



Philippians: Week 6

Week 6, Day 1 - Philippians 4:5

⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Understanding the Passage:

'Kuchisabishii' is a Japanese word that has no equivalent in English. The closest translation is "lonely mouth" but the sense of what it means is missing from that. The Japanese use the word for boredom eating rather than eating out of hunger. It is a comical phrase (and one we might actually need in English!), and it reminds me of how many words are untranslatable across languages because of nuances and cultural metaphors.

The Koine Greek word translated as "gentleness" in this passage is *epieikēs*. Scholars have a hard time agreeing on one meaning for this word. In fact, a quick survey of different Biblical translations come up with eight different ways to translate it into English:

- Gentleness (NIV, NRSV, CEB)
- Considerate to others (NLT)
- Reasonableness (ESV)
- Moderation (KJV)
- Forbearing spirit (RSV, ASV)
- Graciousness (CSB)
- Humility (Aramaic, DRB)
- Kindness (NAB)

Some of the older translations (RSV, KJV) imply meanings that are aligned with restraint. The newer ones tend toward positive interactions with other people. In fact, the Message translation says, "Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them."

He's reinforcing the idea that he first mentioned in the Kenotic hymn in chapter 2 – that, like Jesus, we would "do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than [ourselves]." The hymn goes on to say, "Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interest of others."

Our gentleness is witness to others of the presence of the Lord. They should be able to see the spirit of Christ in us through our actions and our gentleness (and kindness, humility, moderation, etc.). "Let your gentleness be known" is not a suggestion; it is a command. It is the way that we should live every single day. The Greek verb for "be known" is third person plural, which means it is a command to let it be known to everyone, not just other Christ followers. Not just your friends at church or your neighbors that you like – but you must also be gentle to the police officer that pulls you over for speeding, to the HR director that you don't like, to the coach of your child's Little League team, and so on.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Would *epieikēs* be the word that comes to mind when others describe you?
2. Do you know anyone who is known for their gentleness?
3. Who have you struggled to be gentle to recently? How can you change that?

Week 6, Day 2 - Philippians 4:6-7

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Understanding the Passage:

A single o-ring that measured .2 inches in diameter was the cause of the space shuttle Challenger explosion. It was less than 7,320 times the size of the entire shuttle - absolutely minuscule - but it was so cold outside that it didn't properly seal the joint and it allowed extremely hot gas to escape, which caused structural failure of the hydrogen tank and the oxygen tank, leading to the explosion.

It wasn't something huge that brought down the whole shuttle - like a rocket booster falling off. It was a tiny little ring. Sometimes we have things in our lives that are like that. They seem totally insignificant but they can bring down everything. While we are focused on avoiding the big sins, we let the little ones go unchecked.

Worry is often like that. It starts as something small - really not the biggest sin in the grand scheme of things - but it becomes completely preoccupying. Unlike fear, which is an immediate reaction to danger, or anxiety, which is an involuntary physical response, worry is anticipatory — it is rooted in concern about something that may or may not happen, and the worst part is that it is a pattern that we choose to indulge.

Worry is sin, but we don't take it as seriously as other sins. It is a spiritual problem, which ultimately cannot be overcome with sheer willpower—its solution is rooted entirely in who God is to us. When we worry, we are willfully rejecting God. The Greek word for worry used in the New Testament is *meridzo*, which actually translates “to choke” — so worry chokes us because it focuses us on our situation instead of God.

The key question, then, is not whether world events and personal troubles make us anxious or afraid, but whether we turn to God in faith in the midst of such things.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Read Matthew 6:25-34. What advice does that passage give about anxiousness?
2. How do you think adding thanksgiving to prayers helps ease anxiousness and worry?
3. What parts of your life need currently the peace that surpasses all understanding?

Week 6, Day 3 - Philippians 4:8-9

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Understanding the Passage:

We will focus on these two verses for the next three days because they are so packed with valuable instruction that we need more than one day!

