

"We Are What We Think" **Philippians 4:4-9**

Introduction

"You are what you eat!" At least that's what a fitness guru on TV said. He didn't explain what he meant but I think I know. The condition of our bodily life is, in large measure, a direct consequence of what we eat. Consider this power point slide. Contrast the **"before"** picture with the **"after"** picture, that is, after he changed what he ate. It shows that what that fitness guru said is generally true. When it comes to our bodily life, we are what we eat.

That, by way of analogy, helps us understand the message of our text, Philippians 4:4-9. When it comes to our spiritual life, we are what we think and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Abundant Life

I'm going to focus on verse 8 but the verses before it and the verse after it give us the context we need to interpret it.

In verse 4, Paul calls us to rejoice in the Lord always. That means to possess joy that is independent of our circumstances.

In verse 5, he calls us to have a **"gentle spirit"** with **"all men."** A good translation of **"gentle spirit"** is graciousness. We should be gracious to everyone including those who dislike or mistreat us.

In verse 6, he calls us to be anxious for nothing but to talk about it with God instead. We're at rest no matter what our circumstances are because we believe in God. We aren't striving either inwardly or outwardly. This is what Paul calls the peace of God in verses 7 and 9.

These verses, as you can see, identify three inner conditions. They are love (verse 5), joy (verse 4), and peace (verses 6, 7, and 9). Those are the foundational conditions from which all other positive conditions flow. If we have them, we'll have the others as well. They comprise what Jesus called **"abundant life"** in John 10:10. An abundant life is one in which love, joy, and peace routinely prevail.

Now, Paul teaches us in Galatians 5:22 that love, joy, and peace are

“the fruit of the Spirit.” That means that they are a product of the Holy Spirit working in us. He and He alone can produce them in us.

And He will – but only if we, as disciples and friends of Jesus, do what Paul tells us to do in verse 8. Notice the first word in verse 8. My Bible translates it **“Finally.”** But the Greek word has a stronger sense than that. It is better translated **“it follows then.”** That meaning makes love, joy, and peace conditional on the response of verse 8. We have to do what verse 8 says, in other words, in order for the Holy Spirit to produce them in us.

It’s safe to say that all of us want Him to do that. So, let’s examine verse 8 and learn what we have to do so that He can.

The Law of Cognition

Let’s start with the words **“dwell on.”** To **“dwell on”** means to set our mind on something. More specifically, we bring it before our mind and are attentive to it. We ruminate on it or mull it over in our mind. Paul’s exhortation to do that shows that he understood one of the fundamental truths of human life. It’s what John Ortberg calls the *Law of Cognition*.

You and I as human beings are complex spiritual creatures. **“Spiritual”** means that invisible non-material dimensions comprise a large part of the persons we are. Those dimensions are thoughts, feelings, will, soul, and bodily habits. Those dimensions make up our spirit and are interrelated. Each works on and influences the others. So, it’d be overly simplistic to say that one alone determines what we are.

But we can say this. There is one that seems to direct what we are more than any other. That one is our thoughts. Just as, bodily, we are what we eat, so spiritually, we are what we think. What we think conditions and directs what we feel, will, and do. That is the *Law of Cognition*, which psychology itself recognizes and endorses.

One of the dominant movements in psychology today is cognitive psychology. Cognitive psychology operates under the assumption that the

way we think is decisive. So, it seeks to alter the way troubled people think. It assists them to think well so they can then live well.

I know a young woman who was raised by adoptive parents. She interprets her birth mother giving her up for adoption to mean something was wrong with her. She has a poor self-concept as a result and is depressed. In contrast, my adopted son Aaron interprets his birth mother giving him up for adoption to mean something was wrong with her. He's able to have a healthy self-concept as a result and to be joyful, which he is. What the young woman thinks about that issue contributes to her struggling in life. What Aaron thinks contributes to him flourishing.

It's true. How we perceive, interpret, remember, and think directs how we feel, will, and act. We are what we think. That is the *law of cognition* and it underlies what Paul exhorts us to do in verse 8.

The Law of Exposure

But there's another law that underlies it. It's the *law of exposure*. This law says that nothing enters our mind without affecting it for good or ill. What enters our mind are images and ideas. How they enter it is that we see or hear them or we bring them to mind by imagining, fantasizing or recollecting. Every idea or image that enters our mind affects it and thus our feelings, will, and actions for good or ill.

Consider a woman I counseled years ago who was deeply resentful of her brother. He took a valuable antique lamp from their father's estate that she loved and that her father had promised her. She commented about fantasies she had like going to his home when he was gone and taking the lamp and writing him a letter telling him what a thief he was. Those images that she brought to her mind affected it and her for ill. They kept her agitated and upset.

Or consider the statement above our sanctuary door as we enter it. Can someone tell me what it is? That's right, "**Jesus said, 'You are My friends if you do what I command you.'**" The first thing I do every morning when I enter the church is look at it, repeat it, and think about

it as I walk to my office. That idea entering my mind affects it and thus, me for good. It sets the tone for my day and makes me a little bit more joyful and resolved about my friendship with Jesus.

