"DWELLING THOUGHTS"

TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 4: 8 NASB

> 8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," goes the old saying — often wrongly attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt or Adlai Stevenson, though it's actually older still, tracing back to a Chinese proverb: *Don't curse the darkness; light a candle.* The point is simple: quit griping and do something useful. Rather than waste our energy complaining about what's wrong, we're called to put our energy toward what's right.

It is so easy to curse the darkness. People spend a lot of time doing it. Do you ever watch the news? What is political commentary but darkness-cursing — usually aimed at the other side of the aisle? Being critical is easy, and I'll confess I've found a dark pleasure in it myself. As editor of my college newspaper, cursing the darkness was stock-in-trade for the editorial pages, and social media has made it easy for absolutely anyone to become an inveterate darkness-curser. It doesn't bring out our best. It certainly calls out the worst in everyone else.

Better that we shift our focus to lighting candles. Paul says as much in Romans 13:12:

> "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."

You may remember a children's song once popular at VBS: *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.* That simple tune carries the same wisdom this sermon is built on — light isn't something we curse the absence of; it's something we let shine.

It turns out modern psychology has caught up to what Paul knew intuitively. Researchers have long observed that "bad is stronger than good" — our minds are wired with a negativity bias, giving far more weight to threats and offenses than to the good around us. That's exactly why dwelling on the positive takes deliberate effort; it doesn't happen on its own. But when people make that effort, the results are measurable. Barbara Fredrickson's "broaden-and-build" research shows that positive emotion literally widens our attention and thinking, while negative emotion narrows it down to the threat in front of us. Gratitude studies back this up: people who practice focusing on good things — through journaling, letters, or simple daily reflection — show reduced rumination, lower rates of depression and anxiety, and even lower cortisol, the stress hormone. In other words, "better to light a candle than curse the darkness" isn't just spiritual wisdom. It's a description of how the mind and body actually work.

Paul knew this two thousand years before the research caught up. And in our verse from Philippians, he doesn't leave us with a vague command to "think positive." He hands us seven specific candles to light instead of cursing the darkness. As we let these things dwell in us, we become happier, healthier, and more whole than we are naturally conditioned to be.

1. Whatever Is TRUE

The Greek word for true is *alethea*. The problem with truth today is that we aren't all agreed that there even is "a" truth. We hear instead about "my" truth and "your" truth. People "live their truth" as a way of giving themselves license for whatever they want to do.

Let's be clear: there is "a" truth. I'm not saying anyone in particular has a handle on it, but to say that there are only our own, little, relative truths is to say that everything is chaos. If there is not a truth with a capital T, then all the little truths—yours and mine—are meaningless and matter nothing.

One of the finest things that can be said about a thinker (that's all of us) is that he or she has an unswerving dedication to truth. As Paul calls us firstly to consider "whatever is true," let us be the people with unswerving dedication to truth.

2. Whatever Is HONORABLE

The word we translate to honorable means something like serious, of good character, worthy, and/or respectable. I would like us to return to that word we've mentioned before: noble. When we meditate on what is noble (a worthy translation, I think), we become mindful of all that is upright and good. To consider what is noble (as well as all these virtues) is an excellent basis for Christian ethics. I'll give you an example:

When I was a youth pastor in Oklahoma, the Session of the church proposed to make a strong pro-life statement. Although I resonate with much of their position, I opposed the measure on the grounds that it was useless. "If a 16-year-old girl gets pregnant, she's not going to come to the Session; she's going to come to me. Having a policy doesn't help." It seemed to me useless to counsel a pregnant girl by saying, "Well, you know, our Session has a strong opinion against abortion."

Too often, asking if something is right or wrong is useless—it just gets people into an ethical debate during which each side supports itself—plus, few pregnant girls have been dissuaded by someone wagging their finger at them and saying, "But it is wrong!" The Session asked me what I would do in such a case.

While I am loathe to imagine the case, I am aware that how I feel about an issue gathered with the Session in righteous indignation over pro-choice excesses, I would feel very different while counseling a weeping girl whose trust I had fought hard to win and who trusts me to advise her in the situation.

I said to the Session: "I would like to stand with Paul in Philippians 4:8, so I would ask her, 'What is the most noble thing you could do? As you thoughtfully and prayerfully work through this, consider the most noble, the most excellent thing you could possibly do, and I will stand with you.'"

We do well to consider what is the most noble course of action in any ethical quandary, and we are likely to arrive at a better, more useful kind of answer than to merely apply an easy legalism.

3. Whatever Is JUST

The word in both Greek and Hebrew that we translate to just can also be translated righteous, and vice versa. That means whenever we see the word justice, we can rightly and legitimately replace it with the word righteousness.

Try to define the word *justice*; it's not so easy. One idea derived from the Spanish word suggests that justice means "everything in its right place." Isn't that wonderful? *Everything as it ought to be, everything in its proper order*—this is closely akin to the meaning of *Shalom* or peace. It is about completion and all things meeting up with their ultimate purpose.

Because the word justice now carries political baggage, we need a new word: justice/righteousness or righteousness/justice. This would properly represent the biblical witness, we need to keep these notions wedded inseparably together. There is no justice that is not also righteousness—alignment with God's will and Word—and there is no righteousness that is not also embodied in justice. Wedding these two terms together into one demands that we not merely seek the good of human flourishing without equally pursuing the will and glorification of God. Something to think about.

