CHARACTERISTIC OF THE MOST effective Public Servants is a hugely disciplined mind. Their ability to stay on point is because they have learned to think (usually very quickly) before they speak. But even more fundamental than that is their habit of thinking about the right kind of things in the first place: they have learned to dwell on certain things and not allow their minds to dwell on the wrong things.

With that in mind, this week I would like to take a closer look at Philippians 4:8. This is a passage I have been meditating on for several years now and it has greatly helped me. I think it will help you too.

**Philippians 4:8**

Continued on page 2
I. INTRODUCTION

**Philippians 4:8** appears near the end of Paul’s epistle to the Church at Philippi, which is the first church he planted in Europe, more specifically Macedonia (now northern Greece). This is a letter characterized by joy. In that the letter is very practical (as illustrated by the verse we will examine) it does provide one of the most profound passages on the humanity and humility of Christ (chapter 2) as well as insights into false teachers (chapter 3). Overall, herein is a love letter of praise and thanksgiving to one of Paul’s favorite churches. Repeatedly throughout my walk with the Savior I read this small epistle and find myself refreshed and encouraged as a result. I trust the same is true for you.

Let us now turn our attention to 4:8:

> Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if any-thing worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

In closer context, this passage follows and contrasts Paul’s command to **be anxious for nothing** (v. 4:6). In place of **anxiety** (*merimnao*) (this Greek word is best understood as “unconscious blasphemy”) the Apostle in this previous passage delineates the manifestations of his and other’s spirituality: **joy, prayer, thanksgiving and peace**. These four elements appear in chapter 4 just prior to the verse of study, verse 8 as recorded above. For an individual in the capital to possess a strong spiritual maturity, a peace of mind, a Christ-empowered confidence, these elements must be depicted of him on a continual basis. How is that achieved? Primarily and **positionally** by one making and possessing peace with God through personal faith in Christ, and being richly filled with the Holy Spirit. But secondarily and **practically** it is achieved through the constant, repetitive training and disciplining of one’s mind. In the study of Satanology (all that the Bible has to say about Satan) the informed,
mature believer realizes he is in a spiritual battle. More importantly, it is critical that he understand where the battleground lies: The believer is in a constant battle for the mind! States 1Peter 5:8 in this regard:

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Ephesians 6:12 states stereophonically For our struggle is not against flesh and blood . . . In Mark 8:33 Satan’s battle for the mind is illustrated by what Jesus states relative to Peter’s misguided thinking: But turning around and seeing His disciples, He [Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.”

It follows from this analysis that the victorious Christian need possess a mind that is not only Spirit-controlled by God, but highly disciplined by self. What follows in 4:8 are eight of these qualities that the believer need dwell on — be highly mentally disciplined regarding. The main verb (an imperative verb meaning this is a command from God), i.e. the action required by God of the believer in this passage is specifically to dwell (logizomai) meaning, “to recon, consider, take into account, calculate” in an ongoing sense the eight virtues preceding the command.

But before examining each of the characteristics in detail, notice the succeeding context in 4:9; in fulfillment of 4:8 Paul immediately pleads for the Philippian believers to imitate him!

The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

4:8 and 4:9 are not disjoined comments. It is to say that the mental disciplines — the virtues of godly, mature thinkers as listed in 4:8 — are more caught than taught. Who in your life emulates the eight characteristics that flow from 4:8? I dare say their personal example is more of an impetus to your spiritual maturity than memorizing and meditating on the list that follows (as important as that is). Whereas Scripture didactically communicates, another’s personal life persuades and influences; a godly example is often more powerful in terms of another’s bringing about change versus what is read. That is why one should attend Bible studies and build close relationships with other mature believers. Choose today to build friendships with godly individuals because their virtues will rub off on you! (Proverbs 27:17; contr. 1Corinthians 15:33). One becomes like the friends he chooses. (I might add that if you are a parent, you must choose your children’s friends for them.)

Let us now turn our attention to the passage. J.B. Lightfoot in his commentary on Philippians provides aiding insights into the order and relationship of this seeming random
Speaking roughly, the words may be said to be arranged in a descending scale. The first four describe the character of the actions themselves, the two former being absolute, the two latter relative; the fifth and sixth point to the moral approbation which they conciliate; while the seventh and eighth in which the form of expression is changed are thrown in as an afterthought, that no motive may be omitted.¹

Take time to digest what Lightfoot is saying by going back over the passage. Make those relationships of the aforementioned in your mind not only now, preliminarily, but as you now study each of the eight that follow.

