

Meditation and Imitation

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.⁹ The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8–9)

At some point in your life, you've had to learn a new skill. Most of us can't remember learning our first language, but you may well remember learning a second or third language, and what you had to do to do so. Some of you began learning a musical instrument, or an artistic skill of painting, sketching, pottery, embroidery. You may have had to learn a swimming stroke, a ball sport. Learning to ride a horse, a bike, a bicycle, or driving a car, or even flying was a skill that involved learning ideas, understanding, watching, seeing it done, copying it, making mistakes, and repeating it until it improved.

The Christian life is in many ways just like these things. It is a new way of life, a new way of thinking, of speaking, of acting, of responding. You have different priorities, different ways of relating to people, new ways of spending your time and money and leisure hours. And it can often feel like a foreign language, like a new, clumsy physical motion. We are not used to it, and yet we must pick it up.

Of course, the Christian life is not like any other skill in that not just anyone can do it. You need a renewed heart, a new nature, with new desires and abilities. But given those things, how do we learn this new skill?

For the Philippians, that was an important question. They had not grown up in Israel. They had not had the Law, the priests, the Temple. None of them had had godly rabbis, maybe even some pious Pharisees to teach them. None of them had grown up with godly parents, passing down a tradition of reverent, godly living. For these Philippians, the Christian life was a foreign language, a brand new skill, a whole new discipline. They had the position in Christ, they had the Spirit within them, but putting it together possible felt daunting.

As Paul finishes this short letter, he is helping these young Christians to know what to do and where to look to learn the Christian life. Now one way to think of your Christian life is the triad of heart, soul, and mind. That's how we are to love the Lord our God: heart, soul and mind.

In the last four verses, Paul dealt with the heart, with Christian affections, where we should set our hearts: we should rejoice, we should choose meekness, we should choose peace through grateful prayer.

Now Paul is going to deal with the mind, and the soul. In this passage, Paul gives the Philippians and us thoughts to think – that's the mind, and deeds to do – that's the life, or the soul.

Learning the Christian life is to elevate your affections to joy, and meekness and prayerful peace. But here we are going to learn that to have a Christian mind, we must meditate on godly ideas, and we must imitate godly ways.

I. Meditate on Godly Thoughts

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

The main verb here is *meditate*. All the eight things listed in this verse come back to this one action: meditate. This means give careful thought to, to ponder, to focus your mind on. The idea is controlled, chosen thinking.

Our thoughts are really the source and root of our decisions and actions. Thoughts work together with affections to make up what we do. For as he thinks in his heart, so *is* he. (Proverbs 23:7)

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:45)

What you think about, particularly when you are at your leisure, reveals much about you. It reveals your priorities, your joys, your hopes, your longings, your beliefs, your fears. The quality of your thoughts is really the state of your soul.

A.W. Tozer: “Anyone who wishes to check on his true spiritual condition may do so by noting what his voluntary thoughts have been over the last hours or days. What has he thought about when free to think of what he pleased? Toward what has his inner heart turned when it was free to turn where it would? When the bird of thought was let go did it fly out like the raven to settle upon floating carcasses or did it like the dove circle and return again to the ark of God? Such a test is easy to run, and if we are honest with ourselves we can discover not only what we are but what we are going to become. We'll soon be the sum of our voluntary thoughts.”

Our thoughts combine with our affections to become our decisions. What you know, and what you love become what you choose. And they seldom travel alone. What you think about begins to influence what you love. What you love is shaped by what you meditate on. Knowing and loving are the basis of who we are.

And both knowing and loving are choices we can make. We saw last week that God does not command our bodies. He commands our souls, and we can choose to set our affections on Christ, to rejoice in Him, to have His meek mindset, to seek His peace through prayer. We cannot control how our body feels, our moods, but we can direct where we seek joy, where we seek peace, where we seek gentleness. The same is true of thoughts. We can control the content of our thoughts, what we think about, and what becomes the fuel of our meditations and then our affections.

But someone says, “Wait! I can't control my thoughts. Things just pop into my head that I didn't ask for. Sometimes weird thoughts, sometimes malicious, destructive thoughts, sometimes lustful thoughts, and I find myself asking “Where did that come from?”

Let's distinguish deliberate thinking from random thoughts. It is true that not every thought that passes into or through your mind originates with you. Though we don't have direct evidence for it, it is likely that spiritual forces are able to suggest thoughts to us. The same is true for the Holy Spirit, who can suggest and prompt. Within ourselves we have the remnant of the old nature, the flesh, that suggests thoughts. Memory is a strange thing that sometimes brings events, thoughts back to us. Now with all these possible sources of thoughts, how can we truly be responsible for our thoughts?

