

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The mind of Christ is to please the Father

How often do you think about what you're thinking about? Is your thinking and the way you're thinking aligned with the way God thinks about those same things? How do you know? If your thinking is conformed to the patterns of the world, are you willing to submit to the active work of the Holy Spirit in transforming your mind according to the Word of God? If you are not willing to have your thinking conformed to the mind of Christ, what does that say about your discipleship?

This study is an invitation to think about how you think.

One of the differences between the believer and the unbeliever is not that they think about different things, but that they think about the same things differently.

Consider happiness. Is happiness the primary pursuit of life? What does it mean to be happy? What is it that makes us happy? How would you finish the sentence, "I would be happy if only ...?" What you fill in that blank is inevitably related to your circumstance.

Contrast happiness with a Scriptural view of joy. Happiness is based on "good" circumstances and the "good" will of others around us. And although we can affect our circumstances by noble effort, prudence and wisdom, we still do not have absolute control over our circumstances. Nor do we have control over the people around us whose choices deeply affect us. Changes in our health or wealth, tragedy, accidents and the evil intent of others can crush our castles built on the circumstantial shifting sands of happiness.

We receive thousands of prayer requests from readers of *The Layman* each year. Each weekday morning, the staff of the Lay Committee gathers to study God's Word and pray for the concerns of our brothers and sisters in Christ across the country. So we know that our fellow Presbyterians are facing a myriad of challenges that, without faith, would prove overwhelming. Death, divorce, debilitating illness, loss of controls related to aging, frustration and grief related to the state of the nation and the church,

as well as siblings, spouses, children, grandchildren, neighbors and friends who reject Christ, are the prayers we are most often asked to address. So, we pray – not at all happy about the circumstances but in full joy with the knowledge that God loves these people and is working even now to redeem.

Therein lies the contrast between circumstantial happiness and the life of joy. Whatever happens, Jesus is Lord. No matter what, in all circumstances, God is God.

Joy is based on a relationship. This truth is demonstrated in the life of Paul, and his letter to the church at Philippi is centered on the joy found in Jesus Christ.

The following four lessons are an invitation to enter into the mind of Christ and think about all things in living relationship to Him, the source of our joyful living.



Do you think
about what
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Lesson I: Joy, not under circumstances, but in Christ

We know from Paul's own account of his life that he was flogged five times within one stripe of his life. We know that three times he was beaten with rods, once he was pummeled with stones, three times he was shipwrecked, and he spent a night and a day adrift at sea. He goes on to say in II Corinthians 11 verse 26, "I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from the Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." In sharing his circumstances, Paul is not complaining. In fact, he counts it all joy.

Even as he writes to the church in Philippi, Paul is in prison, again. They knew Paul as a man who was familiar with jail. They also knew that he was a man in and for whom the power of God was at work. Read Acts 16:11-40 to be reminded of Paul's experience with – and ministry in – Philippi.

Those same Philippian Christians wrote to Paul when they learned that he was in prison in Rome. The letter to the Philippians is Paul's response. You might expect him to be "unhappy" and to chronicle the conditions under which he is living but instead he writes to them a letter of joy. Sixteen times in the brief letter Paul uses the word *joy* or *rejoice*.

Paul's thought patterns are strange from a worldly perspective. That's because Paul possesses – and is possessed by – a spiritual mind: the mind of Christ. Clearly Paul's joy is not a product of circumstance but of authentic relationship with the One, holy God. In Him there is joy, no matter the circumstances.

Paul is demonstrating in his own life, and advocating for the Church, a life governed by the mind of Christ. That mind is revealed in Jesus Christ, demonstrated in Paul, and he in turn exhorts the Church to have the same mind.

As Christians we are instructed throughout the New Testament to have the mind of Christ. The most concise articulation of that command comes from Paul in Philippians 2 where he says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Your translation might read "let the same attitude be in you," but the Greek is clear. It says, "Think this way." A life governed by the mind of Christ is secure in the joy of that relationship and not subject to the rising and falling tides of circumstantial happiness.

Reflection:

1. Read Philippians and make specific note of the references to *joy* and *rejoicing*. What are the circumstances in which Paul rejoices? What is the source of his joy?
2. Do you dwell on the circumstances of life and allow the pursuit of happiness to govern your emotions, relationships and outlook? Or, do you dwell in Christ in the midst of all circumstances and allow the joy of that relationship to govern your emotions, relationships and outlook? Do you see the difference? Are you living the difference?

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Lesson II: The Revelation of the Mind of Christ

In Jesus we see that the ultimate and moment-by-moment goal of life is to please the Father. This is the mind of Christ and this is the servant's joy.

Jesus' mind was set on One: the Father. In the context of teaching about the Father and His relationship with Him, Jesus says in John 8:29, "I always do what pleases Him." In John 4 after the disciples return from town and find Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus says to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work." Jesus' mind is like no other. It is singularly focused not on self-gratification but on the Father's glorification. It is God's intention that we think like Jesus. So, do we think like that?

Throughout Jesus' life and ministry we see His mind:

- The mind of Christ is set on the Father, the Father's will and the Father's way.
- The mind of Christ is not divided, but single-minded.
- The mind of Christ is not easily tempted and answers temptation with the Word of God.
- The mind of Christ submits to the Father, "not my will but Thine be done."
- The mind of Christ thinks rightly and righteously.
- The mind of Christ is compassionate, strong, uncompromising and full of grace and truth.

