

# Controlling Runaway Thoughts

The Peace of God Part 7  
Philippians 4:8 5/6/2017

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Summary: Get control of obsessive thoughts by forcing them through each of these 8 standards one at a time, looking at a thought and asking, “Is it true? Is it noble?” etc. Take what is true, noble, etc. into consideration in all your thinking. This is essential for success in putting what you learn into practice. The reasons, motives, bases, etc. are essential and should not be disconnected from the commands.

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**Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, 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. 9 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.**

## Introduction

### Obsessive Thoughts

If you were to describe what your thought life is like using a single picture, which would best illustrate what goes on in your mind - a big, jumbled, chaotic pile of crayons, or the ones neatly organized in rows in a box?

We are in a section of Scripture dealing with the subject of anxiety. And most of us, when we have high anxiety, tend to have thoughts that are more like that first picture – a whole lot of confused, disorganized, chaotic thoughts racing at 100 mph. And it’s hard to get control of them because you’re preoccupied with whatever this problem is you’re dealing with. Preoccupation is a strange thing. When

you get preoccupied with something, it takes zero effort to think about that thing. If you don't put forth any effort at all, your mind will just take off thinking about that thing. In fact, it takes all your effort just to stop thinking about that thing, but even then, the thoughts come right back. It can get to the point where you wish you could just have a break from these thoughts, but there is no escape.

It might be thoughts about some conflict you're having with someone, maybe some horrible memories that won't stop rising up in your mind, maybe worry about some future thing, or distress over something in your life that you wish were different, constant thoughts about your weight or health or about food or sex or some addiction, or a relationship.

Psychologists would call each of those by a different name, but they all have the common underlying problem of obsessive, preoccupying, nonstop thoughts that dominate your mind. And if something dominates your thinking, it dominates your life. So how do you regain control of your mind in times of stress, so that your thoughts are like that second picture – ordered, controlled, calm, and useful? That's what Paul is going to teach us in this passage.

## Review

To refresh your memory on the context – Paul is teaching the people the character qualities they need in order to have peace, harmony, and unity in the church. You have to have the right relationship with God, with people, and with circumstances. With respect to God, we rejoice in the Lord (v.4). With respect to people, we need to be reasonable (v.5). And with respect to circumstances, we must have peace, rather than anxiety. And Paul is especially concerned about that third one, so this section on anxiety is a lot longer than the first two (vv.6-9). He really wants us to understand how to overcome anxiety.

If you were here last 2 times, you remember that the main thing he said about overcoming anxiety has to do with prayer. Use the emotional energy of the anxiety to enable you to really pray earnestly. And when you pray, make sure you pray with gratitude. That was last time, and if you weren't here for that one, I'd strongly urge you to listen to that study. Understanding what gratitude is and how to have it is so incredibly important for the Christian life.

And I didn't mention this last time, but if you want an example of that in Scripture, take a look at Jonah 2. Jonah gets thrown into a stormy sea, he sinks down, and is at the point of drowning, and in what seem like his final moments, he cries out to God to save him, but he does so with thanksgiving.

**Jonah 2:5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ... 7 “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. ... 9 But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. ... Salvation comes from the LORD.”**

Can you imagine drowning, and in your panic you cry out to God with thanksgiving? He prayed with thanksgiving even though he didn't know how God would answer his prayer yet. Unfortunately, he was a lot like me and he was inconsistent. He did great in that instance, but 2 chapters later his shade plant died and he became practically suicidal. And that's how we are – we exchange the joy of gratitude for the misery of self-pity. Many of us spent more time this past month complaining than giving thanks, and it did us no good whatsoever. God wants your prayer times to be like Christmas morning – not just a time of hopeful asking, but also joyful receiving. Enjoy his favor toward you as you pray for what's on your heart, and respond back to him with favor and love – that's gratitude.