The answer is again in Spurgeon's quote, “We cannot help the birds flying over our heads; but we may keep them from building their nests in our hair.” In other words, there is a difference between what passes through our mind's eye, and what we choose to focus on. There is a difference between thoughts and thinking. Thoughts may or may not be our own, but thinking – meditating – is the active decision to think in a certain way, to think on, and think about, and think through. Paul uses an image when speaking about spiritual warfare: “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,”

(2 Corinthians 10:5). Now the broader idea there is answering false doctrine, but the image is helpful for the thought life. Thoughts that we think must be captured and submissive to Christ. Thoughts we think actively must not be rebels to Jesus; they must be the sort of thoughts that would happily dwell in the presence of Christ.

Think of your mind rather like your eyes. Your eyes have both focal vision and peripheral vision. Peripheral vision includes many things in our surroundings, but they are actually out of focus. Our brain can be slightly aware of them, but they are not the centre of attention. Focal vision is where you direct your gaze and look upon, bringing it into clear focus so you can see it and know it and examine it. Your mind is similar. There can be many thoughts in your peripheral awareness, thoughts from outside sources, thoughts from memory, thoughts from bodily sensations, from basic situational awareness. But that is not meditating. Meditating is where you turn your mind's eye to look.

Now what follows is a list of six virtues to meditate on, qualified by another two. Paul often gives lists of either virtues or vices. Lists like Galatians 5:22-23 gives us a list of the fruit of the Spirit, or Ephesians 4, lists of humble unity. Sometimes he gives extensive lists of sin, like in Romans 1, or 2 Timothy 3.

Paul's lists of virtues and vices are not meant to be tedious or even burdensome. Lists help us by enlarging our understanding of the beauty of Christlikeness or the ugliness of sin. See, if Paul just said, *be Christlike*, we might blink and say, "Okay". But if he tells us in a list like Galatians 5 that Christlikeness is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, self-control, faithfulness, then he just held the diamond up to the light so we could see all the facets. If he just told us, "be loving", we might again nod blankly. But when he tells us in a list like 1 Corinthians 13 that love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious, not boastful, not self-seeking, not rude, believes the best of others, hopes the best, delights in what is good, he has now used a prism to split the white light of love into a spectrum of colours. He does the same with sin, so that we see its ugliness, its many forms, its many applications.

So here, instead of saying, have a mind like Christ's, or think Christian thoughts, Paul gives us a list of what that looks like.

By these things Paul doesn't mean that we should think about these concepts as abstract qualities. He doesn't mean think about the concept of truth, think about the quality of purity, think about the idea of loveliness, like philosophers. (Though that can be a helpful thing to do). He means think about things, ideas, facts, objects, events that have these qualities.

Turn the focus of your mind, with deliberate, captive thoughts to the following kinds of ideas, kinds of events, kinds of people, kinds of thoughts. So what should we meditate upon?

1) Meditate on true things. Truth is whatever corresponds to reality. However God has revealed the world to be is truth. Truth is not facts. Facts are simply raw data. Truth is when facts are interpreted through a Scriptural lens. Truth is the way things are, from God's perspective. Facts are like photons of light, truth is the whole assembled picture appearing to a healthy eye and brain, seeing what is really there. Don't meditate on what is false, deceitful, exaggerated, possible gossip or hearsay. Don't think about life from the world's false perspective, from Satan's deceitful perspective. And don't waste your time meditating on what may be or might be or might never be, because that is not truth. God's promises for the future are truth.

2) Meditate on noble things. This is a word which is mostly lost on our modern culture. It means whatever is honourable, and worth revering. Things that make you pause in respect, venerable. Don't meditate on the disreputable, tacky, cowardly. Are you meditating on the exploits of Hollywood pop stars, or on the exploits of the great Christians of the past? Are you meditating on the greatest stories, greatest ideas in human literature or history? On the adulterous affairs of soap operas, or on the missionary heroes of the last few centuries?

3) Meditate on just things. This is the word for righteousness, justice, fairness. Is this something God loves, or something God hates? Does God regard this as a right, fair, proper thing, or is it out of order, rebellious, ungodly? I may need to think about injustice, or know about sin. But just as you gaze at a sunset and not at rotting garbage, turn the focus of your mind to what should be, what ought to be, what God calls good.