Did you know that the average person has 10,000 individual thoughts each day? That works out to be 3.5 million thoughts a year. So by the middle of the morning, most folks have had about 2,000 separate thoughts since getting out of bed. By the time the workday ends, there's been at least 7,000 individual thoughts that have raced through your brain.

Suppose someone gave you \$10,000 this morning and said, "Spend it any way you like as long as you spend it all before you go to bed tonight." You'd be careful how you spent it, wouldn't you? It's likely that you'd sit down and take inventory of what you could do with that much money. And yet, we aren't that careful with our head space.

We know that old saying about watching our thoughts because they become our words, our words become our actions, our actions become our habits, our habits become our character, and our character becomes our destiny. This verse reinforces that pattern. The things we choose to focus on are important because they will shape us.

Things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise are classical Greek values. Paul was not lifting up something unique to Christians. Socrates could have just as easily listed these things. What Paul is saying here is "in the midst of the secular world in which we live, look for God within it. Where is the goodness of God that are in the values of the world around us?"

The first thing Paul lifts up is the value of truth. In Robert Feldman's *The Liar in Your Life*, he writes, "It's not only the atypically immoral who lie frequently. Indeed, my own research which has spanned more than four decades now has repeatedly shown lying to be more common in daily life than we think. All told I found that most people lied three times in the course of a ten-minute conversation. Some lied as many as 12 times."

Lying has become a part of the fabric of our society. People lie by commission and by omission about their financial lives. They lie about their families and marriages. They lie on a large scale about accomplishments and on a small scale about things that don't matter at all.

Instead of letting that become our standard, we need to look at Jesus. In John 8, it says, "Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'" The Greek word for "know" is not about knowledge or information, but about knowing someone deeply and personally. Jesus is saying that when we know him, we will know truth. So when we focus on whatever is true, we are focusing on Jesus.

If our focus is on Christ, then it isn't on trying to impress other people. We can live with confidence in who we are as Christ followers and we don't feel a compulsion to lie. Paul's reminder is for us to realign ourselves with the truth of Christ in the face of the pressure of the world to deceive others.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you feel like you have control over your thoughts?
2. If someone followed the example of your thinking, where would it lead them?
3. Why are you motivated to lie? Spend some time thinking about this question today.

Week 6, Day 4 - Philippians 4:8-9

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Understanding the Passage:

We struggle with our thoughts because we're trying to control a completely amazing and almost incomprehensible force: our brain. Our minds form opinions, plans, dreams, goals, and thoughts – and it often happens subconsciously or with very little intention. We want to have control over our minds.

So how should Christ followers think? And how should it be different than those who aren't Christians. Yesterday's devotional said the list of values that Paul lifted up were not exclusive to Christians, but if we don't use those values as filters, what will we use?

The reformer Martin Luther said, "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." We know that these categories are like guardrails around our thoughts that help us as Christians to align our thinking with the gospel.

One of the values Paul mentions is to think on things that are excellent, commendable and worthy of praise. What kind of excellence is he pointing to? We all acknowledge that Tom Hanks is an excellent actor, Beyonce is an excellent singer, and James Hardin is an excellent basketball player. But they are excellent by standards which the world measures, not the standards that God calls us to.

There are two things that excellence is not. The first is average. Average is not a lack of resources or time or personnel. It's a heart problem. Average reflects a lacking in our heart. When Cain offered his meager offering to God, but Abel came with the prime cuts of meat, God said, "I prefer this excellent offering from Abel." When the Israelites offered up their lame animals for the sacrifice (animals that were good for nothing else) God scolded them. God demands more than our most meager effort.

Excellence stands out in a world that accepts average. If your car breaks down today, do you want it fixed by an average mechanic? If you go out to a restaurant for lunch, it's likely that you want your service at the restaurant to be higher than average. You definitely want the cleanliness of the bathrooms at the restaurant to be higher than average!