And when you pray that way, the peace of God that is beyond understanding will guard your heart and mind. God will guard your inner man from the ravages of anxiety. You can rest in him because of the promise in v.5 - **The Lord is near**. So in times of anxiety, pray hard, pray with gratitude, and then rest in his nearness and protection. I heard about an American in WW2 who was captured by the Germans at sea, and he was put in the hold of the ship. A pretty stressful situation, right? But he remembered Ps.121:4 that says the one who watches over us never sleeps. And so he said to God, “Lord, no sense in both of us staying up,” and he went to sleep, trusting in God to watch over him.

## Regain Control by Using this Filter

So all of that is review – that’s how you deal with anxiety through prayer. But what do you do when you have prayed hard, but the thoughts just keep coming up? Or you can’t pray because your thoughts are such a jumbled, chaotic mess? That’s where v.8 comes in. Verse 8 give us some very practical wisdom on how to get a handle on runaway, obsessive thoughts. And not just obsessive thoughts, but any kind of problem in our thought life. What he gives us in this verse is a protective grid to run our thoughts through to filter out the harmful ones that are causing all the problem. It’s crucial that we learn to filter the thoughts that come into our head. Most people have almost no immigration policy when it comes to their thoughts. Their brain just has wide open borders that allow any and every incoming thought full access without any kind of vetting. They have dead bolt locks on the front door of their house, but the doorway to their mind just hangs wide open 24/7. Any thought can just wander in and make itself at home whenever it wants – even if it’s a destructive, damaging, terrorist kind of thought. Whatever the people around them are talking about, whatever pops up on their computer screen or on the movie screen , whatever random thoughts just arise in their mind out of nowhere, thoughts that Satan or demons might suggest – everything gets in. And so their thought life is like a piece of paper in a whirlwind – just getting blown here and there and wherever by whatever forces may be acting on it without any ability to direct itself or resist an influence. And the way to recover from that is to use the filter in v.8.

If you run your anxious thoughts through this filter, it will put all the crayons in the box. Instead of the cacophony of discord and noise in your head, your thinking will be like a beautiful orchestra. Instead of thoughts flying around in your head like ants on an anthill, your thoughts will be like a powerful army marching in formation. And the result will be that instead of damaging your soul and your life, your thoughts will be useful and powerful for good purposes. So let’s look at the filter.

### The Filter

**Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy<sup>1</sup>—think about such things.**

### Meant to be Considered Individually

Notice that Paul repeats the word **whatever** each time. Instead of just rattling off the list (whatever is true, noble, right, pure...) he repeats that phrase **whatever is** before each word. When you want the reader to take the whole list as one, big, single concept, then you just give it quickly with no words in between. But when there are words in between each item like we have here, the purpose is to make the reader slow down and consider each one individually. So I think what Paul wants us to do is to take our thoughts, and hold them up against the standard of each one of these items in the list one at a time. So this verse is like an 8-stage filter. First you filter out the thoughts that aren’t true, then the thoughts that aren’t noble, then the ones that aren’t right, etc.

### *Memorize*

And to do that, you’re going to have to memorize this list. You’re not always going to have a Bible with you in times of anxiety, so you need to have this list committed to memory. And it’s not hard. It’s just 8 words, so let’s do it right now. It’s easiest for me to say it in groups of 3, 3, and then the last 2. So

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<sup>1</sup> In my judgment, too much is made by the commentators of the fact that the terms in this list are not common Pauline terms. It seems unlikely to me that the original readers would think, “Most of these terms are infrequently used in Paul’s other letters, therefore he must be making a point here about engaging pagan culture.” The explanation could be as simple as the possibility that Paul was using some other source. Perhaps this was part of Timothy’s contribution to the letter - a list that he received from his grandmother when he was growing up, or perhaps Paul simply wanted to use terms that the world used for virtue so we would have character that not only pleases God but that also shuts the mouths of critics.

your mind starts going off on some worry, or thinking about something someone did that hurt you, or any other kind of obsessive thoughts, take a moment to very intentionally ask these 8 questions:

## True

### *Corresponding to Reality*

First, is it true? You're dealing with a relationship conflict, or some major stress, just stop and ask, "Is what I'm thinking right now actually true?" When we get stressed or worried, it's easy for our minds to drift into assumptions, "what-if's", inferences, possibilities – and not much reality. In fact, the greater the anxiety, the farther we tend to wander from reality. If it's a relationship conflict, we start thinking through possible bad motives the other person probably has. You think you know what he did what he did, but you don't really know for a fact that it's true.

