

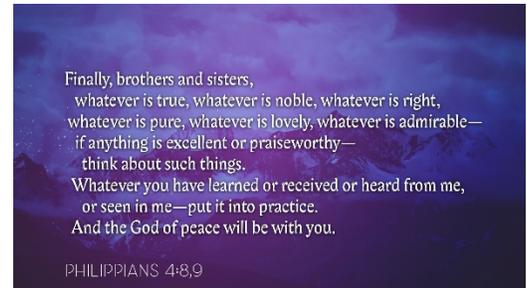
Whatever

We are continuing our *ride* through the New-Testament Book of Philippians, today looking to verses 8 and 9 of chapter 4. If you heard last Sunday's message, you may remember that I touched on these two verses briefly, but promised we would be back today, because I wanted these verses to stand alone... so here we are.



Let's read the passage together:

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. ¹



Our passage today contains a *list*: true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. That is quite a list.

I really like lists. Any of you who routinely work with me know that lists are important to the way I approach my responsibilities. I keep lists on various agenda, and spreadsheets, and even use more sophisticated tools and databases (stuff that lives in the *cloud*) to share and keep track of lists. Usually the only way I get anything done, big or small, is for it first find a place on a list. I really like lists.

So this passage is particularly interesting to me, and as you might expect, we'll take some time here to go through each of these items on the list. But before we do, let me point out something about the list, as a whole, that may be important as we “think about such things.”

Here is the observation: this isn't necessarily a **Christian** list.

That may seem like a strange thing to say; it **is** right there in the Bible, in the New Testament (the really *christiany* part)... yet I'm saying it isn't a *Christian* list. It isn't a particularly Christian list from at least a few perspectives.

First, the words and virtues selected for this list are closely aligned with the cultural virtues of Philippi... specifically Greek (or Hellenistic) virtues. If we wanted to get really nerdy about this, we could take our text (in the original Greek

¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Php 4:8–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

language) and align it with other 2,000-year-old texts from the region and find the same words describing general Greek virtue (not word-for-word plagiarism... but the words and concepts are the same).

With this list, Paul is saying something like “here are some virtues of a good Christian,” but to those who were first hearing this in Philippi, this would seem a whole lot like the virtues of a good Philippian (or just a good person).

Second, compare and contrast this list with the attributes described in the previous paragraph. These are the kinds of things that are more uniquely Christian:

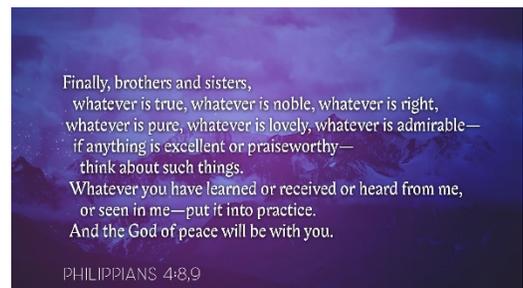
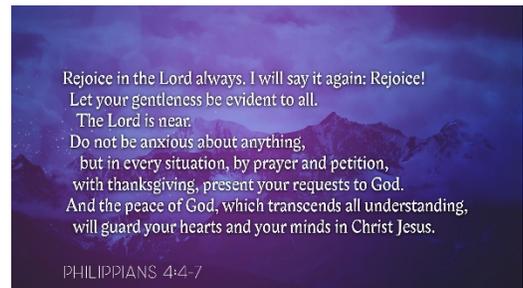
- To **rejoice** in the Lord always. To have joy *not* rooted in circumstances, but rather rooted in the Lord.
- To exhibit the mindset of Jesus through **gentleness**.
- To live mindful of the **nearness** of the Lord... both in terms of the presence of God by the power of His Spirit working in us and through us now, as well as the nearness of the Lord in terms of His second coming.
- To cast all our anxieties (cares) on Him in **prayer**.

These aspects of the Christian mindset, the mindset of Jesus, are more unique to Christianity, in tension with the culture generally found in Philippi.

But this list in verse 8 would sound comfortably familiar to that ancient Greek mind. It would be as if Paul wrote to an American audience: “baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet... think on such things.”

