

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, May 21, 2017**

THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8-9

It's easy for me, as I think back over these last eleven years, to remember the high points of my time here at Faith and the Cove. Walking through the Old City of Jerusalem, along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and through the Garden Tomb with thirty of you in two different groups during 2009 and 2016. Going to Mexico with Susan Service and Lisa Barnett, spending a week ministering to the people of Monterrey alongside the brothers and sisters of Iglesia Bethel Presbyteriana. Teaching pastors the art of preaching in an unfinished house in northern Ghana. Teaching wonderful Sunday school classes at the Cove and at Faith, classes full of people who could easily have taught many of the pastors I went to seminary with a thing or two, and who have taught me so much over the years. Having the privilege of finishing my Doctor of Ministry degree, and in the process learning more about both ministry and myself than I could have imagined. Leading small groups that enriched my relationships and my understanding of Scripture. Baptizing Joel and Anna Goetz by immersion at Rose Hill Baptist Church. Baptizing K. J. Price and other infants at the Cove. Playing autoharp with the terrific musicians of our praise bands. Having the high honor of planting a church, and while it didn't particularize, seeing marvelous ministry done over the course of six years with as dedicated and hard-working and God-loving a group of Christians as I could imagine. Being allowed to dedicate time to work on behalf of the persecuted church with the Iraqi Christian Relief Council. Meeting the chaplain of the United States Senate, Admiral Barry Black, when he attended worship on a random Sunday at the Cove. How many places in America is something like that possible? Being blessed by the generosity and self-giving labors of men like Tee Townsley, Hank Whitehead, and John Hirsch, who have been so much help to us as we prepared to sell our house. Experiencing the genuine fellowship and unity embodied in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church's General Assembly and the Presbytery of the East. Being able to work with devoted servants of the Lord like Neil Smith, Bob Barnett, Mike Bittenbender, Julie Cloutier, Joanna Knoles, Lisa Marik, Adam Rice, Pam Osbourne, Beth Mailand, and all the excellent ruling elders who have graced the Faith session and the Cove oversight commission these last eleven years, whom I want to thank from the bottom of my heart for their wisdom, their hard work, their fellowship and their faithfulness. Seeing the unity and diversity of the Kingdom of God in real life by watching Christians from fourteen different countries work together in harmony and love in this congregation. Having my life and Maryanne's changed by hosting Nico Chantel in our home for fifteen months, mentoring him in ministry, and marrying him off to a beautiful Turkmen girl. I could easily go on for a while longer with this, but I think you get the point. A lot of good things have happened here over the last eleven years, and that's just the stuff that I've been directly involved in. Other than Nico, I haven't even touched on the things Maryanne was involved with, such as the card makers group that is now known world-wide for its impact on the missionaries of the EPC. If each of us were to make our own list of what's happened in our congregation that has been edifying, supportive, holy, thought-provoking, even miraculous, and we then pooled our lists, we'd be here all day and night reading through them.

Now, that's not to say that there haven't been some shadows amidst the light. There have been. No church is perfect, no church staff is perfect, no congregation is made up of perfect people. But I've dwelt on the good things that have happened, and that God is doing even now, and I'm not even going to mention any of the other stuff, for a reason. It's not because I'm burdened by any rose-colored glasses naivete. Rather, it's because of my love for each of you, and in obedience to the Lord's

command, and because I believe with all my heart and mind and soul and strength in the power of the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. It's that power that I've seen at work in this congregation over the last eleven years, and it's that power that lies behind St. Paul's exhortation found in Philippians, chapter four.

That exhortation begins, as we saw last week, with the call to "rejoice in the Lord always," and all the stuff I've just gotten through mentioning is an expression of that. It continues with the call to magnanimity, which I've seen on display here over and over. We're told not to be "anxious for anything," and that's not always been easy, especially through the difficult financial times of the last decade, but we're also told that the basis for that lack of anxiety is not an Alfred E. Newman-esque "what, me worry?" attitude, but grateful, fervent prayer, and that is in fact what has gotten us through tough situations. And we've received a blessed promise as well, that the "peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," a promise that, for those who lean upon Him, will protect our hearts and minds, if not our bodies or our wallets, from "the slings and arrow of outrageous fortune," not to mention the torment of Satan and the opposition of the world.

That brings me to two final things that I want to leave with you from Philippians 4, verses four through nine, and those are found in the last two verses on which I will preach here at Faith. In verses eight and nine, St. Paul gives clear instruction for the focus of our prayers and our praises. First, in verse eight he writes, "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."

Now, I have to admit that as terrific as this sounds, I have a hard time doing this. In more ways than I care to think about, I have always been something of a negative person, having learned that mindset from my mother, who was a master of "glass half-emptiness." For instance, her father, while working as an architect for the firm Eggers and Higgins, helped with the construction of the Jefferson Memorial in DC, contributing the idea of the inscriptions around the inside of the rotunda. Something to be proud of, right? I certainly am. But she always grouched that he didn't get credit as one of the architects or paid enough. Here's another: In 1944, she and her high school civics class founded the Candy Strippers, the hospital volunteers that were known for the pinafores they wore while on duty. The subject always irritated her because the names of those involved have been lost to all but the participants.