I think of the story of the guy who needed to borrow a jack from his neighbor. On the way over there he's thinking, *It's about dinner time – I'm probably going to interrupt his dinner. If I were him, I would be annoyed if someone came and bugged me during dinner to dig through my garage for a jack. Then he'll probably worry about whether I'm going to do any damage to it, because my truck is a little heavier than what his jack is supposed to lift. I'm sure he'll act all friendly, but he'll probably be irritated at me, and from now on he'll have an attitude that I owe him a favor* And the more he thinks about all that the madder he gets at his neighbor, so when he finally gets to his door he pounds on it, the guy opens the door, and he says, "You can just keep your stupid jack if that's the way you're going to be!" and storms off. That's humorous, but isn't that what happens? We may not come right out and yell at the person, but we do allow our emotions toward them to sour – all because of things we've imagined that we don't even know for sure are true.

The same goes for worry. We start imagining worst-case scenarios, conjuring up various painful outcomes until we're all upset – but none of it is reality. It's assumption, conjecture, maybe exaggeration, but not information that we know to be true. If we would stop and ask, "Do I know these things to be true?" the answer would have to be no.

The same goes for our opinions. Someone disagrees with your opinion, and you argue as if your opinion were fact. You get into an argument with your spouse about money or discipline of the kids or the house. "We should do this!" "No, we should do that!" "No, my way is going to have the best outcome – not your way." And you just state that as if it were fact even though it's an opinion.

The next time you have a disagreement with your spouse, try saying to God the same thing you said to your spouse – in the same tone of voice. "God, I'm telling you – this is the best way. This will have the best outcome. Here's what will happen if we do it her way, and here's what will happen if we do it my way..." You can't do it. When we talk to God, we're all humble about it - "Oh God, only you know the future. I know I could be wrong. Is this the best way?" Something about talking to an omniscient, perfectly wise, infinitely good being makes you a little less dogmatic about your opinion being absolute truth. But when we're not praying, we turn just about everything we think into fact and we don't differentiate between opinion and truth.

And don't let your emotions off the hook either. Ask yourself this: "Do my emotions right now reflect what is true about God? Or do my thoughts and feelings right now indicate that I've fallen for some of the enemy's lies?" Lies about God (He's sick of you – doesn't really like you much – he's not going to take care of you – you don't matter much to him – or he'll turn a blind eye to sin, you don't have to fear him). Lies about yourself – making your motives out to be better than they are. Lies about sin (I have the right to indulge angry thoughts or self-pity because of ...). Your emotions always reflect what you really believe. So it's good to ask, "What are my emotions telling me about what my heart really believes? And is it truth?"

It's amazing the impact just this first question can have on anxious thoughts. I think it's first because it's so powerful. It was actually a few months ago when I first started studying this passage, and at the time I was going through some really distressing, painful circumstances with relationships that were

causing a lot of those out-of-control thoughts I was talking about earlier. And when I started using this list to filter my thoughts, it's amazing how much impact this first one had. Just the question, "Is it true?" ended up filtering out so many of my anxious thoughts that I hardly needed the rest of the list. And I found that just asking the question was all I had to do. As soon as those thoughts were exposed as not corresponding to reality, they just kind of evaporated. I think you'll find this first question will solve a good 75% of the problem. Put up some guardrails of truth in your mind and resolve that from this point forward, *I'm going to stay within the bounds of what I know is true.*

### ***The Truth of God's Word***

We need to stay in the realm of reality. But that's not all. There's more to it. When you see the word *true* in Scripture, it usually refers specifically to the truth of God's Word. So the idea is not just that we think about reality, but we think about reality from the perspective of the Truth (the Word of God). We need to think about true things in true ways.

