



“Thoughts Be Holy”

*Matthew 6:25–27; Romans 12:1–2;
Philippians 4:4–13; 1 Peter 5:6–11*

Living with God -- mindfully.

I suppose we have all tried to blank out our minds on one occasion or another. To think of nothing . . . zero . . . zilch. And every time we’ve tried it, we’ve failed. Something is always going on up there. And if you are like me, it is often unhelpful.

So, as we continue our series on making every

moment holy, we are going to talk about pushing unhelpful thoughts out of our minds, such as worry and anxiety, so we can make more room for God. For when I hear that we are to make meals, families, and even our thoughts holy, I hear a call to live every moment intentionally and mindfully aware of God’s presence. Paul tells the saints (believers) in Thessalonica to do exactly that, to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). He can’t mean spending 24/7 on our knees or in a prayer closet. Rather, he means for us to live every moment aware of God’s presence and in communion with our maker.

How do we do this? By pushing away the needless junk that so often consumes our minds, making room for “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable . . . [whatever] is excellent or praiseworthy” (Philippians 4:8).

Still, you say, pushing away anxiety is a lot easier said than done. Remember Covid and the rest!!?? Perhaps we can take comfort in knowing that overwhelming anxiety is nothing new, especially in the world of the Bible.

Anxiety among the ancients

For the ancients, the heavens were populated with countless gods and goddesses, any of whom might take a disliking toward you or your neighbors on a whim. The pantheon of the pagan gods was like one big soap opera, far removed from any human control. The gods would do what they wanted, when they wanted. People coped with the whims of the gods in different ways. Some, like the Epicureans, decided that since they couldn’t control their capricious gods, they’d simply grab all the pleasure and happiness they could in life.¹ Others, like the Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called “contentment.”²

Far from promoting some sort of detached self-sufficiency, Peter urges the Christians to throw their anxieties and worries upon God, for it is God who cares for these believers. It is God who will “restore, support, strengthen, and establish” the believers, even as they discipline themselves and stay vigilant against the work of Satan. Peterson paraphrases Peter this way: “this generous God . . . will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does.”

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as “content” (*autarkes* in the Greek, v.12). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he spoke to them about Jesus Christ. But Paul always meant something different too; there was always a Christian perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the “content” person couldn’t be harmed by the emotions or

¹ Epicurus taught that since we have no life other than this one, the good life is the life bringing the most pleasure and happiness now. It is unfortunate that “Epicureanism” has come to be associated with a profligate and luxurious lifestyle. This is not what Epicurus had in mind. He led a simple, honest life, believing that justice, honesty, and simplicity were the truest paths to a happy and pleasurable life.

² For Stoics, humans become virtuous through knowledge, enabling us to live in harmony with nature and achieve a profound sense of happiness, freedom from emotion, and detachment from the turmoil of life – to be content and self-sufficient in all things.

slights or needs of others. Obviously, Paul means something quite different; contentment is resting in the Lord, whatever comes.

Paul, you see, is writing from prison and he knows that he may soon be executed. Nonetheless, his letter to the Philippians is filled with joy. He has learned to be content in all things, even facing imprisonment and execution.

How has Paul learned this? What is his “secret”? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. Paul’s secret is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist’s portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he will “fear no evil,” confident that God will lead him to green pastures and still water. Paul’s cup will always overflow – in all circumstances. He knows that he will dwell in God’s house forever, because nothing – “not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul’s joyful contentment and Peter’s and our own.

“Do not worry”

And so, both Peter and Paul lead us back to Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel. Don’t worry, Jesus says. Yeah right. Will worrying add a single hour to your life? Well no . . . but still. For too much of my life, I never really heard Jesus on this.

Perhaps that explains why I paid so little attention to the last verse: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” I paid little attention, despite this verse being the climax of the whole section! In the preceding verses, Jesus points us toward this great truth: the kingdom of God is to be the first priority in our lives and, if so, all else will follow. Our energies and passions and devotions are to be poured into the kingdom. In the Greek, “strive” is an imperative, a must do – we are to keep striving. This is not about a hoped-for-someday coming of God’s kingdom but about its reality today, for our own lives. D.A. Hagner puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew: “This imperative means that one should make the kingdom the center of one’s existence and thus experience the rule of God fully in one’s heart.” Even this is a bit abstract for me. How do we experience God’s rule in our hearts?

