**“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure,**

**whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise,**

**dwell on these things.” —*Philippians 4:8 (NASB)***

In Romans 12:1–2, the Apostle Paul described to the Christians in Rome how they must respond to the profound truths of the gospel which he outlined in the first eleven chapters of his letter:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

The second half of Paul’s instruction (v. 2) highlights the great challenge all Christians face: apart from the intentional effort to “be transformed” to resonate God’s will, every Christian will inevitably conform to the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of the corrupt culture around him. There is no neutrality. There is either conformity to the world or transformation into the likeness of Christ.

But how is the Christian transformed? In Romans 12:2 Paul identifies the means of this transformation, although he does not spell it out in detail. He identifies it as “the renewing of your mind.” To define this concept further, we must look to other texts by Paul and other writers of Scripture. As we do, we find that this “renewal of the mind” is synonymous with the concept of *meditation*.

**I. Biblical Meditation Defined**

The term “meditation” certainly comes with a lot of baggage. The use of this term in various religious contexts leads many Christians to approach the term apprehensively. Therefore, it is important at the start to explain **what biblical meditation *is not***. Biblical meditation is not in any way related to transcendental meditation (TM) or to the kinds of meditation practiced in eastern religions, New Age spirituality, or yoga. Nor is biblical meditation the kind of meditation advocated in some so-called Christian traditions, such as in Roman Catholic monasticism, in the mystical practice of *lectio divina*, or in the spiritual formation movements.

Nonetheless, **the concept of “meditation” is rooted in Scripture**, and despite the term’s corruption by false religions, it deserves an essential place in Christian vocabulary and practice. In short, the term summarizes Paul’s prescription of transformation “by the renewing of the mind” (Rom 12:2). It is a crucial concept in any discussion about the Christian mind.

David Saxton provides a simple, straightforward definition of the term when he describes biblical meditation as **“*the doctrine of Christian thinking*”** (*God’s Battle Plan for the Mind*, 1–2). Adding more detail, Donald Whitney describes meditation as “deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer. Meditation goes beyond hearing, reading, studying, and even memorizing as a means of taking in God’s Word” (*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 48). J. I. Packer (*Knowing God*, 18–19) provides one of the best, most robust definitions:

Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God. Its purpose is to clear one’s mental and spiritual vision of God, and to let His truth make its full and proper impact on one’s mind and heart. It is a matter of talking to oneself about God and oneself; it is, indeed, often a matter of arguing with oneself, reasoning oneself out of moods of doubt and unbelief into a clear apprehension of God’s power and grace. Its effect is ever to humble us, as we contemplate God’s greatness and glory, and our own littleness and sinfulness, and to encourage and reassure us . . . as we contemplate the unsearchable riches of divine mercy displayed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A significant amount of the theological exposition of the doctrine of meditation comes from the 17th century Puritans. As Puritan historian Joel Beeke observes, “Perhaps nowhere are the Puritans so helpful as in offering guidelines for the process of spiritual, biblical meditation” (“How Should We Meditate? Let the Puritans Be Your Teachers”). Consider these helpful statements:

* **Thomas Watson (1620–1677):** “Meditation . . . is a holy exercise of the mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder upon them and apply them to ourselves” (*Heaven Taken by Storm*, 23).
* **Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711):** “Spiritual meditation is a religious exercise. It neither consists in idleness, nor is it a passive disposition in which we are but recipients, permitting ourselves to be illuminated about the divine perfections and divine mysteries. . . . Instead, it is an activity in which the soul is occupied in reflecting upon these matters, approving of them, delighting in them, is astonished about them, and quickened by them” (“Spiritual Meditation,” 4.25).
* **Edmund Calamy (1600–1666):** “I would have you pray unto God to enlighten your understandings, to quicken your devotion, to warm your affections, and so to bless that hour unto you, that by the meditation of holy things you may be made more holy, you may have your lusts more mortified, and your graces more increased, you may be the more mortified to the world, and the vanity of it, and lifted up to Heaven, and the things of Heaven” (*The Art of Divine Meditation*, 172).
* **Oliver Heywood (1629–1702):** “Christian meditation is the contemplative and earnest fixing of the mind on the great spiritual realities which the Bible has revealed to us. It should be connected with prayer and the study of Scripture . . . yet it is differs from both. Prayer is the converse of the soul with God; the direct outpouring of its wants and desires before the throne of Infinite Mercy. The reading of Scripture is the exercise by which the soul seeks to learn God’s will, and to gather in the communications which He has made of His character and purposes. But meditation is the soul’s conference with itself . . . . It is the set and solemn endeavor of the soul to bring home to itself divine things; and so to revolve, ponder, and digest them, as to work their transforming power into every element and faculty of its being” (*Heart Treasure*, 250–51).

