

9.17.2023 Sermon

What Are You Thinking? | Philippians 4:4-9

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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Well, good morning, everyone. It's great to see you all. It is wonderful to see the house full. If you're new, welcome to the house of Cornerstone. I'm so glad that you're here. I am Sophia Foutres, and I am so excited to preach today.

I've been thinking all morning, I was like, "Man, I'm not even nervous at all. Like, I'm feeling good. Maybe I've arrived."

And then, about 10 minutes ago, I was like, "Man, what happened?" (Hands shaking)

Anyway, today we are continuing in our sermon series of "Choose Your Own Adventure." It's been cool, because I feel like our sermons are in alignment. It's like, you know, we're all connected or something. So, it's really exciting. Today is nothing short of that. I'm going to preach from one of my favorite books, Leviticus.

Now, I'm just kidding. No, I'm bringing it new school. We're going to be in Philippians four, a classic, right? That's like a sharp turn into safe land. Leviticus is a great book, but just not for me today. So, if you want to, if you have a Bible or an app, open up to Philippians four. Today, we are going to be talking about the mind. How's your mind this morning? Yeah, yeah. How are your thoughts this morning? Have you been thinking good thoughts today, or have they been kind of like, "ooh?"

Tell me one thought that you've been having this morning, in your head, because that's where they are, I think. "Why is my alarm going off?" Yes, good one. Okay. "For loads of laundry." Oh, that's brutal. Does anybody else have lots of laundry to do today?

Okay, you're not alone, my friend. Oh, go please, sir, in the back. Oh, wait. Okay, alright. Nobody else did that, I don't think. You win, I just give you the prize.

So, Pastor Tracy last week preached on the scarcity and the abundance mentality. If you didn't listen to that sermon, I want to invite you to listen to it; it was juicy. It was so good. Something that she said really stuck out to me. She said, "We become what we believe, and God becomes what we believe," kind of showing the power of our thoughts. Whatever you think about essentially starts to become your reality.

So, if I spend all day thinking that I suck and I am a terrible human, by the end of the day, I am probably going to feel like I'm a terrible human, right? Have you ever had a day like that, where you just had thought after thought bomb? By the end of the day, you feel like you've been through a mental war, and you want to just cry or eat ice cream, or fried chicken, which has become a staple for me.

So, what we think matters. Paulo Coelho says, "You drown not by falling into a river, but by staying submerged in it." Lao Tzu says, "Change your thoughts, change your life." Wayne Dyer echoes something similar, stating, "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." It's all about perspective, right? So, if I'm thinking about something and all I can say is "Man, this is such a good moment, I'm so grateful," it changes things. I'm not talking about toxic positivity, but appreciating the present moment instead of focusing on minor negatives, like a stain on a chair, which can potentially ruin the entire experience.

In the book of Philippians, a book in the New Testament written by the Apostle Paul, he addresses the concept of the mind. Some of you may be familiar with this text. To give you a little background on what's happening in Philippians during this time: Paul is in prison and writing to a church in Philippi. The church is facing some conflicts and persecutions, and he writes to encourage them, offering help and guidance based on his own experiences. He urges the church, particularly two ladies who help run it, to resolve their differences and let go of grudges.

Now, let me share some gems I found in Philippians four, verses four through nine. Note that I have combined a bit of the message and the New Testament versions for a richer understanding, so bear with me. Paul expresses his deep love and wishes the best for his friends, encouraging them not to waver but to stay steady in God. He emphasizes rejoicing in the Lord, urging individuals to be conscious of God's grace leaning towards them in every moment. Moreover, he advises showing justice beyond ordinary justice to everyone, emphasizing the closeness of the Lord.

This scripture reveals that one can find joy and grace even in moments of conflict, offering a powerful lesson on the influence of positive thinking and the importance of community and harmony. It's a gentle reminder to approach life with a perspective that fosters grace, love, and unity.

And he says, "don't be anxious about anything." This word, "anxious", means to be drawn in opposite directions, to be divided into parts, literally. What anxiety is, is that it pulls us into a million pieces. It pulls us apart. It wrecks our minds, it wrecks our lives. I mean, I've experienced that. Have you experienced that? When you get worried about something, when you start to get anxious, it's like pieces of you just start going; you start becoming divided in your mind.