I can definitely be the same way. For example, when I go to Washington, I don't see beautiful memorials or great museums, I see politicians. When the Atlanta Braves won their first World Series back in 1995, one of my first thoughts was, "yeah, but can they do it again?" When I was chosen to appear in "Who's Who in American Religion," I turned it down because I thought people would say, "who's who? Who's he?" You get the idea. It's easy, terribly easy, to focus on what's wrong, on what hasn't been done, on what's impossible, or on the just plain ugly side of life. What Paul exhorts us to do instead is focus on the true, the noble, the right, the pure, the admirable, the excellent, the praiseworthy—in short, all that is of God, rather than the forces that oppose Him.

But what Paul is talking about here is far more than just the "power of positive thinking." He is not by any means advocating that we sing along with the men being crucified at the end of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life." The French philosopher and atheist Voltaire, when he wanted to ridicule Christianity, focused on just this kind of thinking in his novel *Candide*. He created a character, Dr. Pangloss, who claimed that ours was the "best of all possible worlds." Voltaire then had his counterpoint character Candide draw the reader's attention to the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755, in which over 100,000 people were killed in the space of a few minutes. Candide asks if the

good doctor could so blithely dismiss such tragedy, and claim that Lisbon was part of "the best of all possible worlds." The answer, of course, is no.

We live in a world that over the last hundred years produced two world wars, the Holocaust, the Cambodian, Rwandan, and Sudanese genocides, the Soviet gulag, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the mass persecution of Christians around the world. We can no more dismiss evil than we can fly, at least not without both looking foolishly naive and hopelessly uncaring about those who suffer. Neither is St. Paul claiming that we should just put the hurts of the world, or of our sisters and brothers, out of sight and out of mind. One need only read Paul's epistles, in which he deals with a variety of problems in churches from incest to heresy to factionalism, to know that this is not a man to avert his eyes when there are evils to be dealt with. No, what he is saying is this: Even in the midst of the world's evil, we can trust that the God who has triumphed over evil in the resurrection of Jesus Christ can and will shepherd His people through any crisis, that at all times and in all circumstances, there are wondrous evidences of God's care for us to be found, and these, rather than our afflictions, are what we are to focus on. That doesn't mean that we won't suffer. That Christ died on a cross shows that His people may have to suffer as a result of being in the world. But it does mean that through tough times, we can always look to the Lord to produce holy, virtuous, pure, noble, lovely, praiseworthy fruit in the lives of His people. We may sometimes have to look closely to see it, but it will be there. And since it will be, we are obliged to look for it, and praise God for it, and hold it up for all to see, as the proof that God's love conquers all.

That leads to the second thing Paul says in this passage. In verse nine, he writes, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice." The words translated "received" and "heard" here are for all practical purposes synonyms for "learned," so this verse is saying two things. The apostle is telling the Philippians that they have been taught by him, and they have seen his life based on the truth that he taught them. They are to take what they have learned and observed, and live it as well.

Even beset as he was by a wide variety of travails, from imprisonment to stoning to shipwreck to beatings, Paul was still able to teach the Philippians that the life of a Christian is to be characterized by joy, prayer, praise, contentment, magnanimity, peace that passes all understanding, and a focus on all that is right and good and true. That teaching, which was a product of the spiritual gift of the same name and thus inspired by the Holy Spirit, was in turn reflected in his life. That it was is a testament to the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart and mind, as well as to his single-minded devotion to Christ and the gospel. In a way perhaps unique in the history of the church, Paul was able to walk the talk, so much so that he was able to hold himself up as an example to other Christians to follow. That doesn't mean he was sinless, of course. He admits as much in Romans 7. But it is to say that he was able to bring together theory and practice in a way that made him, and makes him, a model for all who followed.

I am no Paul, that's for certain. I'm sure the peanut gallery in the back will give me an "amen" on that. So on my own behalf, as a preacher and teacher of the gospel, I will simply say this. If you have learned anything from me in Sunday school, in a small group, in a session meeting, in a committee, in a one-on-one conversation, in a counseling session, in helping me with my doctoral thesis, or in a sermon, I ask only that, if it conforms with Scripture, you live by it. As much as possible, what I teach and preach is not my own. It's filtered through my personality, certainly, but the truth that I have sought to convey in everything I've done here has its basis, not in my own wit and wisdom—thank God!—but in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. At the same time, if you have seen anything in me that is worthy of emulation, anything that Scripture indicates is a characteristic of Christians, by all means do so, not

to be more like me, but to be more like Jesus. For inasmuch as there is anything good, or noble, or true, or admirable, or pure, or excellent, or praiseworthy in me, it is only because God has put it there, in order that Christ may be seen in me. For Christ to be seen in us—all of us, not just me or pastors in general or missionaries, but *all* of us—is God's desire and purpose for us. That's why Paul wrote to the Ephesians that he and other pastors and teachers had been given to the church that all Christians may grow, "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." And that's why he wrote to the Philippians that they should practice anything excellent or praiseworthy that they had seen in him. May that be something that every one of us can say to others of the household of faith.

As I indicated at the beginning of this sermon, there is much that I have to be thankful for, to praise God for, to meditate upon and cherish as I look back in the years to come on my time here in northern Virginia. Above all, I will be thankful for the opportunity to serve the Lord by serving you and serving with you, and in the process, being privileged to experience the love of God as it has come to me through each of you. As you worship together, work together, fellowship together, learn together, serve together, my prayer for each of you is that you will always, in every task and every conversation, experience the love that shines out through your brothers and sisters for yourselves. Let us pray.