

Introduction

One of my favorite songs, sung by Clint Holmes, is titled *Playground in My Mind*. Part of it goes like this: **"When this old world gets me down and there's no love to be found, I close my eyes and soon I find I'm in the playground of my mind. Where the children laugh and the children play and sing a song all day. My name is Michael, I've got a nickel. I've got a nickel shiny and new. I'm gonna buy me all kinds of candy. That's what I'm gonna do."** I share those lyrics because they illustrate what our text teaches: what we can do (control our feelings) and how we can do it (by directing our thoughts).

The Text

In verse 4, Paul calls us to rejoice in the Lord always. To **"rejoice"** means to **"delight"** in something, here, the person and works of Jesus.

In verse 5, Paul exhorts us to be **"gentle"** with everyone because the Lord is near. The word **"gentle"** suggests graciousness or pity. We should feel pity for everyone. **"The Lord is near"** was an early Christian watchword that invoked Jesus' Second Coming.

In verse 6, Paul urges us to **"be anxious for nothing."** Anxiety is an inward striving that's created by the fear of how things will turn out. There are two correctives to anxiety. One is found in the words **"prayer," "supplication,"** and **"requests,"** which refer to asking God for what we need. The other is found in the word **"thanksgiving,"** which refers to feeling and expressing gratitude for God's goodness to us.

In verse 7, Paul notes an outcome of doing what he says in verses 4-6. It's the peace that characterizes God and that is better than we expect. This peace permeates into every aspect of our being and life.

In verse 8, Paul challenges us to dwell on eight kinds of **"things"** as he calls them. **True** – things that are so. **Honorable** – things that are dignified. **Right** - things that are dutiful. **Pure** – things that are morally right. **Lovely** – things that are winsome. **Of good repute** –

things that are fit for God to hear. **Excellent** – things that are at their best. And **worthy of praise** – things that are deserving of approval.

Finally, in verse 9, Paul admonishes us to do the things he has taught and modeled. God will attend to us with peace if we do.

Feelings Are Impacting

This text speaks powerfully to an issue that concerns us all. Notice something about the words **“rejoice,” “gentle,” “anxious,” “thanksgiving,”** and **“peace.”** They either are feelings or involve feelings. When I say feelings, I mean emotions. On the negative side, they include compassion, happiness, contentment, hope, excitement, peace, and more. On the negative side, they include hatred, sorrow, jealousy, anger, anxiety, fear, and more. Those are feelings and as all of us know, they dramatically impact us.

For one thing, they give us a sense of being alive. Consider how often we’re moved to feeling every day. So, a political ad on television annoys us. Or a compliment encourages us. Or new kind of Twinkie excites us and on it goes. We’re routinely moved to feeling in day-to-day life, which we enjoy being moved. Those who aren’t moved, who don’t feel, lose all interest in life. They’re **“dead inside”** as we say it. But that’s a condition that can’t be sustained for very long, which explains much of the drug use and suicide we see around us. Feelings give us a sense of being alive. That’s one way they dramatically impact us.

Another way is that they prompt behaviors. They often initiate, compel, or set in motion the things we say and do. So a client of mine failed to show up at a hearing because he felt discouraged. Or a wife, whose husband criticized her shopping habits, criticized him right back because she felt defensive and angry. Or a driver helped a stranded motorist because he felt compassion. We’ve all experienced it. Feelings are triggers. They frequently prompt corresponding behaviors.

Those then are two of the life-altering ways that feelings affect us, which make them a vital component of our persons and lives.

Thoughts and Feelings

Because they are, we need to know as much as we can about them, including what our text teaches.

Notice the word **"things"** in verse 8. It refers primarily to propositions. Propositions are assertions about what is so. I said in a sermon not long ago, **"Every problem has a lifespan."** Or last week, I heard a person say, **"These are the worst presidential candidates in my lifetime."** Or I heard a mechanic say, **"People are idiots."** A syllogism popped into my mind when he did. Premise #1 – People are idiots. Premise #2 – You are a people. Conclusion – You are an idiot. I thought it but didn't say it. All of those statements are propositions.

Now notice the words **"dwell on"** in verse 8, which is the NASB translation. I like how the Amplified Version Bible translates it, **"Set your minds on."** Both translations mean the same thing. We bring propositions before our mind and keep them there as part of its backdrop.

But what does that have to do with our feelings? The answer is **"much."** There is an obvious causal connection in our text. **Cause:** Set our mind on things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, reputable, excellent, and worthy of praise (verse 8). **Effect:** Feelings of joy (verse 4), pity (verse 5), security and gratitude (verse 6), and peace (verse 7).

That causal connection gives us a profound insight into human personality. Thoughts can and do evoke feelings. I'd quickly note that the opposite of that isn't true. Feelings cannot evoke thoughts. But thoughts can and do evoke feelings.

