

## **A Gospel-Shaped Perspective**

### **Philippians 4:8-9**

We've noted throughout our time in the book of Philippians that the church has a mission: we have been set apart *by* the gospel and *for* the gospel. When Paul uses the word, *gospel*, he's talking about what God has done to establish his kingdom and rescue us from our sin through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. God rescues sinners, people who don't deserve it, rebels against his kingdom. Through faith in Christ, he forgives them, cleanses them, and adopts them into his own family, making us brothers and sisters—part of the one family of God. And as his rescued people he gives us a mission. We are called to advance the gospel of Jesus, to make disciples of all nations by bearing witness to the good news of Christ through faithful and clear proclamation matched with merciful and loving service. That's our mission; that's what the church is on earth for.

But whenever there is a mission, you can pretty much guarantee there will be opposition. Paul tells us as much back in 1:27-28, when he calls us to stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. The reality is that as the people of God living out our days in a fallen world, we live in wartime. We have a mission, but that mission is opposed, both from within and from without. We face war in our relationships within, as we saw a couple weeks ago. We face war in our own hearts, where the residue of our sinful flesh and evil desires continue to fight against God's Spirit within us. And of course we face war all around us. The God we serve seems to this world outdated and irrelevant at best, and bigoted and even monstrous at worst. The task of testifying to his goodness and his rightful rule over this world and the grace and mercy of salvation in his Son is daunting when we consider the risks involved—losing our reputation, losing friends and family, perhaps losing our jobs, and in some parts of the world, our lives. We live in wartime, and it's serious business.

The question is, do we live with a wartime mentality? When the United States entered into World Wars I and II, citizens on the home front were asked to make major sacrifices. Basic goods like coffee, sugar, gasoline, clothing, meat, canned foods, and all sorts of other things were rationed since resources and funds were being directed to the war front. People were encouraged to plant victory gardens to offset the war's impact on the food supply and to invest in war bonds to support the effort. Every day was lived with an awareness that the country was at war, and that everyone had a role to play.

Contrast that with the nation's casual indifference regarding the recent war in Iraq. I'm not interested right now in whether you think the war was appropriate or inappropriate; think about what was asked of the nation in terms of tangible support. Nothing. Certainly many military families and individuals gave much, including many lives, but there was no public expectation

that the rest of the country alter their lifestyle or share in their sacrifice. The average person's personal investment in that war was as safe as turning on the TV and as shallow as turning the channel to watch Wheel of Fortune instead. There was no wartime mentality.

I think we find a sad parallel when we consider the wartime mentality of the church today across North America. There is little sense of urgency in our mission, and so there is little sacrifice given to the cause. The thought of significantly altering one's lifestyle for the cause of Christ is nearly unheard of. So often our investment is as safe as a Sunday drive to church and as shallow as returning home to spend most of our day thinking about football. We don't live like we're at war. It's casual; unimportant; it doesn't cost me anything and it doesn't affect the way I live day to day. And I am just as guilty of this as the next person. This has probably been the most personally convicting sermon I've had to prepare from this book so far.

So if we're not living with a wartime mentality, then what are thinking about? What is it that consumes our imaginations and shapes our actions day in and day out, if it's not the gospel of Jesus? And what impact does that have on our faithfulness to the mission? We need to revitalize a wartime mentality; or to put it another way, we need to cultivate *a gospel-shaped perspective*—a way of thinking that focuses our minds and hearts to live faithfully as God's people on mission for Jesus. And that is what Paul lays out for us this morning in Philippians 4:8-9.

In our passage, Paul has just finished appealing to two women, two co-laborers in the gospel, who were in conflict over secondary matters that threatened to distract them from their mission. He appealed to them to agree or share a common perspective in the Lord Jesus, and to help them (and us) do that, he told us in vv. 4-7 to find our joyful satisfaction in Jesus, to be known for our gentleness, and to turn our anxiety into prayer. We looked at that a few weeks ago. When we come to v. 8, that conflict in vv. 2-3 is still ringing in the background, but Paul begins to offer a more general set of instructions that apply to all of life for God's people on mission in a fallen world. Paul tells us we need to learn *how to think* and *what to do* to be faithful to our mission. Notice the parallel in vv. 8 and 9 between thinking and doing (it's lost a bit in the NIV, but listen to it in the ESV). Look at v. 8: we have a list of several virtues, and then Paul says, "think about these things." Then in verse 9, we have another list, and he says, "practice these things." Think and do. Paul wants us to know how to think and what to do as servants of Jesus and his mission.