Anybody remember that commercial?
You’d have to be old, like me.

We weren’t all that sophisticated in the mid 70’s. Apparently if we could be reminded how much we loved baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie... we might go out and buy a Chevy.



Perhaps in a slightly more sophisticated way, as the Philippians in that day, and we today are encouraged to take on the mindset of Jesus, Paul holds up these virtues. These virtues are familiar and cherished (like baseball and apple pie), **and** have something significant to do with having the mindset of Jesus.

So let's consider the list:

True

This one virtue, of course, could *eat up* all the rest of our time together today. This gets to one of the biggest questions that has occupied us humans for all time.

The question was echoed by an unjust ruler as Jesus faced Pilate before Jesus was sentenced to death on a cross.

³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

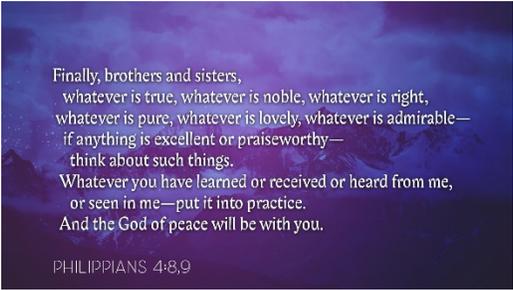
Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

³⁸ "**What is truth?**" retorted Pilate. ²

We could recall that Jesus is the **embodiment** of truth... truth personified. Jesus said of Himself that He is The Truth.

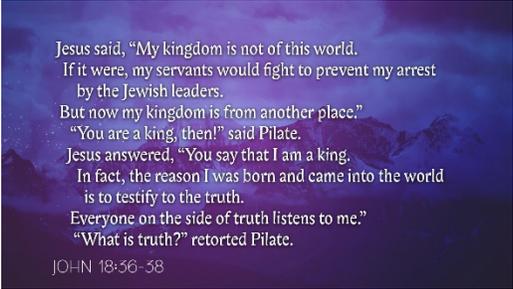
⁶ Jesus answered, "**I am the way and the truth and the life.** No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." ³

We could get philosophical and declare **that all truth is God's truth**. That isn't a direct quote from the Bible; it is Augustine written around 1600 years ago (although one can certainly make a Biblical case for this profound statement).



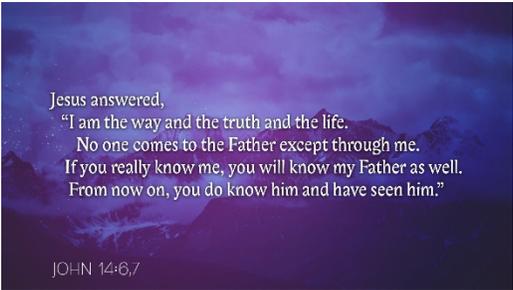
Finally, brothers and sisters,
whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right,
whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—
if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—
think about such things.
Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me,
or seen in me—put it into practice.
And the God of peace will be with you.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8,9



Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world.
If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest
by the Jewish leaders.
But now my kingdom is from another place."
"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.
Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king.
In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world
is to testify to the truth.
Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."
"What is truth?" retorted Pilate.

JOHN 18:36-38



Jesus answered,
"I am the way and the truth and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me.
If you really know me, you will know my Father as well.
From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

JOHN 14:6,7



ALL TRUTH IS GOD'S TRUTH.
AUGUSTINE

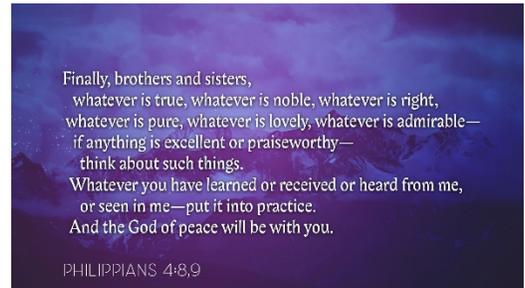
² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 18:36–38). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 14:6–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

“All truth is God’s truth,” expresses “confidence in God, truth, the Bible, science and the ultimate alignment of all inquiry and discovery. Those five words assume that the science from the laboratory and the exegesis from the Scriptures will not contradict one another once we’ve rightly figured them out.” ([Leith Anderson](#))

Like I said, **truth** could eat up all of our time together today... and could easily be the topic of a long series.