This week the House passed a health care bill. That's a fact, but you can look at that fact from the perspective of a secular person, or you can look at it from the perspective of God's Word. And you're not thinking in the realm of truth unless you do the latter – think about true things, and think about them biblically. Think about them the way God thinks about them. We need to immerse ourselves in Scripture so thoroughly that it shapes the way we think about politics, parenting, household spending, fashion, food, sports, the weather, traffic, work – everything we think about.

### **Noble**

Second question: Is it noble? The word means dignified, august, majestic, honorable, worthy, venerable, esteemed, awe-inspiring, that which commands respect. When you're anxious or you're in a conflict or your thoughts are out of control, stop and ask, "Are these thoughts that I'm having noble?" If people could see my thoughts right now, would they command respect? Would people be inspired by what they saw? If not, begin searching for some noble things to think about. Go to the Word of God, and let the high, lofty, majestic, venerable concepts there run through your mind.

### **Right**

This word can mean either *righteous, just, or fair*. When you have anxiety, especially anxiety related to relational conflicts (which is the context of this chapter), the tendency is to become very unfair in your thinking. You take snippets of what the person said and blow them out of proportion – beyond what the person really meant. You assign literal meaning to things that they didn't mean literally. Twist what they said to come out different than what they meant. You assume bad motives. That's the kind of thing we do when we have anxiety. The more anxiety we have, the more unfairly we tend to treat people. So ask yourself, "As I sit back and examine the thoughts going through my head right now, am I being fair to the person?" Are my thoughts righteous? They pleasing to God?

### **Pure**

Are my thoughts pure? Or are they contaminated by sin? And not just sexual sin, but any sin. Sexually immoral thoughts will contaminate your thoughts, but so will angry thoughts, or thoughts of suspicion of motives or selfishness or greed or complaining or discontent or lack of faith or doubt of God's Word or selfishness or pride or fear of man. All of those kinds of thoughts contaminate your soul with sin and are disgusting to God.

It times of great anxiety, stop and ask, "Is what I'm thinking right now pure in the sight of God? Or am I contaminating my heart with these thoughts?"

## Lovely

This word means *that which inspires or calls forth love*. If people could see your thoughts, would they fall in love with what they see? When you are anxious, ask, "If people could see these thoughts, would they say, 'My, how lovely?'" "How beautiful. How attractive these thoughts are." If not, then ask yourself, "What kinds of thoughts *would* be beautiful and attractive right now?"

## Admirable

This word means *winsome, reputable, winning favor, that which is admired*. If my thoughts were put up on a giant screen for everyone to see right now, would anybody admire them and speak well of them? Would they say, "Wow, I want to have thoughts like that in times of trouble"?

## Excellent

### **...if anything is excellent**

Most people strive for excellence in something. For some people it's music or the arts. For a lot of people it's their job – they want to be really good at what they do for a living. For some people it's their appearance – how they dress, their skin, their hair, their physique. For some it's education. If you have kids, you may be striving to be an excellent parent. Maybe you're working to excel in ministry. All of us have at least one area where we are really trying to do well and be achieve excellence.

And God has given us a lot of freedom in that. You can drive for excellence in woodworking if you want, but you don't have to. If you want, you can go through life like me and barely be able to saw a board in half, and God is fine with that. But when it comes to your thought life in times of stress, God has not given us the option of shoddiness. God has not permitted us to be B students in our thought life. You can cut corners in putting up drywall, you can be a lousy driver, you can be content to hunt and peck on your computer keyboard, but if you're a Christian, God requires that you always be pursuing excellence in your thought life. If you're going to get good at something, get good at that.

God requires that when our thoughts are out of control, that we regain control. Martin Lloyd Jones made the point that we would all be much better off spiritually if we spent less time listening to ourselves and more time talking to ourselves. There is a constant dialogue going on in your every waking hour. Your flesh is constantly going off about something, and you can just passively listen, and let it be in control of your thought life, or you can stand up and take control, and say, "No, I'm not going to think about that. I'm going to force these thoughts into conformity with God's standard in Php.4:8."

