

Practical Helps to Cultivate a Philippians 4 Mind

Is it magic? Is it “mind over matter”? Does faith mean white-knuckling it with positive thoughts and affirmations? What do you do with negative realities such as ISIS, your spouse’s infidelity or your doctor speaking the dreaded word “cancer”? Is positive thinking compatible with both reality and Christian faith?

That may seem a difficult question for some. There are preachers who teach that speaking (or even thinking) something negative will bring it to pass, and that the only Christian response is to exclusively think and speak positive things. And then there’s the positive thinking “movement,” where the message seems to be that if you visualize something good long enough and often enough, it will come to pass.

Research is abundant that our thoughts and words do have enormous power.

- Cancer patients who hold a positive perspective do better during treatment.
- Prisoners of war who maintained a hopeful outlook came through their ordeal better.
- Athletes, entrepreneurs and others rely on positive thinking to achieve extraordinary results.

The risk with these ideas is that they imply your mind can control anything. And that’s a distortion of the truth. There is truth here, but it’s not the whole truth.

The Stockdale Paradox may help put this into perspective. When faced with extraordinary challenges, it’s important to “retain faith that you will prevail in the end regardless of the difficulties, and *at the same time* confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they may be.”

Our minds are powerful, but they are not all-powerful. But here's the truth:

We tend to give our thoughts too little power rather than too much.

So what about positive thinking and the Bible? Are they compatible?

The Bible's Mandate for Our Thinking

If someone asked you for a Bible verse that describes what you should think about, would you have an answer? In a poll, the most common answer would probably be easy:

"Finally, brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue, and if there is any praise, think on these things" (Phil. 4:8)

This is about much more than positive thinking. It has little or nothing to do with positive affirmations about the kind of success you imagine you want. This verse does, however, provide an important checklist for our thoughts.

How many of *your* thoughts—and words—would fit into these categories?

- **True.** This includes what's true about ourselves, our circumstances, our feelings and others. It also includes that which is true about God, about what He has done for us and what He has promised to do in the future.
- **Noble.** This speaks to the truth that you become like what or whom you worship and admire. It includes people and characteristics you aspire to be like, those who encourage you and draw you toward the best you can be.
- **Just.** This includes both living right and doing right. It speaks to fairness and justice to those who cannot

defend themselves. It also speaks to righteous living before God, fulfilling His commands and purposes.

- **Pure.** This means that which is set apart, kept clean. It comes from the same root word as “holy.” It doesn’t take a scholar to know that much of our contemporary media and culture doesn’t fit this quality!
- **Lovely.** This means pleasing, desirable, worthy of praise, uplifting and worth loving. It includes the best in ourselves, in others and in our world. It speaks of beauty, joy and even love.
- **Good report.** This includes “speaking auspiciously.” The positive affirmations some people practice would fall under this category. It speaks of hope and the way you desire things to be in the future.

Putting It Into Practice

Learning to think and talk like this doesn’t come naturally for most people. I didn’t learn this until I was a young adult. But once you do learn this, you develop a resilience and strength to make a difference in the world—and enjoy life in the process.

When you look at this checklist, “positive thinking” is only part of the mandate, and really a relatively superficial part of it. Better words to describe the Bible’s message have more to do with character, with the heart, with something deeper. As Jesus said, “For of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).

The words this brings up for me are integrity, courage, gratitude, unselfishness, honesty, trustworthiness, resilience, hope, kindness, perseverance and joy. It’s the flavor of things the Holy Spirit grows in us if we let Him (Gal. 5:22-23).

Developing the kind of heart that overflows with Philippians 4:8 kind of thinking is a process, but it is possible! And

I'll be giving you some further tools and examples in the days to come.

May your heart be so filled with truth, courage and hope that what comes out meets this high biblical standard. {eo}

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