But for the purposes of this list, we can rightly limit the word to the *adjective* form, **true**; it says *whatever is true*. In this context, this is more about true **testimony**... true speech (over and against lies and deceit). This is about *telling* the truth, aligning with true testimony, not compromising, and certainly not lying.



This is about representing the truth, **only** saying what is true and **boldly** saying what is true. “Whatever is true” is the opposite of fake news.

Whatever is true, as an aspect of the mindset of Jesus, is always being on the side of truth, saying and demonstrating what is true.

Noble

Nobility has connotations of **respect**. *Whatever is noble* are those things that are worthy of respect, including people who are to be revered and honored.

It resonates with the commands found in Romans 13:

⁷ **Give to everyone what you owe them:** If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; **if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.** ⁴



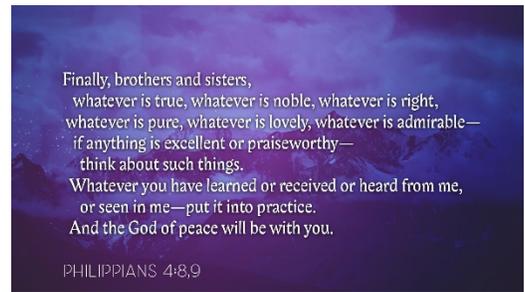
Whatever is noble, as an aspect of the mindset of Jesus, is seeking out and honoring that which rightly deserves respect and reverence.

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 13:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Right

This is a word with *legal* connotations, closely aligned with justice and righteousness.

The *Gospel understood* teaches us that our righteousness before God is entirely in God's hands... that righteousness in the vertical, righteousness in our relationship with God, is only possible because of God's action, God *bridging the chasm*... Jesus being The Way for us to enjoy our righteous standing before God.



But I am concerned that sometimes our focus on *vertical* righteousness might cloud our thinking, allowing us to insufficiently value *horizontal* righteousness. The security of our righteousness in the vertical, before God, does not release us from our obligation to pursue what is right in the horizontal, among people. Vertical righteousness compels us toward horizontal righteousness.

Whatever is right, as an aspect of the mindset of Jesus, fuels our pursuit of what is right and just among people.

Pure

If these were more *Christian* words than secular words, Paul would have likely written “whatever is *holy*.” When something is pure, or someone is pure, there is no stain or wrinkle, nothing that defiles. When something, or someone, is pure, it has not been besmirched by evil.

Whatever is pure, as an aspect of the mindset of Jesus, calls us to pursue and value holiness.

Lovely

Have you noticed that the list seems to get more and more subjective? We can argue about an absolute standard for truth (although there is disagreement in our culture about the notion of absolute truth). We can often agree on what is right, just, noble, and pure... but *lovely*. That seems to be more *in the eye of the beholder*.

A careful study of the words here reveals that what is meant by lovely “throws the net broadly” (Fee). That which is lovely and enjoyable could be as common as a well-crafted donut, to as uniquely complex as a beautiful symphony.

Whatever is lovely, as an aspect of the mindset of Jesus, lets us know that God values beauty and enjoyment.

Admirable

This is as subjective and closely aligned with the meaning of *lovely*. What is admirable would align more with virtue in **action**. What is admirable is conduct and behavior, the sorts of things that are admired and well spoken of by people in general.

Whatever is admirable, as an aspect of the mindset of Jesus, reminds us of how conduct matters, that people are watching and learning.

Excellent

The root word of excellent is *excel*... this word has connotations of successful human effort. It is paired with the word:

Praiseworthy

This word has everything to do with people taking notice.

It seems that *whatever is excellent or praiseworthy* is meant as sort of a *catchall* phrase, an expansive category of all sorts of good things, big and small... perhaps even known and unknown. It really amplifies the **whatever** in all of this.

