

Philippians 4 – changing your mind (Allsaints Waitara)

Introduction

For those of you who don't know, I'm presently studying my Juris Doctor, which is just a fancy way of saying I'm doing a law degree. Last term I finished the introductory course in criminal law, where I learned that almost all crimes have two aspects, which lawyers call the *actus reus* and the *mens rea* because saying things in Latin makes you sound smart. They mean the guilty act and the guilty mind. So take a crime, like smuggling drugs. The guilty act is bringing a border controlled drug into Australia. But you can't be found guilty of smuggling drugs if you don't also have a guilty mind – that is, you needed to know that you were smuggling something into the country. You don't need to know that it's drugs, what kind, how much – you just need to know you're bringing something into Australia that you shouldn't. That way, if someone slips drugs into your bag without your knowledge, you're not guilty of smuggling. But you also can't be found guilty of a crime just for having a guilty mind – you have to perform some act to make it criminal. So in the crime of conspiracy to commit smuggling, just thinking about how you would smuggle drugs into the country isn't enough to get you convicted. You need to take some act towards putting that plan into action. Your thoughts alone cannot convict you.

And that's for a very good reason – because we can't read people's minds. However, Jesus tells us that God's court is not like a human court. God can read our minds, and he tells us that if you think angry thoughts against your brother, you're guilty of murder, and if you think lustful thoughts about someone who isn't your spouse, you've committed adultery. I'll be the first one to say that this is an impossibly high standard, and everyone is going to fail, because we are sinful beings, and I'll be the first to thank God that our salvation does not rely on us living a perfect thought life, because it is Jesus who saves us. Praise God! But because our thought life is so important to God, we have to look at how we live in our minds, what we think about and how we think about it, to keep ourselves accountable to God. It matters to God, so it should matter to us.

Changing our Mind – The Lord is Near

And so here in the last chapter of Philippians, Paul is encouraging the church to pay attention to their thought life, and to ensure that the way they think is in line with the truth about God, and how God wants us to think. The first major shift we need to make in our mindset is coming to an understanding that “The Lord is near,” in verse five. The Lord is near, whatever we might see happening, whatever we think of our situation. These words sit as a centrepiece to this passage, so that everything else in verses 4-9 revolves around it. And this knowledge that the Lord is near should change our attitude towards life.

The Lord is near – rejoice!

So verse 4 says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” This might just seem a cheery and pleasant thing to say to your fellow Christian brothers and sisters, the spiritual equivalent to, “Put a smile on your dial” or “Put on a happy face”. But think about the context of this letter. Paul is in prison, facing the death penalty for preaching the gospel. The Philippians would have been struck to the heart that Paul was in prison. Epaphroditus visited Paul and nearly died. They're under pressure from the Romans, under pressure from the circumcision group. Things are tough. But rejoice in the Lord always, because the Lord is near.

The Lord is near – be gentle!

This understanding that 'the Lord is near' should change our attitude towards each other. Verse 5 says, "Let your gentleness be evident to all." This gentleness is the outworking of our thoughts about other people. It means be gentle all the time, so that whenever people look at you, they see gentleness. It means standing up for Christ, and being unyielding in truth, being unashamed of the gospel, but not crushing people with it either. When you're picking fruit, you don't just grab it as fast as you can, you also need to handle it gently, or you ruin it. We have to harvest people for God, and do it gently. Why? Because the Lord is near!

The Lord is near – rely on him!

Finally, the Lord is near, so we should rely on him. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This was voted as a favourite verse by several of our confirmeres last week, and I'm really glad for that, because relying on God in this way is so hard to do! And yet this is perhaps the most vital, foundation stone of all of these changes of mind we need. We must accept that we are powerless on our own, but mighty in Christ; that regardless of our circumstances, whether we are in trouble because we did something wrong or stupid; or whether people are treating us poorly because we are standing up for Jesus; or even just because some bad thing has just happened as so often happens in life, not only should we rejoice in the Lord, but we should rely on him.

And that reliance is done through prayer. We have to cultivate this mindset that no matter what happens, we can and must rely on God. God wants us to rely on him. God wants us to ask him. And God promises that his peace will be with us if we do. It should be a reflex for us – to rely on God for everything, to ask God when we are worried or anxious, and to recognise it's God's strength that allows us to do all things. It shouldn't be hard to call out to God and rely on him – after all, the Lord is near.

Fuelling our thought life

So understanding that the Lord is near should change every part of our mindset – how we think about our lives, how we think about people, and how we think about God. Now, Paul focuses on the thought life of the Christian. What should we allow to fuel our thoughts?

Fuelling our thought life – the Bible, Christian teaching, anything good

Paul says, "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." Here we are given a list of good traits that should guide us in deciding what we fill our minds with. So what things fulfil these good traits? Firstly and perhaps obviously, we should have our minds full of the gospel of God's word and message to humanity. What could be more true, right, pure and lovely than the scriptures? If you question the value of the Bible in your Christian life, then feel free to come and talk to me afterwards and I'll happily debate the point with you, but I have the feeling the majority of people listening to me will agree that Paul certainly had the scriptures in mind when he was speaking here.

