

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever seen books at the pet store about the “care and feeding” of a cat or hamster or fish? As far as I know, there has never been a book written on the care and feeding of your mind, but it's right here in God's book, the Bible.

How you think really determines how you live. Psychologist William James wrote, “The greatest discovery of my generation is that people can change their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.” You can really change your life by changing the way you think. Scripture says in Proverbs 23:7, “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.” In the Bible, the heart and the mind are often synonymous. The heart and the mind are often used as the control center of your life. Think of your mind as the control tower at a large airport. There are many jetliners that land and take off every day, coordinated by a control tower that is both being fed information and giving out information. Likewise, you are receiving information and you are giving out information. What you receive and how you think determines what you give out.

Philippians 4:8-9 says:

“Finally, brothers, 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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me, put it into practice. [And then here's the wonderful promise.] And the God of peace of God will be with you.”

I'm a big fan of Alcoholics Anonymous and the good work that they have done in the lives of thousands of people. And there is a saying that comes out of AA that says it is not our drinking but our thinking that makes us stinking. They're saying their real problem is not in their drink. It's the way they think. If you've ever been around a person who drinks a lot, you'll admit it's both drinking and thinking that makes a person stink. The problem with addiction is between a person's ears, and how you think will determine your life. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “A man is what he thinks about all day long.” So what are you thinking about? How are you thinking? Do you have the kind of positive thought processes that allow you to rejoice in the Lord? Or are you someone whose mind has become soured?

Are you so negative and always thinking bad thoughts? Those of you who work with computers are familiar with the old saying: “garbage in, garbage out.”

Whatever you program into a computer is what's going to come out. And your mind is the most intricate computer the world has ever known. If you put garbage

in your mind, garbage is going to come out. But if you put good things in your mind, good things are going to come out.

I. FEED YOUR MIND POSITIVE THOUGHTS (4:8)

If you want to live a positive life, you must feed your mind positive thoughts. That's what Philippians 4:8 is all about. I have taught the book of Philippians a number of times; it's been a great part of my life ever since I've been a Christian. I've exegeted it in Greek many times, but I have never taken the time to dig into verse eight and identify eight qualities of thinking. I've always followed the tendency to skip over it and go into other verses. I want to look at verse eight, analyze it, take it apart, and list eight ways that you need to be thinking positive thoughts.

1. Concentrate on real, instead of phony things

“Whatever is true...” There's so much that is plastic in our world today. The world always has substitutes and imitations. And sometimes the imitations are almost indistinguishable from the real thing. But the Bible says, if you want to think right, you need to think about those things that are true (4:8). The Bible says in John 17, “Thy word is truth.” The more you let the word of God feed your mind, the more you'll be thinking about that which is true. We hear false and phony information in life, but the word of God is always true. And so feed your mind with that. Do you have the ability to control your mind? Are you allowing your thoughts to control you?

A little girl went to bed one night. After she finished saying her prayers, she said to her mom, “This has been a good day.” Her mom asked why that was so. The little girl smiled and said, “Because today I pushed my thoughts around. And yesterday my thoughts pushed me around.” You can have the ability to control your thoughts if you so desire. Worry is the thought process that has gone awry. Worry begins as a tiny little drop. And then that drop becomes a steady flow. And then that flow becomes a gusher. And then that whole gusher turns into an avalanche of worry and anxiety. All of us know what it is to lie in bed at night and have one thought captivate us. It's as if we can't turn our minds off. But you can—and you should—if you learn how to think about the real, instead of the phony.

2. Think about noble, instead of trivial things

What does “noble” mean? It means those things that are important, those things that really matter. Trivial Pursuit is a board game based on trivia, but for a lot of people, life is a trivial pursuit. They're only interested in the little things that don't really matter. I dealt with a couple of one time who ended up getting a divorce because they argued about something that I thought was so trivial. They argued about whether or not you should rinse off the dishes before you put them in the dishwasher! He said, no, that's what the dishwashers were for. She said, yes, you

rinse them off because you had to do that before you put them in a dishwasher. And that became such a point of intense argument!

As an impartial observer, I thought that was so trivial, compared to all the other things of life. How easy it is for us to concentrate on those trivial things that don't really matter. A cardiologist gave this advice to people who worry: "Don't sweat the small things, and remember, all things are small things." If you tend to worry about the little bitty things, just don't sweat them. Think about those things that are important like the word of God, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the call of God upon your life.