Continuing on, he says, "but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God. Draw near, lean towards, and then pour out your heart with requests." He says, "Be thankful for God's grace." And then he promises that when you do this, the action is to not be anxious about anything. Instead, pray about it. Give thanks when you pray, and also be thankful. I like to call these future thankful prayers. I pray by saying, "Thank you, God, for the future thing. I don't just say, 'God, can you do this, this, and that thing?' I say, 'God, thank you so much that when I get to this thing, you are going to be there for me. Thank you so much that whenever this happens, because it will, I will not be alone.'" That's like the future Thanksgiving prayer.

It kind of helps you pray from a place of already knowing that when that thing happens, because it will, since it's life, you're positioning yourself to say, "I'll be alright. Because God will be with me, and I will have what I need for that moment." And this is the promise: the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Do you remember that word, anxious? Do you remember what it meant? You can call it out. This is a test. Divided, pulled apart, good. She's an elder though, so thank you. It's good. You're not an elder, you're... So, anxious means to be pulled apart in many different directions. And peace means? Like, yes, it's tranquility. Yes, it's that niceness we feel on the inside. But the Greek word, "a Rene," actually means to join, to tie together into a whole; wholeness, all essential parts coming back together.

So what anxiety does is it pulls us apart. It takes us in a million different directions. It divides our hearts, it divides our lives. It divides our relationships because it messes up our brains. And what peace does is it brings us back together. It takes the things that have been separated and disintegrated, and it calls them into integration. And that word "guard," where it says this is what will happen, it will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus, is not just some

petty word. It's actually like a sentinel guard, like a military sentinel to actively display a defense or an offense whenever necessary.

So, we're going to do a little activity here, okay? If I can have you look up at me for a minute. I'm sure you're fiercely taking notes. So, if you can look at me, I'm going to have you play sentinel guard for me. Okay? I'm going to talk about some things, I'm going to think some thoughts, and I think this is real, this is not a drill, and I want you to play guard and shout out a defense for what I'm thinking, okay? You get it. You get it. Hi. Okay, yes, positive, right? So, you're going to be the guard. Because this is the promise: when we pray right, and when we connect into the reality of God with us, that sentinel guard will guard our hearts and mind and give us that peace. Okay, are you ready?

I'm not feeling very protected right now. Hi, I'm sure God will do a much better job now, okay? I'm just no good at anything anymore. "You are, you're valuable." Dropping the Philippians right in there. "I'll never amount to anything because of what my teacher told me when I was a kid; that I could never read, I could never comprehend, I'll never get anything done in my life." "Other people don't determine your worth. It wasn't a good teacher." Amen. "Maybe I can do..." "You guys are getting good. I'm feeling better already." A little bit more sentinel.

"I don't think that I can keep going. I just feel so alone. And I just feel like I don't have what it takes." Thank you. So good to ask the call. Thank you. That's good. We, uh, get fear scriptures from the front here. Bring her up. Can you hear the difference? Can you feel for me? I heard it, I could feel it, and I took it in because those are real. Hello! Those are real, those are real thoughts that I have, right? Real thoughts, real thoughts that go through my head on a daily basis.

Can you imagine if every time you had a thought like that, you had an army like this to say, "No, it's not true. It's a lie. Don't believe it?" How would your life be different? You can speak. Y'all looked at me like, yeah. It's so different. It's so great. Yeah, be in your head less, right? And if you're in your head less, then what do you have more of? "You're present. Present, exactly. Yeah, yes."

So, Paul is addressing conflict among the leaders and preparing them right. And he goes straight for the mind because he knows that everything starts up here. As soon as you wake up, probably that first thought is going to affect the rest of your day.

Thoughts have the power to bring us together or to tear us apart. That's what anxiety does: it tears us apart inside. That piece brings all the parts back together.

And I want to just review if you don't have your app, so you can check it out later. I also have the forms in the back. I want to briefly talk about some common thought distortions if you've ever gone to therapy or anything like that.

So, I want to just review some of these thought contortions with you. And if you check on your app, I have them all listed there, from some really good online sources. Oh, look, they're there, but you can't really see them.

So, I'm going to just review them and maybe take note of where your mind goes when you're in conflict or when you're having a low moment, or just every day. This is an inventory check so you can be more aware of how your thinking is.

So, the first one is polarized thinking. This means when something happens, it's all or nothing. Just take note and if you kind of just incrementally check: mental filtering, negative focus on details and storytelling, dismissing the positive, overgeneralization, assessing whole situations from one small negative aspect, jumping to conclusions, mind-reading or fortune-telling—gosh, that is the worst when you make up a story in your head about something and it's totally not true. It's exhausting.

