



Speaker:  
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## Elevating our Thoughts

◀ Series: Philippians • 13 of 13

9/25/2022 (SUN) | Bible: **Philippians 4:4-9**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines virtue as “a moral quality regarded...as good or desirable in a person, such as patience, kindness, etc.” Today, we’re presented with a list of virtues. If our society remained in its unbelief but lived according to these virtues, our land would be transformed for the better.

We too can look around and see these good things, and we can elevate our thoughts above the mundane things of this world.

But the gospel preacher doesn’t teach the mere morality of this world. He is rather a preacher of righteousness. So while they encourage people to think on higher things, their real responsibility is to get people to look at Jesus Christ. Because it’s in him alone that we see these virtues exhibited to perfection.

My aim then is for us to meditate a while on these virtues, think about how they’re expressed in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and see how we can let these elevated thoughts direct us to godly behaviour.

We have a list before us. It’s Paul’s list. It’s not Peter’s or John’s. If it was, I expect it would be a slightly different list. And we shouldn’t think it was meant to be a complete list, but these are examples of what’s described further on as “excellent” and “praiseworthy.”

Notice how we see the word “whatever” repeated. Paul could’ve made this shorter by saying, *Whatever is this, this, this, this...etc., think about them*. But he’s making it longer deliberately. By stretching it out more, he gives the reader more time for each word to sink in.

It’s a mercy of God that he brings about good behaviour in people who are outside his kingdom. If he allowed mankind to act out all the desires of their hearts, this world would be virtually impossible to live in. There’d be widespread anarchy, violence, depravity, murder, brutality, cannibalism...a Satanic paradise.

When we see kindness and love in the unconverted people of this world, we should view them as examples of God’s mercy. And no civilisation or person has ever existed without displaying certain virtues. You name me any tyrant or tyranny or civilisation in history, and I’ll give you examples of virtuous behaviour in them.

I recently finished a book on the life of Genghis Khan. Although he has a reputation for savagery, the real man also showed concerns for his family, his people—even people of other nations—not to mention animals and the environment.

Ancient Greece was notorious for its sexual depravity. Yet that civilisation gave us great thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, and it's language was used to first publish God's word.

At the time when Paul lived, the virtues we're talking about today were already part of the world's thinking. The list Paul uses is similar to other lists of virtues used by Greeks and Romans. For all we know, he could've just rewritten someone else's list.

The difference is that Paul, like us, knew Jesus Christ. And he expects our thinking to be elevated far above that of the people of this world.

## The virtuous things to think on

### Whatever is true

Wherever you see truth, you should feel pleased by it.

It could be a person who you trust is truthful. It could be some other source of information which has been shown to only communicate truth.

Where you see truth, you don't see *dishonesty*. Where you see truth, you don't see *unreliability*.

Even among the ancient heathen there was an understanding that whatever God was he must be all truth. And for us who genuinely know God, we see he's a God of truth.

To see truth in this world is to see a reflection of characteristics in the heavenlies.

### Whatever is honourable

Noble. Dignified. Worthy of respect.

I'm not much of a monarchist, but I've always been impressed by the British monarchy. It could be its fascinating history. It could be I'm just biased and think we do monarchy better than everyone else!

But I think what impresses me the most is the majesty of it all. At particular times, like the death of the Queen, people's thoughts are quite naturally lifted up. They stop and think about something beyond them. Their thoughts are raised above the mundane.

When the Queen's coffin was lying in Westminster Abbey, a quarter of a million people stood in a queue to file past it and show their respects. Young girls, old soldiers, disabled people, tattooed men, male, female, black, white...some spent an entire 24-hour period in a queue so they could bow their heads for a few seconds to honour the memory of Her Majesty, a sovereign none of them even knew.

That may not describe you. But there is some benefit in having majestic things in this world. Our highest thoughts will of course be present when we think about our great God, the Majesty on high, the King of all Kings.

I was speaking to Matt only the other day about these things. And we both wondered whether the existence of such majesty on earth might exist as a stepping-stone to God. That is, as we set our thoughts on things higher than ourselves, it seems logical to gaze even higher, to the Kingly Court of heaven.

### Whatever is just

On previous occasions, I've described being just as being declared completely righteous. Being clothed, if you like, with the righteousness of Christ himself.

But the Bible uses the word *just* in another way. Put simply, it describes being good. And again the word was in common use among ancient civilizations. The just man or woman makes for a good neighbour and is a model citizen. They contribute to their societies being more civilised.

Among the Jews, there was a philosopher called Philo. And he said being just was the best of all virtues. To him, to be good was the *cardinal* virtue. To be just was to be conformed to the standards of God himself.

### Whatever is pure

We all have an idea of what "pure" means, I think. It reminds us of things which are wholesome. Things which haven't been contaminated with impurities.

