

REFLECTION

Five Steps to Successful Living

Philippians 4:4-9

Bethany Church

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Some years ago a newspaper in Vancouver, British Columbia printed some real answers given on a Bible knowledge test.

1. Noah's wife was Joan of Ark. 2. Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day and a ball of fire by night. 3. Moses went to the top of Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Commandments. 4. The seventh commandment is "Thou shalt not admit adultery." 5. Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol. 6. Jesus was born because Mary had an immaculate contraption. 7. The people who followed Jesus were called the 12 Decibels. 8. The epistles were the wives of the apostles. 9. One of the opossums was St. Matthew. 10. Salome danced in seven veils in front of King Harrod's. 11. Paul preached acrimony, which is another name for marriage. 12. David fought the Finkelsteins, a race of people who lived in biblical times. 13. The Jews had trouble throughout their history with unsympathetic Genitals. 14. A Christian should have only one wife. This is called monotony.

Kids aren't the only ones who get their facts confused. All of us get turned around, mixed up or disoriented. The Bible teaches that is true spiritually and morally. "All of us have strayed like sheep," declared the prophet Isaiah. We have all lost our way.

If we've all lost our way, how do you know that you are not disoriented in how you are living now? King Solomon wrote that there is a path that seems right to us but at its end is destruction. How do you know that you are not walking that path? What do you think helps us get oriented? Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus was saying if you want to know whether you are headed down a dead-end road, whether you are on the wrong track, whether you are on the path to destruction or life, the key is me. He was saying that the fortunes of your life depend upon you relating and walking with me. In

this series *Five Steps to Successful Living*, St. Paul shows us how to walk with Christ. In Philippians 4 Paul offers us steps that help us live in Christ and thus realize our potential and fulfill our purpose.

Years ago, I met two committed believers: psychologist William Backus and pastoral counselor David Seamands. Dr. Backus opened up a new world for me. He revealed that behind every behavior is an emotion and thought. For example, if you act discouraged, it's because you feel discouraged. If you feel discouraged, it's because your thinking is discouraging. If you're worried, it's because you are thinking fearful thoughts. Backus claimed that what we think, we actually become. We do what we think even though we often are not aware of our thoughts.

Backus learned that you could discover what you think if you monitor your self-talk. You see... all people think with words. Because they think with words, they talk to themselves. Some of us get funny looks because we talk out loud to ourselves; but in truth we all talk to ourselves. Thinking is self-talk. If you observe a behavior and then take the time to listen to your self-talk, you can learn why you do what you do, or why you feel like your feel. You also can discern what truths or lies fuel your behavior. Change the talk, and you change both what you feel and do.

Paul wrote in 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. (Philippians 4:8; NIV)

With these words, Paul told us to take charge of our self-talk. Don't be passive sponges indiscriminately soaking up what others say or whatever Satan engineers. Don't be neutral in your course of thinking. Don't be easily led along. Take responsibility for what you think. Take charge of your thoughts.

Do you remember how Jesus dealt with thinking in his famous sermon on the mount? He said that you've heard that anyone who commits murder will be subject to judgment, but I say that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Jesus told us that we are responsible for being angry. We are responsible for the thoughts that feed our anger. Otherwise, how could we be subject to judgment? Jesus said that you've heard, "Don't commit adultery," but I say anyone who looks at a girl lustfully has already committed adultery with her. Jesus wasn't condemning a momentary feeling of attraction. He was addressing our self-talk that entertains improper desire. He was telling us, "Take charge of what you think." And he was saying, "What you think, you are," wasn't he?

We reflect what we think! Eventually, we reflect what we reflect on. That's why the fourth step to successful living is *Reflection*. We become what we think. We follow our thinking! Attitude brings actuality!

The 17th Century French Philosopher Rene Descartes is sometimes called the father of modern philosophy. He pioneered critical thinking or questioning. He even questioned his own existence until he reasoned, "I think therefore I am." Jesus and Paul go further. They suggest, "I am what I think," or "I become what I think!" Therefore, it is critical to take charge of what you think and what influences how you think!

