

St. Paul was a man of the world and he was a man of God. He was both, in the best sense. For he recognized the virtues of the world, qualities of character which all people praise (but few can live by), and then he showed Christians how to call them their own. This morning we're going to talk about these worldly Christian virtues and about what they have to do with our walk with God and with one another.

## OPENING PRAYER

### PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9

**Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. <sup>9</sup>Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.**

Please close your eyes with me for a moment. Now remember in your mind's eye a winter morning in January; it's cold and rainy, and a gust of icy wind cuts right through you to the bone. Almost makes you shiver to envision such a setting, doesn't it? Now imagine you're with your best friend; maybe you're having lunch together; you remember one of your favorite times with that person; you're sharing a secret, or a joy, or a good joke. How do you feel? It's a good sensation, for you feel loved and cared for.

Our imagination is one of our most powerful tools, and St. Paul wants us to use it for our benefit and God's glory when he writes, **“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. And the God of peace will be with you” (v.8).**

Paul was great with lists. Elsewhere he gave us lists of sins, and spiritual gifts, and spiritual body armor, and so forth. Here he gives us a list of traditional virtues, moral qualities esteemed by all people, believers and unbelievers alike.

He said we should “**think about**” these virtues, that we should meditate on or imagine ourselves being true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable because if we do, they will become ours.

No one argues with this list. Indeed, we could add to it additional virtues, such as humility and dignity and honor, and then we could give examples of people who actually live by them, who live out what they believe.

Our list might include people in our own lives – friends and family – and it might include famous people from history. We might include in our list favorite Bible characters, people like Joseph, Samuel, Nehemiah, or Ruth. There might be New Testament characters like Paul and John, Nicodemus and Tabitha and, of course, Jesus. Perhaps we’d remember the saints of the first 300 years of the church and how they died for their faith. These are all people whose lives were consistent with their words, people who walked the talk.

After we made our list, we would then put it into a drawer, and we’d forget about it, going about our lives as though nothing had changed! This is the reason why Martin Luther didn’t like the stories about the saints, for our tendency is to make them into celebrities to be venerated instead of fellow Christians to be imitated.

That’s what the world does: It venerates good people who make a difference, people who have the discipline and good sense not to break things in an already broken world, people who rise above the fray and speak truth when living in the fog of indifference and indecision would be more convenient.

But Christians have a higher calling: It is our responsibility to be these people of good character who challenge the status quo, to be the responsible ones, to be the ones others admire and seek to imitate. Wouldn’t be something if the world looked at the church and said, “If everyone imitated the behavior of Christians, we’d have peace on earth!”

Indeed, the Great Commission will be fulfilled when we are like Christ to the world, when we take Paul’s list of virtues and live it, when we are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable.

Let’s consider what we’re up against first. We all believe in these virtues, but we live in a world with a set of values which contradicts them. The anti-gospel values of relativism, materialism, hedonism, individualism, and a whole bunch of other “-

isms” are absorbed into our minds and hearts through “cultural osmosis” (Fee). We don’t even see it coming, and we’re infected with the virus of the “-isms” which saps the life from our souls, the life of Jesus which make us shine as lights to the world.

St. Paul’s genius was that he saw the same thing in his time, and he showed his fellow Christians how to overcome the world and how to be like Jesus in their day to day lives, how to discern what was going on around them by seeing them through Christ.

All along, throughout this letter and his other writings, Paul pointed to the work of Jesus such that when he wrote that we should meditate on what is “**true**,” he intended that we would remember that Jesus is “**true**”; he’s true to us in his promise to forgive our sins and blesses us with eternal life. This is the truth that has set you and me free.

Paul also provided a warning. He wrote to the church in Rome that “**the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth.... (for they have) exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:18,25).**

In order to be truly “**true**” we must be careful not to accidentally absorb the world’s values, always aware of the threat of “cultural osmosis.”

When Paul commands us to think of that which is “**noble**,” we reflect on how even though the world is absolutely shameless, Jesus is “**noble**,” that he is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and that he has called us to be fellow heirs of his Kingdom.

When Paul writes that we should ponder that which is “**right**,” we remember our Lord Jesus who was right in his proclamation of the love of God, that he was right when he said his death was for the whole world, and that he was right when he declared victory over death and the devil with his resurrection.

When Paul commands us to think about that which is “**pure**,” we ponder the pure and holy, the perfect unblemished lamb who offered himself as a sacrifice on the altar of God for us.

In the Bible, to say that something is pure is to say that it has not been touched by what is evil. And I'm not just talking about the devil. We read in Proverbs that **"Evil plans are an abomination to the Lord, but pleasant words are pure"** (Proverbs 15:26).

Our plans are rooted in our minds and hearts. They may be evil or they may be pure. To meditate on the purity of Christ's love for us on the Cross blots out the former and brings forth that which is a reflection of his character.

When Paul tells us to set our thoughts on that which is **"lovely,"** we redirect our eyes from the ugliness of the world to Jesus, for who is more **"lovely"** than he who showed us his love and graciousness through his forgiveness and acceptance?

When Paul encourages us to meditate on things that are **"admirable,"** we remember how Jesus is **"admirable,"** even giving his life for a world which even now despises him.

In other words, all these things which Paul tells us to think about can be used for our benefit, for our walk with God and one another in so much as we use the Gospel of Christ as our guide.

When I was 13-years old I moved and enrolled in a new school. There were three guys who were the terror of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and they bullied me the new kid, pushing me around in the hallways after class, threatening me, that kind of thing. One day they were harassing me, and a fellow band member came to my rescue and chased them off. His name was Ron, and he was my hero. Over the next few weeks, we became best friends. We did everything together, and it wasn't long before he and his family became like my second family for the next three years.

Ron was smart, popular, and funny. I felt honored that he chose me to be his buddy. But he was also proud, and he was sarcastic. He had a tongue that could rip you to shreds. I was glad I was not the brunt of his wicked sense of humor. And I started to emulate him. I admired him so much, I became like him.

Which worked when we were together. But then I had to go home. And I'm sure you can imagine how pleased my stepmom was when I tried some of my newfound condescending, sarcastic, demeaning jests on her! Not. Indeed, she was infuriated, and she'd scream, "You're never going to see Ron ever again!" For

she saw my character was being shaped by another character which she didn't like.

After his list of virtues, Paul gave the people a reminder, a command, and a promise. He wrote, **“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (v.9).**

Paul reminded the reader about what he'd previously written, words describing his suffering and imprisonment and his devotion to Christ. And then he commanded them to do what he had been doing; **“put it into practice,”** he said. And then he blessed them with God's peace, the Lord's shalom.

Now please close your eyes again with me for a moment. Imagine a person, perhaps a character of the Bible whom you admire, maybe Joseph or Ruth, or Paul or Mary Magdalene, or hold in your mind's eye a family member or a friend, a colleague or a pastor who lived their life in a way that reflects the virtues Paul listed. Imagine how this person would speak truth to power with gentleness and clarity. Envision how they would rise above a temptation prayerfully. Consider how they would do the right thing even though it would not be the most expedient or profitable thing. Think about how their faith is unwavering despite the scoffers all around. Reflect on how they share their love without conditions. See in your heart how their outward behavior is admirable.

Hold that picture in your mind's eye, and please say with me, “Dear Lord, help me to put into practice that which is true, that which is noble, that which is right, that which is pure, that which is lovely, and that which is admirable, and let your peace rest on me, in Jesus' name. Amen.

This week let us hold in our hearts, Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. He died for us; he rose from the grave for us, and one day he will return for us.

This week let us strive to be ambassadors of this Gospel in our thoughts, our words, and in our deeds.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.