But though we live in wartime, look at his conclusion at the end of v. 9—what we can expect as we think properly and live faithfully: "the God of peace will be with you." And this is an echo of what he just promised in v. 7 as we rejoice in Jesus and turn our anxiety into prayer: "the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." We are at war, but we serve the God of peace, who is in sovereign control over this world, and who will be faithful to utterly destroy sin and establish the peace that Christ won through his shed blood on the cross. As such we don't fight the way the world fights—not with power or coercion or violence. Rather into the chaos and darkness of this world we hold out the one thing powerful enough to give life to what is dead, wholeness to what is broken, cleansing to what is stained, forgiveness to what stands condemned. We hold out the gospel of Jesus—the message of Christ, crucified and raised for us.

So how can we be faithful to our mission? How can we avoid being distracted or compromised while on the battlefield? We need to learn how to think, and what to do. Let's start with how to think, v. 8.

*How to Think (4:8)*

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (4:8). Whatever it is that occupies our hearts, our thinking and imagination, that’s what ultimately shapes how we live, what excites us, what we give our lives to. And so Paul wants our hearts and minds to be filled with and focused on *things that comes from the God of peace*—his Word, the goodness of his creation, and the fruit of his gospel—rather than the propaganda of the enemy—the ugliness of sin and the stain of this fallen world. We need to fill our minds and focus them on that which comes from God.

Look briefly at each virtue Paul lists here, and think about the alternative. First, whatever is *true*. God wants our minds to dwell on what is true, as opposed to what is false. What happens in war with bad intelligence? If your mind is not focused on what is true, you’re going to go the wrong direction. You’re going to make potentially fatal mistakes for you and your troops and the civilians around you. We need to think about, dwell on, fill our minds with what is true. And what is true is what comes from God, whether we read it in the Scriptures, the Word of truth, or see it reflected in his good but broken creation, or see it in the restoration of that broken creation, the truth that corrects the lie as the gospel bears fruit in our lives. What is true is what comes from God. And the same can be said of the rest of these virtues—they come from God.

So beyond what is true, Paul wants us to dwell on whatever is *honorable* or noble, what is dignified. Whatever takes seriously God’s authority and design for creation—as opposed to whatever is dishonorable or crude, what doesn’t reflect his rule and order. Third, Paul wants us to think about whatever is *just* or right, that which accords to God’s rule, as opposed to that which is unjust or wrong, that which throws off God’s rule. Then he says whatever is *pure*, unstained, undefiled, morally upright, according to God’s standards, as opposed to what is impure and stained, falling short of God’s standards. Fill your minds with these things.

Fifth, whatever is *lovely*, beautiful, pleasant, emanating from the beauty of creation and the beauty of the gospel, as opposed to the ugliness and blemish of this fallen world. Sixth, whatever is *commendable* or admirable, things that you can speak highly of and celebrate, as opposed to what is disrespectful or of ill repute, shameful to mention in public. Finally Paul says, “if anything is excellent [or virtuous], if anything is worthy of praise,” which are kind of catch-all, summary statements: anything that reflects the goodness of God, the truth of his Word, the power of his gospel—these are the life-giving things that ought to occupy your attention and imagination as the people of God on mission.

So what does all this mean, practically speaking—to think this way? What does this mean for a culture where we spend most of our thought and imagination on being entertained, a culture where, to use Neil Postman’s phrase, we are “amusing ourselves to death”?<sup>1</sup> It’s striking that the average American spends 4.5 hours a day watching television; stack it all together, and by the age of 65 you will have spent 12 solid years of your life in front of the TV.<sup>2</sup> And that doesn’t

<sup>1</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985; 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Postman, “Introduction to the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition,” in Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, xiv.

include video games or internet. It's hard to live like we're at war when every spare moment and brain cell is spent on tuning out of reality and into a mindless fantasy.

