

“WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?”

Lenten series – 5 (Study)

Philippians 4:8-13 (p. 1140)

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes: “*The purpose of spiritual disciplines is the total transformation of the person. It aims at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the discipline of study.*” He goes on to say: “*Many Christians remain in bondage to fears and anxieties simply because they do not avail themselves of the discipline of study. They may be faithful in church attendance and earnest in fulfilling their religious duties and still they are not changed. They may sing with gusto, pray in the Spirit, live as obediently as they know, even receive divine visions and revelations; and yet the tenor of their lives remains unchanged. Why? Because they have never taken up one of the central ways God uses to change us: study. Jesus made it unmistakably clear that it is the knowledge of the truth that will set us free... Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us. Getting ‘high on Jesus’ will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free.*”

What an insightful word! There is a profound sense in which you are what you study. By “study” I’m talking about a whole lot more than simply reading books. We can make a study of language, of people, of relationships, of culture. But whatever we choose to study matters dearly. Mark my words: The old computer programmer’s mantra, “*GI/GO*” (*garbage in/garbage out*), applies just as much to the stuff you cram into that computer between your ears. The things you study, the things you teach yourself will inevitably play out in the way you live. So let me ask the obvious question: What are the things you make a study of? What do you habitually think about – teach yourself – concentrate on?

Life is one grand classroom. You and I have been given incredible freedom to choose what we study as well as ignore. But regardless of what choices we make, there will come a time (a time the Bible calls by various names: “Judgment Day” – the “Day of the Lord”) when we will be called to account for the choices we have made. I have this diverting fancy that when we get to the end of our lives, we may just be faced with one simple, telling question, “*What have you learned?*”

Probably nowhere in Scripture will you find clearer direction on the sort of things we should fill our minds with than in our text today. In Philippians 4:8 Paul writes this: “*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.*” OK, let’s think about them.

“*Whatever is true...*” The biblical meaning of that word is “real.” The concept of self-talk is very instructive here. What we tell ourselves is immensely important. More than any other source of information, we feed on what we tell ourselves. The single most persuasive voice you listen to is your own. Keep feeding yourself what is not true, what is unreal, pathologically, and you have a working definition of psychosis; living in a make-believe world. The plain fact is that a life of tragedy or triumph comes of actions, and actions are based on perceptions. Abraham Lincoln said, “*If you look for the bad in people, you will surely find it*” (and you will then act accordingly). But the converse is just as true. If you look for the good in people (the good that is truly there) you will find it – and you will behave accordingly. Perception issues in actions; which in turn lead to a life of joy or misery. “*Whatever is true,*” says Paul, “*study it – digest it – know it – make it your own.*”

Paul says, “*Whatever is noble...*” We come close to the meaning of that word translated “noble” in the phrase, “*hallowed be thy name.*” Other than in the Lord’s Prayer, about the only place we find that word these days is on October 31. But the word means more than “holy.” It refers to that which is to be taken seriously – things that are grave and honorable and worthy of respect. If you want your life to be rich and full, study the great books and great lives that have shaped history. I’ve got nothing against vegetating in front of the TV occasionally. Sometimes we need that kind of mental “down time” to chew on stuff that is anything but noble. But don’t make a steady diet of it! Contrary to popular opinion, the world will not come to an end if you turn off the tube. Paul says, “*Look for things that are worthy of respect, things that ennoble the mind, and pay them their due. Study them – own them.*”

“*Whatever is right...*” says Paul. He’s talking about a whole lot more than simply knowing what is correct – having all the right answers. That word translated “right” has the same root as the word “righteous.” And righteousness is simply doing what you know is the right thing to do. You can spout all the correct answers and still do what you know is wrong. In one of the most scathing critiques you’ll find anywhere in the Bible, Jesus said, “*Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices ... but you’ve neglected the more important matters of the law – justice and mercy and faithfulness.*” (That is, “*You may have all the right answers, but you’re just about as far from right living as you could be.*”) Paul says substantially the same thing here. “*Don’t play that ‘I’ve got all the right answers so I must be right’ game. No, you need to study what is the right thing to do – and then do it – until it’s a part of who you are.*”