### A. WHATEVER IS TRUE

Paul’s circumscription (def: “the property of having limitation in space as opposed to omnipresence or infiniteness”) and understanding of truth is that which is confined to God’s revelation in Holy Writ (cf. Romans 1:18). As a Public Servant you can rely on a poll or consensus for ascertaining public opinion; one can rely on science or psychological data, but be sure of this: sources of truth apart from the Scriptures possess varying levels of certitude: Keep in mind that polls change daily. Science once believed the world was flat. Shock treatments were once routinely administered. Bloodletting was thought to cure disease. Doctors used to perform frontal lobotomies. But the Bible is immutable and veracious because it is breathed by God Himself (1Thessalonians 2:13; 2Timothy 3:16-17).

**WISE IS THE LEADER WHO DWELLS ON SCRIPTURE — WHO POSSESSES A LIFELONG HUNGER FOR ITS MIGHTY FORTRESS OF ALWAYS-RELIABLE, ALWAYS-CERTAIN TRUTH**

The prophet Jeremiah bespeaks of his understanding of this, his manifest personal discipline, where in 15:16 of his book he states, “Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Your name, o Lord God of hosts.” Have you been called by God to public office? Are His truths foremost in your mind and in your votes? John 17:17 is an apt summary of this mental orientation, this absolute presupposition relative to intellectual well-being and proper functionality. Jesus states, “Sanctify them in truth; Your word is truth.” What a tragic disconnect — a tragic testimony too I might add — when someone names the name of Christ in the Capitol, but His truths are not characteristic of his or her thinking or the way he or she acts or votes.

In the wisdom of Proverbs, in a largely verbal culture, truth had to do with true speech as opposed to a lie or deceptive speech (cf. Proverbs 22:21). This insight makes for
another practical application point: Go to great lengths to discipline your speech in terms of truthfulness. Do not exaggerate, speculate, provide false impressions or mislead. Do not be disingenuous or opportunistic in your speech. Remember the definition of disingenuous: “lacking in candor”; also: “giving a false appearance of simple frankness.” In addition, do not talk too much (cf. James 1:19; 3:5). Conversely, “...GIRD YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH” (Ephesians 6:14). The only way I know of doing this is to develop a voracious appetite for God’s Word!

B. WHATEVER IS HONORABLE

This Greek word here for honorable is semnos and is found elsewhere only in the Pastoral Epistles where it is a descriptor essential to leaders. The idea of this virtue is for one to possess mental “seriousness, sublimity, and dignity.” It is the sister idea of worthiness. In context, one cannot allow his mind to dwell on things that are unworthy of his time and attention, or baser things beneath them. Avoid the profane and dwell on the sacred. Choose only high-protein items from the menu of a fallen world. Consume only dignified content versus junk-food weight-gainers like soap operas, gossip sessions, pornography, or sounds that are something other than music. Those things serve to rot one’s mind, not buoy it. Per the Lightfoot quote, these first two virtues are absolutes, the non-negotiable foundational aspects of sound mental discipline. In that 2Timothy 1:7 promises believers a sound mind from God, truth and honor serve as absolutes to keep it that way! Choose this moment to upload into your computer only truthful and honorable content!

C. WHATEVER IS RIGHT

Given the bedrock mental commitments to scriptural truth, and being a person of seriousness, sublimity, and dignity, what is the right or just thing that you should choose to dwell on? Dikaios carries the idea of thinking only on what is just and proper. Is your mind disciplined to think about and conclude to do the right thing when there is no one else watching, or to whom you are accountable? To illustrate, do you choose to vote pro-life because the Scripture says that is right? Or do you do what is wrong according to the truths of Scripture? This is a remarkable character quality of the chairman of the board of the ministry I serve; I have known him for nearly 40 years, since my college days, and he consistently thinks and determines to do what is right based on the truths of Scripture. If one lacks the personal conviction to do what is right apart from accountability, then when in private he will sin. Do you possess a strong discipline to dwell on and do what is scripturally right no matter what the consequences? Therein is a virtue of a godly mind and a godly person. God always blesses that!

D. WHATEVER IS PURE
Learning to Better Discipline Your Mind

Pure (Hagnos) means “holy, chaste.” In the Book of Proverbs (15:26) the equivalent Hebrew word (per the LXX [Greek Septuagint]) is tahor. The word stands in contrast to the thoughts of the wicked. Notice this here: Evil plans are an abomination to the Lord, but pleasant words are pure. Thus the idea of dwelling on whatever is pure has the connotation of focusing one’s mind on things that are not besmirched or tainted or in some way evil. Cease such mind-wandering ventures beloved public servant friends! Don’t go there; nip it in the bud!

In the Philippian epistle, pure stands in contrast to those whose motives and plans were impure so as to cause distress to the Apostle Paul (1:17). This is the habit of not dwelling on or devising evil toward another in one’s mind. Disciplined godly minds dwell on their presenting circumstances with a determination to do what is right and pure per scriptural principles.

Rather than think about the hurts of people from the past, choose to dwell on ideas about the future and what could be!