Now I'm not against entertainment or recreation; to quote Don Carson, "like everything, it has its place, but it's not God." There is in fact much to be commended in art, literature, and film; much that is life-giving and stimulating. There is also much that is drivel and dirt, and our society has lost the ability to distinguish between the two. To quote Carson again, "The sad fact is that many people dwell on dirt without grasping that it is dirt. The wise Christian will see plenty of dirt in the world, but will recognize it as dirt, precisely because everything that is clean has captured his or her mind."<sup>3</sup>

So what's at stake in buying into the propaganda of the enemy, and letting our hearts and minds be filled with and focused on whatever is untrue, whatever is shameful, whatever is wrong or unjust, whatever is impure, whatever is ugly, whatever is objectionable, if there is anything vicious or blameworthy?

For starters, the consistent message across all media (whether film, art, TV, radio, print, or internet) is that life is all about you. Your dreams, your glory. So we risk being *distracted* from our mission as God's people. Just think of the phrase, "the American Dream." There's a reason we call it a dream—because it's something that occupies your minds and imaginations, that motivates you, that promises you satisfaction and delight. It's all about you—the home, the car, the career, the family. It's a vision of an entirely different mission than the mission of God.

Moreover, the constant bombardment of images of violence, sex, and sensuality across media, not to mention the celebration of immoral expressions of these things, has the subtle effect of *desensitizing* us toward the evil of what we're watching. We're no longer shocked to see limbs blown off, or to see an unmarried couple wake up in the same bed. Sometimes we're forced to decide which bad guy to root for, since none of the characters in the film are good. As the Church Curmudgeon, whom I follow on Twitter, recently said, "Looking back, the movies were a whole lot more moral when it was a damnable sin to go see them."<sup>4</sup>

But beyond distracting and desensitizing, the entertainment culture has a more subtle and even more insidious effect of *trivializing* our life and mission—of telling us it doesn't really matter. As Postman points out, it's hard to sustain a serious commentary on the evils of sexual trafficking when the show has to break in 30 seconds for bikini-clad beer commercial.<sup>5</sup> Sure the world is bad, but it's not that bad. Not if you can just grab a Bud. In the same way, it's hard to take seriously our commission as God's people when our mind is taken up more fully and consistently with the plotline of *Twilight* or the recent antics of the Kardashians than with the story of God in Scripture—which is the real story of how the world is.

I'll be honest. This is the most personally convicting aspect of wrestling with this passage—realizing how prone I am to treat entertainment as my functional savior. What is it that gets me through a long and frustrating day? Is it the presence of God's Spirit, strengthening me and

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 116.

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/#!/ChrChCurmudgeon> (Feb. 27, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See Postman, 99-113.

reminding me of who I am in Christ and all that he's done to rescue me and make me his own? Or is it the prospect of sitting down on the couch after the kids are in bed and watching *Downton Abbey*?

Now contrast all this with what happens when our minds and hearts are filled with and focused on the life-giving milk that flows from God's Word, his good creation, and the transforming fruit of the gospel. What happens when we follow Paul's call to "take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5)? What difference should that perspective make?

First, it reminds us what our mission is all about. It brings us back to reality. When I set my heart on God's Word, when I engage culture from the standards of his Word, I remember that God really is holy. He really is king of his creation. This world really is fallen and rebellious. Men and women, friends and family, really are going to hell. Sin really is sinful. But grace really is sufficient. Jesus really is Lord and Savior. He really does rescue us and cleanse us. We really do have a mission, a calling. God really is worth our undying devotion and allegiance. He really is in control. And he really is making all things new. A gospel-shaped perspective reminds us what our mission is all about.

Second, a gospel-shaped perspective gives us a framework to advance our mission with a posture of grace and love. Think about advancing the gospel among neighbors. If when I think about my neighbors, all I can see is the junk in their yard, all I can hear is the swear word that came out of their 10-year-old's mouth, all I can remember is how they forgot to return the tools they borrowed last spring, I'm not going to be very mindful that part of my calling in life is to testify to them of the life-giving gospel of God's grace. I'm going to take up a posture of self-protection and distance. But if I'm constantly reminded that this person is made in God's image (that's true), that apart from faith in Christ they are facing eternity in hell (that's serious), that in Christ they can find all they need to deal with their sin and the brokenness of their lives (that's beautiful), then it's a lot easier to reach out to them in vulnerability and love.