4. Whatever Is PURE

The word for pure has the same root as *holy*(*hagios*) — freedom from defilement, undivided motive. Remember that in the Old Testament, purity and holiness are about being *set apart for God's purposes.* Chosen people are to be set apart from the pagan, sinful, fallen humanity—unmixed, untainted — with their thoughts uncorrupted by the ways of a sinful world.

Purity can be thought of as chastity, integrity, or innocence. It contains all three, but I'd like to focus on innocence. The world doesn't believe much in innocence; they call it *naivety*. Modern culture has made big business out of violating innocence: we call it entertainment.

For over fifty years, "serious" movies deliver their impact precisely by violating the innocence of viewers, and as we become inured, our sensitivities weaken and fall away altogether.

When Clark Gable, in Gone With the Wind, said, "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn," newspapers reported that viewers had fainted in the theater aisles across the country. Today? Well, I just used it in a sermon and not a single eyebrow raised.

Innocence is not naivety but a virtue. It is that which enables us to feel shock or wonder. The good news is that no matter what your past or past experience, God can restore your innocence—he can refill your soul's tank with childlike wonder. We should long for this innocence, protect it in our children and grandchildren (as is our instinct), and promote it in American culture.

Innocence is a goodness. It is a purity, and worthy of our meditations as well as our unswerving defense. And we need to know that God can and does *restore* innocence by His grace.

5. Whatever Is LOVELY

This is a great word, but it doesn't mean lovely as in rather pretty; it means pleasant, or that which moves toward love.

I love Jimmy Stewart. Because it doesn't matter, I won't mention that he was a lifelong Presbyterian, but his favorite role in his favorite movie was playing Elwood in Harvey. There's a brilliant scene wherein Elwood is being tracked down and he is calm as a cucumber. It is revealed he has advanced academic degrees, though he seems like something of a simpleton. When confronted, he says:

"My mother used to say to me that in this world you either have to be extremely smart or extremely pleasant. I started out with smart, but now I'd rather be pleasant. My advice to you is to be pleasant, and you can quote me on that."

It's too easy to be snarky and critical in a pseudo-sophisticated way. Isn't it better to be pleasant, and a source of enjoyment to others. We contribute to an improved world and existence if we truly consider "whatever is lovely."

6. Whatever Is GRACIOUS

This comes from the word *euphemy* closely related to "euphemism" in English, but the root sense is "well-spoken-of," things that sound good when said aloud, that build up reputation rather than tear it down. Some render it "gracious" or "of good repute."

We can focus on *whatever is gracious* as speaking well of others, saying things that build them up rather than tear them down. *Euphemy* is the polar opposite of gossip. Gossip undermines others and degrades them with ridicule. Being gracious and speaking graciously brings value to others and builds them up positively.

7. If There Is any EXCELLENCE or WORTHY of PRAISE

This is the great Greek ethical term — "virtue" or "excellence" in the philosophical sense used by Aristotle and the Stoics. Paul uses it only here (it appears elsewhere in NT only in 2 Peter and 1 Peter). Paul reaches outside typically "biblical" vocabulary into the vocabulary of Greco-Roman moral philosophy — a signal that goodness isn't a specially "Christian" category walled off from wisdom found elsewhere.

The other part of this is *praiseworthy. "*Praise" — what is genuinely commendable. Paired with virtue (*aretē)*, this final phrase functions as a summary catch-all: if it has moral excellence, if it deserves commendation — think about that.

And not only *think about,* but stand in support of what is excellent and praiseworthy. Always side with with what is excellent and good, and become a defender of these good things.

[THINK ABOUT] DWELL UPON THESE THINGS

Paul tells us to “think about” these things, but it is more than that. The word means to “take account of,” which is close to saying “judge accordingly by” these things. This is the same word as Paul uses in Romans, rendered “reckon” as in Romans 4:3 quoting Genesis 15:6:

> "Abraham believed God, and it was ***reckoned*** to him as righteousness."

Paul actually leans on that word hard throughout Romans 4 — it shows up again in verses 4–5, 6, 8, 9–11, and 22–24, essentially hammering the point that righteousness is something "reckoned" or "credited" to Abraham through faith, not earned through works.

God *reckons* righteousness to us as a gift. In Philippians 4:8, Paul turns the same verb back on us — now we do the reckoning, actively accounting for what's true, noble, and praiseworthy. God who credits righteousness to us also calls us to credit — to take seriously, to count as real — the good things around us.

If I were able to translate it, I would stick to the word *dwell,* because it isn’t just a one-off reckoning, but an ongoing, constant and future reckoning. We don’t just *consider* these virtues, we *dwell upon* them that they may become our thinking, our attitude, and our own virtue.

It's not passive wishful thinking; it's active, deliberate mental accounting. When we intentionally "light a candle” we are being Disciples and masters of our appetites. Dwelling isn't drifting, it's choosing where the mind does its accounting.

May the Holy Spirit search all of our hearts and draw us into a deeper dwelling upon the virtues by which we grow to reflect the nature and character of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. This is discipleship: that we come to reflect the character of Him who embodies every and all virtue.