

# The Raging Battle

10/11/20

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Epistle reading where we hear these words once more from St. Paul: "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. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me - practice these things; and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8-9) This is the Word of the Lord.

Beloved.. in case you are unaware there is a battle going on.. and it is a mighty fierce battle. It's not the COVID 19 virus that we are battling with... it's not the conservatives or the liberals... it's not the fake news media or the fact checkers... it's not those who stand for our National Anthem or those who kneel... and it's not about appointing a new Justice or stacking the court...

No, friends, it is none of these. And although those battlefields are quite large and extensive... our battlefield... well... it's relatively small... It's only about six inches wide. If you haven't figured out the battleground I'm talking about yet.. it's right there.... In that itty bitty space between your ears... contained in that gray matter called the brain... this battlefield.. is your mind!

Indeed, brothers and sisters... a Christian's mind, is the place where THE warfare is waging.. and you, unfortunately... are not exempt from this battle. There are various forces at work, seeking to take control of your mind.. whether you like it or not.... The devil.. the culture.. your own sinful flesh.. these are all conspiring to take your mind captive.

..... Will you let them? Are you going to surrender those six inches of space to the enemy.. or, instead.. will you claim them for your rightful master.. our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? And make no mistake... every Christian... every last one... is called to active duty in this raging battle... for the believing mind.

What brings this to my mind today - no pun intended - is our Epistle text which was just read.

We find here that St Paul is instructing us Believers... to direct our minds - to direct our thinking - to certain things and not to others. He is pointing out the positive things we should be focusing our attention on... but in so doing... he is also suggesting that we not devote our minds to those things that do not live up to those qualities. Implied is that there is a battle raging for our minds... that our thinking could be led astray to those other things.

But also notice that by giving us this instruction.. St. Paul is expecting that we Christians can do what he tells us... to direct our minds and orient our minds toward these more excellent things. That's because he's writing to Christians - to you...to you and me... who have been born again... who have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit... to you whose minds have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit.. so that now you are new creations in Christ.

Now of course you and I will often fail to live up to the calling to which we have been called. Time and time again we fall into the old patterns of thinking. We let the devil whisper in our ear... and we go along with him. We let the world pour their sewage into our brain... and, disturbingly... we like it... we find it entertaining... fun... exciting. We yield to these sinful desires of our own flesh... letting our primeval instincts get the better of us... and we let our minds stay there... for far too long.

So... we don't always do such a great job in this raging battle, and that... is sin... and for that we need God's forgiveness. Always. We never outgrow our need to be forgiven... not as long as we live this side of heaven.. for we daily sin much... in thought, word, and deed. And so today... we are focusing on the thought component... for the thought.. is the father... of both the word and the deed.

Truly... we always... and desperately... need God's forgiveness. And I am keenly aware of this myself... for I know how poorly I have performed in this battle. And I suspect... you don't do a whole lot better, either.

And here is where I have good news for all of us. The sins that Christ died for on the cross - which also include the sins of an unclean mind - Christ's cleansing blood washes all those sins away. Our Savior purifies us... his holiness poured out on our behalf... washing us clean in body, mind, and soul. There is not one tiny part of you that God - in Christ - has not redeemed... including that itty bitty space between your ears. There is not one sin that is left unforgiven. You are free... you are clean and pure, beloved! Christ the Cleanser makes it so. Believe it... fully... it is God's gift to you!

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” That's what Paul wrote in Romans... “By the renewal of your mind”!

So now you are a new person in Christ, and constantly being renewed. God wants to reorient your thinking. The way the world thinks misses the mark... so don't let the world squeeze you into its mold. Instead... there's a shift going on, so that you will not think like the world thinks. The renewal of your mind is what Paul now gets at in our lesson.

Let's look at the terms Paul uses in our text once again. "Whatever is true": What are the things that correspond to reality... that are the genuine article, the real deal... according to how God has arranged life and made his truth known? Think on these things... not on the false or the fraudulent.. the fake or artificial.

"Whatever is honorable." In other words, that which is noble or worthy of respect. Let your mind go over things of that nature, and not on the disreputable or the shameful.