Let's go back to the propositions I mentioned earlier. Each one evokes accompanying feelings. Every problem has a lifespan – peace and hope. These are the worst presidential candidates in my lifetime – tension and fear. People are idiots – anger and impatience.

The lesson we learn here is clear. There's a strong causal connection between thoughts and feelings. Feelings have a source, which is thoughts. Thoughts evoke feelings. The propositions we set our mind

on condition and even determine what we feel.

Control Our Feelings

Please grasp what that implies and this is a million dollar insight. You and I can control our feelings, to a significant degree, by directing our thoughts.

We do have that ability – to direct our thoughts. I've said it many times before. Our mind is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. We can set it on whatever we choose to set it. We can bring before it whatever we choose to bring before it. So, we choose to bring before it the propositions that evoke the feelings we want. Yes, it's true. We can't just choose the feelings we want. But we can choose the thoughts that evoke the feelings we want.

Do you realize what that means? Our feelings don't just happen randomly or haphazardly. We feel what we allow ourselves to feel. You may at first blush disagree with that. But give it some thought. You'll realize it's true if you do. We feel what we allow ourselves to feel.

Take criticism, for instance, and I'll share my own experience. For most of my life, when people criticized me, two propositions in the backdrop of my mind reactively came to its forefront as thoughts. I'm above criticism and criticism is a personal attack. Those thoughts then evoked accompanying feelings of defensiveness and anger, which in turn prompted behavior. I criticized right back, defended myself, and/or withdrew from the person.

What I want you to see is this. My feelings of defensiveness and anger didn't just happen. I felt them because I allowed myself to feel them. I could have exercised the freedom of my mind and chosen to dismiss those two thoughts, but I didn't. I chose to let them stay in the forefront of my mind instead, which in turn caused me to feel the destructive feelings I felt.

The moral of the story is that we can control our feelings, to a significant degree, by what we choose to set our mind on.

What to Set our Mind On

Paul understood that, which is why he commands what he does in verse 8. On the negative side, and this is implied, do not set our mind on propositions that are untrue, dishonorable, wrong, impure, ugly, disreputable, perverse, or shameful because they evoke destructive feelings. On the positive side, do set our mind on propositions that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, reputable, excellent, and praiseworthy because they evoke constructive feelings.

Let's go back to criticism again. Understanding what I've just explained, I don't respond to it the way I used to. If someone criticizes me, and propositions like I'm above it and it's attack come to mind, I choose to dismiss them. I choose to set my mind on other propositions instead. I'm not above criticism. All of us, including me, have faults. And criticism isn't an attack. It's a gift instead – the gift of knowing. It reveals faults or perhaps even sins in me that I don't see but need to. Those propositions are what Paul calls **"true"** and evoke constructive feelings, in this case gratitude and joy, which in turn prompt constructive behavior. I thank the criticizer and seriously consider the criticism to determine if it's true or not.

That illustrates Paul's call in verse 8. Set our mind on the **"things,"** the propositions, that evoke constructive feelings.

To do that, we obviously must know what those propositions are. So, relying on the Bible, people in the know, and our own observation, analysis, and thought as resources, we learn as many of the most important propositions that are true, honorable, right, and so on as we can. God of course is the dominant reality of the universe. The first propositions that we need to learn, therefore, are about Him – His person and His works. Thus, using our *First Aim* study or resources like A.W. Tozer's book *The Knowledge of the Holy*, we do just that. We learn the details of God's person and works. We then set our mind on those details that relate to the circumstance or event before us.

I set my mind on two propositions that relate to our presidential

election, for instance. Proposition #1, which I learned from Daniel 2:21, is that God makes kings to rise and to fall. He will work out His historical purposes no matter which one is elected. Proposition #2, which I learned from our United States Constitution and four decades of observation, is that presidents can't ruin or take over our federal and state governments. They can harm but not ruin or take over. We will survive either candidate in other words. Those propositions are part of the backdrop of my mind. And when the issue of the election comes up, I bring them to the forefront of my mind, which evokes a feeling of peace.

Or I set my mind on a stunning proposition that relates to my self-concept, which I learned in Romans 8:27, 34. The Holy Spirit and Jesus **"intercede"** personally for me before Father God. I've identified the staggering implications of that, one of which is this. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit routinely converse with each other about me. I'm a constant topic of their conversation. That proposition is part of the backdrop of my mind. And when I'm feeling badly about myself for whatever reason, I bring it to the forefront of my mind, which evokes feelings of self-worth and joy.

Conclusion

You get the point I'm sure and the old idiom we use expresses it well in closing, **"Get a grip."** We've all been told that and know what it means. Control our feelings don't be controlled by them. Make them our servant not our master. That's what we need to do. So, let's do it. Set our mind on things, propositions, that are what Paul describes in verse 8. We'll get a grip, and feel and live well if we do.