

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: Think on These Things; Content in Christ

Philippians 4:8–13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this passage is the Christian discipline of the mind, the necessity of practice and not merely knowledge, and the nature of true contentment as something learned in Christ. Paul teaches that what we dwell on shapes who we become, that right thinking must issue in obedient practice if the God of peace is to be with us, and that contentment is not a temperament but a learned secret grounded in the strength Christ supplies. Be ready to teach the famous verse 13 carefully in its context, against its common misuse, so that students grasp it as the promise of strength for contentment in every circumstance rather than a guarantee of personal success.

This passage is also intensely practical and formational. Every student is feeding their mind something, and in our age the menu is often fear, outrage, comparison, and impurity poured in through screens. Every student also struggles with contentment, whether in seasons of want or, more subtly, in seasons of plenty. The aim is to make them honest about their mental diet and their discontentment, and to lead them into the learned, Christ-supplied contentment Paul describes. This is the kind of transformation that changes daily life, not merely belief.

So aim at both targets. Teach the discipline of the mind, the link between practice and the God of peace, and the true meaning of strength in Christ, and at the same time press your students to examine what they feed their minds, to put known truth into practice, and to begin learning contentment in Christ rather than in their circumstances.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul instructs us to “think about these things,” listing whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable (4:8). What does this teach us about the importance of guarding and directing our minds, and why does it matter so much what we dwell on?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul gives a deliberate command about the content of our thoughts. The verb think about means more than a passing glance, it means to consider, ponder, dwell on, let the mind settle and feed. He then lists the qualities worth this kind of attention, true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy. This is a menu for the mind.

This teaches that the mind is not neutral ground and our thoughts are not beyond our responsibility. We can, to a real degree, direct what we dwell on, and we are accountable for it. The renewal of the Christian is largely the renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2), and that renewal happens as we deliberately fill our thoughts with what is good rather than passively absorbing whatever comes.

Explain why it matters so much. What we dwell on shapes our desires, our character, and eventually our actions. A mind that marinates in resentment grows bitter, a mind that feeds on impurity grows impure, a mind that dwells on fear grows anxious. Conversely, a mind that dwells on what is true and lovely is slowly conformed toward the good. We become what we behold.

Help students see this as active stewardship, not mere avoidance. Paul does not only say avoid the bad, he says fill the mind with the good. The best defense against a corrupt mental diet is a positive one, deliberately feeding the mind on Scripture, on the character of God, on what is honorable and lovely, so that there is less room for what defiles.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The mind as ground we are responsible to guard and direct, not neutral
- Christian renewal as largely the renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2)
- What we dwell on shaping desire, character, and action: we become what we behold
- Active stewardship of the mind, filling it with good, not merely avoiding evil

Discussion Prompts

- Why is what we dwell on not a matter beyond our responsibility?
- How does the mind's diet shape the kind of person we become?
- Why is filling the mind with good a better strategy than mere avoidance?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest about your mental diet, what you scroll, watch, read, and replay in your mind. What are you actually feeding your thoughts, and how is it shaping you? What would it look like to change the menu this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question makes Paul's command concrete in the age of screens. Most people have never honestly audited their mental diet, the steady stream of content and rumination they consume each day, much of which fails every test in Paul's list.

Help students take honest inventory. What occupies their scrolling, their watching, their idle thoughts? Much of the modern mental diet is the opposite of Paul's list, the false, the shameful,

the impure, the ugly, the outrageous, consumed for hours without reflection. Naming the actual diet is sobering and necessary.

Trace the effects honestly. A diet of outrage breeds anger, a diet of comparison breeds envy and discontent, a diet of impurity breeds lust, a diet of fear breeds anxiety. Students often feel these effects without connecting them to their consumption. The connection, once seen, is hard to unsee.