3. Concentrate on what's right, instead of the convenient

All of us have to live out a life of our choices. And sometimes we choose that which is expedient and profitable—and we take the easy path. But the Bible says we ought to concentrate on those things that are right. One of the biggest problems our teenagers and children are facing today is they're being taught that there is no absolute moral standard. And that's why we need to insist that children are taught the word of God, because the Bible says there are things that are right and there are things that are wrong. We tell them never to do wrong and do right instead. But when you try to teach children that nothing is absolutely wrong (and nothing's absolutely right), they have no moral foundation. They don't know what's right. A lot of people are being taught situation ethics, where they say sometimes it's okay to tell a lie (and other times it's wrong to do so). They say there are times when it may be good to cheat on your spouse, and there are other times when it's not.

The word of God gives us a moral standard, and we need to concentrate on those things that are right, instead of convenient. Let me give you an example of a person in the Bible who did what was convenient. Do you remember Pontius Pilate?

When he interviewed the Lord Jesus Christ, he found no fault in Jesus and wanted to let him go. But there was such an outcry from the crowd. And they said, "If you let him go, you're no friend of Caesar." And he began to think about what it would mean for his business. So he made a choice based on what was better for his career, rather than what was right. How many of you have made decisions based on what was better for your business than what was right? The Bible says to feed your mind thoughts about what's right.

4. Concentrate on clean, instead of dirty

Scripture says to think on whatever is pure. Now that word "pure" means morally, sexually pure. We live in a dirty world. It's getting even dirtier morally. Our world is getting worse and worse, and it will keep on getting worse and worse until the Lord Jesus Christ comes back. The middle ground between those who are lost, and those who are saved, is going to get wider and wider. And those of you who are trying to straddle the fence and live with one foot in the world and one foot in the church, you're going to find that it's like to be a boat leaving the pier. And you're

going to have to decide because the world is getting worse and worse. Pornography addiction begins with a thought. Then that thought became a deed. Then that deed became a habit. And then that habit has become a lifestyle. And that lifestyle has become a character. And you'd better be careful because a character determines your destiny. Pornography is a terrible trap that the devil sets, because once a person attains a level of satisfaction in pornography, then they have to get deeper into it for there to be a feeling of satisfaction. And that's part of where the mind comes into play. If you keep looking at those magazines, if you keep looking at those videos, you're going to continue to be a slave that. Turn it off, throw them away, renounce it, and instead put clean thoughts in your mind. You can't have clean thoughts as long as you're looking at those things. Garbage in, garbage out.

Ted Bundy was a very educated, highly intellectual professional man who was a serial murderer and probably killed over 50 women. He was tried and convicted of only one. And that was enough to send him to the electric chair. Dr. James Dobson interviewed him on his radio program. Ted Bundy admitted that his obsession started with his involvement with pornography, and it got worse and worse and worse. I want to tell you the battle is fought in your mind. That's why it says in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 that Satan sets up strongholds in our mind. We are to cast down imaginations and bring every thought under the control of Jesus Christ. If you keep thinking dirty thoughts, you'll live a dirty life.

5. Concentrate on lovely, instead of harmful

Scripture says if there's anything that's lovely, think about that. It's the word that means "that which promotes brotherly love and harmony." Are you the kind of person who always wants to think good of other people? Or are you so distrustful that you hope bad things happen to somebody? Are you contemplating harming someone? Now here's the problem. In the Old Testament, if you wanted to hurt somebody, it was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but if you didn't do it—you just thought about it—you were okay. Jesus comes along and he says, "The Old Testament says don't commit murder. But I say unto you that if you have hatred in your heart, you're guilty by intent."

Jesus said the same thing about adultery. The Old Testament said not to commit adultery. A guy could think about it, but as long as he didn't do the act, he was innocent. Then Jesus comes along in the New Testament and says if you just lust after a woman in your mind, you have committed adultery already. That's why it's important to keep our minds clean. Don't have harmful hurtful thoughts toward other people.

In Arkansas, a lady called the police station and asked the police officer, "What is the fine for assault and battery?" The officer said it was \$250. "Why do you want to know?" he asked. And this lady said, "Well, I'm about to beat up my sister. And I just wanted to see if I could afford to or not." Talk about premeditated harm!