The kingdom of God is exactly what the words say: it is the place where God is king, where God rules. Thus, experiencing the rule of God in our hearts is a bit like this. I am a citizen of the United States. I try as best as I can to live according to the laws of the U.S. If I move to another country, even a lawless country, I can still choose to hold the laws of the U.S. in my heart, to be governed by them even though I am no longer in the U.S. I can forswear thievery even in a land in which it is condoned. Even though we live in a world that is plagued by tragedy, violence, illness, materialism, and selfishness we can choose to live according to God’s law. In other words, we are to keep striving to live according to God’s moral will, for that is true righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount is an extended block of Jesus’ teachings about the nature of God’s will for our lives, about what it means to be righteous, to do right in God’s sight.

Jesus says if we strive first for God’s kingdom, then “all these things will be given to you as well.” What sorts of things? What we eat. What we drink. What we wear. (v. 31). Though I doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth, I also suspect he wasn’t speaking of dinner at a four-star restaurant, Moët-Chandon, and designer clothes. We have a way of making “wants” into seeming “needs.” To an extent, this is a good thing. Increasing standards of living have resulted in numerous benefits for millions of people. But, still, we seem to chase an unreachable goal. No matter how far along we get, we just redefine the target further away. Somebody always has a bigger house or a more luxurious car. George Will wrote, a need “is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want,” leading to “a blurring of needs and wants.” The result is what he calls the “tyranny of the unnecessary.” And it is this very tyranny that keeps us from sharing in the contentment enjoyed by Paul. He has forsaken the tyranny of the unnecessary and its attendant anxieties for the abundant life in the kingdom. So must we.

Finally -- our helper, our counselor: the Holy Spirit

Intentionally living in the awareness of God's presence does not come naturally to us. The "with-God" life is neither obvious nor easy. Indeed, much of our modern and post-modern culture strives for the "without-God" life, thinking that we can meet our deepest desires and needs ourselves.

But we cannot. As the writer of Ecclesiastes put it long ago, a life without God is nothing but vapor, with no lasting meaning or purpose.

Left to ourselves, such vapor would be all we have. But we are not in this alone. God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, empowers and comforts and encourages all those who have placed their faith in Christ. It is God who has made us, not we ourselves. And it is God who calls us to him and offers us the fulfillment we so desperately seek.

Our long-term neglect of the Holy Spirit, thinking of him, when we even do so, as something akin to electricity or an energy drink has impoverished us. We say we want to be "spiritual" or pursue "spiritual growth," but we imagine that we can do so if we just find the right program or the right guru – rather than acknowledging that it is the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, whom we must embrace and allow to work with us and through us as we strive to be the people God has re-created us to be. There is no other way. This is God's Way.

By pushing our worries aside and thinking on the higher things, we will find that our most deeply held beliefs, our core convictions, are being transformed. We will see our families, our work, our lives, our world differently.

This is not the work of a day or a week or even a year, but of a lifetime. A life intentionally lived in the presence of God is the life that Jesus hopes for us and expects of us.

Excellence and the Virtues

Have you ever wondered what God thinks of baseball? Personally, I think God enjoys a well-turned double-play! Here is what I mean.

In Philippians 4:8, when Paul urges the Philippians to dwell upon the things of "excellence," he uses a Greek noun that he never uses in the rest of his letters, *arete*. In the NT world, the meaning of *arete* was very broad, encompassing all virtues, all excellence, and all goodness. It was a word that certainly conveyed moral excellence, but also more and I think Paul uses it for that larger sense.

God is good – indeed, God defines it in his very being. All the goodness and all the excellence and all the virtues in God's creation point us toward God; it is all to God's glory. In the goodness of this world, we can glimpse the kingdom of God. Therefore, Christians seek excellence in all we do – a well-done project at the office, a well-delivered lesson in the elementary classroom, a well-prepared meal – all this glorifies God. Will we be excellent in all we do? At least speaking for myself – of course not! But there is great joy in seeking after excellence and this is the path to which Paul points us.

The Greeks certainly advocated the virtuous life. The Greek philosophers urged people toward honor and truth and justice and purity and goodness. They understood that such virtues were essential to a truly fulfilling life. They would speak of the supreme Good and the importance of humans resembling the Good.

We, of course, speak differently. We proclaim that God is not only the Good, but also personal and fully revealed in Jesus Christ. We don't talk about our resemblance to the Good, but we do talk about our own desire for Christlikeness. When we dwell upon the virtuous, we are dwelling upon God and the things of God. N.T. Wright had this to say about raising our eyes, "How are you going to celebrate the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the places in the world which humans have made ugly? How are you going to fill your mind instead with all the things that God has given us to be legitimately pleased with, and to enjoy and celebrate?"
