

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...and the God of peace will be with you.” (Philippians 4:8)

This piece of advice from Paul’s letter to the Philippians is known as the ‘4:8 principle’ and is the subject of today’s sermon.

Have you ever wondered why the world continues to experience so much pain and suffering, conflict, wars, and woundedness after 2000 years of Christianity? I mean, if Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life,” shouldn’t things have turned out better by now? What seems to be the stumbling block? Well, over the centuries, the teachings of Christianity have focused mostly on actions. We have been taught what to do and what not to do. We have the great commandment to love God and neighbor. We have the *shall* and *shall not*s of the 10 commandments. And yet we struggle with an inner conflict between our commitment to do good and our actual behavior. Paul summed up this inner conflict in his letter to the Romans: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (*Romans 7:15*)

I think what is missing in Christian teachings is the training of the mind. We know what is right but our thoughts seem to have a mind of their own. The mind is a powerful force. How and what we think matters! Every emotion, every action, begins with a thought. Good thoughts bring good emotions, bad thoughts bring bad emotions. The words you mutter to yourself and the thoughts that you dwell on have the power to encourage or discourage, to motivate or deflate, to generate joy or generate sadness. Little by little, the conversations that you hold in the privacy of your mind are determining your destiny. Each thought can move you toward or away from your God-given potential.

So how can we followers of Jesus “put on the mind of Christ?” Let’s take a closer look at today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. It offers some helpful advice on redirecting our thoughts from a place of negativity to place of joy and peace. Paul is writing this letter to the Church in Philippi while in prison. He has been falsely accused of profaning the temple in Jerusalem and is awaiting trial. If you have ever been falsely accused and have suffered the consequences, you know the pain of injustice. And yet Paul maintains a posture of joy while incarcerated and encourages the baptized to do likewise: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known by God.” (*Philippians 4:4&6*)

Paul is encouraging this church to “put on the mind of Christ” by focusing their thoughts, not on negativity and conflict, but rather on that which is “true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise.” We are not our thoughts and we have the power to change them. The Tao claims that life is made up of 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows. So why not focus on the joys!

The average person thinks about 50,000 thoughts per day. Most people are oblivious to their habitual way of thinking which unfortunately leads them to do things that go against their own principles. This ought not to be so. Our mind is to be used as a tool for problem solving, learning new things, engaging in activities, and delighting in God’s creation. We mustn’t allow the mind to be hijacked by useless thoughts, fearful thoughts, and old emotions that deplete our joy and deprive us of abundant life. For our own spiritual healing, it is time for us to take charge of our mind rather than allowing our mind to take charge of us. Focusing on the 4:8 principle is a good place to start.

Let me give you an example of how easy it is for the mind to be hijacked. Kathleen tells the story about being on a zoom call. As she glances over the faces of the participants, she notices that one of the women is wearing a scarf. Her thoughts begin to take her attention away from the zoom meeting to thoughts about the scarf. She thinks to herself, “hmm, that is a very nice scarf; very attractive. I would look nice in such a scarf.” Soon, Kathleen’s interest in the scarf begins to morph into coveting a scarf which strengthens her desire to have one. Then she thinks, “Well there is no reason for me not to purchase a scarf; after all, I have the money.” And before she knows it, she has logged onto Amazon.com, chosen a scarf, and has pushed the order button. Just then, someone in the meeting asks her a question. Of course, she is not sure what the question is because her thinking was hijacked by a thought about a scarf!

How do we take back control of our thoughts so that they work for us? Here are three insights that I find helpful in my own spiritual journey to reclaim control.

1. Strengthen your consent muscle: If we want to develop upper body strength, then we commit to a practice like weight training, gradually increasing the weights, and maybe doing some push-ups and pullups. Likewise, if we want to strengthen our mental consent muscle so that we can decide which thoughts we want to focus on and which thoughts to discard, then we need to train our mind and commit ourselves to a practice of mindfulness. This is how it works. Once we notice a distracting thought, we need to ask: “Do I want this thought? Is it helpful to my well-being? How does this thought or cycle of thoughts make me feel? Next, we need to make a decision to let go of the thought/s. The most difficult part in this practice is to catch the thought in its infancy before it turns into a distraction or a full-blown emotion. Like strengthening our muscles by lifting weights at the gym, we can strengthen our consent muscle through the practice of mindfulness. Like weight lifting, it takes commitment, practice, and patience.

When I am plagued with a thought that is negative or distractive, or if I am rehashing a painful experience from the past, I simply say to myself internally or out loud: “I do not want that thought. I am in charge of my mind, not you!” And if the negative thought continues (which it often does), I replace it with a different thought or ask for the grace to be released from the negativity.

2. Guard your heart: To guard one’s heart means to avoid exposure or attention to negative environments. For instance, if a person is beginning the path to sobriety, the last place he needs to go to meet his friends is at a bar. If the fear mongering news is making you angry or anxious, you need to shut it off as a way of guarding your heart. Recently, several of my friends are taking a break from the toxic, partisan fighting on Facebook. For myself, I decided to shut off both the presidential and vice-presidential debates after 10 minutes when I realized there was little that was “pleasing, commendable or excellent.” In fact, the political bickering depleted my joy. That is how I guarded my heart. We need to be careful about our environment and “extraordinarily picky” about what we read, watch, and listen to on a consistent basis.

The psychologist Dan O’Grady said: “our negative and critical thoughts are like Velcro - they stick and hold; whereas our positive and joyful thoughts are like Teflon - they slide away. We have to deliberately choose to hold onto positive thoughts so that they can imprint.”

Neuroscience can now demonstrate that the brain has a negative bias. “The brain prefers to constellate around fearful, negative, or problematic situations. In fact, when a loving, positive, or unproblematic thing comes your way, you have to savor it consciously for at least fifteen seconds before it can harbor and store itself in your “implicit memory,” otherwise it doesn’t stick.”

3. The Practice of Prayer: Paul encourages the Philippians to pray. (*Phil. 4:6*) Here are three types of prayer that can help us diminish negative thinking. 1) Mindfulness Meditation: This spiritual practice is perhaps the most helpful in disciplining the mind. It involves staying focused on the present moment. Mindfulness meditation includes practices like contemplative prayer, yoga, counting the laps as you swim, or focusing on your breathing as you walk on the beach. Mindfulness is needed to ‘nip those thoughts in the bud’ that are not useful to your well-being. 2) The Prayer of Gratitude: If “thank you” is the only prayer you know, then that is sufficient. Practicing gratitude can transform a sense of scarcity to a sense of abundance. Give thanks throughout the day and before you go to sleep each night, list 5 things you are grateful for. 3) Arrow Prayers: Arrow prayers are short prayers to utter when it becomes difficult to move beyond those thoughts and emotions that we don’t want. Some arrow prayers that I frequently use are: “God come to my assistance.” “Grace, grace, grace.” Sometimes I say the Jesus Prayer while other times I seed my thoughts with the St. Patrick’s prayer: “Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ beside me, Christ above me, Christ below me, Christ to guide & to restore me.”

We live in a society that is fearful, cynical, and negative. We have a tendency to nurse old wounds. Our country is divided along partisan lines, while our minds are being goaded by a news media that highlights all that is wrong. Our biology is wired to focus on danger, threats, and negative input as a survival tool. If we are ever to attain peace, our world needs more people who are conscious, mindful, and careful

thinkers. Our Church needs disciples whose thoughts are focused on that which is “true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise.” The 4:8 principle shows us the way.

“Your mind is a garden, your thoughts are the seeds. You can grow flowers or you can grow weeds.”*(Seanna)*