Harm costs you a lot.

6. Concentrate on helpful, instead of critical

The Bible says to think on whatever is admirable. All you have to do is go overseas and work in mission churches, and you'll find we are so absolutely blessed that it really is a sin for anybody to be critical about what God's doing in churches here. If you come to a church looking for something to criticize, you can always find something! But if you come to church looking for something that is admirable and good, you can find that too. It just depends on what you're looking for and how you're thinking. What is your thought process? The Bible says to think on those things that are helpful, not critical.

Do you remember in the Old Testament where Caleb and Joshua, along with 10 other spies, were sent into the Promised Land to scout it out? Those spies were very critical. They said, "We can't do it. They have great armies. And they look like giants. We look like grasshoppers. We just cannot do it." But Caleb and Joshua came back hauling a huge cluster of delicious grapes. They told people, "Look! This land is flowing with milk and honey. Let's go in. We can take it."

Most people can be categorized in one of those two groups: those who bring gripes and those who bring grapes. Which camp are you in? I did a children's sermon one time where I had a child pull the petals off a beautiful rose. Then I asked him to put them back on. Of course, the child couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. Nobody could do it. And the lesson is that it is so much easier to tear down than it is to build back up. You're never more like God than when you're building bridges toward other people, instead of building barriers; when you're tossing bouquets toward people, instead of tossing bricks.

7. Think excellent, instead of inferior thoughts

Paul says, if anything is excellent, think on those excellent thoughts. What that means is that if you're looking for good things, you can usually find good things. But if you're looking for bad things, you can find bad things. And it all begins with how you think. I knew a lady in a former church who always had a sour look on her face. I soon learned that she was not the kind of person that you said, "How are you doing?" because she'd really tell you. It would take about 20 minutes for her to tell you about every ache, every pain, every problem that she had. She had a reputation for being a hypochondriac, but I decided to try something with her. Every Sunday, when she would leave church, I started saying to her, "You sure are looking good. You're looking better. What's happened?" I just started trying to compliment her, say good things about her, and find good things about her. Before long, she actually was feeling better! You ought to try that with somebody. Instead of thinking inferior thoughts about them, try to find the good things in them. Think excellent thoughts.

8. Concentrate on positive, instead of negative

Paul says, "If anything is praiseworthy..." What kind of person are you? Are you a positive person? Or are you a negative person? It all begins with the way that you think. We sometimes call them optimists and pessimists. Which one are you? Optimist or pessimist? I am a positive realist. A positive person is the kind of person who says that the glass is half full. A negative person says it's half empty. A positive person says every cloud has a silver lining. A negative person says every silver lining is hiding a cloud. A

positive person looks for a pearl in the oyster. A negative person expects to get poisoned from the oyster. A positive person counts their blessings. A negative person discounts their blessings. A positive person sees opportunity in every difficulty, whereas a negative person sees difficulty in every opportunity. I once read, "A optimist is a lady who starts putting on her shoes when the preacher says. "In conclusion..." A pessimist is a person who is seasick during the entire voyage of life. When two positive people meet, they shake hands. When two negative people meet, they shake heads. So what kind of person are you? Paul says to fill your mind with positive thoughts.

These eight characteristics form a biography of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is true. He's real. He's noble. He's right. He's clean. He's loving. He's helpful. He's excellent. Jesus Christ is the most positive person who ever lived. The devil is negative. Jesus said the thief that is Satan comes to steal, kill, and destroy. But Jesus says, "I've come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." And so the key is to think about the Lord. Is your problem that you're thinking about fake things, trivial things, convenient things, dirty things, harmful things, critical, inferior, negative thoughts? Yes, my friend. That's your problem. You need to replace those negative thoughts with positive thoughts. That's why Paul says, think on these things. He's not just giving you some suggestion. He's giving you a principle for life.

Your mind can be controlled by your own conscience, by yourself. It doesn't have to control you. Let's do a brief little experiment here. Let me borrow your mind for just a moment. What if I told you for the next minute, don't think about an elephant. Don't think about a long-nosed elephant with big ears and a little tail. Don't think about it. Honestly. How many of us wouldn't be able to help thinking about an elephant? I did have a lady tell me one time, "I didn't think about an elephant. I quoted scripture when you said that." And that's the key. She didn't think of an elephant because she was thinking about something else. And what I'm trying to say to you. If you're a guy who constantly says to yourself, "Don't think about lust," guess what? You're going to think about it. But if you replace that negative thought with something else positive, that's the secret.