4) Meditate on what is pure. This word means chaste, innocent, morally pure, “whatever is not ‘besmirched’ or ‘tainted’ in some way by evil”. Do you think about the body and sex the way pop singers sing about it, the way HBO portrays it, the way Netflix thinks about it? Dirty jokes, pornographic images, gutter talk, toilet humour, these are not thoughts fragrant with purity. Pure thoughts are the kind you could be unembarrassed to have in front of others.

5) Meditate on what is lovely. This is a word mostly unknown to secularised Christians. It means things that are pleasing, agreeable, lovely, amiable. One commentator calls it “aesthetic appreciation”. “Here is where Mozart and Beethoven come under Christian embrace” (Fee 417 n. 17).” Put simply, whatever is beautiful. Meditate on whatever in nature, and culture is beautiful to the eye, the ear, the senses, the mind. Love true beauty. Don't meditate on what is tacky, rotten, degenerate, misshapen, deformed, sentimentalised. When a Christian loves ugly music, ugly appearance, ugly literature, that is not a mere preference. That is a reflection on something gone wrong in the soul, because souls that are becoming more beautiful are simultaneously loving what is beautiful.

6) Meditate on what is of good report. This means what is commendable, well-reputed. Whatever ideas, words, objects, acts, events, people could be spoken of openly and delighted in. ¹¹ And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose *them*. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. ¹³ But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. (Ephesians 5:11–13)

Now Paul adds, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy. By this he likely means, I can't exhaust the list of commendable kinds of thoughts. Basically, if the thought is virtuous, which means excellent morally, and praiseworthy, then meditate on it. If God would love it, then think on it. If God would praise and be pleased with it, then think it.

Tozer: “Make your thoughts a clean sanctuary. To God, our thoughts are things. Our thoughts are the decorations inside the sanctuary where we live. If our thoughts are purified by the blood of Christ, we are living in a clean room no matter if we are wearing overalls covered with grease. Your thoughts pretty much decide the mood and weather and climate inside your heart, and God considers your thoughts as part of you. Thoughts of peace, thoughts of pity, thoughts of mercy, thoughts of kindness, thoughts of charity, thoughts of God, thoughts of the Son of God—these are pure things, good things, and high things.”

Now while our thoughts are our own, our thoughts are also fueled by and feed upon what we put into our minds. What we think about is largely shaped by what our minds have been taking in. Remember how Psalm 1 contrasts the righteous from the wicked by contrasting what is shaping the

wicked man compared to what is shaping and influencing the righteous man.

Blessed in the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight *is* in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper. (Psalm 1:1–3)

A tree puts its roots down, and draws up water into itself. So we put our roots down into the things we read, the conversations we have, the things we watch, the music we listen to. Thoughts are shaped by exposure, and by repetition. What you watch, read and listen to online, your books and magazines, your movies and TV series or Youtube channels, your background music and active listening, the podcasts, radio shows that you listen to or subscribe to, these are all becoming thought fuel.

What is that content like? True, noble, righteous, pure, beautiful, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy? Even if what you are listening to is supposedly factual, non-fiction, does it result in thoughts like these?

Surrender your thoughts to God. Invite the Holy Spirit to fill your mind, and convict you of thoughts that grieve Him. Pray for longer periods when you are reading the Word, but then learn the habit of combining your thoughts with prayers and prayers with thoughts. You cannot pray to God thoughts that are ugly, dishonourable, impure, unjust, untrue. So a simple test for the thoughts is this: can this be prayed to God? Can this thought live in the presence of God?

From thoughts to deeds, from the mind to the soul. Paul now moves from meditation to imitation.

II. Imitate Godly Things

The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.

Here again is the main action: These *do*. Do these things, perform these things. First, think on these things in verse 8, now do these things in verse 9. Act them out.

Once again, see what a high view the Christian faith has of human responsibility. You must act, and by grace, you can act. You are not a victim, a passive bystander, a spectator of your own Christian life. You are as spiritual as you want to be. Perhaps not as much as you wish you were. But true faith is not in the wishes; it is in the will. You can choose to act.

But the source of our acts is not just our meditations, but imitation. So Paul says, do four things you got from me. Things you learned and received. Things you heard and saw. Very likely, the first two have to do with Paul's public ministry, his preaching, and the second two have to do with his personal ministry, his example. These are all matters of imitation by exposure and example.

The things you heard from me was when he preached. But they didn't just hear it, they accepted it. They were receptive and submissive to the message. Paul passed on to them the truth, and the apostolic tradition of the gospel and sound doctrine.