Press for one concrete change to the menu. Not a vague resolve to think better, but a specific subtraction (a feed unfollowed, a habit curbed) and a specific addition (Scripture, worship, something true and lovely) this week. The mind's diet changes by changing what we actually consume, one deliberate choice at a time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honestly auditing the daily mental diet in the age of screens
- Much modern content failing every test in Paul's list
- Connecting effects (anger, envy, lust, anxiety) to what we consume
- One concrete subtraction and addition to change the menu

Discussion Prompts

- What are you actually feeding your mind each day?
- How is that diet shaping your desires and moods?
- What one subtraction and one addition could change the menu this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul moves from thinking to doing, "what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (4:9). Why does Paul insist on practice, not just right thinking, and what is the connection between obedience and the presence of the God of peace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul will not let right thinking remain merely mental. He moves immediately to practice these things. The faith he teaches is not a set of ideas to be admired but a way of life to be lived. What the Philippians had learned, received, heard, and seen in Paul was meant to be done, not just known.

This is consistent with the whole New Testament. Jesus said the wise man is the one who hears his words and does them (Matthew 7:24). James warns against being hearers who deceive themselves rather than doers (James 1:22). Knowing the truth without practicing it is not neutral, it is self-deception. The faith is completed in obedience.

Note the striking promise attached, and the God of peace will be with you. There is a connection between practicing the truth and experiencing God's presence and peace. We often want the peace without the obedience, but Paul ties them together. The God of peace draws near to the obedient walk, while disobedience and the peace of God do not coexist comfortably.

Help students feel that this is good news, not burden. The path to the felt presence of the God of peace runs through practicing what we know. Many who long for a deeper sense of God's nearness are looking everywhere except the place Paul points, the simple, costly practice of the truth they already possess.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith as a way of life to be practiced, not ideas to be admired
- Knowing without doing as self-deception, not neutral (Matthew 7:24; James 1:22)
- The God of peace drawing near to the obedient walk
- The felt presence of God connected to practicing what we know

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul insist on practice and not merely right thinking?
- What is the connection between obedience and the presence of the God of peace?
- Where do we want God's peace without the obedience he ties it to?

Question 4

Student Question:

Name one truth you genuinely know but have not been putting into practice. What has kept it in the realm of knowing, and what would it take to actually practice it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses verse 9 onto the gap every believer carries between knowing and doing. Most of us are not failing for lack of knowledge but for lack of practice. We know far more than we obey.

Help students name one specific truth left unpracticed, a known command to forgive, to give, to speak the truth, to break a habit, to reconcile, to pray. The aim is one identifiable truth, not a general confession of inconsistency.

Examine honestly what keeps it in the realm of knowing. Usually it is comfort, fear, or cost, the truth would require a change we have not been willing to make. Naming the obstacle is important, because the gap is rarely closed by simply knowing the truth more thoroughly.

Press for the concrete step that would move the truth from knowing to doing this week. Practicing the truth is not accomplished by resolving to be more consistent in general, but by taking the one specific action the known truth requires. Invite each student to name that action.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal gap between knowing and doing
- Naming one specific truth left unpracticed
- Comfort, fear, or cost as the usual obstacle
- Closing the gap by one specific action, not more knowledge

Discussion Prompts

- What is one truth you know but have not been practicing?
- What has kept it in the realm of knowing?
- What specific action would move it into practice this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content" (4:11). What does it mean that contentment is something learned rather than a natural feeling, and where is it learned?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a quietly profound admission, I have learned to be content. Contentment did not come to him naturally or instantly. It was learned, acquired over time through experience. This is liberating for students who assume that contented people are simply born with an easy temperament. Contentment is available to be learned by anyone willing to enter its school.

Note where it is learned, in whatever situation. Contentment is not learned in a classroom of theory but in the actual situations of life, the hard ones and the easy ones alike. Paul learned it in prisons and shipwrecks, in hunger and in plenty. The circumstances we would most like to escape are often the very classrooms where contentment is taught.

Define biblical contentment carefully. It is not apathy, resignation, or the suppression of all desire. It is a settled sufficiency in God that does not depend on circumstances, a peace that holds whether we have much or little. It is compatible with effort and even with sorrow, but it is not at the mercy of what we possess.