The other day Tracy and I walked through a neighborhood where houses that were so dilapidated that it was hard to imagine people living that way. A back yard so full of trash that you couldn't even walk through it. Weeds, doors hanging off the hinges, holes in the roof – it just blew me away that someone could live in a house and give no attention whatsoever to keeping it up. Most of us would never let our house get like that, but we do let our thought life get like that. They give no attention to putting it in order, no effort to protect it from the elements or to clean it up or to maintain it. They just do a shoddy job in tending the garden of their mind. God wants excellence.

## Praiseworthy

And excellence is measured by the last one – whether your thoughts are praiseworthy. You don't have to have a high IQ, you don't have to have formal education, or be clever or witty or any of that. To have excellence in your thoughts, all you have to do is have thoughts that God will praise on Judgment Day. When you're tempted to freak out over something, and your thoughts start running crazy, just stop ask yourself, what kinds of things that I think right now that would make it so that when this whole thing is over, God would look at me and say, "well done"? You'll get to judgment Day and God will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," and you'll say, "I didn't even do anything? The whole crisis was out of my control, so I couldn't even do anything about it." "Yes, but your thoughts were excellent. You

prayed earnestly, you had gratitude in your heart, you took comfort in knowing I was with you , and you did a great job in filtering out false, shallow, unfair, impure, ugly, and shameful thoughts.” That should be our goal. These qualities will be a corrective to toxic thinking and they will repair your soul...if you **think** this way.

## Take them into Consideration

The word translated **think** here means *to take into consideration*. So the idea isn't that you just recite these words (“true, true, true, noble, noble, noble, right, right, right...”). God's not calling you to think about those abstract concepts – to think about the concept of truth. This is much more practical. The idea is that in your normal, everyday thinking – about work, recreation, family, whatever, you *take these things into consideration* – things that are true, noble, right, etc. As you make decisions, as you deal with various circumstances, as you reason and think through things, make assessments about your life – in all of that you take these things into consideration. You take things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy and throw those things into the hopper of all your reasoning. You let them govern the direction and the outcome, and you use them as a standard to measure whether you're thinking is on track.

So it's not that you can never think about anything that is false or impure. The Bible talks about a lot of things that are false and evil. The point is that when you think about them, you think about them from the perspective of truth and purity. You read Php.4:8 and think, “Does this mean I can never watch TV? Never read a newspaper or have a conversation with coworkers?” No, you can watch TV or talk with unbelievers or read secular things – as long as your thoughts about what you're seeing and hearing are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. If a show comes on that you can't keep your thoughts within those boundaries while watching it, then you don't watch it. But you can think about anything as long as it stays within those bounds.

## What about when You Fail?

What about when you fail? You know you should go through this list, but you just decide, “I don't have the energy or willpower to do that right now,” and you let your mind run with wild anxiety. We all do that. The question is, how do you recover from that – especially if you've gone down that road so many times that you've dug deep ruts that pull you in that direction every time?

The answer is the same as for any sin - repentance. And make no mistake – anxious thoughts are sin. Verse 8 is a command, so failure to conform your thinking to this list is disobedience to God, just like lying or stealing or committing adultery. Whether it's those sins, or the sin of wrong thinking – step one in recovering is always repentance.

And if it keeps happening again and again, it may be that your repentance is too shallow. Try this – when you realize you've been letting your thoughts run out of the bounds of this list , get on your knees, open your Bible to Ps.51 for guidance on how to repent , and spend at least as much time in repentance as you spent committing the sin. If your mind was going off for 15 minutes, spend 15 minutes in prayers of confession and contrition and repentance before God. So often we give extended time to sins of the mind, followed by 10 seconds of repentance. “I'm sorry God, that was really bad. I shouldn't be thinking those things. Please forgive me and purify my heart.” If you kneel down and repent before God for a full 5 minutes, you'll be surprised how long that is. If the sinful thoughts went on for 20 minutes, follow that up with 20 minutes of contrite prayer. It's amazing the effect this has. It causes your soul to take the sin far more seriously, and you can start to see real change.