Paul presents the mind of Christ as revealed in Jesus in Philipians 2:5-8. Therein we see that Jesus, although totally free, was also fully surrendered. He did not retain His rights, much less demand them. He gave Himself totally over to the will of God: emptying Himself and humbling Himself in total obedience, even unto death. The intimacy of Jesus' relationship to the Father was so rich that pleasing the Father and living in relationship with the Father was the goal of life.

Reflection:

1. Read Philipians 2:1-11. What does this passage reveal about the mind of Christ?
2. When the Bible says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," ask yourself, "Is it?" Is this self-emptying, humble mind that is set continually toward the pursuit of one goal (pleasing the Father) my operating system? Is my every thought captive to Him? Is my thinking conformed to His?
3. If so, rejoice! If not, read and follow the instructions found in Romans 12:1-2. Study the life of Paul and see him as a demonstration of the mind of Christ revealed in Jesus.

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Lesson III: The Demonstration of the Mind of Christ

What does the mind of Christ lived out in a regular person look like? One answer is the example of the life of the apostle Paul. He demonstrates the mind of Christ.

Read Philippians 3:4-14. Here we see parallels between the mind of Christ revealed in Philippians 2:5-8 and the life of Paul.

Jesus had reason to exalt Himself. He was, after all, in very nature God. From a worldly mindset Paul also had reason “to put confidence in the flesh.” Today’s parallel to Paul’s litany of superior qualities might be a resume that included being born into the right family, living in the right neighborhood, having the right friends, attending the right schools, having access to power, wealth, prestige and fame. Paul had it all and yet he “counted it all loss for the sake of Christ.”

That is not how the world thinks. That is not the way the world keeps score. That’s counter-intuitive, counter-cultural and ultimately threatening to a world not set on pleasing God but pleasing self.

Paul recognizes the ultimate exchange of his mind for the mind of Christ. He “gets it” that the secret of being content is not all the stuff of the world or the relative happiness we might experience in a fleeting moment. He knows that the joy of being in relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ and living a Spirit-filled and God-directed life is far more rich and worthy than anything the world can give. Add to that the profound reality that the world cannot take it away and you have the kind of joy Paul experiences in every moment of life, no matter the circumstances.

Reading Acts chapters 9-28 as well as Paul’s letters to the Christians in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, the region of Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae allows us to know Paul and the mind of Christ governing his life. Paul helps us see what the mind of Christ operating in a regular man looks like. It provides a pattern for us to follow.

Paul actually offers himself as a pattern in Philippians 3:17-4:1. He invites the Philippians to follow his example, to live according to the pattern he has given, to walk this way. In Philippians 4:9 he adds, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” And that is JOY!

Reflection:

1. Knowing what you know of Paul from Acts and his own letters to the churches, what was on his mind? What characterized his thinking? How did he make decisions? What would a life like Paul’s look like today?
2. If Paul possessed, and was possessed by, the mind of Christ then the same mind that was in Paul ought to be operating in each Christian disciple today. So, is the same mind in you that was in Paul?
3. How did Paul offer himself as a pattern for others to follow? How are you doing that for Christians in the spiritual generation coming along after you?

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Lesson IV: The Exhortation for the Church to have the Mind of Christ

The Church is the communion and community of redeemed people who live in the knowledge that we are in the presence of God and experiencing real life in Him moment by moment unto eternity – and this is not our own doing, but by grace through faith in Christ alone. This is life viewed and lived from a supernatural perspective. This is life that is not tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine nor by every wave of circumstance; this is life that is anchored in Christ, centered in God's Word, guided by God's Spirit and conformed to God's will.

Paul describes it as a life lived in one Spirit with one mind as one man (Philippians 1:27). It is a life governed by the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:1-11) unto a purpose (Philippians 2:15-16).

In exhorting the Church to have the mind of Christ, Paul lays out six imperatives in Philippians:

- Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel. (1:27)
- Make my joy complete by ... (2:2)
- Have the same mind in yourselves that was in Christ Jesus. (2:5)
- Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. (2:12)
- Do all things without grumbling or disputing. (2:14)
- Rejoice and share your joy with me. (2:18)

Paul says that the result of such a life would be authentic witness in the world. He describes it as “holding out the word of truth.” Just as God highly exalted Jesus (Philippians 2:9-11), so too God will exalt the Church (Philippians 2:15-16).

To what purpose? God's purpose (Philippians 2:13).

To what end? Joy (Philippians 2:18).

Reflection:

1. The exhortations to the Church concerning the mind of Christ comprise the bulk of the material presented in the book of Philippians. It is a worthy exercise to read through the book in one sitting, listening for God's instruction to us personally and collectively.

2. Read Philippians 1:27-2:18. What is Paul exhorting the Church to do? Are you doing it, and are “we” as the Church in the world today? What is one specific, tangible commitment you can make to more fully cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work of bringing your mind and life into greater conformity with the mind of Christ?

3. Read Philippians 3:15-4:9. As you walk through these verses, examine your life. Do you take a mature Christian view of things? Is there some point, some cultural idea or moral standard where you “think differently” than God thinks? Is that not a place where your mind is set against the mind of Christ? Are you willing to submit to God in that matter? If not, what does that reveal to you about your relationship with God?

4. Conclude this study by meditating and committing yourself to live out Philippians 4:8-9. And rejoice!