But Paul didn't then sequester himself after he had finished preaching. He lived among them. He spent time with them. They saw him in real life settings. He was in their homes, and they were with him. He was confident enough to say, the way I lived before you, that's the Christian life you must practice.

We act the way we do because we think the way we do, and also because we are watching and copying, looking and repeating, listening and mimicking. Mimicry is a massive way that humans learn. Those who study human language believe that the powers of mimicry in the brain of an infant are amazingly powerful, which is why children pick up language almost entirely by imitation. They hear, repeat, and then begin to comprehend.

What you learn by imitation is often more deeply engrained in you than what you learn by abstract thought. Think of how deeply you are shaped by your parents, and by your peers. Your accent, your body language, your attitudes, your very way of approaching things are matters often not taught, but caught.

The Bible knows this and repeatedly calls for holy imitation, Christian copying. A disciple is a follower, one who copies and mimics the master.

Therefore I urge you, imitate me.(1 Corinthians 4:16)

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.(1 Corinthians 11:1)

Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.(Ephesians 5:1)

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit,(1 Thessalonians 1:6)

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, (1 Thessalonians 2:14)

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.(Hebrews 13:7)

And just as often as Paul tells the pastors he is mentoring to get their doctrine straight, he tells them equally as often to be an example.

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Timothy 4:12)

in all things showing yourself *to be* a pattern of good works; in doctrine *showing* integrity, reverence, incorruptibility,(Titus 2:7)

Now here is something to understand about how God expects us to learn. In a computer age, and an information age, we have come to think that Christian truth is the same as information. We have come to think that we are like computers, and sadly, we even use vocabulary that pictures us as computers. We talk about processing information, or that something doesn't quite compute, or how we need to store that idea, or that we need input from others. When you speak and imagine that way, you start to think that Christianity is a set of facts, a bunch of ideas, a series of concepts. Supposedly, if you get the right concepts, from whatever source, whatever teacher, book, website, podcast, online sermon, and you input it into your head, that your output will be godly living.

But that is not the way the Bible describes Christianity or learning the Christian life. Christian truth is always embodied in Christian teachers. Christian doctrine is always to be taught by obedient Christians. It is not supposed to be disembodied, taught by people you don't really know, whose lives you never see, whose example you can never watch. It is not supposed to be isolated from a living context of life-on-life, face-to-face. Covid-19 has revealed how deeply Christians have been

colonised by screens and disembodied information, because many saw absolutely no problem with streaming church, video church, church on a screen. But that is not worship, it is not communion, and it is not Christian discipleship.

Look two books ahead into 1 Thessalonians, and ask yourself whether this sounds like an Internet ministry:

But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. You *are* witnesses, and God *also*, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:7–12)

You cannot learn moral matters, matters of human life, matters of worship from a textbook. You cannot learn how to love, how to worship, how to pray, how to obey, how to suffer by watching a famous stranger on a screen. I do not say you can learn nothing, and if the teacher is expository in nature, I'm sure you will benefit. But you will probably learn more in an hour spent in the presence of a godly Christian than you will by reading multiple sermons of someone you don't know or haven't met.

The Christian life is more like learning an instrument than it is like writing computer code. It is more like learning manners than it is like calculating a budget. It is more like farming and gardening than it is like trigonometry. Code, accounts, and trigonometry still need a teacher. But music, manners, and cultivation usually require someone show you how, not just tell you how. It is not only taught, but caught.

But what do we do, who do not have the apostle Paul before us? We look to the living examples God gives us. They may not always be many, they may not be like the apostle Paul, but they will become models to us of what Christian doctrine looks like when fleshed out.

If you are hoping to string this thing together without example, counsel, fellowship, friendship, leadership, then you will be like those people who tell you they have taught themselves to sing, taught themselves to swim, taught themselves how to be a perfect spouse or a perfect parent. Ambition is one thing, psychopathic self-confidence and stubborn independence is another.

There is no cheating or cribbing or shortcutting the Christian life and avoiding the necessity of learning from others. If you refuse to imitate the good examples God has placed in your life, then are you are almost certainly imitating someone else: someone less mature, less godly, less helpful than the Christians you know. This places an obligation upon us, doesn't it? You need to spend time with mature Christians if you want to learn the Christian life.

Christianity is heart, soul, and mind. Your heart must be elevated to things above, where Christ is, to joy, meekness and peace. Your mind must meditate on Christlike things: truth, nobility, justice, purity, beauty, commendableness, anything that is morally excellent and praiseworthy, the kinds of thoughts in which the pure, Holy Spirit will happily dwell. Your soul must imitate the best of what you hear preached, and what you hear and see lived out before you.