## Thinking and Doing

Ok, when you have runaway thoughts, if you stop and ask these 8 questions, you'll find the chaos start to give way to the peace of God in your heart. But that's not the only benefit. Something else will happen that will change your life. In the Greek, verses 8-9 come off as a single sentence. So let's take a

look at how they go together. Start with this - look at your Bible and read vv.8-9, and tell me how many commands are in those verses.

**8 Finally, brothers, 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. 9 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.**

## **Action Springs from Thought**

Think and do. Verse 8 is all about how you think, and v.9 is about how you act. Paul puts these two thoughts together – first think, then act, to remind us of a very basic principle: namely, that all action springs from your thoughts. That’s what action is – thoughts that get carried out. You look around and see things that seem solid and substantial – buildings, machines, governments, institutions – what are all those things but embodied thoughts? They all began as thoughts, and those thoughts drove actions. Your thoughts are like lightening and your actions are like thunder. Actions are nothing but the reverberation and after-clap of your thoughts. So if you’re going to live the Christian life, you must first think Christianly.

You can change the whole trajectory of your life by changing the way you think. Chuck Swindol made the observation that the outcome of your life is determined about 10% by what happens to you , and 90% by how you think about what happens to you. That’s why some people are abused as children, and their life is a train wreck, and other people go through that same abuse and turn out fine. Some people have trauma and get PTSD; others go through the same trauma and don’t. Our society wants you to think that you are mainly the product of what has happened to you. But the wonderful truth of Scripture is that you are not the slave of circumstances. You can be whatever kind of person you want to become by the way you think.

At high school graduations they tell the students they can be anything they want to be if they set their mind to it. And whenever I hear that, I always roll my eyes because it’s so ridiculous. No matter how much you put your mind to it, you’re not going to be able to be whatever you want in this world. No matter how much I put my mind to it, I will never be a professional athlete or musician , I could never be a scholar, I could never become president – I will never dunk a basketball, no matter how much I put my mind to it I can barely jump over a basketball. Millions of people set their minds to becoming rich, and they never get rich. When it comes to earthly things, you can’t be anything you want to be. That’s how it is with earthly, temporal things, but that’s not how it is with everything that’s truly important. With regard to the most important things in life, you can become anything you want. When it comes to eternal things, spiritual things – things like self-control, joy, being like Christ, integrity, being a wise – all of that is within your reach if you think the right way, because you’re thinking determines what you become. And the Holy Spirit enables believers to think biblically and then uses that to shape our actions.

## **NOTE: This section is not included in the recording**

Our emotional responses and our actions are shaped by our thought life. We aren’t like Pavlov’s dogs. Pavlov found that if you keep giving dogs the same stimulus, you’ll get a predictable response. And the evolutionary psychologists say, “Human beings are the same was, since we are basically just fancy dogs.” But that’s not true. We aren’t mere stimulus-response beings. You could give the same stimulus to different people and you get very different responses. In fact, you can give the same stimulus to the same person at various different times in his life and get completely different responses. You could get a different response in the afternoon than you got in the morning. Why? Because his responses are conditioned by the way he’s been thinking.

Your thinking sets the condition of your soul. And so we need to be careful what we allow to go through our minds. Imagine a person who just eats whatever he sees. Grass from his front yard, a rock, garbage - whatever’s right in front of him he just puts it in his mouth and swallows it.



That's the way anxious people tend to be with their thought life – no discernment or controls over what they allow their mind to think about. Thoughts just go wherever the currents push them. I did a lot of white water rafting, and I can tell you that there's a huge difference between a boat just drifting downstream going wherever the currents happened to take it, and a boat with someone paddling on a certain line. One is lethal in the other one is great fun. Anxious people very often just let the currents pull their thoughts along in whatever direction they happen to be going. So in v.8 Paul teaches us how to paddle and guide the boat. He teaches us how to be discerning eaters, so before something goes through your mind, you do what you do with food – examine it, make sure it's edible, make sure it's not poison, and make sure it's healthy before consuming it.

