



***Strengthening Your Core:  
“EXCELLENCE!”***

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Scripture: Philippians 3:10-14, 4:8-9

*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

*Finally, beloved, 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. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Hey! What are you thinking? What’s on your mind right now? I’ll give you a penny for your thoughts. Although I’d sure hope that your thoughts are worth a lot more than a penny. We’re usually rather casual about our thoughts. We don’t guard them too zealously. Most of the time we just sort of let our minds wander – thoughts come into our minds and we think we’ve actually got a good reason for them being there. But really we let thoughts come into our mind and out again – we don’t monitor or filter them all that carefully. As our eastern cousins say, “The mind is a drunken monkey.”

Over forty years ago, when the computer revolution was really getting up some steam, the pioneers in the field coined a brand-new word. In those olden days, not many people knew how to operate a computer and those who did made many mistakes. Sometimes people entered the wrong data only to discover a universal truth: if the raw data is bad, the computer can’t do anything good with it. What you put into a computer determines what comes out.

In order to express that truth, a new word was coined. Most computer buffs know what word I’m talking about. The word is *GIGO*. G-I-G-O. It stands for Garbage In, Garbage Out. Those four letters summarize a huge truth about computers: What you put in determines what you get out. If your input is garbage, guess what your output will be? Garbage.

What is true of computers is also true of the human mind. That comparison is apt because human beings have often been called a “bio-computer.” In fact, the human mind is far more complex than the most advanced computer ever designed. As complex as computers are today, Dr. Gerhard Dirks, who holds fifty patents on the IBM computer, once said, “If we could invent a computer that would duplicate the capabilities of the human brain, it would take a structure the size of the Empire State Building, just to house it.”

I hope that gives you some new appreciation for the innate equipment God has given to each one of you. But the basic principle of GIGO is still true: Garbage In, Garbage Out. So, I wonder: are you putting to use the highest and best that God has placed in you? Are you striving for whatever is honorable, and just, and pure and true; that is, are you striving for Excellence in being a follower of Jesus Christ? If not, as the saying goes, what are you striving for? If you’re not striving for the best, you will likely obtain the worst. As with silicon-based computers, so also with us human bio-computers.

As you think, so you shall become. This is not a new teaching. King Solomon knew this. More than three thousand years ago, in Proverbs 23, he said, “For as you think in your heart, so you will be.” The ancient Greeks knew this. The Greeks had a formula for this that I’ve always loved. They said, “Plant a thought, reap an action; plant an action, reap a habit; plant a habit, reap a character; plant a character, reap a destiny.”

The Apostle Paul thundered: “Think on these things!” because he knew we shape ourselves by the image set in our minds and hearts. It’s no wonder to me at all that Paul echoes some of Christ’s key teachings. “Do not be anxious,” Jesus said. “Do not be afraid,” he commanded. “Do not return evil for evil.” Because you’ll poison yourself. But above all, “Be perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect.” And while you and I may be convinced that we can’t be perfect, it’s still a great goal for you and me. It was Vince Lombardi who said, “Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence.” In other words, strive for the highest and do not let lesser garbage into your human bio-computer.

So on what do you set your heart, soul, mind and strength? Do you set your sight on God and the things of God? Do you resist fear, anxiety, criticism, vindictiveness, retribution, hate – or do you water them like weeds? When we’re not striving for the highest and best in God’s sight, then all too often we’re seduced by the popular, the glitzy, the shallow, if not the outright base, instead of those things which are sound and firmly grounded in Jesus Christ.

Or do you strive for excellence in being a disciple of Jesus Christ and do you keep your sights on him? Teresa of Avila put it this way for her life: “Address every action that you perform to God; offer it to God and beg it to be to God’s honor and glory.” The great basketball player, Michael Jordan, puts a different gloss on it. He said that there is a great difference between those players who “strive for excellence” and players who “strive for acceptance.”

Now, I want to point out something very surprising about the words St. Paul wrote to the tiny Christian community in the Greek city of Philippi. These are peculiar words, quite unlike anything else Paul wrote. The paragraph is a list of classic Greek and Roman civic virtues, and this is the only place in either the Old or New Testaments where we find the Greek word *arête*.

*Arête* means to offer all actions as a sacrament to excellence, of devoting one's life to finding excellence, identifying it when it offers itself, and achieving it in your own life. And I think we need to wonder what is Paul doing using Hellenic culture as a source of Christian ethical teaching.

But Paul knew what he was doing. He knew "Truth is truth!" The situation seems to be like this: that particular Christian community had come to be very suspicious of the culture around it. Ridiculed, sometimes persecuted, the early Christians had an extremely negative view of the larger world. Christians were becoming self-righteous and isolationist. They weren't treating their neighbors with Christ's love. They weren't even living up to the standards of civic courtesy and civility of their neighbors. So Paul drew on a list of virtues directly from Greek moral philosophy, Hellenistic culture at its best, and said, in essence, that this, too, is of God. He was saying, "Remember that the mind with which you relate to the world and your neighbors is at the heart of our faith."

It's also, I think, Paul's response to the tendency in the early Christian churches to argue and contend and dispute, in city after city. The early church made a spectacle of themselves by publicly fighting. So Paul is gently chiding his friends and suggesting that they might behave as decently and courteously as their pagan neighbors, telling the early church to lift up their minds to those things which please God and are of God. This is a surprising argument from Paul.