Catastrophizing, this is when you either magnify something to make it like the worst thing ever, or you minimize it to make it not bad at all and everything is fine. Either way can take your mind into a negative place. Personalization—Are you somebody who takes everything personally? That when somebody looks at you, and really, they're probably looking past you, you think "Oh my god, they don't like my outfit. They don't like my hair. Oh my god, I shouldn't have worn these shoes." You know, it's just constant. You're in your head thinking it's always about you. In reality, it's probably not; that person is probably thinking about themselves. Right? Blaming—does anybody always feel like the victim, like they're always the one to whom something bad is happening?

Labeling? Do you assign judgment on every situation? Does your mind constantly judge and just say this is this and this is that and I can't be talked out of it?

Always being right—anybody always love to be right? Okay, you can raise your hand, it'd be right about it. With a little console, I would also add always being wrong because that can be a state of mind as well.

Oh, should statements—does anybody live constantly in "I should do this, I should do that?" Gosh, shoulds are really exhausting.

Emotional reasoning, trusting any and all feelings—I once heard that your feelings can come to the party, but they can't host the party. Okay, because they're welcome. They're important. They're indicators.

Control fallacies, believing that life is controlled at all times, and nobody or nothing is responsible.

The fallacy of change, believing that others should change to make your life better.
The fallacy of fairness, being someone who thinks "that's not fair" or "this should be fair", right?
Or "life's not fair".

Heaven's reward fallacy: based on how hard you work, you will be rewarded. But then it feels not fair when others are rewarded when they obviously didn't work as hard as you. Oh, I saw some of your faces go, yes, you felt that?

So, were there any of those that you identified with?

Okay. So, I want you to just take a minute. If you have a piece of paper or phone, or just in your own head, I want you to think about what are one or two things that always kind of are your mantra, that you kind of go to? Is it the victim role of like, "Oh, this is not fair? It is, everything always happens to me"?

Where do you go?

Where do you go?

Just think about that.

And sometimes, you know, as we talked about this morning, it's hard to know, actually, what's bringing you down because you may be so used to that inner monologue. So, when considering these things, you're like, "what?"

Because your mind is just on autopilot, constantly thinking about everything opposite of what was mentioned, that it's just so normal. So, it might take time to discover what your kind of tearing apart mantra is.

So just hold on to that for a minute.

And think, I want you to think about that throughout the day. Even just ask yourself what thoughts are ripping me apart? Is this thought tearing me to pieces or is it bringing me together?

And you might know, you might not know. Sometimes it's familiar to be in a state of negativity and self-sabotage, that it feels so comfortable. That to believe something else is actually hard to believe.

The other aspect of this that I think is trying to be achieved here is thought restructuring. So, if there are thought distortions, there is an unraveling of what you believed. Like Cindy and I were talking about today, there's a becoming that we become through life and what happens to us. And there's an unraveling, that we recreate who we are and what we think, and how we can think. That's the gift that we get, and that's the choice that we have every day—that we can choose how we think, what we think about.

So, some ways to restructure thoughts, and I'm going to have us restructure our thought that we thought about:

Identify automatic thoughts, thoughts that continually occur after difficult situations, even if you try to ignore it. So that's kind of like something bad happens and you're like, "Oh, well, of course, something bad would happen because I'm not loved, or because I'm ugly or whatever."

The next is to identify those distortions, negative or unhealthy thoughts and beliefs. It's to be able to be aware of them and say, "Hey, that is not good." Like you guys did for me, "No, that's not true. This is true." And actually, do it throughout the day. Sometimes you'll see me walking throughout the day and I probably look like such a weirdo. But when I'm on my walks, and I get a crappy thought, I'm like, "No, no." And I'll literally shake my head to make it go away. I know it's funny, right? It's really funny.

But it helps me because I'm like, "Nope, nope." And I just kind of, as if I'm saying, "Nope, not here. Thank you."

I don't say it out loud or anything, but it's like a little, you know, I can change my mind. I can change my thinking. It's not going to be on my terms. And sometimes I need a little extra movement to get rid of it, to be like, "Nope, not accepting it."

So, think about that. Can you identify what those are and can you change them? Replace distorted thoughts with healthier ones, reality-based ones, right? Like you guys did for me. You said, "Nope, that's not true. This is true."