Paul goes on: “*Whatever is pure...*” He uses that same word in 1 Timothy. He’s advising the young preacher not to let people look down on him because of

his youth, and he tells Timothy to set an example of (among other things) purity. There's a big difference between being pure and being sterile. You can be hermetically sealed, aloof, always keeping yourself at a safe distance from people so nothing in the world can contaminate you, and you can be one kind of example of purity. But you can also be that sort of winsome, guileless person – the kind of person who doesn't dabble in deceit or duplicity – who is a pure delight to be with. That sort of behavior sets an altogether different kind of example of purity. I'll leave it to you to figure out which kind of purity Paul is calling for here. Think about that kind of purity, and then live it.

“*Whatever is lovely...*” It's not simply whatever appears lovely. Literally, the word translated as “lovely” (προσφιλη) means: “to call forth love.” It's an active word, not just a passive descriptor. What is it that triggers love in you? It could be a kind word – a gentle touch – an understanding smile. But every one of us also has those “hot button” words or pictures that can trigger fear, resentment, hatred, envy. The question is: what kind of things will you allow your mind to play on? “*Don't dwell on those things that poison your mind toward others,*” says Paul. “*Focus on those things that engender love for others.*”

He goes on to say, “*Whatever is admirable...*” The word εὐφημα (translated as “admirable”) means, “spoken in a gracious way.” Paul is talking here about speaking in a way that would be fit for God to hear. Sometimes the way you express yourself can be more important than the thing you're trying to express. That raises an interesting point. If God listened to your conversations, would he be blessed by what he heard? That's a pointed question, when you consider the fact that God does hear and understand every word of every conversation (including your body language) and including all those conversations that you carry on with yourself inside your head. Paul says, “*Be careful not only of what you talk about with others, but also how you talk about what you talk about. Make a serious study of communicating in ways that are gracious.*”

“*If anything is excellent...*” he says. The idea of “nothing but the best” that seems so natural in the secular world has its rightful place in the life of faith as well. Let's face it; if there is anyone who deserves nothing but the best, it's God. God deserves the first fruit of our labors, not the leftovers. He deserves our rested, attentive minds when it comes to studying his word. I freely admit that I'm as guilty as the next person when it comes to offering God less than my best in this area. All too often the only time I study God's word is when I'm preparing a sermon or lesson, rather than for the sheer pleasure of studying what God has to say. But that doesn't absolve me or anyone else of our responsibility to study excellence. Paul says, in effect, “*May it be said of you Christians, 'They gave to God and to others and to themselves the best they had to offer.'*” Paul calls for a commitment to excellence in all things.

And “*if anything is praiseworthy...*” says Paul. I’ll admit there are times when it’s a challenge to find something to praise. But it’s there. And one honest word of praise works like leaven in a lump of dough. We’ve probably all had the experience of wondering why bother with something – it seems like such a waste. Then someone thanks us for the work we’re doing, or they tell us how something we’ve done has blessed their live, and we’re ready to go at it with renewed enthusiasm. We could spend the rest of our lives learning how to give and receive praise, and it would be time infinitely well spent.

In one of his famous summary statements Paul give us a lifetime worth of things to study: “*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.*” Learn them inside out, wrestle with them, and digest them until they become part of you.

God has made it clear in his word that it is his good will that you be shaped into the likeness of Christ by the renewing of your mind. And so it turns out that study is an immensely important spiritual discipline. But being a spiritual discipline, it can either be used by the Holy Spirit to your good, or used by evil spirits to your undoing. And the way it goes will depend in large measure on the choices you make about the things you study – the things you concentrate on and listen to and tell yourself.

It may well be that come Judgment Day, when called on to account for the way I have conducted my life, I will be asked, “*What have you learned?*” My fervent prayer is that, like Paul, I will be able to say in all humility, “*I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want... I have learned that I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.*” God, may it be so.

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