I think it was a bit of a surprise, as well, when the "Core Values" group met to identify those virtues at the heart of Birmingham First United Methodist Church. Table after table identified "excellence" as a value at the heart of what we seek and do here. It's not a quality we often think of when we think of Christian life, yet it thoroughly characterizes the quality of our endeavors. Why is so much of what is done here successful? Because the members of this congregation seek to do all things with excellence. And, really, we ought not to be so surprised at this. In so many ways in the scriptures, we are admonished, encouraged, instructed, commanded to strive for God, the highest and best. We are told to "be perfect." We're taught how to love in ways far beyond the limits of what this world believes about love. We're to fix our minds on the things that are of God.

A number of years ago, a woman in Georgia felt God calling her to excellence. She started out teaching Sunday school classes to local children. Then she felt God calling her to somehow build a school for little children, for children who could not go to school, who were not allowed in the schools. Her name was Martha Berry, and the place was Rome, Georgia.

Finally, somebody said to her, "Martha, you need more money. There's no way you can build a school without more money. Did you know that Henry Ford has a winter place down here in Georgia? If you could speak to Mr. Ford, maybe he could help you."

Martha tried to see Mr. Ford, but he was a very busy man, and the name "Martha Berry" meant nothing to him. She couldn't get an appointment, but she waited patiently, and one day she saw Mr. Ford coming down the street. She rushed over to him and started trying to tell him about her school, how there were little poor children who needed an education and she felt called to build a

school. Henry Ford surely had people asking him for money all the time. He reached in his pocket, pulled out one shiny new dime, put it in her hand and walked on.

Now, Martha Berry could have said something really angry, ugly and bad. She could have felt discouraged and defeated. But she kept her mind on better things. Martha Berry went back to the school to this handful of little children and said, "I got us a dime today!" Then she went to the store and bought a bag of seed peanuts and brought them back to the school and the children planted the peanuts. The children watered the peanuts when they needed it, scratched the weeds away, and they sold the peanuts for almost ten dollars.

Martha Berry then wrote to Mr. Ford, and onto her letter she taped a bright, shiny new dime. She said, "I thank you for the loan, Mr. Ford. You helped us. You helped us draw closer together. Our kids now have something to work on. We're still moving forward with the Martha Berry School. I just wanted you to know that your gift helped us." Henry Ford was impressed. And before he died, Henry Ford made several gifts to the Martha Berry School, totaling a million dollars.

Martha McChesney Berry founded the Berry Schools for academically able but economically poor children of the rural South. These schools of the early 1900s grew into Berry College, a comprehensive four year liberal arts college that has an endowment today of \$813 million. As a result of her forty years of work with the schools and college, Martha Berry is among Georgia's most prominent women of the first half of the twentieth century. The motto of Berry College today is still "Not to be ministered unto but to minister."

Martha Berry could have acted spitefully. She could have responded in bitterness to that gift of a dime. She could have spoken trash about Mr. Ford and his miserly gift. But she expelled those thoughts from her mind and focused on the mission she felt called to do. She kept her sight on the vision of the high calling she had in Jesus Christ and she responded with charity, with forbearance, with courage and with patience. And in the end, in the end, glory was given to God.

So how are you going to spend your thoughts? Are you going to waste them by letting advertisers tell you how to think about how you should look or feel or vote or buy? Will you squander those precious and powerful thoughts by being angry and trying to get even with somebody who hurt you? Will you put them in a well of anxiety and fear? Will you invest your powerful thinking in thoughts of self-pity, or blaming, or anger or bitterness?

Are you casually thinking about how long the worship service is going to be this morning or how long-winded Pastor Gary is going to be? You've all had about 2,200 separate thoughts this morning. How did you direct them? Or did they just direct you?

Think on these things, and if there is any excellence, strive for it! For as you think, that's what you will become.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Beware of what you set your mind on because that you surely will become."
- Norman Vincent Peale said, "Change your thoughts and you change the world."

- And Betty Sachelli perceptively wrote: “Two thoughts cannot occupy the mind at the same time, so the choice is ours whether or not our thoughts will be constructive or destructive.”

We have choice in what we think. Garbage In, Garbage Out. And this brings us back to where we started: “As a person thinks in his or her heart, so they will be.” What you think today, you become tomorrow.

If you think angry thoughts, angry words are sure to follow.  
If you dwell on rejection, you will isolate yourself.  
If you obsess about your problems, they will overwhelm you.  
If you give in to worry and anxiety, they will soon rule you.  
If you focus on despair, you’ll chase faith and hope away.  
If you focus on how others misunderstand you, you will soon be bitter.

Your thoughts shape your world, so strive for excellence. Strive for Christ. You’re not what you *think* you are, but what you think, *you are*.

Here is Paul’s prescription for everyday people trapped in unhealthy living: Think On These Things. Focus on the good, the pure, the true, the holy, the right, the lovely. Find those things that elevate the mind and think on them, for you will become them. And above all, follow his example of following Jesus Christ. For, excellence in, excellence out.

What a marvel this is. From a wretched Roman prison, Paul encourages us to a simple sanity. Outward circumstance cannot defeat him, because he has shaped his inmost being after the pattern of Christ. “Beloved, 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. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

So what do you think? I’ll give you a penny for your thoughts – and I trust and believe that they’re going to be worth much, much more.

May we pray? Gracious God, may our first thought in the morning, and our last thought be of you, of your forgiveness and your love, and of our need to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. As we do so, give birth within us of all that is true, honorable, just, pure and excellent, that we might be worthy followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.