Paul encourages us to find people or things which are pure. He expects that, as we look upon them or meditate on them, our hearts will be stirred. We'll appreciate the value of purity. We'll see how a God who is all pure creates purity in this world that we might see something of him in his creation.

### Whatever is lovely

This word *lovely* has a broad range of meanings. It means things which bring pleasure. Nice things. Things which naturally bring calm to the soul and quench anger.

When the Jews wanted their Bible translated into Greek, they chose this word to describe the beauty of Queen Esther. So it describes beautiful things.

What lovely things have you seen in life which lift your soul? Remember, it's God who gives gifts to men. Not just strictly spiritual gifts but talents in art and music and architecture. Have you never felt amazed at a piece of art? Have you never been emotionally affected by a piece of music? Have you never had your breath taken away by a magnificent cathedral?

Perhaps for you it's something in the natural world. Some lovely creature he's made, or some great landscape he's carved. Perhaps it's that young man, that young woman, whose inward and outward beauty impressed you so much you just had to marry them!

### Whatever is commendable

If loveliness is mostly about visual appeal, we could think of being commendable as *sounding* good. Some have defined this as "fair-spoken" or "fair-sounding". So this word, which could be translated "admirable", has been translated here as "commendable".

The King James Bible says "of good report". And I think these translations are good. It refers to anything which is well spoken of. If someone recommends a book to you, you might buy it. And if it's good, you'll recommend it to others. In this way, good Christian literature is circulated.

A fellow believer might speak well of someone and tell you they're someone of great integrity. And in paying attention to such characters in the church, it can benefit your Christian walk. You *might* receive a recommendation that turns out to be faulty, but things and people who are well spoken of deserve some consideration at least.

Paul rounds off this section by summing things up. He says, *In a nutshell, WHATEVER is excellent, and WHATEVER is praiseworthy, think about those things*. Let them distract you from the cheapness of this world you find yourself immersed in every day. Let them prompt you to copy them. Let them remind you that to be more just and more pure is good.

### Christ is the highest expression of these virtues

I said to you that the words Paul uses here were very common at that time. Recently, I was reading a book by one of the emperors of Imperial Rome, Marcus Aurelius. He was no friend of Christians, but he was religious. He belonged to a group called the Stoics. And his book, simply titled *Meditations*, is full of this type of language Paul uses.

The Apostle seems to have chosen these words deliberately. I'll offer some reasons why:

- At the very basic level, he was encouraging Christians to look for good in the world around them. It would prevent them becoming too cynical, believing everything and everyone was thoroughly bad. This would make them better citizens.
- In seeing glimmers of pure goodness around them, they'd be reminded that God was still at work in their world, preserving it from evil chaos by suppressing sin and introducing goodness.
- As they looked around them and saw things which were good and noble, it'd be an encouragement to them to consider how they should exceed the world in these virtues.

- And in recommending they raise their sights to better things, it would remind them that **the highest and most perfect expression of all these virtues was to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ.**

We know Paul. We know his doctrine. We know he'd never preach to sinners that they should simply try to mend their ways. He'd never advise them to just turn over a new leaf. **He wasn't a preacher of morality; he was a preacher of righteousness.**

This letter's full of exaltation of Christ. All his writings are like that. He even tells the same people in the very next verse to pay attention to what he taught them about Christ.

This is where he's taking us: our thoughts can be lifted up by considering the admirable things of this world, but he wants his hearers to remember **the very highest level of virtue talked about by the philosophers is found in one person—and only one person—Jesus who is the Christ.**

- **THE SON OF GOD IS ALL TRUTH.** He speaks nothing but truth. He described himself as **the** truth. When we listen to the words he spoke on earth, and when we listen to the words he inspired in his people who wrote this amazing book, we have absolute confidence we're listening to the very truth of God.
- **THE SON OF GOD IS ALL HONOURABLE.** He is noble. He is a monarch above all others. Our Queen had all the trappings of her reign taken from her before she was lowered into the grave. In life, Her Majesty exceeded that of all monarchs who came before her. In death, she awaits the resurrection with the poorest of men, and they will all alike stand before the greatest Majesty of all.
- **THE SON OF GOD IS ALL JUST.** He is perfect in righteousness. He is the standard by which all creatures are measured. The Scriptures call him "the holy and just one". This is why sinful men and women are told Christ is the righteous one who died for unrighteous people.
- **THE SON OF GOD IS ALL PURE.** The animals of the temple which would point to Christ had to be *without blemish*. The Ark of the Covenant, constructed to picture all manner of doctrines about Jesus, was covered inside and out with gold of the *highest purity*. Nothing less was good enough to represent his spotlessness.
- **THE SON OF GOD IS ALL LOVELY.** When he walked this earth, he looked outwardly like any other man. But inwardly, the beauty of the godhead shone brightly. And having been resurrected, he now lives in a state of radiant beauty! The Psalmist says he wants one thing: to live in the presence of God and behold his beauty for ever.
- **THE SON OF GOD IS ALL COMMENDABLE.** He is to be admired. From the day of creation, men have spoken highly of him. *The prophets* commended him in a spirit of great expectation. *The apostles who walked with him* confessed him as a man of the highest worth. *The church since then, it's untold millions of members,* has honoured

him in their testimonies. **Above all, God in heaven presented him to the world as his beloved son in whom he took great pleasure.**

“Excellence?” “Worthy of praise?” Who else in the whole of creation is more excellent and more worthy of praise than our beloved saviour, Jesus!

