appreciate the beauty of art; nature; music and many other aspects of creation and allow it to cause our hearts to rise as it did with David, 'The heavens declare the glory of God.'

'Whatever is commendable.' This is an interesting one because Paul is calling upon Christians to acknowledge that which is universally commended. In other words there are things that all people can call praiseworthy like humble service; or defending the weak; or sacrificing for another's benefit. Because General revelation like the law written on everyone's heart agrees with special revelation, the bible, even pagans can recognize the good and commend it. This is what enabled the apostles to teach the church to return good for evil so that the unbeliever would see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven; and have hot coals heaped upon their heads in recognition of the wrong they were doing to those who were committed to doing good. This means that even though we live in an age that thinks Christianity is part of the problem, the truth denying unbeliever still knows the truth in their hearts and can be convicted when we preach the gospel and live out our faith. This does not mean that we slavishly follow what the majority of people are approving, by no means. Just think for example of the good of male headship in the home. We live in an age of Feminism that thinks that this is a patriarchal tool of control that needs to be ejected. This is part of the Post-Christian narrative that has dominated the West for decades. Yet we see women hungry for men to lead and provide and even joining Islam because they are not willing to suppress that particular truth written on their hearts. This call to think on what is commended by all is not a call to be a people pleaser.

'If there is any excellence; if there is anything worthy of praise.' Excellence has to do with ethical integrity; and praiseworthy is that which is worthy of praise from God and man.

In our engagement with the world we must be discerning and make sure we fill our minds with what agrees with this list and spit out the rest. But the wonderful truth is that Christ is the One who this list perfectly describes. He is the way the truth and the life; He is the best example and perfectly honorable; He is truly just and will one day judge all our deeds; he is sinless and pure; he is the most lovely; He is commended by God as His beloved Son with whom He is well pleased; He is the most excellent and worthy of the praise and love and worship of our hearts. And in beholding Him we will become more like Him.

We are called to have the mind of Christ; spiritual warfare is described as taking every thought captive to Christ. We live in a visual age where we have to set a guard over the eyegate because this is a major inroad of assault in our day. But we are also overwhelmed with a numberless amount of messages and worldviews and lies to sift through. Compare the messages you are being deluged in everyday compared to a middle ages farmer in Europe. If you were a peasant farmer, you would have been part of the majority of the population who could not read. All you know about God; the universe, medicine, science, geography is what you have learnt from your parents, the local priest, and other voices in your village. You would get some news of the outside world from visitors passing through your village. No internet; no phones; no news agencies; no 24 hour reporting; no discovery channel; no radio; no globalization; no entertainment on demand; no adverts; no playlists etc. The point I am trying to make is that we cannot be passive, we are under assault. We have become hard

to the constant stream of messages coming at us, but we must be vigilant; discerning; committed to thinking and upon right things. So how are you doing in this area? How much Bible do you read? How much discerning do you do? Do you stop watching a movie or a program because it does not agree with these standards? When was the last time you just said, 'No, I can't watch this, or listen to this!' If we are what we think how much do you think about Christ and His beauty and His holiness and His grace? What about our commitment to internalizing scripture? Ps. 119:9-16, 'How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.'

'Practice these things'

V9, '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 makes a natural shift as he moves next from thinking to doing. The sequence is logical. We think in order to understand; we understand in order to act; and we act in order to practice. Thinking must result not just in doing, as in once off, but in good practice.

In this final exhortation Paul calls upon the Philippian to practice what they have 'learned and received and heard and seen in' him. Once again Paul is calling upon the Philippians to stand firm by imitating godly examples, especially apostolic example who imitate Christ. The four things in this list divide into two groups. Firstly, the things that the Philippians 'learned and received' is talking about the gospel that was first preached by Paul and Silas in Acts 16. In order to stand firm, and know the God of peace with them, they are to stay with the gospel first learned and received from the apostles. Paul is pointing these Philippians back to the gospel to enable them to stand firm. The truth that we are all sinners who are saved by grace alone through faith alone through Christ alone. That Jews and Gentiles are not saved by how good they are at keeping God's law but by how good Jesus was at paying for our sins on the cross and living a righteous law keeping life on our behalf. If you stick with this gospel, God is with you, and with God will come His peace.

The second set is what they had 'heard and seen' in Paul. Paul was a messenger of the gospel who lived a life of faith consistent with the gospel. He did not only preach but practiced what he preached. Everywhere they went the apostles handed over the traditions handed down from Christ, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper, and set up churches with elders and deacons. And they lived a life of faith modelling what a life of faith looks like. They preached a gracious suffering serving Messiah and lived a grace filled; suffering serving lifestyle. In this letter already we have seen something of what the ordinary Christian life consists of. We will suffer for Christ's sake but we do not despair because we rejoice as long as the gospel goes forth. We will gladly suffer that others might hear. We imitate Christ who though the king of the universe was willing to serve us by paying for our sins and saving us, adopting us into His family and sharing His inheritance with us. Paul follows in this example of Christ working with his own hands so not to be a burden; willing to serve those with his own life which

he once tried to kill; putting away old sins; putting away legalistic religion as a means of righteousness.

Paul then finishes this list with a promise, 'and the God of peace will be with you.' By staying in the truth of the gospel we will no doubt have the God of peace with us and all of His benefits. But how is God's peace linked to our lifestyle of practice? Some think that it is a conditional promise that if you obey you will earn the blessing of the experience of God's peace. The trouble with this view is that it denies the peace we all have access to through the gospel. The view I think makes the most sense is the peace that we can know through a disciplined use of means. If we pray regularly; if we meditate upon God and live out His ways regularly, then the intended peace of God will be ours. If we neglect the use of means namely, the Bible; prayer and obedience we will fail to have a peace that God wills for all of His children.

So stand firm by thinking upon these things; and by practicing them.