Important questions follow: what gang do you hang with, what music do you listen to, what shows or movies do you view, what books do you read, what language do you use? All of these profoundly shape the direction and very words you use in thinking; and you have great power to screen and change them. Don't think that you're unaffected by what you see and hear. Monitor your self-talk for awhile and you'll see what influences you.

Dr. David Seamands specializes in counseling Christian leaders and believers. He's discovered that our relationships with people when we were children influence our thinking and thus how we feel and relate to God. If you had a father who was given to tantrums, you'll tend to see God as easily angered. If you had a mother or siblings who were hypercritical, you will tend to see God picking with you and never pleased. Is your God never pleased? Never satisfied? If you had a parent who was emotionally distant, you may doubt that you can experience intimacy with God. All these early relationships influence how we view ourselves and how we see God. Since even the saintliest parents sin, all of us suffer a partially impaired view of God and ourselves. Even as blessing comes from their righteousness, impairment comes from their sins.

Seamand's findings reveal why it is so important to develop intimate friendships with believers. As Christian love, confrontation, forgiveness and encouragement are practiced, our image of God changes. We begin to grasp the love of God. We discover our gifts and our personal value. When our friends are accepting and forgiving, defensiveness evaporates, and honesty and sheer relief appear in growing measure. Love begins to shape us, and joy sweeps clean our souls. That's what can happen in small groups.

Renewal of our thinking and development of our faith becomes very difficult if we don't participate in a small group. Without small groups it is difficult to identify and overcome some of the patterns of thought and behavior that hinder our lives and hurt our loved ones.

Why do you think every major growth or change program in the United States uses small groups? Whether it be chemical treatment, sexual addictions, gambling problems, grief support, divorce recovery, eating disorders, suicide survivors, abuse recovery, sexual offenders, spouse abusers, marriage enrichment or whatever, small groups are key to healing and change.

Those of you with United Methodist backgrounds have a heritage. Do you know how the Methodist movement that numbers over 40 million world wide and its Pentecostal offshoots that now include a half billion believers began? It began with a small group of men on an English university campus who really wanted to live in Christ. They wanted to be authentic Christians in thinking and living. It began with John and Charles Wesley and some others praying together, reading scriptures, and holding each other accountable to make what was written in the pages of the Bible come alive in their daily life. So they worked hard at their jobs, visited the sick, went to the prisons, and took time and money to help the poor. They studied the Bible, served their neighbor, and sought to taste in greater measure the love and power of God in Christ. In time God directed these men into life-changing experiences that gave them freedom, passion and produced enormous fruit. They were so disciplined in their meeting and doing, that some of their peers ridiculed them with the title, Methodists. The name stuck.

Any touch of mercy, any blessing of God you receive from this church comes in ripple effect, in a chain of blessing, from how years ago God gripped these people's lives as they gathered in small groups to have their thinking formed by Christ.

It is important that you **choose the right company** to support you in healthy thinking and living. It is also important to **deal with your thinking**. The Apostle Paul wrote the Corinthians: "We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). How can you take your thoughts captive, if you don't know what they are? *Monitor your self-talk*. Take time this week to hear yourself. When you are fearful, what are you thinking? When you are tempted, what are you thinking? When you are angry, what are you thinking? Once you hear yourself, *evaluate your thoughts*. Are they reflective of Christ? You may find all kinds of destructive thoughts sowing defeat in your life. You may find unbelief rather than faith, hate rather than love, bitterness rather than forgiveness and fear rather than trust. You may find more traces of popular television shows than the words of Jesus. You may discover that a lot of what you tell yourself is contrary to the Bible and Jesus' words. Whatever the case, you are in charge of what you think. You can *replace those thoughts*. Talk to yourself about what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable. Talk to yourself about Christ's love and will for you in whatever situation you are monitoring.

Remember, to realize your potential and fulfill your purpose on this planet, you must take charge of your thinking and then make every thought captive to the will and wisdom of Christ. You can do it. That's why Jesus and Paul call you to.