Help students see contentment as a discipline to be pursued, not a feeling to be waited for. We learn it as we repeatedly choose to trust God in our circumstances rather than demanding different ones, as we practice gratitude, and as we let God, rather than our conditions, be the source of our peace. It is learned slowly, in the school of real life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Contentment learned over time, not a natural temperament or instant feeling
- The school of contentment being our actual circumstances, hard and easy alike
- Contentment as settled sufficiency in God, not apathy or suppressed desire
- Contentment pursued as a discipline, not waited for as a feeling

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Paul learned contentment rather than feeling it naturally?
- Where is contentment actually learned?
- How is biblical contentment different from apathy or resignation?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where does discontentment have the strongest grip on you right now, in your possessions, your circumstances, your relationships, your body? What is it you keep believing you need in order to finally be at peace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question hunts for the specific location of the student's discontentment. Discontentment is rarely general, it usually fixes on a particular lack we are convinced stands between us and peace.

Help students name the if only that rules them. If only I had more money, a different spouse, better health, that house, that recognition, then I would be content. The if only is revealing, because it names the idol we have made into the condition of our peace, the thing we have set in the place that belongs to God.

Expose the lie in the if only. The discontented heart always believes peace lies just beyond the next acquisition, yet those who attain the coveted thing soon find a new if only waiting. Discontentment is not finally cured by getting what we want, it is cured by learning, as Paul did, to find sufficiency in God regardless.

Press for honest naming and one reorientation. Ask each student to name where discontentment grips them and what they keep believing they need, and then to begin, this week, practicing gratitude and trust in that very area, choosing to seek their sufficiency in God rather than in the longed-for thing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Discontentment fixing on a particular perceived lack
- The revealing if only that names our functional idol

- The lie that peace lies just beyond the next acquisition
- Contentment found in God's sufficiency, not in attaining the coveted thing

Discussion Prompts

- Where does discontentment grip you most strongly right now?
- What is the if only you keep telling yourself?
- How might you seek your sufficiency in God in that very area?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says, "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound" (4:12), treating both want and plenty as conditions to be navigated. Why is abundance often just as great a test of contentment as need, and how can plenty quietly endanger the soul?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul names two conditions he has learned to navigate, being brought low and abounding, want and plenty. We instinctively assume that want is the hard test and plenty is the easy reward. Paul treats both as conditions requiring a learned secret, which suggests that plenty is its own kind of test, and perhaps the more dangerous one.

Explain how abundance endangers the soul. In want, we are driven to depend on God, our need keeps us on our knees. In plenty, we are tempted to forget him, to trust our resources, to grow comfortable and self-sufficient, to let our hearts attach to our possessions. Scripture repeatedly warns that prosperity dulls our sense of need for God (Deuteronomy 8:11–18; Revelation 3:17).

Note that contentment is needed in plenty as much as in want. The contented person is not ruled by abundance any more than by need, neither inflated by riches nor crushed by poverty. They hold plenty with an open hand and a grateful heart, refusing to let it become their security or their god.

Help students apply this to a culture of relative abundance. Most of your class lives in more plenty than most of human history, which means most of them are being tested by abundance, often without realizing it. The comfortable life is a real spiritual test, and learning contentment in plenty, to enjoy God's gifts without being owned by them, is as crucial as learning it in want.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Both want and plenty as conditions requiring learned contentment
- Plenty as a subtle and often greater test than want
- Abundance tempting us to self-sufficiency and forgetting God (Deuteronomy 8:11–18; Revelation 3:17)
- Contentment as being ruled by neither riches nor poverty

- The comfortable life as a real and often unrecognized spiritual test

Discussion Prompts

- Why is abundance often a greater test of contentment than need?
- How can plenty quietly endanger the soul?
- How are most of us being tested by abundance without realizing it?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think about the seasons of plenty in your own life. Do you find it harder to lean on God when things are abundant and comfortable? How might prosperity be testing your heart right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the test of plenty into the student's own experience. It is a gentle but searching reversal, since we usually examine ourselves in hardship and rarely ask how prosperity is testing us.

Help students notice the spiritual effects of their comfortable seasons. Often prayer grows thin when life is easy, dependence on God fades, and the heart quietly attaches to the comforts and securities we have accumulated. We tend to seek God hardest when we need something, and to drift when we feel we lack nothing.

Name the danger of the unexamined comfortable life. A person can drift far from genuine dependence on God during a long stretch of prosperity without ever facing a crisis that exposes it. The comfortable believer can be in greater spiritual danger than the struggling one, precisely because nothing is forcing them to their knees.