"Whatever is just," ... whatever is righteous in God's sight:....The things that line up with what God judges to be right.. nothing crooked or out of line. "Whatever is pure," ... unpolluted by filth... but rather clean and pure.. not the stuff that you would regret or should be ashamed of thinking about.

"Whatever is lovely": What are the things that ought to draw you to them by their wholesome, beautiful, and appealing nature? Let your mind be drawn to them, and not to the ugly, self-centered, and nasty underside of life.

"Whatever is commendable," ... of good report.. spoken well of. These, brothers and sisters... are the things you should be thinking on.

And then Paul adds: "If there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise." There are a lot of good things we that can be filling our minds with.. many things of virtue and not of vice.. things to be praised and not to be condemned.

But let's stop for a moment. As Paul runs through this list of virtues... if one didn't know better.. they might think they're reading an excerpt from the Greek philosophers. Those pagan Greek philosophers would rattle off lists of qualities and virtues that sound a lot like what we're hearing in our text. The philosophers would write texts with titles like "In Praise of Virtue" or "In Praise of Excellence."

So then.. what's the difference between reading Philippians and reading the philosophers? While the pagan Greek philosophers might recognize certain truth or wisdom in the way that people ideally ought to live.. while they might admire the good and the beautiful in human behavior and in nature itself.. while they could see that it is better to fill your mind with high and admirable thoughts rather than with low and dishonorable thoughts - the difference...

... is that the pagan Greek philosophers were not connected to the power source to actually accomplish the good and the beautiful... nor did they know the way to be forgiven when they would fall short.

That power and that knowledge only come in the gospel of Jesus Christ... which you have and you know! It is in Christ - by the power of the Holy Spirit - that we are able to respond positively to the instructions Paul gives here. It is in Christ - through faith in him and his completed work - that we have forgiveness for all of our failures. The philosophers didn't know these things... but the Philippians did... and so do you.

Likewise... what Paul gives us here in these instructions is more than mere positive thinking. There have been some well-known American religious teachers who have popularized various forms of a positive-thinking message. Names like Norman Vincent Peale, Robert Schuller, Joel Osteen, and Joyce Meyer come to mind. However... all these false teachers fall short for the same reasons the Greek philosophers did: They do not give us enough Christ for the forgiveness we will inevitably need when we set out to live a righteous life. They put the pressure all on you... to look inside yourself for your power.. instead of looking to your gracious Lord.

The late Norman Vincent Peale was known for his philosophy of "The Power of Positive Thinking." But if you compare what Peale taught.. to the truly Gospel-saturated teaching of St. Paul.. I would have to agree with the former Governor of Illinois, Adlai Stevenson, who once said, "I find Paul appealing and Peale appalling." And the same would hold true for the positive-thinking gurus of our day: They cannot hold a candle to the Christ-centered message we find here in Philippians and in the rest of the New Testament.

"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."

Who or what, friends... will occupy those six inches between your ears? Will it be Christ and the things of God... the truth and the beauty and the goodness that God has built into his design for human beings?.... Or will it be the crass and the sordid and the shameful things that the devil, the culture of the world, and our own sinful flesh... are pumping into our brains? This is the raging battle that is going on inside each and every one of us.

How are we going to orient our thinking? In what ways do we need to change our minds... and get lined up with God's thoughts? Repent!!... that's how!

We need to recognize how our thinking has been out of line. This calls for faith.. for prayer.. to receive God's forgiveness and to seek our Lord's help. This calls for filling our minds with the Word of God... to know what God would have us to think and to do... to have his Word to meditate on and mull over... to consider how we can apply his Word to our lives. And when God transforms and renews your mind... it will very well indeed... change the way you live. God will help you put these good and praiseworthy thoughts into practice.

The secret is not in stringing together a laundry list of commendable virtues. Even the Greek philosophers could do that. The difference is in being connected... connected to THE God who forgives our failures and empowers new ways of thinking and living. And this connection comes in the good news of your Savior Jesus Christ... and it is in him.. and him alone... that you win the battle... the raging battle... for the mind.

For truly, beloved... as Paul says in our text and as I say at the close of every sermon: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts... and your minds... in Christ Jesus.." This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.