

“Think on these things”

Philippians 4:8 King James Version (KJV)

*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*

In Philippians 4:8 Paul advises on the good life, an ethic for living. Last week I noted that in the context of the first readers, in Philippi, there was every amusement available to a wealthy crossroads of Greece and Rome. I suggested that in part Paul was essentially saying, “Don’t fill your mind up with the bad things.”

That might be a fair inference, but on reflection, I realized my summary misrepresented the way Paul said it.

Look again at Paul’s exhortation. His language is not negative. Instead of saying “avoid the bad” his words advocate actively thinking on the good things, things that are honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy.

Actively seeking the good things helps crowd out the unhelpful, the harmful, and the mediocre. It may help avoid the human tendency to go on “automatic pilot.”

With a lot of time on my hands, I find I need to push myself a bit on this.

Research in psychology shows that humans come with significant differences in terms of the tendency to think about the good things or to dwell on the bad things. Some older readers may remember my grandmother Pearl Brenneman who did not have an easy life, by some measures but laughed and had a twinkle in her eye through a long life. When I think of a “merry heart,” I think of her.

Then there are people who are put together to dwell more automatically on the negative and problematic parts of life. For some, this goes beyond a rational evaluation, and life is anxious and/or depressive. Research strongly indicates that there are medical and genetic determinates for these tendencies.

Most of us are somewhere in between, and all of us are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” I don’t believe that God faults us for the way we are put together, and it is certainly counterproductive to fault each other.

Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians corresponds well to psychological research. Finding the good things in life, dwelling on the good stuff, writing them down if necessary, tends to brighten the mood. As the song says, “count your blessings.”

Yes, this is a hurting world, but there’s family, there are friends, there are pets, there are birds outside. There are silly jokes in my e-mail. There are James and Samantha, who delightfully turn the concept of children’s time upside down every Sunday and teach the rest of us. The world has Bach and “606”. There’s also the gift of God’s word that challenges yet repays careful reading.

What’s on your list?