It's true. Nothing enters our mind without affecting it and thus, us for good or ill. That's the *Law of Exposure* and it speaks powerfully to our current culture. Ours is a culture that insists on the complete freedom to see, hear, and say anything. We're entitled to that freedom, it contends, and we mustn't let anyone or anything, including God, take it away. Hollywood, for instance, produces television shows and movies and companies produce video games that are laced with sex, violence, and vulgarity. And the masses routinely watch and play them.

But there's something with which our culture and we had better come to grips. We cannot choose conditions or behaviors and reject their consequences. That is one of the most defining truths you will ever hear. Sear it into your memory and never forget it. Teach it to your children and grandchildren. We cannot choose conditions or behaviors and reject their consequences. That's especially so when it comes to our mind and the things that we bring to it or allow to enter it.

Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote a poem titled *Mind Has Mountains*. An excerpt from it explains what I mean: **"O the mind has mountains; cliffs of fall. Hold them cheap who never hung thereby."** Manley's point is that our mind has a law that governs it, one that's as unyielding and unbending as the law of gravity is.

Let me ask you two questions in that regard. First, am I free to step off the ledge of the stage? Yes, I am. No one has the right to prevent me from doing that if I please to. Second, am I also free not to fall to the ground if I do? No, I am not. There is a law of gravity from which I will never be free.

It's the same with the mind, Hopkins claims, and he's right. There is a law of the mind – the *Law of Exposure*. Everything that enters it will affect it and thus us, for good or ill. This law of the mind is just as unyielding and unbending as the law of gravity is. We can't escape it any

more than we can escape the law of gravity. We are free to allow anything we choose to enter our mind. But we are not free not to reject the consequence of doing so – being affected for good or ill.

Guard the Mind

If we're wise, therefore, we'll guard our mind. That's the call of verse 8. To guard our mind means to be aware of and to control what enters it. We make and carry out the decision to do two things.

The first is to dwell on things that affect our mind for good. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes: "**The mind will always take on an order conforming to the order upon which it concentrates.**" That is a penetrating insight. Everything has a nature or order that characterizes it. When we dwell on something, we take its nature or order into our thoughts. Our thoughts in turn are formed into the likeness of that nature or order. Our other inner dimensions then follow suit. We become like what we dwell on in other words. So, we choose to dwell on things that form our thoughts and us for good.

What are those things? Paul tells us in verse 8. They're ones that have the following nature or order: true (reliable), honorable (valuable), right (responsible), pure (moral), lovely (winsome), of good repute (profitable), excellent (virtuous), and worthy of praise (appealing to good people). Here is a sampling of such things: the Bible, a Christian chorus or hymn, inspirational quotes, a moonlit sky, a word of encouragement, a compliment, an act of love, the *Sound of Music*, *The Divine Conspiracy*, a classical piece from Beethoven or Bach, inspiring paintings, a Christian testimony, an act of God in our life or someone else's, and more. We dwell on those things – on the ideas and images inherent in them.

Suppose I don't know the Bible, for instance, which is "**perfect,**" "**right,**" "**pure,**" and "**clean**" to quote Psalm 19. The Law of Exposure says that its ideas and images entering my mind will affect it profoundly for good. So, I make and carry out the decision to learn those and to recall them as often and as long as I can.

We make and carry out the decision to do a second thing. It's not to dwell on things that affect our mind for ill. Paul, by implication, identifies what those things are in verse 8. They're ones that have the following order or nature: untrue, dishonorable, wrong, impure, unlovely, of bad repute, non-virtuous, or unworthy of praise. We don't dwell on things with that nature or order. We deny the ideas and images inherent in them entrance to our mind.

Suppose I watch a television reality show, for instance, the substance of which is tension, anger, pettiness, and relational conflict. The Law of Exposure says that the sights, sounds, and images of that show entering my mind will affect it for ill. I can't escape the Law of Exposure anymore than I can the Law of Gravity. So, I make and carry out the decision not to watch that reality show.

That then is how we guard our mind. We make and carry out the decision to dwell on things that affect our mind for good and not to dwell on things that affect it for ill.

There is a strong force, however, that we have to overcome in order to do that. It's denial. People constantly let things into their mind that they know they shouldn't. But they rationalize it by contending that it won't affect them for ill. It might affect *others* that way but it won't *them*. They're deluded thought. It will. It's the Law of Exposure and it's inescapable. My point is that it takes insight and discipline to guard our mind, which the Holy Spirit will help us develop if we seek to.

Conclusion

We now know the message of Philippians 4:8 and its implications to us. Two power point slides, as similes, sum up well what that message and those implications are. You and I dwelling on things that are true, honorable, right, and so on is like eating this. You and I dwelling on things that are untrue, dishonorable, wrong, and so on are like eating this. We are what we think. We become like what we dwell on. So, guard your mind. Your life can be abundant if you do.