Again, these are words that may not be immediately associated with our understanding of the Gospel... that our understanding of the Gospel may call most of our attention to **God's** work over **ours**, **God's** perspective and notice over our own.

Whatever is excellent or praiseworthy, as an aspect of the mindset of Jesus, throws wide open the options of how God may find pleasure in His people.

True, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy... what are we to do with all of this? The text says: *Think about such things*. Just think about it?

To those ancient Greeks living in Philippi, that was a virtue in itself. Sound thinking was held in the highest regard.

What is meant here is to really contend with all of this, to wrestle with it and have it align with all of what is presented in this letter to the Philippians.

It was no mistake that Paul used these familiar words that resonated with their Greek culture. The Church in Philippi was a colony of Heaven, an embassy in a land that was, in many ways, foreign to the ways of Heaven, but of course still home to Philippians. By using these familiar virtues to urge the Philippians to pursue the mindset of Jesus, they were challenged to consider, and reconsider, their usual ways of thinking.

Perhaps these familiar virtues should challenge us and our ways of thinking too.

The Gospel causes us to rethink what is **true**, to understand truth not merely as an abstract, and perhaps flexible, virtue, but as a person: Jesus. The Gospel causes us to identify absolute truth, not merely as a concept.

The Gospel causes us to rethink what is **right**, to understand righteousness according to God's standards, to receive His righteousness by faith, and be agents of what is right in whatever ways we can.

The Gospel causes us to rethink what is **pure**, to acknowledge that only God can define purity or holiness. We see purity not merely as something for our benefit, but as an act of worship. We pursue purity (holiness) because God is holy.

The Gospel causes us to rethink what is **lovely** and **admirable**; our appetites for enjoyment and even beauty change when overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit.

But Paul doesn't leave it there with the charge to merely: ***think about such things***.

He takes it a significant step beyond *thinking* with verse 9:

⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—**put it into practice.**⁵

This, again, places the spotlight on the vital importance of relationships in the Christian life. This Christian life is taught and caught... it is contagious. The Christian life done well is accomplished working with and among God's people. How are we to live as colonists and ambassadors of God's Kingdom of Heaven? We watch, do, and learn, side-by-side with those a step ahead and walking alongside.

And, yes, the mindset of Jesus is not merely to be that, a mindset, it is to be on display, put into practice, bearing fruit, making a difference, calling others to take their place in God's work and Kingdom.

It **is** God's work and God's Kingdom, and we are not alone. The promise is in the text before us:

the God of peace will be with you.⁶

The ***mindset*** of Jesus is accompanied by the ***presence*** of Jesus by the power of His Holy Spirit.

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Php 4:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Php 4:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

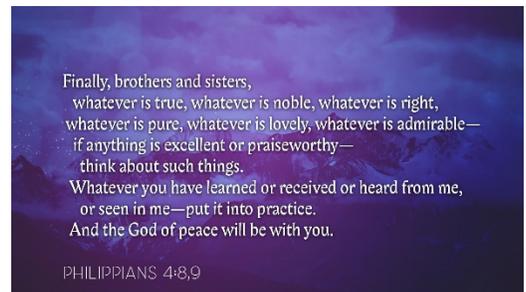
Allow me to ask a question I ask from time to time (and try to *imply* every Sunday). That question is **so what?** What do we do with all of this? It is an important question. We're not merely wasting time here on Sunday mornings; we want to take something valuable away from the text.



I think there is something important about this notion that the list of virtues we considered today are the kinds of things that were not only common in that ancient Greek culture, these are the sorts of things held up as virtuous by most cultures, including our culture today (at least in general terms).

What are we to do with the list: True, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy?

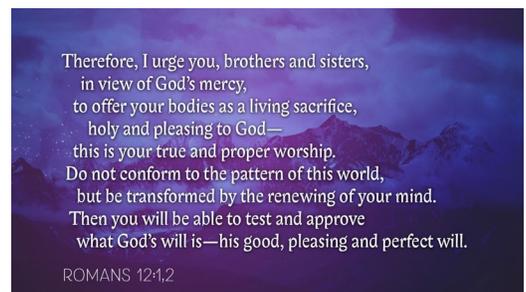
Is it a matter of Christians simply being really good at all of that? If we attain excellence in the list, if we are the most true, noble, right, pure and such... is that what makes a good Christian?