And it's also, you know, that saying of "think good thoughts, think good thoughts". Well, that's not just like an airy-fairy saying. It's real. It's science-based that when you think good thoughts, you create different chemicals in your brain that actually can change your mood and your state of being.

And practice these new thoughts until they become habitual, right? So that they're the new norm.

So, the next step is challenging those thoughts, what I talked about—about shaking my head, saying "nope". Or even if you have to do a little movement or even if you have to be like, "Nope, I'm not going to believe that, that's not true. This is true."

And eventually, you know, when you practice something, it becomes habit. It becomes a part of your life, a part of your daily routine. And then the hope is that it becomes so normal, so natural, so ingrained that you don't even think about it anymore.

You can just be in a state of good thoughts, good feelings, happiness, joy, peace, love, and all of that. It is possible. It takes time, it takes practice, it takes effort, but it is worth it.

So, I just wanted to share that with you today. I hope that it resonates with some of you and I hope that it helps. And I hope that, you know, if anything, you take away that you have the power to change your thoughts and your mind, and you can be in control of it.

And remember, it's a practice. It's not going to happen overnight. But with time and with practice, and with effort, it can happen.

And you're not alone. You're not alone in it. We all have these thoughts. We all have these experiences. We all have these moments. And it's okay. It's okay to have them. It's okay to feel them. It's okay to experience them. But it's also okay to change them.

In this quest to manage our thought patterns, I urge you all, just as you all did for me, to find a way to apply rationality or objectivity. This helps to prevent ourselves from continually spiraling into negative thoughts and patterns.

It seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? Just think something different. I remember a quote by Pastor Tracy that resonates well with this concept. She said, "If you have a thought that isn't great, simply think another thought." It really isn't that complicated, because essentially, all we're doing is thinking thoughts. So, if a thought isn't helpful, simply shift your focus to a different one.

At times, simplifying this process aids me. Rather than overwhelming myself with a series of complex tasks and efforts, I try to shift my thinking onto something else. Just doing this lightens the load a bit, helps you seize the moment, and allows you to be more present.

So, I encourage you to structure a new thought, a positive mantra perhaps, to challenge one of your negative thoughts today. Later, I'll ask Dave to join us and maybe strum a tune for us to reflect on this. Consider one of your recurring negative thoughts, perhaps something along the lines of "I'll never be enough." Now, try to supplement this with a helpful, peace-inducing statement that can help realign your mindset.

It's essential to identify the statements that bring you down. We won't tackle everything right now, as it is a continuous process and we would be here indefinitely. But start with pinpointing that one thought that tends to bring you down. Then find a thought, phrase, or verse that uplifts you. For me, at this moment, it is, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." Every morning, I remind myself that I am moving closer to my truest, best, and most authentic self. This phrase is a beacon of strength and affirmation for me, helping me approach each day with positivity and determination.

Now, let's take a moment of silence to reflect on this. Consider what your restructured, uplifting thought could be. It's something that can help knit you back together, a thought that fosters unity within yourself.

I'd like us to gather our thoughts for a moment. If you're comfortable, you may close your eyes or softly fix your gaze at a point. Take a pause from what you're doing and imagine God's love and presence guarding you, just as you have done for me. Ask God, "What are you conveying to me? What does your guard resemble for me?" Take a moment to listen; even if nothing comes through, that's completely fine. Allow the comforting thoughts of God's love, light, and presence to speak to your spirit and guide you to your restructured thought.

Now, breathe deeply, inhaling positivity and exhaling any lingering negativity. In a moment, we will open the floor for anyone who wishes to share their experiences. You can talk about the thoughts that have been pulling you apart and then share the thoughts that are helping knit you back together. If you feel moved to share, we will bring a microphone to you.

(Sharing begins)

I have often really struggled in the last couple of years to get this nonprofit off the ground. As we get closer and closer, what has sustained me – not always, as I don't always remind myself – is that I can do all things through Christ who resides in me.

Yes, thank you.

Another participant shares, "So, I often think to myself that I'm not smart enough. But then I have to remind myself that my reframing thought is that I've learned so much already. I am capable, and I am an intelligent person."

Yes, thank you.

One person mentions a recurring thought: "The thing that I say to myself a lot is that there are not enough hours in the day." They then share their reframing thought: "Each day, each moment, is an incredible gift."

Yes, thank you.