Press for honest reflection and one practice. Ask each student how their current measure of comfort may be dulling their dependence on God, and what one practice, deliberate gratitude, intentional generosity, renewed prayer, could keep their heart soft and dependent in the midst of plenty.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Examining ourselves in prosperity, not only in hardship
- Prayer and dependence quietly thinning when life is easy
- The unexamined comfortable life as a place of hidden spiritual danger
- Gratitude, generosity, and prayer keeping the heart dependent in plenty

Discussion Prompts

- Do you lean on God less when life is comfortable?

- How might prosperity be testing your heart right now?
- What practice could keep you dependent on God in seasons of plenty?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul concludes, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (4:13). In the context of contentment in want and plenty, what is Paul actually claiming here, how is this verse often misused, and what does it teach us about the true source of a believer's strength?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, and it requires careful handling, because few verses are more loved and more misused. Read in context, Paul is not making a general promise that Christ will empower us to achieve any goal we set. The all things he can do is defined by the verses right before it, being brought low and abounding, facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. The claim is, I can face any circumstance, content and faithful, through him who strengthens me.

Address the common misuse directly but graciously. The verse is often pasted onto athletic victories, career ambitions, and personal dreams, as though Christ guarantees success to those who believe hard enough. That is not Paul's meaning, and treating it so sets believers up for disillusionment when their dreams fail. Paul wrote this from prison, with no athletic victory or career triumph in view. His all things included hunger and want, not just abundance.

Now teach the glorious truth the verse actually holds. The secret of Paul's contentment is not in himself, not in a positive mental attitude, not in his circumstances, but in Christ who strengthens him. The strength to be content in any condition is supplied by Christ, infused into the believer who depends on him. This is the answer to the whole passage, contentment is learned, yes, but its power source is the indwelling strength of Christ.

Draw out how this works practically. When we face hardship, Christ supplies strength to endure without bitterness. When we face plenty, Christ supplies strength to enjoy without idolatry. The same Christ meets us in every condition, and our part is to lean on him rather than on our circumstances or our own resolve. The strength is real, and it is his, not ours.

Land it pastorally. This is better news than the misreading offers. The misreading promises success, which God has not guaranteed and which would not finally satisfy. The true reading promises something deeper, that in any circumstance God hands us, whether triumph or loss, abundance or hunger, Christ will supply the strength to remain content and faithful. That is a promise that holds in a hospital room and a prison cell, not just a winner's circle.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The all things defined by context: contentment in plenty and want, not unlimited achievement
- The common misuse of the verse as a guarantee of success, and its disillusioning fruit
- The source of contentment in Christ who strengthens, not in self or circumstances
- Christ's strength to endure hardship without bitterness and enjoy plenty without idolatry
- A promise that holds in suffering and loss, not only in triumph

Discussion Prompts

- What is the all things Paul says he can do, read in context?
- How is this verse commonly misused, and why is that a problem?
- What does the verse actually teach about the source of a believer's strength?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Paul calls you to a disciplined mind, a practiced faith, and a learned contentment grounded in Christ's strength. Name one specific way Jesus is using these verses to form you, whether toward a cleaner mental diet, deeper obedience, or genuine contentment in him.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the passage into one personal response. Paul has touched the discipline of the mind, the practice of the truth, and the learned, Christ-supplied secret of contentment. Help each student identify the one Christ is pressing on them.

Press for the specific. Not I want to think better, but I will cut this particular input and add this one. Not I want to be more content, but I will practice gratitude in this exact area of discontentment. The transformation Paul describes is entered through concrete change.

Connect the response to Christ as the source. Whether the student needs a cleaner mind, deeper obedience, or contentment, the power is not in their willpower but in him who strengthens them. Keep them leaning on Christ rather than resolving to try harder in their own strength, which is the very thing the passage corrects.

Close the lesson in prayer, asking God to renew the minds of your class, to move them from knowing to doing, and to teach them the secret of contentment in Christ. Invite one concrete step this week that begins to put one of these truths into practice.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gathering the passage into one specific, personal response
- Choosing concrete change over general resolve
- Christ as the source of a renewed mind, obedience, and contentment

- Leaning on Christ rather than trying harder in our own strength

Discussion Prompts

- Which is Christ pressing on you: your mind, your obedience, or your contentment?
- What one specific step will you take this week?
- How will you lean on Christ's strength rather than your own resolve?