Think about advancing the gospel of Jesus within your friendship or marriage—whether your friend or spouse is a believer or an unbeliever; both need the same thing—to depend more fully on the gospel of Christ. If when I think of my spouse, all I can see are the dirty socks on the floor or the dirty dishes in the sink, all I can hear is the constant nagging or criticism, all I can remember is the broken promise or the careless word, then I'm not going to be very mindful that part of my calling in life is to help them see and hold fast to the transforming gospel of God's grace. Again, I'm going to take up a posture of self-protection and self-centeredness, being more concerned about how they're loving me than how I'm loving them. But if my heart and mind is filled with the truth of God's Word about my spouse and the privilege I have of loving them, if I can see the goodness of this marriage covenant and I can focus on the fruit of God's grace at work in their lives, then it's a lot easier to follow the model of Christ in laying my life down in love, regardless of what I get out of it. And you can apply that to any relationship—friend, colleague, parent, child, sibling.

We need to learn how to think—to fill our minds with all that is true, good, and beautiful in this world. We need a gospel-shaped perspective. We need to *think* so that we can *do*, which brings us to v. 9—what to do.

### *What to Do (4:9)*

Here more briefly. With a proper perspective in place, Paul now calls us to follow his example as a servant on mission for Christ. “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (4:9). So what is it that they have received or been taught by him? What have they seen and heard in him? We need only look back earlier in the book where Paul has held his life up as an example.

Think of Philippians 1:12-26 where Paul rejoiced in the advancement of the gospel, despite his own suffering and imprisonment, where his singular goal was to make much of Christ, whether by life or by death (cf. 2:17-18). Think of 3:7-11, where he considered his heritage and hard work and everything else to be complete rubbish compared to the joyful satisfaction of knowing Christ and being counted righteous in him. Remember 3:12-16 and the gospel-fueled passion and perseverance he modeled, forgetting what is behind and straining toward the prize of Christ. Or 3:17-4:1 where he told us to join in imitating him and those like him, the kind of people who know that their citizenship is in heaven, not this world, and who hope fully in the resurrection to come.

Are we willing to follow that example? If we don’t think clearly, the answer will be no. If our minds are not captivated by the gospel and the goodness of God, there’s no way we’ll be willing to lay down our lives. But this is our call by God’s grace: to follow the selfless model of Paul, who follows the selfless model of Christ. Remember ch. 2:5: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,” who did not consider his status as God something to be exploited for selfish gain, but laid his life down in love (as we saw last week in John 13)—he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on the cross.

If we are to be faithful to our mission as the people of God in Christ during this wartime, while we await the Lord’s return, to hold out the hope of Christ and new life in him so that men and women here in New England and from all nations might come to believe and know the joy and peace only he can supply, then we need to think properly, and live sacrificially. We need a wartime mentality, a gospel-shaped perspective, a willingness to lose everything for the cause of Christ. And when we live this way, not only will we bear witness to the God of peace, we will know and enjoy his presence while we fight this war. We will be reminded that he is in sovereign control over this world, that he is with us and for us; he’s given us a firm foundation in his Word and the peace of his presence. And we’ll be reminded that he will be faithful to utterly destroy sin and establish his peace, to claim the victory that Christ already won through his shed blood on the cross.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. The sermon spoke of a relative lack of “wartime mentality” regarding our mission as the church in America. Do you agree with this assessment? What indicators are there among Christians that we are at “war” (i.e. on mission)? What indicators seem strangely missing?

2. We suggested that an uncritical engagement with the entertainment culture that surrounds us can have several adverse effects. What were they, and which ones do you see evidence of in your own life?
3. How does Paul's instruction in v. 8 give us some practical guidelines for how to engage entertainment and other aspects of culture as a people on mission for Christ?
4. As you think about our mission to make Christ known, how might adopting this virtue-focused perspective help you deal with specific challenges or opportunities you're presently facing (at work, in marriage, friendships, church, etc.)?
5. Verse 9 encourages us to imitate Paul's example. As you think back over his example in Philippians, what stands out to you? What do you find most encouraging? Most challenging?
6. Why do you think Paul concludes his exhortations here (and in v. 7) by highlighting the peace of God? What kind of peace do you think he is talking about? What difference should an awareness of or dependence on his peace make?