For us who have received the truth, we do well to take time to consider people and things which transcend this existence of ours. Higher things. Wherever we see them.

But we never stop there. Our inward vision steepens, and we behold the risen Jesus Christ.

### How these high thoughts are to affect us

Paul has spoken about meditating on higher things. Most especially, he would have you and I think on God the Son.

But it was never God’s purpose for us to simply exist in a state of blessedness. Christians who have a keener understanding of doctrine are prone to this temptation. They perhaps understand the nature of God and grasp the work of Christ to a greater degree than many others. If they do, it’s a gift of God, of course.

But they can become complacent. They can feel they’ve reached a higher plane of Christian experience. And they can comfort themselves with these thoughts and become lazy.

Paul now reminds the Philippian believers of their duty. In v9 he says, *All the stuff I’ve taught you— DO IT!*

The way they learned from Paul was twofold. Firstly, he’d taught them directly through his words. He preached sermons. He taught the church in his letters, such as this one to the church in Philippi.

But he also taught them *indirectly* by the way he lived. You’ll see in verse nine he refers to the things they’d *seen* in him. You might remember a few weeks ago when we were in ch3, Paul unashamedly tells the believers to copy him. He said in verse 17, “...join in imitating me.”

He not only repeats this idea of using him as an example to live by, but he mentions peace again. Now last time, we spoke about the **peace of God** *in* us. Now were talking about the **God of peace** being *with* us.

I’m not sure how clear I’ve made that. But what it comes down to is this: we can think of the peace of God being dropped down by him like a gift into our laps. It’s a good image. That kind of picture of a gift is used in Scripture.

But now it's described in a different way. Now, the God to whom this peace belongs is said to be *with* us. Standing right next to us. Better still, **living in us**. We still receive his peace. But in this image, he doesn't send this gift but brings it personally.

Whichever way we think of it, this peace of God is available to us. Last time, we spoke about how it becomes ours through prayer. Now we're told it also comes through obedience. Our relationship with God improves the more we obey him.

So how *do* we obey him? Well we have a Bible full of instruction, including contributions by Paul.

But given what Paul's said here, we might start by being the very best examples we can of the virtues Paul lists:

- **WE'RE TO BE *TRUTHFUL* PEOPLE.** We tell the truth and are known for it. We love truth wherever we find it, but we devote ourselves particularly for learning the truth which falls from the lips of God in his Word.
- **WE'RE TO BE *HONOURABLE* PEOPLE.** We rule alongside Christ the King, and we should think and act like it. In his letters to his brethren Timothy and Titus, Paul talks about the qualities of church leaders, their wives, and others. And all are encouraged to be **dignified**.
- **WE'RE TO BE *JUST* PEOPLE.** Truly, we understand our acceptance with God is through the righteousness of Jesus. It's because he is just that we are accepted. But our lives are to be marked by righteous habits.
- **WE'RE TO BE *PURE* PEOPLE.** When the Bible tells us we're to remain unspotted from the world, it's as if sin is a contagious disease. Through our interactions in this world, sinful habits can infect us. We can get covered in spots like measles, but the rash is a sign of sinfulness. Instead, we're to be make sure we remain spotless in our behaviour and even in our very thoughts.
- **WE'RE TO BE *LOVELY* PEOPLE.** This has nothing to do with male grooming or female make-up! Just as it wasn't necessary for Jesus of Nazareth to be handsome, so it is our beauty is to be found **within**. We're to reflect the beauty of God and become walking advertisements for citizenship of his kingdom.
- **WE'RE TO BE *COMMENDABLE* PEOPLE.** As we go on in our Christian lives, people will begin to form an opinion of us. And if we're in a close walk with God, people will notice. We'll be well spoken of, and not just by the church. As a follower of Jesus Christ, you'll never get widespread commendation from this world. But some will grudgingly acknowledge your honesty, integrity, consistency and love.

To the anxious soul, Paul gave a sweet gift of advice. He exhorted the brethren to have an attitude of thankfulness and a keen habit of prayer.

And now, as another avenue to enjoying the peace of God, he encourages us to elevate our thoughts to higher things—especially the Lord Jesus Christ.

In doing this, we not only get to see more of the nature of God, but it inspires us to serve him. And in serving him, we're rewarded with greater closeness to him.

Amen.