Now try this. I would like to ask you to see on the screen of your consciousness the Lord Jesus Christ, hanging on a cross. Picture him there with his hands outstretched, nails piercing his hands and his feet, a crown of thorns on his head.

He is hanging there with a look of love in his eyes. As he says to you, “I love you. I did this for you.”

Did you think about an elephant? No! The mind is an amazing thing, but it can only grab hold of one image at a time. You can go back and forth quickly, but you can only hang onto one image at a time. And so the way that you improve your thinking is that, by an act of your surrendered will, you say, “I’m going to think about good things. I’m going to think about the Lord Jesus Christ.” Every time that the temptation to lust comes in your mind, think about the Lord Jesus Christ. For those of you who have problems about being negative, every time that negative thought rises up, think about the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. FOLLOW THROUGH WITH POSITIVE ACTIONS (4:9)

Paul says whatever you've learned from him, put into practice. There are some people who are given, but they don't really receive. There are some people who listen, but they don't really hear. That's why Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” And then there are some people who watch, but they don't really see.

Paul says, once you have learned the truth, once you've received it, once you've heard it, and once you've seen it, then he says, practice it. It's not that we don't know what to do. It's that that we're not doing what we know to do! And that's why the Bible says there needs to be a discipline to put these principles you're learning into practice. Bob Whitman, who is a father of two children and a businessman, lives on the West Coast and trains as a triathlete. Every morning he gets up at 3:30 and jogs 10 miles. Then he rides his bicycle 40 miles, and then he swims a mile. And by that time, it's 7:30 in the morning. He does that every day. Why? Because he wants to succeed as a triathlete. Larry Bird is a great basketball player, I believe, because he practiced more than anybody else. Beginning when he was in high school, when practice was over he stayed and shot 100 free throws. When he was playing for Indiana State, he did the same. When he moved to the Boston Celtics, he would do the same. That was his dedication and his commitment to excellence.

“Practice” doesn't mean doing something one time. It means “to do it and keep on doing it.” I say that because there are some people who lack the discipline to keep on doing what you know to do. Some of you started a quiet time, which you've stopped it. Some of you started tithing, but you stopped it. Some of you started having a regular prayer time, but you've stopped it. You haven't continued. Life is not practice. Paul says: the things you know you ought to do, do them. And here's the promise. The God of peace will be with you. Do you see how these things flow together? Rejoice in the Lord. Always think about the good things—and do good things—and God will bless you.

CONCLUSION

When I was in college one summer, I worked as a counselor at an RA camp for boys—Royal Ambassadors. Terry was about 12 years old. One night a missionary preached and asked every boy to raise his hand if he knew he was going to heaven. And everybody raised their hand around me, except Terry. He didn't raise his hand. But then the preacher said, "If you're here and you'd like to accept Christ tonight, raise your hand." I could tell Terry was burdened, but he didn't raise his hand. And so right after the service, we sat in the front seat of my car one-on-one to talk about Jesus. I talked to him and found out that he wasn't a Christian. Now, the thing about Terry was he was very timid and shy. The two previous nights, after the evening service, I had taken Terry and a cabin of boys to hike around this lake down in South Alabama where they were alligators and snakes. Terry was so afraid that he would stand right next to me. And he would take every step with me, just frightened out of his skin of being in the woods at night. That night in the front seat of my car, Terry prayed and invited Jesus to come into his heart. And he was saved. And it wasn't 10 minutes after that, that we went on our hike that night. I've never seen such an immediate change in a little boy. He didn't walk right next to me. In fact, he got out in front of all the other guys in our cabin and led the way through the woods. Later that night, I said, "Terry, what's the difference? Why could you lead us when always before you were hanging back next to me?" His answer would never pass a test in a seminary, but I love it. He said, "God has given me guts." What kind of woods are you walking through right now? What kind of alligators and snakes are you facing? The God of peace can give you guts. He can give you peace. He can give you courage to be faithful and to keep on thinking and acting positively.

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