The Puritans emphasized that meditation is **the crucial bridge between reading God’s word and speaking to God in prayer**. If a man is to pray in accordance with God’s will (1 John 5:14), he must first have God’s word saturate his being so that God’s will truly becomes his earnest desire. The Puritans also emphasized that meditation is **the crucial bridge between knowing and doing**. If a man is to love and obey God’s word, he must first have that word permeate his intellect, will, and affections so that living by that word becomes “natural.”

**Biblical meditation**: the discipline of thinking so thoroughly about God’s truth that it leads to the appropriate application of that truth in practical living.

According to this understanding, biblical meditation can be summarized by these characteristics:

* It actively engages *the mind*; it never takes place without it.
* It fills the mind with *the revealed truth of God* (His words and works); it does not fill it with an imagined reality.
* It contemplates that truth *carefully, from God’s perspective*; it does not consider truth superficially or from the standpoint of self.
* It applies that truth *to the will and the affections*; it does not keep compartments of life free from truth’s authority.
* It leads to conformity to that truth; it does not draw to a close without some degree transformation.

**II. Biblical Meditation Prescribed**

Scripture is rich with the terminology of meditation. For example, consider these Old Testament texts:

* **Joshua 1:8 –** “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”
* **Psalm 1:2 –** “But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.”
* **Psalm 63:6 –** “When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches.”
* **Psalm 77:11–12 –** “I shall remember the deeds of the Lord; surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds.”
* **Psalm 111:2 –** “Great are the works of the Lord; *they are* studied by all who delight in them.”

Psalm 119 brims with meditation terminology. For example,

* **Psalm 119:15 –** “I will meditate on Your precepts and regard Your ways.”
* **Psalm 119:27 –** “Make me understand the way of Your precepts, so I will meditate on Your wonders.”
* **Palm 119:48 –** “And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, which I love; and I will meditate on Your statutes.”
* **Psalm 119:97 –** “O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.”
* **Psalm 119:148 –** “My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word.”

While the terminology of the New Testament is slightly different, the same concept is evident:

* **Romans 8:5–6 –** “For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”
* **Colossians 3:1–2** – “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.”
* **Colossians 3:16 –** “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”
* **2 Timothy 2:7 –** “Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.”
* **Hebrews 12:3 –** “For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

One of the most detailed texts on meditation is **Philippians 4:8** – “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” The verb **“to dwell on”** (λογίζομαι, *logizomai*)here means **“to give careful thought to a matter”** as in “to ponder, dwell on” (BDAG, 598). Paul commands this activity to the Christian as an ongoing discipline in life—not just an occasional religious activity. And this careful thought is to be focused on six specific characteristics and two summary qualities:

* + 1. **“true”** = “pertains to being in accordance with fact” (BDAG, 43); that which *corresponds to reality as God has determined it*; the antithesis of falsehood.
    2. **“honorable”** = that which evokes “special respect” (BDAG, 919); that which is noble and dignified; the required quality of deacons and mature men (1 Tim 3:8; Titus 2:2).
    3. **“right”** = “that which is obligatory in view of certain requirements of justice” (BDAG, 247); that which measures up to God’s standard of righteousness.
    4. **“pure”** = “holy”; an attribute of God; is required of all that belongs to God (sacrifices, etc.); free from the profane and worldly.
    5. **“lovely”** = “causing pleasure or delight, pleasing, agreeable, lovely, amiable” (BDAG, 887); that which draws admiration.
    6. **“of good repute”** = “praiseworthy, commendable” (BDAG, 414); that which winning and attractive.
    7. **“if any excellence”** = “uncommon character worthy of praise, excellence of character, exceptional civic virtue” (BDAG, 130); that which describes God Himself (1 Pet 2:9; 2 Pet 1:3).
    8. **“if anything worthy of praise”** = “a thing worthy of praise” (BDAG, 357).