A person shares their simple yet powerful restructured thought: "I know I can lose the weight with God's help, and I will walk. My new mantra is simple: just give grace to yourself. I can have grace for myself. If I can ask others to have grace for themselves, then I can have grace for myself."

The next participant voices a common feeling of inadequacy: "I often feel like I am not doing enough. I am not being enough. I am not doing what I need to be doing in this moment." They've reframed that into: "I am doing the best I can, and I am here, present in this moment."

An individual shares their struggle with control: "I struggle a lot with trying to control my handicapped sister's situation. I have to be in control. I'm the only one who can ensure the things she needs are provided for her." They are learning to trust others more, allowing them room to make mistakes as long as they learn from them and no great harm comes to their sister.

One participant reveals their past tendency to dwell in darkness and their resolution for the upcoming year: "I've often lived and operated from a place of darkness because it just feels so familiar and safe to me. God wants me to embrace life and happiness, not be afraid that the other shoe is going to drop, and to allow Him to bring me to the next level."

Towards the end of the session, an adult shares their realization about their perfectionist tendencies: "As an adult, I've learned that my sense of professionalism, or striving to be a perfectionist, has stemmed from growing up with the mindset that nothing is ever good enough. No matter how hard you try." Now, they are changing that narrative to: "I am enough, just the way I am."

Another person shares their experience living with others with mental illness: "In living with others with mental illness, my reactionary approach is directly proportionate to the outcome of my ability to help."

I often feel overwhelmed and kind of paralyzed by the ginormous list of things that I should do. All of them seem pressing and I find myself unable to tackle any of them because I feel paralyzed by that.

I think the reframe that I hear God's calling for is to take just one step, pick one item and do that one thing. That's probably good, actionable advice. But I believe it calls for a different mindset too. You know what, just pick one and take that step.

In my case, if I am not the most self-actualized, woke, educated, disciplined, kind, giving, and caring person, I feel like I'm failing to meet expectations and consequently, I'm not good enough or even bad. The reframe here would be to perceive God as my coach and trainer, and cheerleader, not a Trunchbull who throws me into the emotional chokey.

I often struggle with anxiety, a struggle that has been with me since I was a child. Many of my anxious thoughts are centered around feeling out of control or trapped. My reframe for that is realizing that I can safely let go. I am someone who constantly grapples with trauma, often feeling trapped or stuck. The reframe is acknowledging that while I can't change what has happened to me, I can change my relationship to it. I am not defined by the terrible things that have happened to me.

Thank you.

(Sharing ends)

Thank you all so much for your vulnerability and honesty, and for being willing to share. If you resonate with something that somebody else said, just grab it, it's there for you. I encourage you to ponder about that thought and maybe throughout this week, you'll start to notice it and identify that which tears you down. In those moments, try to think of something else instead.

I believe Paul's intention in addressing this is to emphasize that when we take care of ourselves and our minds, we are better equipped to be present in the world. Moving away from a self-hating and self-deprecating status enables us to show up in the world in a different, more positive way. It allows us to give from a full cup, instead of one that's battered and bruised. We are then able to love and pour out into a cycle of continual spiritual growth and journey.

I urge you to continue contemplating these things. On a lighter note, I'd like to mention my fiancée, Ally. She's amazing and has a remarkable social media presence, though she's shaking her head at me saying this. I wanted to share a video she posted, which succinctly encapsulates how I hope we can present ourselves in the world. It's quite short, so pay close attention; we'll play it a few times.

Hopefully, it will be a reminder for when that old negative self-talk emerges, but you find your mindset game is strong.

(Video of a woman staving off “negative thoughts” trying to attack her is shown)

So, when you're walking down the street, remember this. Know that your mindset game is potent and you're undergoing inner work to authentically present yourself to the world, not fragmented into countless pieces. Sometimes life and trauma can cause this fragmentation, but remember that you are constantly working to rebuild yourself, to pull all parts of yourself back together.

Let us be individuals who not only avoid tearing others down but actively work towards bringing justice and support to every person we meet. Let's extend our hand and thoughts to encourage others in their journey, letting them know that we are here to uplift them, not bring them down.

Let us be the people who foster unity, both internally and externally, wherever we go, for the sake of love, for the sake of God, and for the sake of this journey. Because we truly need each other, don't we? Let's be guards for each other, and for ourselves, while allowing God to guard us, remembering that God is always, always, always there.