It's so important that we hold verses 8 and 9 together, because there is a tendency for Christians to either neglect one or the other – thinking or acting.

## Moralism

There are many Christians who focus on obeying God in their actions, but neglect the thinking side. They are all about v.9, but they neglect v.8. And they never make progress on overcoming sins, because they are just trying to white-knuckle their way to holy living, but there's no power to really change because they try to change their behavior without changing their thinking.

A huge percentage of Scripture is information – information about what God is like, what God has done, information about sin, about the human heart, about the world, the devil, etc. And it is on the basis of all that information that we are to act. The book of Philippians is roughly 35% commands (telling us what to do and how to live), and 65% information (telling us what is true). I did a similar study of 1 Peter and found the same percentages 32% commands and 68% information. So in Philippians, it's not just, "Be humble and loving toward one another." It's "Be humble and loving toward one another *because* of how much encouragement, comfort, fellowship with the Spirit, tenderness, and compassion you have received from God." Be humble *after the example* of Christ, who humbled himself in the incarnation. Be humble and loving *because* gaining Christ and being found in him is worth more than anything in this world you might have to give up. Be humble and loving *so that* you might become like Jesus in his death and so attain the resurrection from the dead. Be humble and loving *because* that's part of the reason why Christ took hold of you in the first place. Be humble and loving *in order to* win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus. And when you make your effort to be humble and loving, make sure you do it *through faith*, because that's the only path to righteousness.

The commands in Scripture are never just, "Do this." It's always, "Do this because God is like this, and God has done these things, and God desires this, and God has promised that..." And all those promises and instructions and motives and reasons are what make it Christian, rather than just moralism. Moralism is when you just try to watch your P's and Q's. You try to be a good person. It's not done by faith in Christ, it's not done for the glory of God, it's not done by the power of the Holy Spirit – it's just you trying to be a good person. And, of course, it never works. People who are into moralism are basically still trying to get the hang of the things they learned in kindergarten – don't tell lies, don't hit, don't take people stuff, don't be mean, be nice to people And you find that you're 40 years old and you're still trying to get the hang of things you learn when you are 5. Why? Because there's no power.

And even if it did work – even if you made tons of progress in becoming a better person, it would be worthless, because it wouldn't bring any glory to God. It would only bring glory to you. It wouldn't be done out of love for the Lord, which means it would be missing the whole point of righteous living.

There is much more real estate in Scripture devoted to the reasons and the motives and the promises and the bases for what were supposed to do then there is describing what were supposed to do. The book of Romans is 11 chapters of information about what God has done and what his purposes are, and then a big *therefore*, and then 5 chapters how we should therefore live. Ephesians – the first 3 chapters - information about salvation, the last 3 chapters - how we should live in light of that.

The temptation is to skip over the information parts and go right to the real, practical stuff on how to live. But if we do that we fall into moralism and we lack power and we make no progress. Always watch

for reasons when you read Scripture. Watch for words like *because, therefore, so that, in order to, by means of* – because those words connect the actions to the truths that will enable the action. If all you do is look for commands, you'll never make it past kindergarten.

**James 1:22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**

How do you do that? He tells us in v.25, and it involves looking intently into the law of God – understanding the truths of His Word. That's when you'll be successful in putting them into practice, and that's when the blessing comes. And that's where we'll pick it up next time.

## Small Groups

1. I mentioned the health care bill. In your small group, discuss what the Christian way to think about that bill is, using the standard of Php.4:8. (If you don't care about the health care bill, pick something else in the news or in your life that is more prone to give you anxiety.)
2. What are some common pitfalls Christians may fall into when thinking about that issue that would fall short of the standard in v.8?