If we were to merely settle for such a thing, we would miss the point (as I fear many do).

If we were merely striving to be the most true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy, it seems that we would be settling for merely **conforming** to the standards of our culture, conforming to the standards of the world. But we are called otherwise:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² **Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.** Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. ⁷



We can't settle to merely conform; we are called to be transformed. We must not merely conform along the lines of that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy; we want those virtues to be transformed. These are the kinds of things that should not be rejected, but rather transformed.

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 12:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Let me put it this way: The Christian life, the mindset of Jesus, is not *merely* that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy... but it **is** still all of that. (It is certainly not less than that.)

Allow me come at it from another angle. Have you noticed that sometimes when we put a *Christian label* on things, we take that as permission for something to be *less than*... *Christian* can sometimes mean lower quality.

There were long periods of time in our civilization in which the opposite was true. For ages, the best music was Christian music (I'm talking about Bach, not the Gaithers), the best art was Christian art, the best architecture was Christian architecture, the best scholarship, science, medicine and all were Christian. But that doesn't always seem to be the case today.

How about this for an illustration. Some of you may know that Chris and Lorie Riser are expert scuba divers. I suppose in some ways there is no such thing as a *non-expert* scuba diver... since when it comes to scuba, if you are not an expert (or under the watchful care of an expert), you won't last long. A non-expert scuba diver is soon a dead scuba diver. Am I right?



Chris and Lorie are experts in that they are qualified to do all sorts of dangerous things, and they are qualified to supervise and teach others.

I don't know a lot about scuba diving (my one lesson and experience qualifies me for nothing), but it seems that high-quality gear is important, and knowing exactly how to operate that gear is a difference between life and death.

So my question is: Could I interest you in some *Christian* scuba gear?

Would we think that *Christian* scuba gear was necessarily the best? Or might we even wonder about the quality of something labeled as *Christian* scuba gear?

I suppose we are all in favor of supporting Christian business and such... but when it comes to scuba gear, is being Christian the most important thing about scuba gear? I would think that I'd only use *Christian* scuba gear if it was high-quality scuba gear in every other way. If I could verify that it was high-quality scuba gear in every other way, then I'd be glad to use *Christian* scuba gear.

Finally, brothers and sisters,
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.
Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me,
or seen in me—put it into practice.
And the God of peace will be with you.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8,9

I suppose the notion of Christian *scuba gear* might seem silly, but let's now think about Christian *people*.

What might be some virtues of high-quality people? What kinds of things might high-quality people think about? Perhaps that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

The Christian life, the mindset of Jesus, isn't merely that... but it is not less than that.

In these verses, Scripture calls us to excellence. Being a Christian isn't merely this, and it is not instead of this... it is all of this and more.

I read this list and it challenges me to work harder, be more creative, to pursue all that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. I have high standards, but they can be higher.

To use the phrase Dr. Gordon Anderson brought us a few weeks ago, when it comes to the supernatural, we do the natural and God does the super. These virtues are, in large part, are the natural that we can bring.

We bring what we bring, and God multiplies it. We bring the natural, even offering our very lives as living sacrifices, and God brings the super, multiplying our natural, resulting in the super natural.

It is *not* a call to *not* do anything until we reach some standard, but rather a call to bring our very best... the very best we can bring in the natural, allowing God to overwhelm it all, multiplying it, with His super. Let's bring our very best... all that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

Perhaps you are sensing God's call to a higher standard, whatever it might be. Perhaps it is a call to truth or purity, or some area where there is room for excellence. Commit that to prayer today; see what God might do.

Perhaps this is all new to you today and it is a day to start a journey of faith, to believe in Jesus, turning from your own mere strivings, changing direction with your life, and trusting Jesus. Today is your day to believe.