Very helpful to this, earlier on in the epistle, Paul gives us a powerful insight into his way of thinking: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead (3:13). The disciplined mind occupies itself with big ideas in the future, versus small people in the past. It is sober to the reality that the past is finite and the future is infinite! Such thinking leads to much success and accomplishment relative to the hand one has been dealt in a fallen, often disappointing world; for sure people will fail and betray you, but how you respond is everything. The best way to get over past hurts is not to keep bringing them up in your mind; think about something else that is pure.

E. WHATEVER IS LOVELY

The NJB (New Jerusalem Bible) captures the sense of meaning very well when it translates the above as “everything that we love.” Many commentators recognize that this is a broad, open statement, a big tent, versus addressing biblical morality only. Accordingly one’s mind should dwell on the things that are admirable by the world at large such as the works of Beethoven or Mother Teresa, a scientific invention or a medicinal breakthrough, be they accomplished or authored by believers or not. Such are lovely and admirable things and worthy of praise. Let your mind dwell also on these things! How many Christians do you know who are critical of everything, coming across as morally superior and condescending, offering little praise of others? Do you see the good in others, or in your mind is everyone else below your standards? Are you the only lovely thing in the world? Such a mentality is contrary to what this clause teaches. Believers
should give praise where praise is due and celebrate the virtuous image and greatness of God as manifest in and through mankind, both regenerate and not. The excellence, achievements and merits of all of mankind are praiseworthy because they illumine a responsible omniscient Creator who has left His imprimatur on all of mankind. Enjoying *whatever is lovely* is a biblically conciliatory approbation, an apt illustration of the breadth of mental outlook in an otherwise fallen world, said to be suitable by the Apostle.

At least two other passages reinforce this idea of positive attitudinal breadth: Romans 12:15 states in general, *Rejoice with those who rejoice*. Galatians 6:10 states, *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith*. Are you given to mental and outward praise when you see something that is lovely? Don’t be one of those Evangelicals who is always angry.

**F. WHATSOEVER IS OF GOOD REPUTE**

This relates “to the kind of conduct that is worth considering because it is well spoken of by people in general.” Akin to the broadness of *whatever is lovely* these are virtues generally respected in the virtuositites of God’s Creation, such as respect for others, manners, kindness, consideration, listening, etc. The mature believer need *dwell on regard one another as more important than yourselves* (Philippians 2:3). Is your mental outlook, speech and conduct symphonically pleasing in its overall demeanor?

**G. IF THERE IS ANY EXCELLENCE**

*Excellence* (*arête*) “moral goodness” is a seldom used word by Paul imported by him from secular Greek moralizing culture. As used by him, this is the basis for mental disciplines expressing themselves in noble actions. O’Brien suggests that the better translation is therefore “moral excellence” providing a more codified meaning. I.e. the contextual meaning relates to one keeping with God’s overall goodness in his thinking. Goodness is an attribute of God and a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Extending outwardly from the foundation of *truth* and *honor*, herein we find ourselves plumbing Paul’s multifaceted descriptors of the believer’s intended and ensuing radiant demeanor.

**H. AND IF ANYTHING WORTHY OF PRAISE**

This word relates to the mental discipline of praising others in one’s mind and with one’s mouth. This is the kind of conduct that wins the respect of others; such a mentality is becoming of God and others — and it spells influence for the believing Public Servant. Those who name the name of Christ are to *have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5).
II. CONCLUSION

In both Ephesians 5:2 and Philippians 4:18 believers with the aforementioned virtues are termed a fragrant aroma. This is beautiful summary terminology of the passage under study. Unfortunately for the cause of Christ and the advance of the kingdom, too many non-believers accurately refer to too many believers with the exact opposite phraseology. The virtues of a godly mind as described here are not only imbuing the attributes of God, but depict an overall proper attitude toward life. Herein described is not a critical, condescending, stuffy self-righteousness that proves to be such a stench to unbelievers. Keep in mind the kindness of God leads you to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Philippians 1:10 adds regarding the believer’s mental outlook, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ. The Greek word for sincere (eilikrines) means “judged by sunlight, unalloyed, pure.” More literally it can be translated as “without wax.” The word was used of a potter whose pot cracks were not waxed over. I.e. others could see the blemishes because they were unpainted. Paul is stating that believers who are a fragrant aroma are unpretentious and in possession of a breadth of mind that non-believers find genuine and attractive.

Do you have praise for things virtuous in believers and non-believers alike? The disciplined, godly mind of Philippians 4:8 depicts an attractive, real person who possesses a Christ-like spirit. May God grow us in this way.

1 Lightfoot, J.B. St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians (Hendrickson publishers: October 1999) p161
2 Fee, Gordon D. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) p 418
3 O’Brien, Peter T. The Epistle to the Philippians, A Commentary on the Greek Text (Carlisle: Eerdmans, 1991) p 506

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