Ultimately, if a man is to think Christianly, he must discipline his mind to meditate in the manner and on the topics stipulated by Paul in Philippians 4:8. A mindset that is thoroughly Christian is a mindset that has been formed by this kind of disciplined thought life. It is this very mindset that becomes increasingly impervious to the invitations, pressures, and demands of the world. It is this mindset that progressively leads to comprehensive transformation. Conversely, a mind that fails to meditate according to that standard of Philippians 4:8 is a mind that will by default dwell upon things in a way that conforms to this world. It will be a mind occupied with error, dishonor, unrighteousness, impurity, ugliness, ill repute, mediocrity, and shame.

**How must we respond?**

As Thomas Watson observed, the real issue is not *whether* we meditate, but upon *what*. He writes,

By nature we shun holy meditation. To meditate on worldly secular things, even if it were all day, we can do without any diversion, but to have our thoughts fixed on God, how hard do we find it! How do our hearts quarrel with this duty! . . . Satan does what he can to hinder this duty. He is an enemy of meditation. The devil cares not how much we hear, nor how little we meditate. (*Heaven Taken by Storm*, 23)

To cultivate biblical meditation, examine your life in light of these principles:

1. **Commit to read Scripture.** Dwelling upon those things which are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and worthy of praise is not possible without setting those things before your eyes and ears. As Jerry Bridges states, “It is vain to pray for an increase of the fear of God on our hearts without meditating on the passages of Scripture that are particularly suited to stimulate that fear” (*The Practice of Godliness*, 50). So how is your reading? What will you do to take in more of God’s word?
2. **Take time to ponder.** Biblical meditation is not merely *eating* truth, it is *digesting it.* This requires time. Donald Whitney compares it to steeping tea: “Hearing God’s Word is like one dip of the tea bag into the cup. Some of the tea’s flavor is absorbed by the water, but not as much as would occur with a more thorough soaking of the bag. . . . [It] is like immersing the bag completely and letting it steep until all the rich flavor has been extracted” (*Spiritual Disciplines*, 48). Are you committed to put in this time?
3. **Recognize the means.** That which is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and worthy of praise will come to you by various means. In addition to reading Scripture, opportunities to meditate on biblical truth will come through hearing sermons, singing hymns, participating in Bible studies, reading books on biblical doctrine, etc. In other words, meditation is not limited to the time of your own personal study of Scripture. It is greatly enhanced by your dedicated involvement in the local church and your fellowship with other believers. Are you seizing these opportunities?
4. **Include God’s works.** The Psalmists speak not only of meditating on the *words* of God, but on His *works* as well: “I shall remember the deeds of the Lord; surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds.” Be observant of God’s creation. Be alert to stories of God’s redemption and works of providence. Of course, these works of God must be pondered in light of Scripture, but they provide tremendous fuel for meditation. Are you observant to God’s handiwork around you?
5. **Redeem the time.** The Puritans spoke of *deliberate meditation* (regular, planned, lengthy) and *occasional meditation* (sudden, short, spontaneous). While we often think of the former as integral to meditation, we often forget the latter. Look for opportunities during daily commutes, waiting in lines, unexpected downtimes, etc. Will you continue to squander these opportunities out of mental laziness?
6. **Aim for change.** Meditation is never just a religious ritual. Meditation that does not effect real life change is not meditation (see James 1:22–25). Meditate to be transformed. Do you embrace your need for change?

**For Further Study**

1. Memorize Philippians 4:8 and Psalm 77:11–12.
2. Return to Psalm 119. Reread the psalm several times this coming week, paying special attention to the psalmist’s references to “meditation” and other related words and descriptions. Create a list of observations about what Psalm 119 teaches you about biblical meditation and be ready to share it with others.
3. Review the six practical applications listed above. Take time to pray about each one, asking the Lord to give you discernment and strength to make necessary changes in your current practice of meditation. For each of these six applications, write out a plan for growth.
4. On a notecard, right out the eight characteristics listed in Philippians 4:8. Keep this card with you over the coming week to remind you of how to use your thought life.

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** gracechurch.org/motw

**Next meeting:**February 2, 7pm, Evening of Prayer