If we become frustrated with mediocrity in these areas, why do we settle for average in our Christian faith? Isn't our relationship with God greater than these things? There is no neutral in the Christian life. We are all either going forward or going backward, but we cannot stand still. Excellence is about surpassing your current state. The word excellence actually comes from late Middle English from Latin *excellētia*, which means "surpass."

There's a t-shirt that is sold at MIT that has the slogan: "if it ain't broke, fix it." Read that again: "if it ain't broke, fix it." Don't wait for something to fail. It's no wonder that so many amazing inventions come from MIT graduates. Their mindset of "this is great, but what if it could be improved upon?" is the reason that we continue to advance as a society. Think about what it might be like if we all approached our faith journeys and thought life in the same way. We wouldn't settle for "this seems good enough." We would always strive for "I think I can make this better."

But it's important to note that other thing excellence is not is perfection. Excellence is doing *your* best; perfection is doing *the* best. God calls us to do *our* best, not *the* best. Edwin Bliss was a professor of philosophy at Harvard in the early 20th century and he said this about pursuing excellence: "It's healthy and gratifying. But pursuing perfection is just neurotic, frustrating and a terrible waste of time."

You don't have to be better than everyone else, or even like everyone else, in order to be excellent. The gifts and skills that God put in you are the ones that you need to use to achieve your excellence. Ultimately, excellence in our lives should point to God. It's not about making *us* look good. It's about magnifying God in our lives so that others can see God's excellence.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you associate excellence and perfection with each other? What do you think is the difference?
2. What parts of your life have you let remain average rather than striving for excellence?
3. Is there anything in your life that is currently "ain't broke" but still needs improving?

Week 6, Day 5 - Philippians 4:8-9

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Understanding the Passage:

In *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen, he writes, "Cynics seek darkness wherever they go. They point always to approaching dangers, impure motives and hidden schemes. They call trust naïve, care romantic, and forgiveness sentimental. But in belittling God's joy their darkness only calls forth more darkness. People who have come to know the joy of God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself. And that a little bit of light can dispel a lot of darkness. They point each other to flashes of light here and there to remind each other that they reveal the hidden but real presence of God."

When we think on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worth of praise, we become the kinds of people that help others see God. These thoughts shape us into people who work for the kingdom of God here and now.

Jesus says, "It is not what goes into someone's mouth that defiles him, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles him." Why is that? It seems counter to every rule of the holiness code that Jews lived by. But Jesus knew that what comes out of our mouths comes from something that is within our heart.

We fool ourselves into thinking that the secret things in our lives – those things that no one else knows we think or do – don't matter and don't hurt anyone else. But those are the things that actually shape and influence us and end up being reflected out in the world.

That's the reason that Paul lifts up thinking on things that are pure as one of these values. Purity means that something is uncontaminated. For the Israelites, this was achieved by not touching anything impure or unclean, like a leper or a dead body. But Jesus shows us another way to achieve purity – by what the Christian author Philip Yancey calls "reversing the flow."

Because Jesus is clean, when he touches someone or something, that thing becomes clean and pure. When we let ourselves be truly reached by Jesus and we let down our guards, we are able to be cleansed as well. We no longer live a contaminated life, but one of purity – pure love, pure mercy, pure grace.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Being honest with yourself, can you name the secret things in your life that you think don't affect anyone else but are actually destroying you?
2. What part of your life needs to be touched by Jesus so it can be cleansed?
3. Looking at the Henri Nouwen quote, do you identify with the cynic or with the person who lives in the joy of God?

Video Questions

1. Why do you think gentleness is attractive to other people?
2. Can you think of a time when you've had more success in a relationship when you've switched from harshness to gentleness?
3. Do you feel that the Lord is near or far away?
4. Does your joy come often from Jesus or the circumstances of your life?
5. Have you found unexpected peace when you pray with thanksgiving?
6. How do you control what you dwell and focus on?
7. Which one of the values listed in Philippians 4:8 do you struggle with the most? Which one comes easiest for you?

Prayer requests and other notes.