While we're dealing with easy and obvious sources of these good traits, Paul gives another trustworthy place to find them in verse 9, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice." Now for us, the example of Paul's life and his teachings are contained entirely in scripture, so that's already covered. But these words should come from the mouths of our leaders, our ministers, our experienced Christian brothers and sisters. Our minds should be full of their good example to us and their teachings to us. Regular, relevant Bible

teaching and hardy, veteran Christians to learn from are two of the greatest reasons for coming to church. You're here, so use them!

But we should not stop our thought fuel there. If all Paul meant was “Read your Bible and listen to sermons,” he would have said that. Instead Paul says whatever is noble, whatever is admirable, anything excellent or praiseworthy, we should think about these things too. These are secular words he's using, the same words Greek philosophers would have used. There are things where we might see godly values espoused that do not have a Christian source or do not conflict with biblical values. An obvious one might be democracy, a Greek concept that predates Christianity by hundreds of years. Another more recent one would be human rights, or the rights of the child. God wants Christians to have an open mind, and to take the good from what the world has to offer. All good things come from God, even if they do not come in Christian packages.

Fuelling our thought life – don't be ignorant

We must also be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that because we are told here to think on these good things, we must therefore never think about bad things. Too many times have I seen misguided Christians telling people that we should avoid anything that mentions idolatry, violence, sexual violence, bad language, demons, magic, the occult, or any other number of topics. I'll say straightaway that these are not things we should condone, or be involved in, or glorify. But as God's people we can't afford to be ignorant of these topics either. We can't turn our back on the world's problems because thinking about them is unseemly. We have to acknowledge and deal with the evil in the world. The Bible does. We need to be aware of these things, both to be on our guard, and to help those who might be trapped in such situations. If we toss ourselves into ignorance on topics that are not fit for polite conversation, then we are not going to be able to help people who are in dire need, that we are called as Christians to show our gentleness to.

With those two truths before us – that we should fill our minds with good things, while not being ignorant of evil things – we come to the question inevitably arises from this topic is, “What about sex in movies? What about violence in video games? What about magic in Harry Potter?”, and I want to deal with this issue, because it's a big and relevant one for lots of people, whether thinking about their own activities, or those of their children or grandchildren.

There is a whole sermon here – there's a whole book here – but I want to cover three principles we can work from in this issue. The first is that calling for the destruction of televisions, DVD players, mobile phones, iPads, computers, gaming consoles or the internet is not the answer. These things are not evil. What we need to look at is content, not delivery systems. Kitchen knives are deadly, but banning them would make cooking a lot harder.

Secondly, what we use content for is important. The naked person posing for a pornographic magazine is no different to the naked person posing for a Renaissance portrait, but one is often used for inspiring lust, the other for appreciation of the beauty of the human form. If you find that coffee table books about Renaissance art make you think lustful thoughts, don't read them. But don't be surprised if other people can go to see Michelangelo's David without being inflamed with lust. Of course, most of us are consuming content for fun, relaxation or as a hobby. Which leads us to our third point.

Thirdly, don't leave your godly brain at the door when you watch a movie or play a video game or read a book or listen to music. The Lord is near, remember, so make sure your thoughts about your life, other people and God are in order, and look at content through that understanding. This means you can watch or read or play anything – Christian holiness doesn't need to be protected, we rely on God's strength and God's holiness. But remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12,

“Everything is permissible for me' - but not everything is beneficial.” What you might find is when you start consuming this content with your Christian mindset switched on, the casual violence of some computer games, or the flippancy towards sex in music, or the entire premise of some movie plots, just becomes distasteful or unbelievable because of the way the characters live, the way people are treated, or the general absence of God. It will likely still be thought-provoking, and great for discussion, but may not fill your mind with those good qualities Philippians 4:8-9 espouses.

Changing your mind - conclusion

When we talk about changing something, we can mean many different things. We can mean to make an alteration to something: so we might change hairstyle or change direction. We can mean to refresh or renew something: like we change a broken light bulb, or change a baby's nappy. We can mean we substitute something different: changing jobs or changing places with someone. We can even mean that we select a higher or lower version: as in to change gear or change focus.

Which are we talking about today, when we are talking about changing our thinking? Well, that really depends on you. Do you already know everything I've said, know how you should be thinking, and just need a refresher? Do you not take God seriously enough, and need to focus a little more? Are there some alterations you need to make to how you think in some parts of your life? Or perhaps do you need a complete substitution from ungodly to godly thinking? Take a moment to think about what God says in these verses, and what kind of change your mind requires to put your thinking and attitude in line with what God wants. But don't think you can simply wake up one morning and change how you think. Remember, the Lord is near, rely on him. Pray that God will transform your mind as necessary, and you won't be disappointed.